

Jam, jute and journalism may have faded into Dundee's history, but general aviation keeps soldiering on. Pat Malone profiles Tayside Aviation



Not even the most patriotic Dundonian would hold that Dundee is the centre of the known universe. It's quite a long way from almost everywhere and can be difficult to reach, although Scot Airways now runs direct flights from London City.

But for all its isolation, Dundee is a thriving hub of general aviation. The clubhouse at Tayside Aviation is usually heaving, with elbows jostling at the water cooler and the met screens. The hangars echo to the merry hum of profitable work, and rarely is the apron still. Dundee offers a level of activity that urban clubs in the Home Counties of England would envy. Pilots come from as far away as Hong Kong to train with Tayside Aviation. How do they do it?

The answer is, in large measure, Lovat Fraser – a man honoured by AOPA and many other aviation bodies for his contribution to general aviation in Scotland and beyond. Just recently he won the Air League's Scott Farnie medal, which recognises great work in the field of air education, and had his award presented to him by Prince Philip. There have been many men and women down the years who have contributed to the success of Tayside Aviation, but none have driven the business like Lovat Fraser.

The big feather in Tayside's cap is, of course, the Air Cadet Pilot Scheme – formerly

known as the RAF Flying Scholarship Scheme – for which Lovat Fraser bid successfully in the early 1990s, and through which thousands of RAF cadets have learned to fly. Tayside has been doing these scholarships continuously since 1978, initially as one of a number of contractors, but in 1994 it was awarded the sole national contract and farmed some of the work out to other AOPA corporate members as far afield as Southend and Bodmin, so the fruits of Lovat's labours were spread far and wide. The contract was originally for three years, but has twice been extended by five years. The task of each contract was to train 500 aspiring RAF officers and aircrew, each of whom receives 20 hours of flying.

The walls of Tayside's offices are lined with photographs of aircraft flown by Tayside alumni, military and civilian, who include the youngest 747 captain in British Airways, Andy Shaw, the chief pilot of Air 2000 and literally hundreds of military pilots who have passed through in 27 years of cadet scholarships.

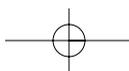
Lovat has a special affinity for air cadets, having learned to glide as a cadet in the 1950s. He had designs on an RAF career but the Sandys White Paper on defence in 1957 made the future of the RAF look so unattractive that he went instead into the family car business.

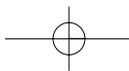
In 1968, with two friends, he formed a

company called Aerosport to operate a Topsy Nipper from a grass strip at Dundee. Lovat Fraser is not an overly sentimental man, especially where business is concerned, but after 37 years he still has the Nipper, and a twinkle comes into his eye when he speaks of it.

The grass strip had been established in the mid-1960s when Willie Logan, the civil engineer who started Loganair, flew to Dundee in his Aztec against the clock with his tender document for the construction of the Tay Road Bridge. He landed on some playing fields, made the deadline by 15 minutes, got the job and arranged to use the field for site inspections.

But the strip closed in the late 1960s and Lovat moved the Nipper to nearby Glenrothes while a battle raged to reopen Dundee. The strip had been approved by a Socialist council who thought it would be a good idea to promote flying. "Not something you'd hear from many councils today," says Lovat drily. When the Tories got in, they closed it and gave the land to Dundee University for playing fields, but when they in turn were ousted the Socialists opened it as an airfield again, and it has remained in business ever since. It now boasts a 1400-metre hard runway and a scheduled service – the Scot Airways Dornier 328 flying to London City five times a day, and





there's a weekly rotation of package holiday flights from Dundee to Jersey in a Fokker F27, May to September.

When the strip reopened in 1971 Lovat bought a second-hand Cessna 150 for flight training, and a small flight training operation bumped along just fine. A major milestone came in 1975 when the late Ted Girdler joined as CFI and operations director to put the club on a completely different footing.

"Ted made a very great contribution to this company," says Lovat. "We got our AOC, and at one point had two Aztecs doing charter work and pleasure flying, but we've had to give the AOC up because it's simply too onerous and expensive to keep it. It cost £2,200 just for the privilege of applying to the CAA for a single-engine AOC for the Aberdeen operation – Tayside operated in Aberdeen from 1988 to 1995 – and there were just too many hoops to jump through. We had the aircraft and the pilots, but the AOC had to go."

In 1978 Ted Girdler got approval for flying instructor training, something Tayside Aviation has never relinquished. "It's quite difficult to

go straight on to a different type of flying."

Scottish airline operators are particularly keen to take on Tayside's pilots because they know they're getting well-trained pilots who are happy living in Scotland. Says Lovat: "We get a lot of people going to Loganair and Scot Airways – we must have a couple of dozen at Scot Airways, Highland Airways, Eastern Airways and Loganair, and they have a built-in advantage in that they've always had to deal with the type of weather and turbulence that these small Scottish airlines encounter every day.

"They also go on to the major airlines, of course – we must have people with every major name in the business. I know of three or four former students now at FR Aviation, quite a lot at BA, including their youngest-ever 747 captain, Virgin, Monarch, Midland. Remember, we've trained about 4,000 cadets and countless pilots and instructors."

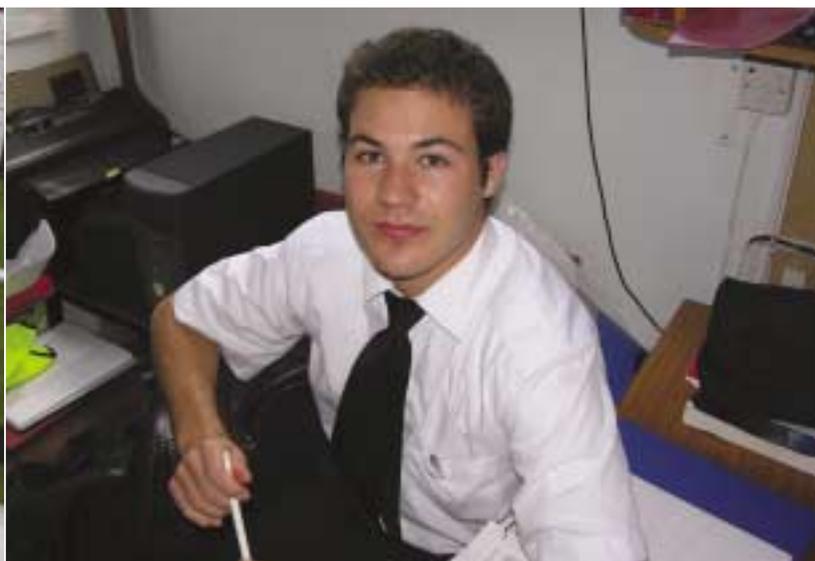
Lovat himself went full-time as MD when Ted left to form TG Aviation at Manston – now run by his son Mark, who also got his start at Tayside. Lovat, who also became CFI when he got his CPL in 1986,

contractors at Manston, Nottingham, Bodmin, Carlisle, Tesside, Wellesbourne Mountford and Southend, and we trained 88 cadets ourselves that first year.

"It was pretty hectic to start with, but we made sure everything went smoothly. The hardest part was waiting for the money from the MoD. Our subcontractors were anxious for their money, and we didn't have the resources to pay them. But the MoD finally paid up. Eventually we were able to train 250 of the cadets ourselves every year.

"It was tremendously good discipline for us because the RAF had to approve everything we did. They inspected our classroom facilities and aircraft minutely, and they weren't easy to please. It was good for us because it forces us to maintain the highest standards."

But under budget pressures, the RAF Directorate of Recruiting and Selection decided to put a stop to the Flying Scholarship scheme. Lovat did a lot of lobbying, including talking to Defence Minister Lewis Moonie, a local MP who was Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Defence, and the then Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Peter Squire, who



recruit flying instructors up here in Scotland," says Lovat, "so we have to grow our own. The hardest thing is to retain flying instructors – we've had some very good people, but it's difficult to keep them out of the clutches of the airlines. In fact, we've recently taken on four foreign instructors who approached us – one from Spain and three from Denmark – and they're very good indeed."

The Spanish instructor is Xavier Lopez, from Albacete, who heard of Tayside Flying Club when he was doing an English language course in Perth. "This is a great opportunity for me," he says. "I love this country, I love this area, I love flying and I love my work."

This shortage of flying instructors is a sore point with Lovat Fraser. "I believe we ought to be allowing people to instruct without having taken the commercial exams," he says. "You don't need them to do the job, and the CPL requirement hasn't made one bit of difference to standards of instruction, which is the only possible reason for imposing it. "We need an NPPL instructor, UK or pan-European, who has no need for these. As far as commercial exams are concerned, you forget half what you've learned as soon as you pass the CPL exams. There are lots of people who would like to be instructors but who don't want to go through the exams, and those who do go through the commercial exams are aiming to

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kept open the operation at Glenrothes and opened in Perth in partnership with the Scottish Aero Club, but moved out recently when local political factors made operations difficult. Tayside bought Glenrothes in 1995 after it had been closed for four years, and it is now home to an excellent licensed restaurant called – what else – the Topsy Nipper. The restaurant attracts pilots from all over Scotland, and some even fly from England for lunch. Says Lovat: "The restaurant is a means of diversifying and being less dependent on flying revenues. It's been very successful and adds a certain flavour to the Fife operation."

A second milestone came when Tayside Aviation was invited to tender for the UK Flying Scholarship Scheme, which was designed to train 500 cadets a year. Tayside won the contract, but the launch was far from smooth.

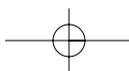
"As usual everything was done at the last minute," Lovat says. "We were given 488 names on May 28th and told to be up and running on July 1st. We sought out sub-

was an old friend. Partly as a result of his pressure the RAF said they would keep the scheme going but cut the number of cadets to 250 a year. In anticipation of the work, Tayside kept a full staff of 25 instructors waiting for the contract. When it came, there were only 10 cadets.

"That was extremely expensive for us," says Lovat. "We kept people on from November to May with little or no work, and it did serious damage to the company. We lost £180,000 that year, and it was almost terminal. In the event they eventually sent us 30 cadets and we had to downsize dramatically. Crucially, our general manager George Leckie wrote a restructuring plan which kept the bank onside."

The following year HQ Air Cadets took over the scholarship scheme and matters improved with the awarding of a new five-year contract, with Tayside Aviation getting 100 cadets in the first year and 191 the year after. The company has managed to retain 20 instructors and has 22 aircraft – four Grob 115s, two Katanas that are being sold – the Grobs are replacing four Katanas – ten 152s, three Warriors, two 172s and an Arrow for complex single training. Tayside Aviation employs 60 people.

Private pilots who fly from Dundee enjoy the advantage of having all the RAF-approved infrastructure, together with a highly-





disciplined staff and a well-equipped fleet. "People come from Dundee, all over Fife, even from Glasgow and Aberdeen," says Lovat. "At Glenrothes we get a lot of people from Edinburgh, with general aviation having been forced out of the airport there.

"They benefit from the RAF standards, from the PowerPoint briefings we do to the Outbrief and Endbrief we do for the cadets. The most important thing in flying training and aircraft rental is supervision. We have the 'drill of the day' which makes sure everybody goes through an emergency or non-standard practice regularly.

"It's one thing to attain a level of excellence, it's quite another to sustain operations at that level year after year, which I think we have done. It's important not to let your heart rule your head, too – I'm a businessman first and an aviator second. I've had to be, to survive for 37 years in this industry.

"We're able to offer private pilots competitive rates with no landing fees – we pay a block landing fee of £24,000 a year, which we absorb, and that can be a big incentive when you think that at Aberdeen and such places you pay £15 just for a touch and go."

Tayside also has a thriving engineering side, having got into the business in 1982 when it was taking its aircraft to Strathallen, Glasgow and Perth for maintenance. "We thought we'd be better off doing it ourselves," says Lovat, "and the Scottish Development Agency helped us out by paying for the hangar. We now have EASA Part 145 approval and we are the biggest maintainers of light aircraft in Scotland, looking after our own 20 aircraft and about 100 more besides."

Tayside Aviation has now been taken over by four Scottish business people and Lovat has agreed to stay on as MD and head of training to at least three years while they gain experience of the company and the industry.

The only flyer among them is PPL Jim Watt, but Robert Purvis, who is managing director of Thistle Aviation Services, Tayside's parent company, has a plant hire business and can build hangars relatively inexpensively. He has already built two new hangars at Glenrothes, and is one of Fife's biggest employers. "The new owners have some pretty good ideas and they're learning a lot," says Lovat.

In common with everyone else in the general aviation industry, Lovat Fraser is in the dark as to what tomorrow holds – but he says: "I'm an optimist. It's very hard to make a profit in flying training and we have not made a profit for four or five years. We almost broke even last year but a couple of unexpected engineering problems prevented that.

"We've been through difficult times and we're still here. We seem to be fairly resilient to obstacles and counter-productive bureaucracy which the authorities keep putting in our way. We thought it was the end of the world when the requirement to have a BCPL to instruct was introduced, then it was JAR, then EASA, now massive fuel price increases, but we have managed to survive so far and I am confident we will survive in the future."

Lovat says Tayside is a corporate member of AOPA because it's important to support the battles that need to be fought. "Martin Robinson does a good job," he says. "AOPA is under-funded, but it has done a lot with a little and doesn't always get the credit it deserves, for things like the NPPL. We all need AOPA, and at Tayside we're happy to make our contribution." ■



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18 months to command

Not only are Tayside's former instructors being winkled out by the airlines, but many have found themselves on a fast track to the left seat. One instructor, Peter Anderson, got his command on the Saab 340 with Loganair just 18 months after leaving Dundee.

"It was rather quicker than I expected," Peter says. "Loganair is expanding and there's a lot of job mobility at the moment, with pilots going to NetJets, Flybe, easyJet and many others."

Mindful of his own background, Peter still instructs part-time at Tayside. Says Lovat: "Peter is a very good pilot, and Loganair can fast-track people into commands when they have 1,000 hours.

"Loganair's preference is for pilots with 1,200 hours, which gives our people an advantage over those who take integrated courses.

"I believe people who have gone the self-sponsored modular route have a broader experience of aviation which will stand them in good stead in their careers. Someone who has worked as a flying instructor is a more rounded individual, a salesman for his airline, a pilot who already knows how to interact with the public.

"There is a shortage of captains right now, and in my opinion there is going to be a very serious shortage of pilots in the very near future. There will be a shortage of quality airline pilots, particularly captains."

