



Westward Ho!

Cornwall's only hard-runway GA airfield offers a wealth of aviation history and a warm welcome. **Pat Malone** reports

If you're an airfield owner and 37 people are rushing towards you desperately waving chequebooks and wanting your land, it must be hard not to grab the cheque with most noughts on and push off to the islands. To put the interests of your fellow aviators before your own profit calls for a degree of saintliness possessed by few – so hats off, please, to Tony Arthur and Richard Seth-Smith, who did not flog Perranporth Airfield to the highest bidder. For this reason, Perranporth is still available for you to visit, which you urgently need to do. Not only does the airfield offer a friendly welcome, good food, plenty of avgas and JetA1 and enough tarmac to re-lay the M5 but it's a gateway to the most beautiful parts of Cornwall, and you can park there for a week for peanuts.

Perranporth is one of those 'despite everything' airfields that survives and thrives because of the tenacity and sacrifice of those who love it. Perched on towering cliffs west of Newquay, it has suffered its share of assaults from 'antis' and dodged the attentions of predatory property developers, and stands out as a GA oasis in a county that is not exactly blessed with them – friendly Bodmin and rather less friendly Lands End complete the pack, and both are grass. This is a shame because good airfields were once virtually contiguous in this neck of the woods. The wartime need to protect the Channel and the western approaches spawned a dozen of them, and within a few miles of Perranporth were RAF Davidstow Moor, RAF St Merryn,

RAF St Eval, RAF St Mawgan and RAF Portreath, all big, busy airfields for which there was little need after the war. Davidstow, St Merryn and St Eval are closed, St Mawgan has become Newquay airport and is expensive to fly to, and Portreath became home to a lot of dodgy business we don't talk about involving nerve gases too dangerous to be handled at Porton Down. Perranporth might have followed the others into oblivion had it not been for an odd character called Ernest Milner-Haig, who

according to lifelong opponents of Perranporth Airfield, nicked it in 1957. The story is convoluted, but when Perranporth was created out of parts of five farms in 1940 there was

Top: Perranporth aerodrome, perched on the rocky cliffs of Cornwall
Below: the tower is virtually unchanged from wartime, and a new garage for the fire truck is under construction



Richard Jones



supposed to be a verbal agreement with the farmers who got compensation that they could buy it back at a discount after the war. Perranporth had a distinguished war record in

which it played host to British, Canadian, Czech, Australian, Free French and Polish Spitfires, Typhoons and Hurribombers. In 1944 the Fleet Air Arm took over with



Avengers and Swordfish, but the Air Ministry decided to hold onto the airfield when the war ended, just in case the Cold War heated up. It was not until the mid-1950s that it was advertised for sale by public auction, and the five farmers got their money together and planned a visit to the auction house. But a few days before the auction Ernest Milner-Haig, who knew that the small print in the auction notice also said 'or for sale by private treaty', nipped into the agent's office in Truro, gave them some money and came away with the deeds. This did not endear Milner-Haig or Perranporth Airfield to its neighbours, and a certain amount of ill-feeling has been handed down from father to son in the traditional manner. Milner-Haig invited the Cornwall Gliding Club to come to Perranporth from St Merryn and leased most of the land to the farmers he'd finessed. They erected fences along the edges of the runways, which encouraged accuracy in landing.

If you hang around the clubhouse in the restored wartime control tower at Perranporth you can still meet men who began flying with the gliding club back in 1957. Ernie Hayman and Noel Ellis were CFI and deputy CFI in the 1960s when the club was in its heyday. "It was second only to Lasham, and we had big regional and national competitions," says Noel. "We built two hangars and had a dozen gliders and a Tiger Moth to tow them off with. The ridge soaring along the cliffs here is second to none and people would come from all over the country. I got my Silver C here – that means five hours airborne, and that was after one Boxing Day when I flew for four hours and 50 minutes and they wouldn't give it to me, the miserable sods."

Ernie adds: "As a teenager in Perranporth I used to sit on the fence and watch the Spitfires land, and I joined the RAF in 1942 as soon as I was old enough. I failed pilot selection on eyesight and learned to be a navigator, and eventually ended up in South Africa where they gave us a few hours on Ansons, the only flying I did in all my years in the RAF. On the way home our ship dropped anchor off Gibraltar on VE Day, and when we got to England they didn't know what to do with us.

Top: gliders at Perranporth in 1972 - in its heyday, the airfield was second only to Lasham

Middle left: getting permission for the new hangar took years and cost a fortune

Left: David Gourlay mans the mike in the tower at Perranporth

When I was demobbed I went home to Perranporth and decided I would learn to fly. Now I've got 30-odd different gliders and a dozen powered aircraft in my log book, including the Nimrod which one of our members, Jack Alcock, flew for a day job and in which he gave me a turn at the stick."

For various reasons, the gliding club faded away. Milner-Haig was run over by a train on his way home from the pub and the airfield ended up in the hands of the Receiver. For two years it languished without a buyer until along came two Scillies Skybus pilots, Brian Sperring and Peter Channon, who did the Receiver a favour and took it off his hands at a discount. They hired two flying instructors, husband and wife team Mike and Tina Lomax, and began building a successful flying school. The Lomaxes brought with them a student from Truro airfield, local hotelier Tony Arthur, who'd been bought a trial lesson by his wife in 1991 – something she regrets more bitterly than



anything else in life.

Tony says: "After I got my licence I rented club aircraft but in 1997 Brian lost his Class One medical and he and Peter decided to sell the airfield. They let the licence lapse, which meant there was no longer a school, which meant there were no planes to hire. Mike and Tina took over a pub and I bought a PA-28 and parked it on the grass. Then myself and my wife, and Richard Seth-Smith and his wife, decided to buy the airfield, and we paid £310,000 for it. It was really just an investment in 350 acres of land – I didn't have any ambitions to operate the airfield, and Richard's wife was so involved she's never set foot on the place to this day. Richard himself was more interested in running an airfield, and as I lived only two miles away I ended up doing it, too."

The pair got the licence reinstated and Tony and his wife resurrected the school, which over a ten-year period they built it into a sound business with two full-time instructors, two part-timers, over 100 members, 25 students and an affiliated engineering operation run by Stefan Heale. A hangar was built at the end of a 15-year planning battle which cost the price of a decent aircraft in legal fees, but there's never enough space for the number of aircraft that would like to live at Perranporth – especially since Lands End turfed out GA last year – and more is desperately needed. Like everything else at Perranporth, the hangar was largely a self-help operation, built by members offering their own particular skills.

In 2007 Richard Seth-Smith wanted to retire and Tony didn't want to pick up the slack, so they put the airfield up for sale. "The agents said it was the kind of thing that would

Top left: instructors Terry Earl and Laura Khot at the entrance to Perranporth's unique briefing room

Left: the old air raid shelter has been kitted out as offices and briefing rooms



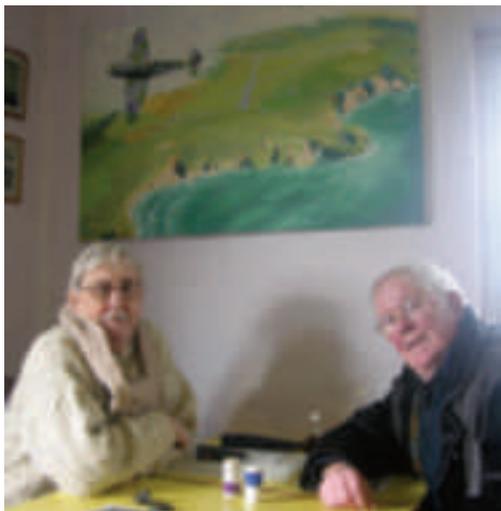
interest either nobody or everybody," says Tony. "In the event it was the latter. We had 37 serious would-be buyers, which we eventually narrowed down to nine serious-serious buyers, and I showed each one around and interviewed them carefully. Richard and I agreed we would sell it to someone who intended to maintain it as a GA airfield and was able to do so, which in business terms is not very smart. We had higher offers – much higher offers – but in the end we sold at a discount to someone who fit all our criteria."

(Dry your tears, they still got the thick end of a million quid.)

The buyer was John George, a Cornish boy made good, founder of the mobile phone company JAG Communications. George started JAG in a disused railway carriage in his back garden in 1989 and now commutes from Guernsey in a TBM he's about to chop in for a Citation Mustang. Bet you wish you'd had his vision in 1989, eh? The new owner asked Tony Arthur to stay on for six months to effect a smooth handover, and as is the way of these things, three years later Tony is still there. The recession has put a crimp in John George's plans to expand the airfield, and the running is left to Tony while the owner looks after the core business.

There can be few airfields in Britain which have a more beautiful aspect, with the sweeping curve of the rugged Cornish coast stretching into the distance. What is surprising is that so much wartime construction remains

on the airfield – blast pens for fighters, pillboxes, underground bunkers. One air raid shelter next to the Tower serves as CFI David Beckinsale's office and briefing room; one can almost feel the ghosts of the past as one sits down at the whiteboard. The dugout was refurbished on a self-help basis; they uncovered the roof, re-laid the felt and the tar, then waterproofed the inside, and the Club has two more that can be similarly treated.



Above: old hands - Ernie Hayman and Noel Ellis with painting of Perranporth airfield in wartime
Below: Tony Arthur with the memorial dedicated to all the squadrons who flew from Perranporth

As with most GA airfields, hangar space is at a premium – more so at Perranporth because it took a lot of refugees from Lands End last year. Tony Arthur says: “We need a new hangar simply to get everything that’s parked outside under cover, even before we start chipping away at the waiting list of people who want to come here. The Cornish climate is not kind to aircraft. We do keep them out of doors, but there’s pressing need to resolve that problem.” The hangar contains an eclectic assortment of aircraft including a Tripacer, Beech Duchess, Aztec, Schweizer 300 helicopter, Cessna 206, Mk 26 Spitfire (that’s the 80% scale replica that chap in Scotland sells), Jodel, Rallye, some Cubs, a PZL Ogar motorglider – no, I hadn’t either – and an Aviat Husky. A move to extend the hangars will meet with the usual withering gunfire from across the fence – Perranporth has only just got permission to build a garage for the fire truck and some maintenance and safety equipment storage buildings, at the cost of much blood and treasure.

The Club itself has three 172s and operates from two well-surfaced licensed runways, 05/23 and 27/09, with a third, 01/19, unlicensed and a bit rough, in reserve. The licensed runways are the only tarmac GA strips in Cornwall, and with the main runway being almost 1,000 metres long, you can get



Top: you may also abandon ship here, if you are of that persuasion
Above: the Eden Project, one of many tourist attractions within striking distance



some fairly heavy metal in there. Landing charges are described as ‘very reasonable’ at 10p a kilogram. Instructor Terry Earl warns that when the wind is strong and in the north-west runway 27 can be a bit sporting, even for the locals. “The end of the runway goes pretty well straight over the cliff,” Terry says, “and the curlover can catch you out. When the wind is sufficiently strong and in the north-west, we stop using 27 for take-offs altogether.”

From the visitor’s point of view Perranporth can be looked on as a base from which to explore everything the country has to offer the tourist, from the nearby surfing beaches and unique attractions like the Eden Project and the Lost Gardens of Heligan to the gourmet’s delight of Rick Stein and Jamie Oliver restaurants just up the coast. For the day tripper chasing the £100 cup of tea, Perranporth offers a fascinating mixture of history, scenery and hospitality. The airfield is part of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and incorporates a Site of Special Scientific Interest in one corner because of the unique nature of its flora, and not many GA airfields can say that. But most rewarding is the knowledge that you’re among like-minded aviators here, men and women who hold flying even above personal profit, and they deserve the support of all. ■