



General Aviation

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Chairman's message

Recession? What recession?

For those who fly for pleasure, such as myself these days, the rapidly lengthening daylight hours is a welcome harbinger of more benign weather and the opportunities for longer trips. Sometimes, in the winter, it can be a struggle to maintain currency, but this year, as for last year, February, despite the heavy snowfalls, was actually a good month for getting into the air. At White Waltham, which is my own base, February saw more activity than the same month in 2008, which happened to be one of the busiest months that year. Half an hour before an early sunset on a good day, in the vicinity of the airfield, the radio was choc-a-bloc with calls from aircraft returning from all points of the compass (well, maybe not from the Heathrow direction...!)

Further enquiries have elicited the fact that over the past six months business at the airfield, both in terms of flight training and private flying, has been buoyant, despite the global and national financial downturn. On one notable day in December, no less than 14 introductory flying lessons were booked, practically one every half hour. Of course, one must avoid generalising from the particular, and, there will and have been casualties in the flight training area, but this is not especially new (the old adage of making a small fortune in aviation – start with a large one – always applies), but it is hard not to conclude that some money that is no longer earning interest, or being used for holidays abroad that have suddenly become much more expensive, is actually being diverted towards more personal aims and achievements. If so, this is good news for general aviation.

On a slightly different tack, one of the productive sectors of GA in terms of earning money for UK Ltd, and expanding the internal market beyond into Europe (one of the prime objectives of the EU), is that of business aviation. The British Business and General Aviation Association (BBGA) is a colleague organisation with whom we at AOPA have much in common under the umbrella of GA, although AOPA also has a few bizjet owners in membership. The BBGA hold an annual conference in March that attracts high calibre speakers and an invitation to the AOPA Chairman and CEO is always welcomed, as it is useful to feel the pulse and view the trends of the business aviation sector. One of the presentations summarised the results of a survey conducted by a household name financial and management consulting firm into the value of business aviation to the UK economy and whilst there were some obvious omissions, it was very revealing to discover that the turnover in this sector was some £3.7 billion. This indicated a significant increase over the past four years from the time statistics were gathered by Terry Lober for his report of 2006, that had provided much useful material for the CAA Strategic Review of the same year, but completely in line with Lober's extrapolation that showed business aviation to be expanding rapidly.

Although business aviation is more likely to be affected by the recession than private flying, the substantial contribution to the UK economy adds great strength to the viability of GA at large. In a nutshell, it provides more clout, and will add impetus to the achievement of government recognition for the need for a stable and widespread network of general aviation aerodromes that meet the needs of this sector.

Finally, to return to the flight training aspect again, the imminent advent of the EASA LPL (Leisure Pilots Licence) will provide encouragement for people who feel tempted to learn to fly, because the Restricted version allows a licence to be gained for a significantly smaller potential financial outlay even than the current UK NPPL. Gaining a PPL is a big achievement, and the UK weather sometimes turns the process into one of attrition, so being able to get there in a couple of smaller steps without reducing safety standards will not appear so daunting to prospective student pilots, and it is on the influx of student pilots that the whole of the manned aviation industry ultimately depends.

Not everything you read in the newspapers these days applies equally to all spheres of human activity and, whilst bearing in mind that things may yet get worse before they get better, the examples above indicate that even in today's financial climate, there is room for cautious optimism in the future of general aviation. On that note, I'm now off to go and fly one of the aeroplanes I have a share in, and I hope that all AOPA members will be doing the same fairly soon too!



George Done