

Who needs runways?

All aeroplanes land; not all of them use runways. Martin Robinson samples a lake landing in a de Havilland Beaver



I t's not often that I get a chance to fly while anyway on AOPA business but given the chance if time permits I grab the opportunity. About a half an hour's drive north of Toronto lies the GA airfield of Buttonville, and it was there that I was introduced to the DHC -2 Beaver. Buttonville airfield is a busy place serving the Toronto conurbation, with a variety of aircraft including a healthy number of business jets, although the majority of aircraft were single-engine aeroplanes and light twins. As may be expected, a number of aircraft had wheels and floats!

While sitting in the lounge area waiting to go and fly the Beaver, the co-owner of the aircraft gave a potted history of the aeroplane. C-FDTZ was the 33rd Beaver off the Canadian production line in 1948, a full 12 years before I was even thought about! de Havilland Canada's production of Beavers ran to almost 1700 sold to both the military and civil world – the Beaver is truly a Canadian aircraft as in 1946 the Ontario Department of Land and Forests made a considerable input to the design, with particular attention to its versatile utility, seating for six people with short take off and landing capability. The aircraft received its certification in March 1948.

Eventually I went out to the apron to meet Rick, who was to take me through the finer points of flying the Beaver. Immediately I was drawn by the size of this single engine aircraft. As an amphibian it sat high on the tarmac and it looked enormous. Although it is almost 60 years old, it has been refurbished by Muskoka Golf Airways with club style seating, bubble windows for the passengers and a fresh paint scheme, and in the morning sunshine she glistened.

Although I was to fly up to Orillia to do some lake landings, C-FDTZ's main job is hauling golfers and their kit up to the Muskoka resort and golf course. The huge Pratt and Whitney radial engine reminded me of what gave me the aviation bug in my youth. This was a rugged single engine aeroplane and it is big.



*Top: float planes moored at the edge of the 'runway' at Orillia, Ontario
Above: on finals, oddly enough, you check to make sure that the gear is up*

Climbing up onto the side of the floats to take a look inside, once again I could not help but be impressed by the dimensions of this aircraft.

So this is the story of the flight. After a delay due to some administration issues we are finally invited to strap ourselves in. Sitting in the right hand seat, so high off the ground, I notice how other pilots are beginning to gather, presumably to listen to the sound of that radial engine. Rick fires her into life, and once again I'm surprised, this time by how quiet the aircraft is. It had a three-bladed propeller, but I

can only assume the low noise level is down to the additional insulation the company has installed to give the interior of the aircraft the feel of an executive jet.

Cleared to taxi, we follow a Beech Jet down the taxiway to the easterly runway at Buttonville, and as we wait our turn to line up Rick talks me through the take off procedure. With those two huge floats, I imagined that our take off run would be quite long. Looking down the run with nothing in front of us, Rick applies the power smoothly and the Beaver's three-bladed propeller begins to drag that large airframe down the runway – 20, 30, 40, 60kts, rotate with the Ts & Ps in the green. With plenty of runway still ahead and a positive rate of climb I raise the gear.

As we clear the ATZ we turn north. There is



*Left and above: many of the owners of the beautiful homes which line the lake shore at Orillia own and fly float planes
Below left: the Beaver has a 'throw-over' yoke for passing control between pilots*



only one control wheel which is connected to a central post. By releasing a locking system Rick swings the control over me and says, "You have control – just fly us north." On reaching 1500 feet we settle into the cruise at 90kts. Looking at my map I notice that the route we are flying takes us past the towns of Aurora, Newmarket and Keswick. Rick points out Cooks Bay, which is the southernmost point of Lake Simcoe. Up to this point the scenery below had been fairly average, but on reaching the lake Canada seemed to explode into full Technicolor. Rick asks me to follow the right hand shoreline and to descend to 750 feet QNH in order to get a better view (the lake is 650 feet above sea level). I make a right hand turn to follow the shoreline – in a



*Above: Rick and Martin back at Buttonville after flying from Orillia
Below right: see yourself going by - the Beaver on short final
Below: Orillia's ramp; the aerodrome has water, grass and tarmac runways*



aircraft with a 40 foot wing span and 100 feet above the lake your turn is no more than rate one. Keeping around one thousand feet from the shoreline you get a fantastic view of the stunning lakeside properties, most of which had boats moored alongside. Some also had float planes. Flying an aircraft like the Beaver in such a stunning environment has to be one of the most rewarding jobs in the world. I said to Rick that I preferred the view from his office window to mine. With a nod and a smile Rick replies, ah yes, but you don't have to land your office on water! The nearest I've ever been to landing on water in the UK has been on a very wet runway, so I was looking forward to my first ever lake landing.

Orillia has three kinds of landing area, grass, tarmac and water. As we get nearer to our destination we climb back up to 1000feet. When landing on a lake for the first time it is advisable to fly over the landing area to inspect the surface, looking particularly for things that may be floating. However, the spot that we are to land on is already in use with a variety of float planes arriving and departing – Beavers, Cessna 172s and Cubs. Prior to entering the pattern I hand back the single control to Rick. The preparation is the same as for landing on a runway – checks downwind and so on. Turning onto finals the vastness of the lake becomes apparent. Flying a normal three degree approach at about 75kts the lake continues to fill the screen. After a final check that the gear is up, we glide over the lake and float onto the surface. There is a rush of noise as the floats make contact, but it's over before it's begun. "Now we're a boat," Rick says as he begins to sail us over to the ramp, manoeuvring with the rudders at the back of the floats attached to the rudder pedals. On approaching the water ramp Rick lowers the undercarriage and we taxi out of the water and park on Orillia apron.

Given the operating environment in Canada it's easy to see why this aircraft has had such a long career, and one which is set to continue for some time. When the Ontario Department of Land and Forests had a hand in the Beaver's design those folks knew what they had in mind. It's hard to imagine the same thing happening today. ■

