



What's going on at Sywell?

The question has been asked frequently of late, but answers have been few and far between. **Pat Malone** talks to the aerodrome's owner



All is not sweetness and light at Sywell Aerodrome. Rumours are on the wing. Individuals have been kicked off the field, a stalag-type fence has been erected around it, the management plays ducks and drakes with the licensing, and the biggest and best flying school has upped sticks and moved to Peterborough Sibson. Sywell's owners have been blocked in their attempt to build a hard runway, and the future is widely said to be bleak.

Some say it's all part of a Machiavellian plot to drive aviation out of Sywell and turn it over to industrial use. Alienate all the people, put in for planning permission for a runway you know will never be granted, then claim the place is unviable and apply for a change of use. But the pieces don't quite fit; if this is somebody's cunning plan, the sub-plots and double bluffs would certainly baffle Machiavelli.

Plotter in chief would have to be Michael Bletsoe Brown, largest shareholder in Sywell Aerodrome Ltd and hands-on operator of the field. He doesn't come across like an evil genius; he has an answer for almost everything and seems bemused by circumstances beyond his control. It's not hard to see how he could alienate people, though – he's very much the owner of the aerodrome, and there's only one right way to do things.

Sywell, he says, has been in the family for 78 years and he is not about to wind it up. However, the aerodrome has never made a profit; it is supported by the industrial units on site – 60 of them, all providing lucrative rents. But, says Bletsoe Brown, that's the way life is.

"It is not part of the plan to turn over the aviation sector to industrial units," he says. "I could not do that even if I wanted to. The local strategic development plan – which this company campaigned for – sees Sywell as an aviation asset, and we would not have supported that if we had plans to the contrary."



So will Sywell still be an aerodrome ten years from now? Momentary pause. "I don't see why not. We would never shut aviation down at Sywell. But maintaining a licence might be a problem. It costs us £150,000 a year just to run the tower.

"But look, whether there's aviation here or not, the demarcation line between the aviation side and the industrial side is sacrosanct, and we could not build on the aviation side. That was something that we ourselves fought for in the Structure Plan back in 1988. We would not have done that if it was our intention to change the use.

"If aviation was moribund it would make no difference. It's not a brownfield site. The reason these buildings are here is because it's an airfield. It would otherwise be classed as 'development in open countryside,' and these buildings could not exist. They were built for aviation but have been converted to light industrial use. If we were forced to close we might well try to change the plan, but that's not on the agenda at the moment."

Sywell Aerodrome was established by

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Bletsoe Brown's grandfather Harold Brown and a group of enthusiasts in 1927 and remains

substantially in the hands of the Browns and the Shaws, the two families who were in at the beginning. In the 1930s, as well as being a base for private flying it attracted scheduled flights in Rapides and Fox Moths to the Isle of Man, Channel Islands, Bristol, Norwich and elsewhere. In 1935 Brooklands Aviation moved in armed with a War Department contract to train pilots, and 120 Tiger Moths operated here as 6 EFTS. Later they set up a maintenance facility for the Wellington and began assembling Mk 2 Lancasters, and later still they picked up a contract to maintain Vampires. In the late 1940s Derby Airways ran DC-3 and Ansons out of Sywell, before moving to Castle Donington and changing their name to British Midland.

Mr Bletsoe Brown speaks wistfully of those days, and it is clear he has in mind some updated version of that operation in mind. "I'm thinking of corporate aircraft," he says. "There are a significant number of businesses in Northamptonshire that would benefit from a base for corporate aircraft.

"A lot of business aircraft are going to be



