



Corporate member profile: Southport and Merseyside Aero Club

Sixty of the best for SMAC



*A Liverpool flying club celebrates its Diamond Jubilee. What is the secret of its longevity?
By Pat Malone*

Congratulations to Southport and Merseyside Aero Club, one of AOPA's longest-standing corporate members, which is this year celebrating its Diamond Jubilee. Sixty years ago in July a group of five Lancashire men, some pilots, some would-be pilots, got together in a hall in Southport and decided to form a flying club to operate out of what was then a beach aerodrome at nearby Hesketh Park. It didn't quite work out the way they had intended, but the club endures and prospers to this day.

Aero clubs and flight training organisations come and go for many reasons – financial, social, demographic, airfield kicked out from under them or whatever – and while Southport and Merseyside – SMAC – has faced all the usual trials, it has held together and even been strengthened by difficulty. There have been great times when it had several aircraft and a busy clubhouse on a welcoming airfield, and other times when it had no clubhouse, no home airfield and



Top: member pilot David Speechley, left, with Simon Wright at the Sturgate fly-in with the Queen of the Skies. (Photo: Roger Penney)
Middle right: Tiger Moth G-ANOD in the hangar at Hesketh Park. David Vernon in rear cockpit, Henry Harker in front cockpit and Wilf Bold on the wing



This photo: G-ANOD on the beach at Hesketh alongside Foster Wickner Wicko G-AFJB which won the 'Freddie March Spirit of Aviation' award at Goodwood in 2007

no aircraft, but the members stayed with it even when they had to fly elsewhere. What glue bound them together?

Chris Wylie, 20 years the club secretary – and ‘temporary’ treasurer for 17 years – can’t quite put his finger on it. “We’re a like-minded gang of skinflint PPLs who want a nice, safe, well-maintained 172 at our beck and call when we wish to play,” he says. “We’ve always been careful with our money but we’ve always had maintenance to the highest specification. We keep a close eye on the margins, and any surplus goes into the engine fund. The club is in sound financial health, and above all, we all treat the aircraft as if it was our own – it really doesn’t look like a club hack.”

The aircraft is a Cessna 172N, G-GYAV, invariably referred to as ‘the Queen of the Skies’, recently repainted and re-upholstered in leather and kept in concours condition by the club’s 70 members, of whom fewer than 30 are regular fliers. AV is the latest in a string of aircraft owned and operated by SMAC, and some of them have been pretty unique. Moths, of course, but a Foster Wickner Wicko (what?), Ercoupe, Piper Tri-Pacer and Colt – where are they now, eh?

SMAC, originally Southport Aero Club, came into being at an inaugural meeting in St John Hall, Southport, in July 1951. The driving forces were Eric Baker and Henry Harker, but also present were Wilf Bold, Cyril Clumpus and a man who was to figure prominently in the Club throughout its life, David Vernon. Baker and Harker were already pilots, Vernon had been demobbed from the RAF that year having



Top: the inaugural meeting that established Southport Aero Club in July 1951
Above: at Woodvale with Ercoupe G-ARHA on delivery day, David Vernon in the cockpit
Left: G-ARMP, the club’s first Cessna



flown Moths, Harvards and Meteors, and was later to fly from Blackpool for Silver City – six round trips a day to the Isle of Man. The plan was to fly from RAF Woodvale, but permission could not be obtained. Plan B was to operate from the beach at Hesketh Park, but the owner thought it was ‘not suitable for flight training’. So with no base and no plane, the club members began by flying other people’s aircraft from Blackpool or Liverpool – not an auspicious start. After a lot of Air Ministry to-ing and fro-ing it was finally ruled that as Hesketh Park was a licensed airfield anybody could fly from there, so the club settled in. They bought a Tiger Moth, G-ANOD, for £250 and hired

a CFI, John Formby, whose day job was flying a Spitfire from Woodvale on ‘THUM’ flights, gathering data for the weather forecasts of the day.

Charging 45 shillings an hour (£2.25) the club soon realised it was losing money, but once the basics were sorted out it began to prosper. In 1956 it bought a second aircraft, the above-mentioned Foster Wickner Wicko G-AFJB, which was an enclosed-cabin type more suitable for touring. A pre-war design, it was one of only 11 examples made and it still exists – it is being restored by Joe Dible at Ron Souch’s airstrip near Southampton. (See www.wicko.com). Three years later a third aircraft briefly appeared, this one an Auster, G-AJIH, borrowed from Barrow-in-Furness.

Trouble is, if you want to see what a proper maintenance bill looks like, you should fly your aircraft off a beach strip that’s inundated by the tide twice a day. By

1960 the Tiger needed a total rebuild, and had to be sold for £109. The Wicko had been sold in 1959, and once again the members were flying elsewhere. In 1961 they leased an Ercoupe, G-ARHA, and finally got permission to move off the beach to RAF Woodvale. The Ercoupe was followed by a Piper Colt, which in turn was replaced by the club’s first Cessna, a 172B, G-ARMP. A Cessna 150, G-ATNX, was bought for training towards the end of the 1960s.

In 1969 the club was afflicted by the GA disease, factional in-fighting, and a split saw half the members take the two Cessnas to the old North Airfield at Speke in Liverpool, which is now an industrial estate. They took over the old British Eagle canteen as a clubroom, but in their truncated guise they could not keep two aircraft running, and the 150 was sold. The clubhouse, too, was expensive and under-used, so it had to go, and they became a club where pilots could take a touring aircraft away for a week at a time, paying only for the hours flown rather than a minimum daily rate. Members ventured all over Europe, and utilisation was heavy.

Chris Wylie joined at that time and

learned to fly on the North Field at Speke. "It was a great aerodrome and could have become the primary GA field in the north of England," Chris says. "CAT had the South Field and GA had the North, and they operated perfectly together. It was fun, too – when you did your first solo they'd get the fire engines out and hide behind walls, which did wonders for your confidence." But Liverpool Council sold off everything it owned, North Field fell into the hands of a property developer and GA was forced across the way to Speke.

In 1979 the club became a limited company and changed its name to the Southport and Merseyside Aero Club 1979 Ltd. Another 172, G-BFJV, followed ARMP in 1988, but after it was written off in a taxiing accident SMAC was once again a club without an aircraft. In 1992, they bought the Queen of the Skies. Today, as

Right: club member Andy Ireland with the Queen of the Skies at Benbecula
Bottom right: pilot member Peter Dodds takes a back seat in AV with son Josh somewhere over Cheshire (Photo: Roger Penney)
Below: the club's Cessna G-BEJV was written off following a taxiing accident



ever, SMAC has no owner or manager and operates entirely on voluntary labour. The Queen of the Skies flies over 200 hours a year and is lavished with love. Among the members is an AME, always useful, and an examiner, ditto, and three instructors – CFI Archie Grice recently retired from Cranfield. Speke has been reinvented as John Lennon International Airport and the amount of commercial traffic has increased radically, but Chris says GA operations are not hampered. "The airport's development has been a great boon to Liverpool," he says. "It hasn't always been busy, and it's good to see it thriving. Fitting into the traffic is not a problem. Sometimes they'll ask you if you're ready immediate, and if you say yes and sound confident you'll be fine."

Addressing the club's longevity, Chris says: "It's all about the flying, really. We don't really have a social side. We meet for the AGM, and afterwards everybody goes down to the brewery, but beyond that everything focuses on the Queen of the Skies."

The club has 76 members but only around 30 could be described as active pilots. They use an online booking system,

and members often point out on the booking chart that there's a spare seat or two, and would anyone else like to come along? The aircraft is maintained by Keenair at Liverpool, with whom the club has a symbiotic relationship – as a nominated affiliate of Keenair the club arranges security passes for all its members, at a cost, unfortunately, of £110 for three years. And if you come back late you'll find they've locked the gate on Dungeon Lane, which means you also need an Ingersoll key costing £30, which hurts if you're a skinflint. "Security's not an over-riding issue," says Chris. "The North Field used to have 'Checkpoint Charlie' so it's always been something we've coped with – the access card was only £5 a year then, though."

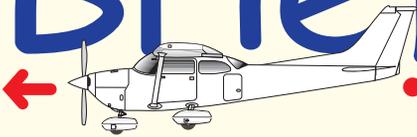
Members have traditionally come through word of mouth, and some travel

from as far away as Manchester. "There's room for more flying members and anyone who lives in our catchment area and who thinks they'd enjoy our kind of flying is welcome to come along for a look," says Chris. "We're arranging more trips away now – AV has been to Spain and the South of France, and it goes to the Isle of Man TT every year. The pips are squeaking for a lot of people at the moment, but these cycles come and go. We have a great group of people and above all, an excellent touring aircraft that's as well maintained as it's possible to be. Financially we're in good health; we have a fund set aside for when we have an engine to zero and as long as we repaint and stay on top of corrosion we're set fair for the future."

AOPA wishes Southport and Merseyside Aero Club well for the next sixty years, at least. ■



Briefings



Coventry rises from the ashes



In a major turnaround given that it lost its only passenger service in 2008 and its then operators filed for bankruptcy soon afterwards, Coventry Airport has announced grand plans for expansion which could create something on the order of 10,000 jobs.

Unlike too many such visions it does not rely on the provision of des res estates where once aircraft flew; owner Sir Peter Rigby is committed to developing the aviation side and returning passenger flights to Coventry.

Sir Peter, who made his money with SCH computers, is Chairman of Coventry Airport and has a portfolio of aviation interests, including Patriot Aviation and London Helicopter Centres, and is a fixed-wing and helicopter pilot. He's planning a two-pronged development, with the airport and its infrastructure on one side and a joint

Coventry Airport – the dark clouds may be lifting

venture to develop the environment around the airport on the other. The latter will apparently include a technology office and manufacturing park covering more than 200 acres, while the former starts with improvements to the airport's passenger terminal and cargo facilities. He also wants an airport hotel, restaurant, car parking, hangarage and a new access road.

Sir Peter, who acquired the airport in April last year, says Coventry would have the immediate capacity to serve one million passengers a year by re-starting airline operations, but the company stresses that general aviation is a primary focus and passenger operations are further down the line. ■

When you're in trouble...

'Stranded Flyer' is a new website that describes itself as 'a communal self-help breakdown service for pilots' and it looks like a very good idea indeed. Set up by pilots Nigel Charles and Tony Oliver, it allows you to register your whereabouts and your contact details so any fellow-pilot who is stranded in your neck of the woods has someone to turn to for help. While in the general aviation world you'll usually find someone to give you assistance if you need it, sometimes beyond the call of duty, it's a positive step to have the business formalised so helpers openly volunteer their services.

When you sign up, you input the skills and services you're able to provide – ground transport, accommodation, air transport, engineering help, Serbo-Croat spoken, whatever – along with a phone number. You'll be flagged up on the Stranded Flyer map at your home location, partly because aerodrome locations might get clogged.

Nigel, a retired BA long-haul captain, says almost 200 people have so far signed up. Tony, an IT specialist who formerly worked for QinetiQ, is in the process of making the site smartphone compatible, running trials on Android and iPhone operating systems so you won't need access to a laptop when you're stuck.

The website is at <http://sites.google.com/site/strandedflyer2/>

Putting the big in Biggin

Biggin Hill has been ranked in the top ten most popular business aviation airports in Europe, according to a league table by publishers Blue Sky Aviation News. The rankings are winnowed out of a pile of data and trends in business aviation across the continent, and as this segment of general aviation continues to grow quite strongly – up 5.5 percent during 2010 – Biggin is landing an increasing portion of the traffic. In 2002, the level of international arrivals as a percentage of the total was 31 percent. Today, the figure is nearer 50 percent.

Biggin's Managing Director Jenny Munro is very bullish about the ranking, and about the future. "This shows London Biggin Hill in its rightful place among the ten most convenient and valued executive airports in Europe," she says. "Our proximity to London and the full MRO and FBO portfolio offered by the leading industry service providers based here combine with choice, flexibility and a flawless service to achieve the right balance for the customer."

Well, that's good. If you're old enough to remember twelve or more light singles in the pattern at Biggin at the end of a sunny Sunday afternoon when everyone was rolling home replete from Le Tooks you might have mixed feelings about its success as a business hub, but it remains friendly to the lower orders of GA, and importantly, it has just (finally) joined the Strasser Scheme! (See story in 'AOPA Working for You' section).

Line up after the what? Today's traffic on the ramp at Biggin



See those green shoots yet?

Pilot poaching between airlines is on the rise, according to Boeing – an early indicator of a recovery in the employment landscape. At the Paris Air Show Boeing's Flight Services Vice President Sherry Carberry released the company's annual analysis of global air crew requirements, which predict that 459,600 new pilots will be needed over the next 20 years. Last year, Boeing predicted a requirement of 446,500 pilots. The predicted number of new technicians and engineers needed to keep the fleets flying has risen from 596,500 to 650,000 over the same period. That means the industry must train 23,000 new pilots and 32,000 new technicians a year. Most demand comes from Asia and is driven by growth, but there will also be significant demand in the west because of retirement.