

Unhappy landings



David Ogilvy writes on aerodrome threats in which AOPA is involved, and pleads for early warning of new problems

AOPA continues to oppose the many obstructions faced by UK GA in its fight to retain a geographical spread of available aerodromes and airstrips, without which ownership of a private or business aeroplane loses much of its practical purpose. Several months ago Government policy confirmed support for this, but still little has been done to back the statement.

The problems confronting owners, operators and users of flying sites remain as widespread as ever, but without doubt wind turbines are at the top of the current complaints list. Interestingly this extends way beyond aviation's concern, as an article headed 'Wind Farm Developers are bribing communities' appeared recently in a national newspaper. Although clearly your association must be concerned only with the flight safety aspects, the principles apply regardless of the reasons for lodging objections.

It is common knowledge that developers may contribute to local community projects through what are known as Section 106 agreements. These may well be sweeteners to reduce the number of objections, but they are channelled through the local planning authority and are above board. However, there are increasing numbers of cases in which energy firms wishing to build wind farm

Right: developers stand to make massive profits from wind farm subsidies

undermine the recognised planning process by offering payments directly to the communities concerned, to cover the cost of such amenities as sports pitches, children's play areas or even pensioners' lunch clubs.

The Campaign to Protect Rural England has unearthed no fewer than 35 sweeteners offered by wind farm developers. In one case, according to CPRE, this included an income to a small community of £30,000 for each year of the farm's lifetime. AOPA strongly supports the Campaign's statement that the only solution is to outlaw these payments, insisting that such proposals should go through the accepted system. There is evidence to support allegations that some airport operators may be parties to this dubious procedure, accounting for their failure to object to proposals in their own immediate vicinities. More than one cynic, understandably, has queried whether they place safety below money on their scale of priorities. It is a problem that is being watched closely.

Although companies intending to erect wind farms or single wind turbines have many ways and means of obtaining support for their proposals, some remain sensitive to local attitudes and we are aware of at least three applications that have been withdrawn as direct result of objections. The latest in which AOPA has been involved concerns Eaglescott, in North Devon; here the intended siting of the turbines would have been detrimental to the broad range of flying activities that take place there and could have been hazards on the track of Devon Air Ambulance flights between the airfield and the neighbourhood hospital.

Where aerodromes change ownership, often there are justifiable shudders within the GA fraternity. Sandown is now owned by a developer and several users have approached AOPA with concerns for its future. Although all is far from fine for the longer term, we have received this response to our queries that may ease immediate worries: 'We have not made any final decisions about what to do with this holding, and in the present economic climate are unlikely to do so immediately.' A broadly

Right: there's a risk that Wycombe Air Park could be turned into a football stadium

comparable situation applies to Wycombe Air Park/Booker, where the developer intends to convert much of the available space to a major football facility. AOPA's request to Wycombe District Council for information on what they might accept or refuse brought the following response: 'The Council is only at the very start of a long process of considering the future of Wycombe Air Park – and consulting thereon.' We have asked to be kept informed of developments.

Many readers will know that Redhill has been the subject of several proposals, which have led to some confusion. The current situation relates to an application to convert the site to an equestrian centre, and an appeal has been made to the Secretary of State on the grounds of non-determination by Tandridge District Council.

AOPA has received complaints that plans for Humberside to have a substantial chunk of controlled airspace will involve considerable delays and route diversions for GA aircraft. The objectors' argument is based on the fact that by far the majority of users are GA related and that on an average day the airport handles only 6-7 commercial air transport movements, with numbers that have declined over the past 18 months.

AOPA has been involved with complaints about a substantial wind farm proposal in the vicinity of Durham Tees Valley. The airport itself is not objecting, for it is owned by Peel Holdings, which includes a company called Peel Windpower. The environmental page of Peel's website states 'The Department is heavily committed to wind farm developments both in England and north of the border in Scotland.' Despite repeated requests, the airport has failed to provide satisfactory answers to the questions that we have raised.

The long-standing battle between Finningley Village airstrip and Robin Hood Airport (formerly RAF Finningley) is far from over. Controlled airspace for the latter has been approved by the Directorate of Airspace Policy without satisfying local objections; lawyers are now involved. If the situation can be clarified in time we hope to provide the full and complex story in the next issue, written by the long-standing AOPA members who own, operate and have long-term plans for their flying site.

Early attempts to have Lee-on-Solent (formerly the Royal Navy's HMS Daedalus) converted to a site for GA were fed and watered almost entirely by AOPA, with moral support from Gosport and Fareham Councils. More recently, though, Lee Flying Association (LFA) has taken very effective control of a very complex case, in which the Hampshire Police Air Support Unit, South-East England Development Agency, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, Portsmouth Naval Gliding Centre, Fleetlands Heliport and others are key players. There is now an air-ground frequency of 118.925 MHz. Visiting pilots must be fully briefed before flying to Lee and should study both the Airfield Manual and Pilot's Guide at www.eghf.co.uk. LFA is to be congratulated on the work carried out to make such progress on what has been – and is – a politically complex

Right: Branscombe in Devon is under attack from neighbours who have moved into the area recently



situation. Now AOPA is in the back seat, but your association started the ball on the move more than 15 years ago.

Among many smaller bases that have need for help is Branscombe near Seaton in Devon, which has been operating for more than 20 years. Several residents, all of whom have moved into the area since the aerodrome was opened, have made loud noises of objection and they are aggressively opposing the continued use. In certain parts of the USA, anyone who objects to a local airport (as they tend to call even smaller flying sites) is required to have this recorded with the Deeds, which could affect a house's valuation. AOPA's policy is that a person who buys property in the vicinity of an aerodrome should organise a proper search beforehand and then he/she buys any noise with the house. Branscombe serves many useful purposes and has hosted an annual Air Day that, over the years, has raised a substantial six-figure sum for charitable causes. Also, its closure would cause loss of several skilled jobs. Both these points are especially relevant in the present economic climate and anyone who objects to a relatively low-key flying operation is being inexcusably selfish. AOPA has asked East Devon District Council not to take into account any such unjustifiable complaints.

Among other places that have sought your association's help recently are Wickenby, in Lincolnshire, regarding an application for a new hangar, Colemore Common in Hampshire,

seeking a Lawful Development Certificate and Llandegla in Wales with a prospective windfarm problem. More than a dozen earlier cases remain on the AOPA active list.

An entirely separate issue in which we are involved concerns the government's proposed eco-towns, at least five of which, if implemented, would lead to aerodrome or airstrip closures. On this score we are deeply involved with Leicester, on which we are providing aviation advice for Leicestershire County Council. Also we have provided guidance for Manby and Strubby in Lincolnshire, which are threatened.

It is becoming increasingly clear that threats to all sizes and shapes of flying sites are on the increase. Although for thirty years we have been involved with planning applications, requests for Lawful Development Certificates, appeals and all the longer term trapping, now windfarms and eco-towns add to both the nature and number of related problems.

AOPA continues to provide first-aid advice to anyone who has a planning or operational problem and offers more detailed help to an organisation or individual in current membership. However, experience shows that we need to repeat our earlier request: to contact the association immediately a problem arises, using us as the first port of call and not the last. We cannot undo damage that has been done, but, given time, we may well be able to help prevent it happening. Then you are happy and so are we! ■

