



Flying Solo

A 'big' airport that's off the beaten track offers great deals for Soloflight customers.

Pat Malone reports

What am I bid for four ILS approaches to a 2200-metre runway with an NDB on the aerodrome and all mod cons, including a decent restaurant? Would you believe that if you play your cards right, you can change out of a tenner? No? Read on, unbeliever.

Mel Stewart runs Soloflight, which for 33 years has been providing flight training and hire from Humberside in Lincolnshire, an airport which primarily serves the North Sea helicopter industry but has a handful of scheduled and charter flights and which is keen to attract and succour general aviation. She explains that Soloflight can offer a non-Humberside based private owner a 50 percent discount on the landing fee – which is £14.99 if you're under three tonnes – so that if you go through Soloflight, you can shoot four ILS approaches and go-rounds, then land and pay the far from extortionate sum of £7.49. And there are no handling charges! Those of us who have difficulty practising ILS approaches anywhere, much less paying reasonable sums for them, can only look on in envy.

"Humberside is a fantastic place to train, especially so if you're doing IMC work," says Mel. "The helicopters have their own area and terminal and there are a handful of commercial flights – four times a day to Aberdeen, two KLM flights to Amsterdam, and there are charters mostly at night. So while it has all the facilities, it's not frantically busy and ATC always have time for training flights. It's owned by Manchester Airport and we have an excellent relationship with the management, which is keen to foster general aviation.

"We've recently been doing IMC ratings for people from well outside our area – one chap came recently from Shoreham, because the cost of approaches is getting obscene in some places. You can pay £30 for a good B&B here, and less for a bad one. This chap did four

days, then went away and came back later for three days. He was weather-bound for one day and beer-bound for another, which was partly my fault. Even with accommodation costs he came out well ahead."

The name of Soloflight is inextricably bound up with that of Glen Stewart, who died in 2004 in the unexplained crash of Soloflight's Cessna 310 together with experienced pilot Peter McNeil. Mel, his widow, has kept the



Top: Humberside's 2200-metre runway
Above: Soloflight has the advantage of being the first flying school through the Humberside gate
Below: owner Mel Stewart with one of Soloflight's Piper Warriors



**Below: big planes, North Sea helicopters and slick ATC, but Humberside still welcomes GA
Right: unusual Humberside landmark – Thunderbird 3, formerly at Blackpool Pleasure Beach. No SFH
Inset below: the website produces a lot of our business.**



flying club running since then with the help of members and pilots who were friends of Glen, but it hasn't been easy and there are those who believe she shouldn't have had the temerity to try. "Aviation is full of difficulties and politics," says Mel, "but you just have to get on with it."

Soloflight started in 1977 when Glen Stewart came to Humberside from Leeds, where he was a Cessna dealer with Northair, selling light singles and twins in the good days. Mel says: "He had 20,283 hours, all on GA aircraft, but hadn't been able to get into the RAF because he'd had measles as a child and was deaf in one ear. He couldn't get a CAA medical, so he got an FAA one, and then a CAA one on the strength of it."

"As sales director of Northair he used to go over to Wichita and fly new aircraft back with very little equipment on board, because they were also King Avionics dealers and wanted to sell the whole package. In those pre-GPS days Glen only once crossed the Atlantic in a single – otherwise it was 421s, 310s and so on – and he completed the London – Sydney air race in a C182RG in 2001.

"I was working at the airport in 1990 during my recuperation after a car accident and I agreed to help out at Soloflight in return for

flying lessons. I'd wanted to fly since I was six years old, when a friend of my father took us all to the Isle of Man in his aircraft. My brothers got turns to sit in the front, and I didn't because I was a girl – so from then on I was determined to learn to fly, to get my own back. We lived close to Binbrook, and I used to ride my horse under the final approach to try to get right underneath the Lightnings and Vulcans as they crossed the fence. I used to go to all the air shows, and I was able to do my PPL with Soloflight.

"Glen was always buying and selling aircraft and there was a lot of administrative work to be done, so one way or another I never left – I ended up working full time and married the boss in 1995. I still have a PPL but I've never progressed it further. It's like running a sweet shop – it won't work if you eat the stock. I do a large amount of P2 flying, fixed-wing and helicopter, but I fly for fun, and as soon as you depart from that, you ruin the effect. If it was work, I'd hate it. We used to do CAA commercial training, and to see the heartache, the financial commitment, the trauma – I never wanted that. I just want to fly."

Soloflight developed to offer FAA ratings and built a good reputation. "Glen did his instructor rating in the States at a time when there were a lot of US aircraft coming into the country and staying on the N-register for various reasons," Mel says. "Soloflight began to offer the FAA computerised exams on the Lasergrade multiple choice system, which gave you an immediate result – we had the only one in the country after 911. I was the examiner, and I used to have to sit an exam myself every year on the computer to remain qualified to run it. The system was very well regulated, and we

offer a useful service mostly to private owners with N-reg aircraft.

"We use freelance FAA instructors, and the people who come to us don't have the time to spend a couple of weeks in the States. We can do renewals and biennial flight reviews in any aircraft with FAA instructors. A lot of FAA licence holders don't realise they need a biennial flight review, and they also have to have an English Language Proficiency Endorsement – and of course you need to get rid of your paper licence and get a laminated one, and we can arrange that."

Soloflight has about 45 members who come from Hull, Grimsby and further afield – some from Lincoln, 30 miles away, others from Sheffield, Leeds, and Harrogate. "They're people who've been with us for a long time," says Mel. "We have two full-time instructors – Richard Amor, who's been with Soloflight for ten years and who was an SAR winchman for 25 years before that, and Edward Hawkins, who learned to fly here. He's from Grimsby and used to be a dockmaster. We call on part-timers as necessary, and we also have an examiner on call. We have two Warriors, a 150 and a 160, and we send our multi-engine students across to AAA, the commercial school at Humberside. Sandra runs the main office and takes bookings."

Glen's death still clearly affects Mel personally. "When Glen was here I was in the background, I was just Mel in the office," she says. "He died on 13th March six years ago, flying a 310 with Peter McNeil, who had a JAA CPL/IR and was being checked out on his company aircraft. The accident hasn't been explained. ATC phoned me that day and asked me if I was talking to him on the company



Left: Soloflight has been in business for 33 years, a significant achievement in GA

frequency, but there was nothing. I tried his mobile, then a student called and said he'd heard an aircraft had gone down...

"He'd had a serious accident a year before, when he was safety pilot during a student's exam. It was a 421 from Guernsey, and the examiner was in the back in the usual FAA fashion. As safety pilot you're not allowed to speak or touch anything. They came in for a touch and go, and it is believed the pilot raised the gear when it was still on the runway. It crashed and burst into flames, and the examiner was killed.

"It haunted Glen, and it changed him – he didn't get back into an aircraft for a long time,

but he loved it so much he eventually went back. He was so passionate about flying. After his death, there was no thought of closing Soloflight down – it was our life, and we had a very good team. I couldn't have got through it without them. The buck stopped with me and I didn't have anyone I could discuss it with; it was a difficult shift to make at a traumatic time, and even now Soloflight is Glen.

"I started the Glen Stewart Flying Scholarship, which led to my involvement with the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators, the Air League, AOPA, Women in Aviation – the Guild through the CAA's David Cockburn, who lives nearby. I'm the only non-instructor on the

Guild's Instructor Sub-Committee, and I'm a training advisor to the Air League as well as being on their scholarship panel.

"It's quite a challenge running a flying school in this part of the world. The catchment area is Hull, Grimsby, Scunthorpe, not the most prosperous area of the UK. One significant drag on the business is the Humber Bridge toll, which is £5:20 and which discourages people from crossing the river to learn to fly. It seems designed to be only marginally cheaper than making the 75-mile journey around by Goole. Lincolnshire is one of the more sparsely populated counties in England, there's no passing trade and we're in a recession but otherwise everything's rosy. We have a prime spot on the airfield, where people coming in have to pass us first, and the website produces a lot of our business."

Being off the beaten track also means they have a lot to offer the private pilot and owner, and not just inexpensive ILSs. "We encourage people to come in from grass strips to practice their RT and see what life is like in a big scary airport," Mel says. "Our own people get used to a high standard of RT from the start, and they all visit the Tower before they go solo. RT standards are an issue, and it'll probably get worse because of de-licensing for training. We've lost five of our instructors to Eastern Airways in recent years, and they're now flying ATRs and Jetstreams, but after 33 years we're still going strong, so we must be doing something right."

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