The Fairchild F24 Argus

Some aircraft make an immediate impact, but here we have a steady, reliable, plodding wartime workhorse, says ***David Ogilvy***

The origins of the Fairchild F24 Argus date back to 1926, when Sherman Fairchild – an American designer and maker of aerial survey cameras – decided to fill a gap in the available aeroplanes of the time by producing a machine suited to the specialist photographic task. Ideas developed through a parasol-winged open tandem two-seater that progressed to a side-by-side cabin monoplane, which, in turn, grew into the four-seater F24. Powered by a 150 hp Warner Scarab radial, soon the type was offered with the Ranger six-cylinder in-line as an alternative power source.

If it were not for World War 2, it is unlikely that the F24 would have been seen in the UK in any numbers. However, the Air Ministry chose this as a communications machine for use by the Air Transport Auxiliary. This was a civilian organisation whose members – male and female – delivered thousands of military aeroplanes, mainly from the factories to their allotted units, but also moving machines between active Service stations. Such a task meant that the pilots who were delivering these aeroplanes needed to be carried as passengers to or from the airfields concerned. Where only two or three pilots were involved, the Argus was the main workhorse, while when more were needed, the larger and better-known Avro Anson 1, with its manually retracting undercarriage, bore the brunt.

The Argus was used in larger numbers than many of us imagined. More than 500 were supplied to Britain under the wartime lend lease agreement and in 1941 the type entered service with both the ATA and the RAF. All specimens based in the UK were Warner-powered F24 Ws as, at the time, the Ranger-engine was not approved here, so the F24R was used by the RAF only on far-away overseas duties. Not until several years after World War 2 was the Ranger accepted by the civil airworthiness authority (then the Air Registration Board), so all 54 examples that survived into the early peacetime era had radials. Both versions were used by the USAAF as the UC-61 Forwarder.

My initial contact with the Argus was wholly unexpected. In 1955 I worked with the Air Schools/Derby Aviation Group and frequently this led me to the pleasant omni-directional grass aerodrome at Burnaston. I was walking along the front of the works

hangar with an F24W outside and the chief engineer called out 'I am glad you are here. Can you do a C of A air test on this? It is rather urgent, as the airworthiness surveyor is coming this afternoon to clear it and he will need to see the flight test report.' I had mixed feelings; as always, I was keen to fly another type, but I doubted if I could combine familiarisation with a proper written assessment of the machine. However, as in my heart I knew I would, I said 'yes'. In later years I might have thought differently!

My first impression was that it was bulky, looked strong and had a reasonably spacious four-seat cabin with the typical American levels of comfort. Entry is through car-type doors. The front seat occupants sit fairly high, while the passengers behind are at a lower level and have a spacious luggage area behind them. It is essentially an A-B aeroplane.

From a pilot's operating aspect, the Argus sports a proper stick control column and the view forward is better than one might expect on a tail-dragger with a radial engine in the front. The instrument panel seems to be unusually low in relation to one's eyes and is well forward. The overall layout, though, is practical, with handbrake lever on the left, throttle, mixture and carb heat controlled by plungers in the centre and a flap lever growing out of the floor. There are separate controls for each of the two 27 gallon fuel tanks in the wing roots, so care is needed to avoid having both either on or off at the same time. With its electric starter the Warner Scarab is reasonably easy to bring to life and soon chugs away quite quietly. Taxying is easy and brakes are needed only for tight turns in confined spaces. The undercarriage rides well and the view is better than I expected, giving a generally favourable impression of a good aeroplane. Take-off, though, using the recommended one notch of flap, calls for a fairly strong forward push to lift the machine's back, but this is short-lived as the ground roll into a very light wind is modest at about 250 yards.

Unfortunately I have not retained any notes that refer to the Scarab's power settings, but as with most radials the figures are low. The rate of climb is not sparkling at little more than 500 fpm, but once on the level the 24W purrs happily at 112 mph and can do so for a very creditable range of 720 miles. In normal flight stability is good and in calm conditions the Argus can be left to follow its own path almost hands and feet off.

Here we have a machine with impeccably tame low-speed characteristics, the clean stall occurring at about 65 mph IAS with a touch of early buffet, but with no subsequent wing-drop tendency. With flap lowered, the buffet is far more distinct but surprisingly the break is at about the same speed and, unless aggressively provoked, the wings are

Main photo: the Argus could achieve 112 mph and could keep it up for 720 miles
Below left: more than 500 F24s saw service with the RAF and ATA in wartime
Left: forward visibility was surprisingly good for a radial-engined taildragger

Photos via Philip Jarrett

This photo: in calm conditions the F24 could be flown hands- and feet-off
Below: parasol wing helped to give the Argus an unusual degree of stability

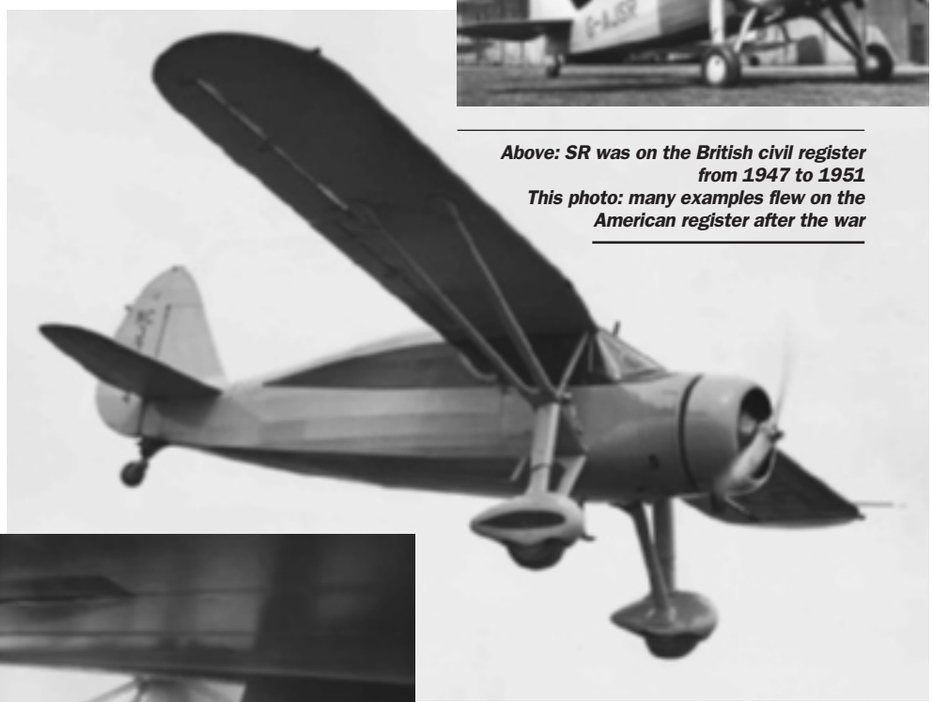
determined to remain level. It is possible, though, to lose a substantial chunk of height, especially in the pre-stall wallowing phase.

Many aircraft reveal their true identities and characteristics when in the circuit, with the various assortments of power settings, airspeeds, flaps and trim; often I find this the most interesting part of a flight. Here the Argus continues to behave both well and predictably, using 90 mph IAS on the way round, reducing to 80 on the initial stages of the approach. Either one or two stages of flap lowering cause small nose-down tendencies, with the trim reaching its backward limit when the rear seats are unoccupied.

The landing itself is quite a pleasant experience, with adequate float time and elevator control to be reasonably precise for a three-point touchdown. Here the softly-sprung undercarriage adds to the pleasure. In my limited experience of just three landings that I have made on the type, all almost into wind, I cannot vouch for its conduct in a real crosswind, but as it was designed in and for the era of omni-directional aerodromes, I imagine that it could call for serious swing-prevention action.

There is nothing specifically noteworthy about the Argus, except that it gives a seemingly justified feeling of confidence in its ability to do its allotted job and to do it well. For its time it is unusually comfortable and it is both easy and pleasant to fly, with a useful fuel/person disposable load of 1100 lbs.

Today there are four F24s on the UK register and, perhaps surprisingly when we consider the type's history, all are F24Rs with Ranger engines; three of these have current Certificates of Airworthiness. It would be interesting to see a Scarab-powered Argus back in the home skies as a reminder of an American type that worked hard for the British war effort in an unsung role during the nineteen forties. ■



Above: SR was on the British civil register from 1947 to 1951
This photo: many examples flew on the American register after the war

Above: Ranger-engined version was not approved in the UK until after the war
Left: car-type doors gave access to a relatively spacious cockpit