

To fly or not to fly?



David Ogilvy, who was severely injured in a DH53 crash, offers a personal view on the flying of historic aeroplanes

The unfortunate accident to the de Havilland DH53 at Old Warden on 1st July reopens the many discussions that were rife a few years ago in the world of historic aeroplanes; I have been asked by more than one person to give an airing to that old conundrum of whether elderly aircraft should fly or whether they should sit silently in the comparative safety of static museums.

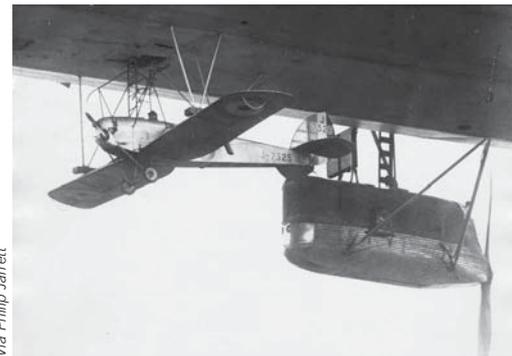
Before I venture into the general theme of pros and cons I feel that we should consider the specifics of the machine concerned. Whilst its loss may be a pity, this becomes wholly insignificant when we compare it with the human aspect; the pilot was killed. He, Trevor Roche, was Chief Pilot of the Shuttleworth Collection and, as are all his former comrades, he was very experienced. Trevor flew 27 operational missions in the Gulf War and, perhaps more importantly, he was a graduate of the Empire Test Pilots' School who passed out top of his course. Where aircraft handling and evaluation are concerned, nowhere in the world can anyone obtain a better grip than through ETPS.

Despite several requests for views, I will not make any attempt to pre-judge the professional findings of the Air Accidents Investigations Branch. However, I do claim a right to make some comments about the aeroplane. Built in 1923 to compete in the light aeroplane trials at Lympne, the DH53 obtained a small production order for the RAF for experiments with launching light aeroplanes from an airship, but this was short-lived and the type faded into virtual oblivion. Following resurrection with the Shuttleworth Collection, it became clear that it was not the best aeroplane that had emerged from the wide-ranging de Havilland stable: I need mention only the many varieties of Moth and the Mosquito as examples of the other end of the value scale.

The DH53's flying history at Old Warden is far from a happy one. Following restoration by the DH Aeronautical Technical School G-EBHX took to the air on its new life in August 1960. Soon, however, the troubles began. The little 34hp ABC Scorpion (a horizontal twin) failed in flight; this led to a severe crash on the aerodrome in which Dickie Martin – chief test pilot for the Gloster Aircraft Company – was seriously injured and spent several weeks in hospital. Following the rebuild I endeavoured to do the first flight, but despite four full-throttle runs across the aerodrome to ensure that both pots continued to fire, after take-off I managed to attain only about 50 feet before the package seized solidly. After that very short flight I found myself in the same hospital. Extensive professional research into the engine's failings failed to prevent another total stoppage, when Desmond Penrose – a de Havilland test pilot – managed to persuade the Scorpion to take him as far as overhead Radlett before it cut; this enabled him to make a successful forced landing on the large, but by then closed, former Handley Page aerodrome. As though this was not enough evidence, the 53 flew again from Old Warden and the engine stopped shortly after take-off, leaving John Lewis – then chief test pilot for Rolls Royce – trapped beneath the



Via Philip Jarrett



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**Top: Desmond Penrose demonstrates the Shuttleworth's DC53 at Old Warden in 1975
Centre: the prototype DH53 in 1923
Above: The RAF ordered the DH53 for experiments with launches from airships
Below: engine run-up before first post-restoration flight in 1960**

machine that, due to ruts in the ploughed field, had finished inverted. Fortunately John was physically unhurt.

I mention all this detail because I wish to remove the chance for the 'don't fly them' brigade to use this as another



Via Philip Jarrett

opportunity to support their cause. Apart from the engine problems, the 53 had an aggressive dose of aileron snatch at low speed and I support all who say that it should not be rebuilt and flown yet again. I had the good fortune to enjoy thirty years of close involvement with the Shuttleworth Collection and this one little beast caused more problems than all the other machines on the fleet. It must not be used as a yardstick for deciding whether old aeroplanes should or should not be flown.

Looking at the more general picture, there may be viable reasons to listen to the views of both camps. The keep-them-on-the-ground people argue that a valuable aeroplane should not be endangered by taking to the air, yet more historic machines have come to grief on the ground than have ever been broken by flying. The last remaining Handley Page Hampden medium bomber of World War 2 was destroyed by an airfield fire service, almost certainly without any idea of the seriousness of the sin; another famous machine had its wings sawn off; dozens of aircraft were destroyed in a fire at France's Musée de l'Air. In my travels I have seen several significant machines rotting – usually in the open – through a lack of TLC. By contrast, almost all aircraft that fly, or are intended to fly, are given the attention that they deserve.

Without doubt, aeroplanes on static display serve an essential educational function to explain the backgrounds and development that have led to the machines of today. However, there is no substitute for seeing, hearing and even smelling historic aircraft in the air. They complete the essential educational aspect and provide good clean entertainment for many people. However, not all types are suitable for being active in the 21st century. Not only is there a strong need to retain or acquire skills in the flying and technical sides of the operation, but there are some designs – the DH53 among them – that have seemingly insurmountable weaknesses that should keep them firmly on the museum floor. There is another reason for suggesting that in today's world some designs should not fly. This is not because they have inherent faults, but purely because the expertise and the relevant resources may not be available. I admit to being cynical when I heard about proposals to make an Avro Vulcan airworthy, but when it became clear that the available hard-earned funds would enable the nation's technological best to be harnessed, slowly I began to change my opinion; when WB 588 took to the air, I confessed that my initial judgement had been seriously flawed.

There are a few very good and famous historic aeroplanes that perhaps should not be flown again. No one could be keener than I am to see and listen again to a Mosquito in flight, so perhaps I should be



Peter R March

Top right: more Mosquitos were written off in handling accidents than were destroyed by enemy action
This photo: the last Mosquito to fly, the T3 RR 299, crashed when an engine lost power during a manoeuvre



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excited about the three projects around the world that aim to make this possible. However, I have disciplined my natural enthusiasm and I have the cheek to call for caution. Nowhere today is there an active pilot with experience on the type, which was very successful and manageable when flown by someone with suitable training and experience. However, on the later marks the asymmetric safety speed of 184 knots (or 211 mph if you wish to make it sound more impressive!) after an unstick at about 105 knots, leaves a long critical post take-off phase that is foreign to the modern mind. This is no one's fault, but is a function of aviation development over recent years. The unfortunate loss of the last Mosquito to fly – the T3 RR 299 then operated from Hatfield by British Aerospace – revealed the problems facing a pilot with insufficient understanding of the machine's characteristics. In many ways perhaps the most noteworthy of all World War 2 aircraft – for three years of the conflict, the fastest type in RAF service, the most versatile machine of all and, in the end, the one with the longest range (in the entire history of aviation, no other type can claim both the first and last of these qualities) – the Mosquito has tended to fade from people's minds. With Spitfires, Hurricanes and a Lancaster deservedly available for all to see in the air, many younger people may never learn of the wooden wonder and its achievements. This is a shame, but it is better than

risking lives unnecessarily. The Mosquito was one of the greatest aeroplanes of all time, but more were written off in handling accidents than were destroyed by enemy action, even with pilots trained on the type, so, in my view, this is one machine that perhaps should stay on the ground. As a former Mosquito pilot I hate to say this, but today we are very safety conscious and the thought of such a lethal aeroplane coming to grief at an air display is too much to bear.

So, what is my humble verdict? Historic aeroplanes which are within reach of today's piloting and engineering skills (by far the majority) should be flown under strictly controlled conditions, but a few types may best serve by remaining on static view. I accept that some readers may disagree, but I base my judgement on a few years of activity in the field. Opposing views are welcome! ■

When Avro Vulcan WB 588 took to the air, the author confessed that his initial judgement had been seriously flawed

