

Corporate Member Profile: Stapleford Flight Centre



One-stop flight training shop

As one of the few remaining family-owned flying schools in the UK, Stapleford Flight Centre continues to flourish despite the best efforts of Eurocrats and VATmen.

Liz Moscrop pays a visit

One of the earliest Stapleford-based commercial pilots was one Amy Johnson, who flew paying passengers to Paris in de Havilland Dragon Rapides. Today Stapleford students head off to captain 737s for Ryanair. The aerodrome may be steeped in history, but its owners maintain its edge by keeping a well-honed business eye on the future. With forty years of continuous training under its belt, Stapleford Flight Centre (SFC) must be doing something right. Oh, and club membership stands at 800, with many members owning and operating their own aircraft from the field.

Captain Colin Dobney, head of training, says SFC has ambitious plans to keep growing. "We are now looking at going integrated and offering integrated and modular training," he says. "We take a good look at the money and investment required, however – we always try to do things in easy steps, and not bite off more than we can chew." Prospects are bright, though. He continues: "We have seen no let-up in the number of enquiries and CVs we are receiving."

Scratch the surface of this slick operation and it is easy to see why it has enjoyed such longevity. Many of the staff are long-serving employees who have been there for decades. John and Pam Chicken own the airfield and most of the training aircraft outright, which saves them landing fees, parking charges and large leasing and mortgage costs on their aircraft. Stapleford Maintenance is part of the Stapleford Flight Centre group, so their aircraft are maintained to the highest JAR 145 standards at cost. There are eight engineers, all with more than fifteen years service, as well

as two CAA-approved air test pilots on site.

The school offers commercial flight training, private pilot flying lessons and aircraft servicing and maintenance. It offers PPL, CPL, IR, ATPL and MEP training courses as well as PPL taster lessons.

With a fleet of almost forty aircraft ranging from Cessna 152 basic trainers to the advanced twin-engine PA23 Seneca and PA31 Chieftain, the jewel in its crown is a spanking new glass cockpit Diamond DA42. There is also a dedicated simulator building on the premises, housing modern flight simulators capable of replicating PA31, PA34, PA28 and DA42 aircraft, with another sim on order. To cater for its steady growth, SFC recently built swish new accommodation for its commercial students, who pay £15 a night for an ensuite single room and share a large kitchen.

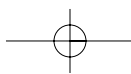
Unlike many schools, SFC has not suffered an instructor shortage. Colin says: "We have an extremely busy flight instructor course with a ready supply of students that has helped to fuel our expansion." SFC has 26 full time and 10 part time instructors on its books, with around 25 fresh entrants pumping new blood into the school via its instructor courses. Colin continues: "All our people come back and instruct to continue with their hours."

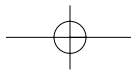
In a roundabout way, that's what he did. A former Stapleford student, Colin became an



instructor, winding up at Ryanair flying Boeing 737-200s. In 2000 he returned to Stapleford as head of training. He has around 10,000 hours, half of which are on B737s, on which he is still current. His flying activity at Stapleford is mostly as an examiner for commercial students and IR renewals. He attributes the school's success to its good name, and prudence. "Everything hinges on the airlines taking people on. We were quite lucky after 9/11 as we are a reasonably-priced outlet, with a good name in the modular market. We attracted lots of international students."

Colin believes that the training industry will slow down in 2008, albeit while still experiencing growth. "Ryanair will continue to grow. The industry has hardly drawn a breath, but we are seeing instances like easyJet acquiring GB Airways and incorporating its pilots in their pool, so it is allegedly not hiring." He blasts the current British taxation laws, saying: "We are very disadvantaged in having the VAT regime. We have been looking hard at the Chinese and Indian markets. They are





attracted to the UK as our standards are higher than anywhere else, but ultimately choice comes down to price."

Flying at Stapleford

Stapleford aerodrome is situated near Epping Forest, about 3.4 nautical miles (6 km) south of North Weald. I've done a lot of flying from Stapleford, and Scott Welsford, an SFC CPL and IR instructor, took me up for a quick spin to refresh my memory and get some photos. Like any airfield around London, Stapleford suffers from some restrictions on flying, with Luton, London City and Stansted in its vicinity.



Above left: on short finals over the M25 for Stapleford's half-paved 22/04
Left: Captain Colin Dobney, Stapleford Flight Centre's Head of Training
Above: Stapleford's 40 strong fleet starts with the venerable Cessna 152
Right: there are several noise-sensitive areas close to Stapleford

potential loss of the IMC and other licences. He says: "Training does not do any harm and helps prevent accidents. It is stupid to lose it and the basic commercial pilot's licence (BCPL). People with 20,000h experience will potentially be refused a BCPL, which will become a PPL under EASA when national ratings will no longer exist. It has another knock-on effect for us as all our existing IMC business will go." With that in mind, Colin fully supports AOPA and its work. "It is great to be

give us talks on the airspace around here. We are very lucky with our membership as we are in an affluent part of the world, so people do go flying here." Club members are exempt from any landing fee charges. Full flying membership costs £80 a year, with associate membership and a joining fee priced at £30 and £10 respectively. The light and airy clubhouse is open 364 days a year and serves food and drink all day and most evenings.

The school also offers a "PPL Plus",



part of an umbrella organisation that is standing up for general aviation. It is very important that AOPA is behind GA to keep the general flying public up to speed with what is going on. We need a voice on industry committees to make our views known so that things can be changed."

On the positive side, the club is flourishing. Says Colin: "We offered quite a few flights into France, including Paris last year to encourage members to come down and fly. Flying groups use their own aircraft and we put on popular events. We have also got proper catering in-house, so often people come in for Sunday lunch. We run regular safety training evenings and get the CAA and NATS to come across and

intended for pilots with a PPL who want to beef up their skills. The course involves five hours flying plus eight hours ground tuition and is flown mainly in a PA28 Warrior, so doubles as familiarisation training for pilots who have not been signed off in a Warrior. For those who like excitement, SFC provides aerobatic training in its T67M260 Firefly.

So Stapleford looks set to thrive. It is likely to attract more commercial training business. London is only five miles down the road, and there is beautiful countryside on its doorstep. With such an illustrious history and a determined management team, it is evident that Amy Johnson's spirit lives on over Lambourne. ■

Both Stapleford and its neighbour North Weald have Stansted's Control Zone on their doorsteps. However, most PPL flying for students at SFC happens well out of the way over Essex. Just up the road is East Anglia, with beautiful countryside and virtually no controlled airspace. There are also LARS from Southend, Lakenheath and Marham, plenty of flat fields and disused wartime airfields.

Stapleford airfield contains the Lambourne VOR and has two parallel runways 22/04, one all grass and the other is paved, eventually becoming grass. There is a third runway, 28/10. Because of noise abatement regulations over the nearby garden centre and Abridge village, 28 is not commonly used. It can be a bit bumpy on departure as you cross 04/22, but theoretically not on landing as the 28 threshold is immediately after 04/22. There are pylons on finals to runway 22, which has a displaced threshold, but it has an upward slope, which helps with braking. The circuit can become extremely busy, especially at weekends, with lots of traffic passing through the overhead. The other thing to watch out for is the Stansted zone if you are coming from the North. The base is at 1,500 ft, which is near the circuit height of 1,200ft for Stapleford.

That said, there are some fantastic benefits of flying at Stapleford. In clear conditions, the views to London are fabulous. The club also has a great deal to offer the PPL who wants to bolster her or his skills, including a night rating, an instrument and Meteorological Conditions Rating (IMC)... for as long as this is valid, of course. Colin is angry about the

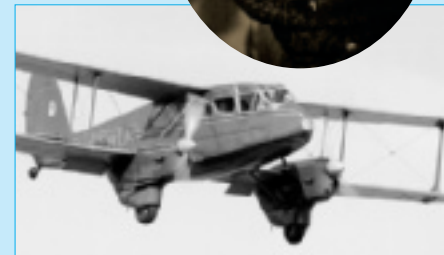
Where BA was born

Stapleford Aerodrome opened in 1933 as Essex Aerodrome and was an operating base for Hillman Airways, run by Edward Hillman. The service ran scheduled services to Paris using De Havilland DH.84 Dragon and DH.89 Dragon Rapide biplanes, charging £5.10s.0d return. One of the pilots was Amy Johnson. After two years Hillman ran into financial difficulties and was taken over by Whitehall Security Corporation, which merged the three airlines it owned to form British Airways. In 1936 BA transferred operations to Heston.

During the war the airfield was home to several operational squadrons, flying Hurricanes, Airspeed Oxfords, Tiger Moths and Austers. Stapleford played an important part in the preparations for D-Day. On 20 November 1944 a V2 rocket landed in the middle of the airfield leaving a 60 feet wide crater. On 23 February 1945 another rocket landed on the airfield campsite killing 17 people and injuring 50. An on site memorial recalls those who lost their lives.

In 1953 Roger and Buster Frogley transferred the Herts and Essex Aero club from Broxbourne in Hertfordshire to Stapleford Tawney, the hangars were renovated and they began flying Tiger Moths and Austers. And in 1955 the famous designer Edgar Percival set up a company at Stapleford under his name and started a production line for his EP9 crop spraying aircraft, building 40 aircraft. The current owners, the Chicken family took over in 1969.

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Above: Amy Johnson and Dragon Rapide

