



Corporate Member Profile: Fenland Flying School

Flatland flying club



Based at one of the UK's friendliest GA airfields, Fenland Flying School flourishes in the floral Mecca of South Lincolnshire. Mike Jerram reports.

Some six miles south-east of the South Lincolnshire market town of Spalding, famous for its flower- and vegetable-growing industries, Fenland Airfield is host to AOPA Corporate Member Fenland Flying School. The school changed hands in the summer when Tunbridge Wells-based businessman and private pilot Humphrey Penney, CBE, bought it from former owner and chief flying instructor Lee Haunch, who left to pursue a career flying business jets.

Penney, the son of a WW2 fighter pilot, has been flying from Biggin Hill for more than three decades. He says he was attracted to the fen country school and the local area because of the way in which single-engined light aircraft are being squeezed out of London area general aviation airfields in favour of business jets. "Fenland has a lovely atmosphere and is a beautiful little grass airfield. It is famously friendly to everyone," he notes.

Fenland Flying School's staff is headed by chief flying instructor Matt Mitchell and commercial manager (and SOCATO Rallye owner) Diane Spencer, backed up by Stuart Funnell and Deborah French in the office, part-time receptionists Charlotte, Emma and Lottie, instructor/examiner Alan Walton, and instructors Nick Carter and school owner Humphrey Penney, while the associated Aircraft Engineering Services is run by James Dooley, who also provides the airfield's fire/rescue cover.

The school offers training for the NPPL, JAR-PPL and Night Rating on its fleet of two Cessna 150s, one Cessna 152 Aerobat and two Cessna 172Ms. It hopes to be able to offer tuition for the IMC Rating in the near future.

Rates at the time of *General Aviation's* visit were £130 Dual, £99 Hire for the 150/152 and £145 and £115 respectively for the 172s. For appropriately qualified members an N-numbered Mooney M20J and a similarly US-registered Cessna 337 Super Skymaster belonging to school owner Humphrey Penney are also available for self-fly hire and touring trips, VFR only.

The school has around 150 active flying members who hail mostly from the local area, but some travel from North Lincolnshire and across the county borders from Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and Leicestershire to fly at Fenland. School and airfield are open Tuesday

Above: the only thing that's not flat around Fenland is the welcome

Bottom right: Matt Mitchell learned to fly at Fenland, came back as an instructor and is now CFI

Bottom: Fenland is one of the very few places where you can self-fly hire a suck 'n' blow Cessna



through Sunday, closed Mondays, when no ATC, fire cover or fuel are available. The field has two runways. The shorter 18/36 (18 is 512 metres long for takeoff, 594 metres available for landing, while 36 has 594 metres for takeoff, 591 metres for landing) is licensed, whilst the recently extended 670-metre 08/26 is not, and thus is unavailable for training or commercial flights.

Matt Mitchell took over as CFI from the school's former owner Lee Haunch in the summer, completing a 'full circle' in his flying career. "I learned to fly here," he explained. "I had wanted to go into the armed forces — preferably the Royal Air Force — as a pilot, but I failed the medical due to suspected asthma, though it was never really proven, so after gaining my PPL here at Fenland Flying School I went to Professional Air Training at Bournemouth Airport to gain my CPL/IR." After that Matt took a Flying Instructor Course on Slingsby T67Ms at the Defence Elementary Flying Training School at RAF Barkston Heath,

and while completing that he spotted an advertisement for a flying instructor's job at his old alma mater at Fenland, where he instructed for two years before becoming CFI. He has logged around 1,600 hours total time.

Despite the economic downturn of recent months, business at Fenland Flying School is holding up, says Mitchell, with some 30 to 40 students currently on the books, and training slots were booked through December when GA visited in early November. The school boasts a 90% pass rate for its PPL students, who are divided roughly 50/50 between those learning to fly strictly for leisure, and those aiming for a career in military or commercial aviation, with some bias towards airline careers. Many are young. Some are very young. "We've got some students of 14 years of age," Matt Mitchell said. "We just have to slow them down! The best course of action is to wait (until old enough to go solo) and then aim for continuity."

Lincolnshire, known as 'Bomber County'

from World War II when it was characterised as a 'landlocked aircraft carrier' because of the number of RAF bases established there, boasts many military airfields. Whilst the number of active bases has declined following the ending of the Cold War, Fenland still sits in an area of fairly intense military aviation activity, with the RAF Holbeach bombing range nearby, and a number of fixed-wing and helicopter bases in the county or just across the border in adjoining Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Rutland. Does it affect the school's operations?

"Not really," said Matt Mitchell. "As regards the bombing range, you just stay away, especially on weekdays. And RAFs Cottesmore and Marham offer a useful LARS service."

And in years to come, no doubt more than a few of those who transit fen country skies in military transports and helicopters, or practise air combat manoeuvres in Eurofighters high above, will look fondly down at 'friendly Fenland' as the place where it all started for them.

Fenland's history



Positioned at the juncture of Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire, Fenland Aerodrome was established on a 40-acre site in 1972 as Holbeach St. Johns, the name of the nearest village, and renamed four years later. Fenland Aero Club began operations with Austers and Beagle Terriers, re-equipping with Rollason Condors a year later, and with an all-Cessna fleet in mid-1976.

Today, in addition to the flying school and maintenance operation, Fenland is home to many resident light aircraft, including homebuilts, classic types such as the Luscombe Silvaire, Auster and Yak-52, and modern singles and light twins. The airfield restaurant and bar is noted for its fine food — especially Sunday lunches — that not only attracts fly-in visitors, often from far afield, but is a popular spot for non-flying locals to eat and watch the aviation activity from the spectator enclosure, which also boasts a play area for children — a welcome touch that does much to boast the airfield's family atmosphere. Landing fees are modest: £5 microlights, £10 singles fixed-wing and helicopters, £15 multi-engine fixed-wings and helicopters, with charges waived when uplifting a minimum 100 litres of fuel, of which 100LL and Jet A1 are available.

Fenland hosts a number of fly-ins each year, beginning in Spring with events to coincide with the local flower and strawberry harvests, and the world-famous Spalding

Above: Fenland's unusual aircraft include Luscombe, Auster and Yak-52
Right: the world-famous Spalding Flower Parade is held nearby in May
Below: it may be a small grass field, but Fenland stocks both avgas and Jet-A1

Flower Parade each May (local plans for the 2009 event were still in flux as this was written), while the British Aerobatic Association holds its Fenland and McAully Trophy competitions here in May.

Here is an airfield that enjoys a relaxed

atmosphere and affords a close proximity to aeronautical activity that is fast being lost to the high security at so many GA fields. You'll find no chain-link fencing at Fenland, and whilst the local landscape may be flat, the warm welcome isn't.

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