

A voyage round my *Chipmunk*



After more than 30 years, Dennis Baldry's relationship with the de Havilland Chipmunk comes full circle

I was one of more than a million air cadets who, between 1958 and 1996, made their first ever flight in a Chipmunk. My turn came in August 1971 at RAF Coningsby, Lincolnshire. As I waddled towards WG321 in my (too tight) seat type parachute, the thundering surround-sound of departing Phantom jets filled the air. By the time I was strapped in (too tightly), the noise had become a distant rumble, replaced by the gentle putt-putting of a Gipsy Major on tickover. I felt a few welcome wafts of cool air on my face before the canopy slid forward and locked. This was it! I was 14 years old.

'Can you hear me, cadet?' asked my pilot, anonymous under a big white bone dome. I

faffed around for several long seconds before clicking the intercom switch on my mask in the desired direction. 'Yessir!' There was a distinct whiff of the breakfast someone had not kept down. I quickly released the mask before my stomach went into reflex.

In the next 30 minutes I got the usual package. 'Put your right hand on the stick and your feet on the rudder pedals. You have control.' This time I was determined to be snappier: 'I have control, Sir.'

'Don't grip the stick with your hand, thumb and forefinger is enough. Try a turn to the left.' To say I was enthralled would be an understatement. But this was no epiphany. From about the age of 10 the desire to be a

pilot had entered the depth of my heart. I was particularly interested in the combat aircraft of World War 2, especially fighters (both Allied and Axis). The Spitfire and Hurricane stood apart of course, and were my firm favourites. Now, for a few tantalising minutes, this Chippie was as good as my own personal Spitfire.

That was the first of several air experience flights I enjoyed over the next five years. For the

record, the first cockpit I ever sat in belonged to a Phantom FGR.2. During the same annual camp at Coningsby, I volunteered to fetch and carry for the technicians on No 54 Sqn. My reward was a generous invitation to assist with various checks, which included cycling the landing gear at least four or five times. I can still recall the thrill of it all, even now.

My life, my future, was all mapped out. There would be a seamless transition from Air Training Corps cadet to fighter pilot in the RAF. Soon, though, dark clouds of doubt began to settle in my mind. Did I really have the mental equipment to fly a fast jet? Somehow, I felt much more at home behind a standard RAF panel. Perhaps I could just fly Chipmunks? Perhaps not. The RAF tested my eyes and turned me down. Not 20/20. And colour blind

to boot. I do not mind admitting that I cried an absolute river. My dream was over and out.

Step forward JM Ramsden. In June 1978, JMR quite literally turned my miserable life around by giving me a job at *Flight International* magazine. He was *Flight*'s most distinguished editor and the head of a supremely talented editorial team. Despite being little more than an office boy, those years at *Flight* will always be special to me.

Next came another unbelievably lucky break. Over the next several years, I was given carte-blanche to commission a wide range of aviation books for Osprey Publishing. These included *Fast Jets: A Pilot's Eye View* by Chris Allan, and *Jet Combat* by Ian Black. Both flew with the Lightning Training Flight (LTF) at Binbrook, Lincolnshire. Chris later gave me an

exciting ride in a Lightning T.5. Ian gave me his Chipmunk pilot's notes. Before retraining as a pilot, 'Blacky' had been a navigator on Phantoms. We now fast forward to 2002.

A finger sign pointed to 'Wickenby Airport'. Within a few minutes I was inside the old watch office, signing up for a 20 minute trial lesson. CFI Steve Trafford showed me the controls of a Cessna 152. 'Done anything like this before?' he asked. 'Chipmunks in the cadets. I wanted to be a fighter pilot.'

Steve started the engine and then gave me the shiny levers. 'Nice take off.' Without bothering to check the ASI, I managed to fluke just the right amount of back pressure for a smooth lift off. It soon became obvious that I was no Lindbergh. But I stuck at it, taking inspiration from the motto of 626 Squadron:



Keith Wilson



Air Blume

'To Strive And Not To Yield'. Together with 12 Squadron, 626 flew Lancasters from Wickenby until the end of the war.

'Got your medical yet?' asked Steve. 'You'll need it before I can send you solo.' A mere formality – I was as fit as a stallion duck.

'You're colour blind,' announced my aeromedical examiner. It was that Ishihara test again, you know, the one where a series of dots reveal different sets of numbers. I thought my number was up. 'I'm sending you to Gatwick for a red lantern test.' I passed with (ahem) flying colours.

I could write a book about what happened next. Suffice it say that Steve was nothing if not thorough. Looking back, the depth of his instruction probably saved my neck more than once. First solo came in January 2003. When I turned downwind I could see the Red Arrows looping overhead Scampton in Diamond Nine. It was a poignant moment.

By the time I'd passed my GFT in June 2004, I knew exactly what I wanted to do next – fly something with a tailwheel. After five wonderful hours in a Super Cub at Clacton, I was sent off solo for my three take offs and landings. Indeed, I was enjoying myself so much that, after a good night's sleep, I did a landaway at Rochester. The weather was nigh on perfect, and I could see the whole of the Thames Estuary up to London.

After bidding a reluctant farewell to Clacton Aero Club, it was back on the road to Derbyshire and Baldry Towers. Being a total aviation person, I stopped for a sandwich at Old Warden, admiring the usual suspects (which for me always includes Shuttleworth's exquisitely original Spitfire V), and a bright yellow Chipmunk. Of course! Now I've got my tailwheel ticket, all I need is a conversion to type. No chance of doing that at Shuttleworth, obviously. But where?

The answer came, quite unexpectedly, on a drive-by at Sheffield City Airport (SCA). Parked on the apron was one immaculate Chippie, which, with its dayglo panels and overall grey paint scheme, was a dead ringer for WG321. Couldn't be the same one though, could it? Of course not; what are the chances of that happening?

Enquiries revealed that the former WD347

was operated by Yorkshire Vintage Flying School. Having booked my first slot, I went home to study the pilot's notes that Ian Black had given me all those years before.

My new instructor was Mike Roe, a QFI at Yorkshire University Air Squadron, Church Fenton. In the RAF since 1968, Mike had flown Phantoms with 19 Squadron at Wildenrath, in what was then West Germany.

'Got any pilot's notes?' he asked. 'I've got these,' I replied, handing them over for inspection. Mike then read aloud the only name written inside. 'Ian Black! He used to be my backseater on 19 Squadron! How did you come by these?' I told him my tale. 'This was obviously meant to be,' opined Mike.

We buckled in. This would be my first Chipmunk flight in nearly 30 years. And this time there is nobody to spoil the view because I'm now sitting in the front. As circuits were not allowed at SCA, we had to use Church Fenton and Retford Gamston. At first those

hard runways highlighted any inexactitude in my footwork. Soon, though, I began to click with the Chipmunk. After logging about six hours p/ut, including transits, circuits and some serious general handling, Mike decided that The Time Had Come.

'You've been flying the aeroplane very nicely; I'm getting out.' Before closing the hood and stepping off the wing for a cup of tea, he gave me a message of encouragement: 'DFU.'

The sweetness of that solo in April 2005 will stay with me forever. I kept everything normal, flying the aeroplane on the numbers.

Top: Dennis Baldry in WG321
Right: Dennis with the former WD347 at the former Sheffield City Airport
Below: WD390 up from Wickenby



Neil Parnham



And I didn't forget my downwind checks: 'My Friend Fred Has Hairy Balls'. Once heard, never forgotten! Mindful of the enormity of the moment, I gave myself a bit more room on base leg. I turned final with half flap, airspeed decreasing below 70kt. Time for full flap (30 degrees). I pointed the nose at the target. Anyone who has flown a Chipmunk will know that the aeroplane virtually lands itself. I closed the throttle over the threshold, added a touch of right rudder, and kept the package in the air until it gently three-pointed. Trebles all round!

'A dirty picture in a golden frame' is how the steel city of Sheffield was once described in its industrial heyday. If SCA ever had a USP, it was the Peak District National Park. I did a 'Dambuster run' at the earliest opportunity, revelling in the magnificent views along the Hope and lower Derwent valleys. On the way back to

Above right: WG321 in formation at Chipmeet
Right: original Chippie pilot notes

Below and right: nobody to spoil the view

Sheffield, I flew a dog-leg route via Dronfield, my home town. I dipped a wing over my old alma mater, the ATC hut of 1890 (Dronfield) Squadron and the family home where my heroic parents had brought up six fine, strong children.

Sadly, Yorkshire Vintage did not survive and its Chipmunk had to be sold. Incredibly, in April 2008, SCA closed for good. By that time I had returned to Wickenby and joined the WD390 Group. Established by Ron Best and



Stewart Smith, the Group operates one of the finest Chipmunks in the UK. Over a pint in The Ivy, the favoured watering hole of Wickenby's aviators, I asked Stewart if I could take the aeroplane over to Belgium for the forthcoming Chipmeet. Not unreasonably, he wanted to join me in this noble endeavour, but was thwarted by a prior engagement. WD390 stayed behind and I flew Fokker 50 from London City to Antwerp.

Arriving at the Chipmeet sans Chipmunk, I was rescued by organizers Tony and Edith De Bruyn. For a modest sum they allowed me to hire G-DHCC. It was ex Army, painted in the attractive red, white and light grey scheme now most associated with British military Chipmunks. With retired RAF instructor Guy Pearce in the rear cockpit, I sallied forth from Zoersel Oostmalle on a sector recce.

Right: after the day's flying was done



Air Blume



Air Blume



I soon picked out the Albert Canal, along which, 68 years earlier in May 1940, F/O Garland and Sgt Thomas Gray attacked a vital bridge in their all too vulnerable Fairey Battle light

bomber. Hacked out of the sky by intense flak, both men were awarded posthumous VCs.

Sipping a cold beer after the day's flying was done, I took another, longer look at the Chipmunk in which I had made my first flight as captain outside the UK. I concentrated on the serial. At that moment you could have knocked me over with a Chipmeet shoulder patch. It was WG321. It really was meant to be. ■

