

I stood looking at a small, tubby, solid-looking low wing monoplane with a bubble canopy for two, all perched on a short-coupled nosewheel undercarriage. This was my first meeting with the Victa Airtourer, which I had been asked to assess as possible equipment for the London School of Flying (LSF) at Elstree, to replace the Chipmunks that formed the backbone of the fleet.

So, what was this newcomer? Designed by Henry Millicer, then chief designer of the Australian Government Aircraft Factory, it was the winning idea in a competition for a two-seat trainer/tourer sponsored in the UK by the Royal Aero Club. The prototype had been of wooden construction, but the type was developed by the Victa lawnmower company and put into production with an aluminium structure. Launched in 1959 with the then ubiquitous 100hp Continental flat four to provide the power, it soon proved to have not enough of it to cope in the hot

Australian climate, so later machines produced for home consumption were fitted with 115hp Lycomings. Many that found their ways to Britain, though, retained the smaller unit.

Soon there were troubles. Selling successfully, the Airtourer caused concern among the more established builders of GA aircraft and several American products flooded the Australian market at bargain prices. There was no government support for the home industry (an idea cribbed from the UK?) so Victa were unable to compete; although they continued in their main role as makers of lawnmowers, they

opted out of the aeroplane business and, for a while, the Airtourer seemed dead. By this time 168 had been produced; allegedly, six had been ordered – just too late – by the LSF, although this conflicts with the information that I had after completing the assessment stage. Personally, I would have preferred to instruct in the antipodean product than on the type eventually chosen, but my first choice would have been to retain the Chipmunk. Despite the setback, this was not the end. The design rights were sold to Aero Engine Services Ltd (AESL) of New Zealand and production restarted. Under



# **Victa Airtourer** **Down Underpowered**

the new ownership 80 Airtourers were produced and 25 of these in unfinished form were shipped to Britain, where Glos Air of Staverton (now Gloucestershire Airport) completed and sold them. During this time power increased again; some AESL machines had 150hp Lycomings, while others went to 160hp with the performance benefits of variable pitch propellers. Later still, the Airtourer was phased out and replaced on the line by the Airtrainer, which became the ab-initio trainer for the Royal Australian Air Force. Had it not been for combined political and economic issues, it might have been used

in a similar role for our own flying Services. The Scottish Aviation/BAE Bulldog won the toss.

Now that we know a bit about the Airtourer's pedigree, perhaps it is time to look more closely at the state of the hardware and then clamber aboard. The way in is via walkways on both wing roots and fuselage-mounted footsteps, a journey that leads to standing on the seats. This is not as unkind to one's clothes as it may seem, as a mud flap can be lifted on to the seat cushion.

On entry the most

notable sight is the central mounting of the control column, a feature that I have met on the Topsy Trainer and the Hornet Moth. Although this leaves some nice free airspace ahead of the seats for reading maps, I find it disconcerting not to have the stick immediately in front – especially when the time comes to try some aerobatics. Other cockpit equipment

includes throttles within reach of both occupants, two brake levers and duplicated top-pivoting rudder pedals, but unfortunately only one left-mounted flap lever. Behind the seats is a small baggage area, and a map compartment sits beneath the instrument coaming. The internal set-up seems more modern in concept than one might expect from a product of its time.

Unfortunately, neither my brief notes nor my memory can recall whether the machine used for the tests was of the 100 or 115hp variety, but as it had been in the

Colour photos: Keith Wilson



**This photo: Airtourers were shipped from New Zealand to Staverton for finishing**  
**Below: original brochure shows interior details**



Via Philip Jarrett

*David Ogilvy ponders on an impressive antipodean design that could have been a contender*

UK for some time and as I was not heavily impressed by the take-off or climb performance, I assume that it was one of the lower-powered breed. On the move, taxiing calls for unusually firm use of the rudder pedals to make it go where ordered, but a brief touch of help from the brakes can tighten the turn. The take-off roll can be shortened by use of the first of four notches of flap, which brings with it a touch of aileron droop, but although this improves initial roll rate it is alleged to have an adverse effect on general handling. However, overall, I felt that the ailerons needed more input than expected and certainly they were less effective on the climb than those on a Chipmunk, which take a lot of beating for lightness and rapid response rate.

In level flight the Airtourer runs along smoothly and only minor trim changes are needed between speed variations; the primary controls all seem reasonably well



Via Philip Jarrett

**Top: original Airtourer was underpowered for Australian conditions**  
**Above: a 1962 Victa Airtourer 100 – swamped in its home market**  
**Left: centrally-mounted control column felt 'disconcerting'**  
**Below: central stick left bags of room, although you had to stand on the seat**

coordinated, with the ailerons continuing to produce the desired results right down to the stall breakaway, about 10 knots before which a warning horn jogs the mind. My notes show that the horn starts at about 60 knots, although this seems to be on the high side. There are restrictions on spinning (or there were at the time) so I cannot vouch for its conduct in that mode.

I am no aerobatic artist, but I went through the basic manoeuvres that cover

the needs of any pilot's normal training programme. A loop went round happily from 125 knots IAS, but I found the off-centre stick unhelpful and particularly so on a slow roll, in which the ailerons needed to have greater movement than I would have chosen. I had no cause to fly the machine to its permitted limits, but the airframe's published figures of +6g and -3g are comforting, as is the VNE at 203 knots.

The end of a flight is as important as is the start, but a generous flap limiting speed of 103 knots allows plenty of choice to suit different traffic patterns. Equally the choice of flap settings is helpful (better than the Chipmunk) with the fourth position offering 34° of depression, although this leads to a rapid speed decay and an unnecessarily steep approach for normal training operations. The single flap lever, within reach of the left-hand seat occupant only, is a minor handicap on dual instructional flights. I found nothing unusual about the final approach and touchdown, choosing the second flap setting as the most comfortable for most conditions.

According to the registration section at the CAA, ten Glos-Airtourers and three Victa Airtourers are airworthy in the UK, with eight more known to exist, so despite its age this interesting Australian design should have a happy future, all aided and abetted by an active Airtourer Association. It is unfortunate that in its heyday, through no fault of its designer or original producers, it had a chequered production career. Without this setback it might have spread its wings more widely – and justifiably. ■

