



The Noah's Ark of Austers

Down in Devon there's a magical airfield that's home to one of the finest and most important collections of historic British aircraft still flying – and it's a well-kept secret.

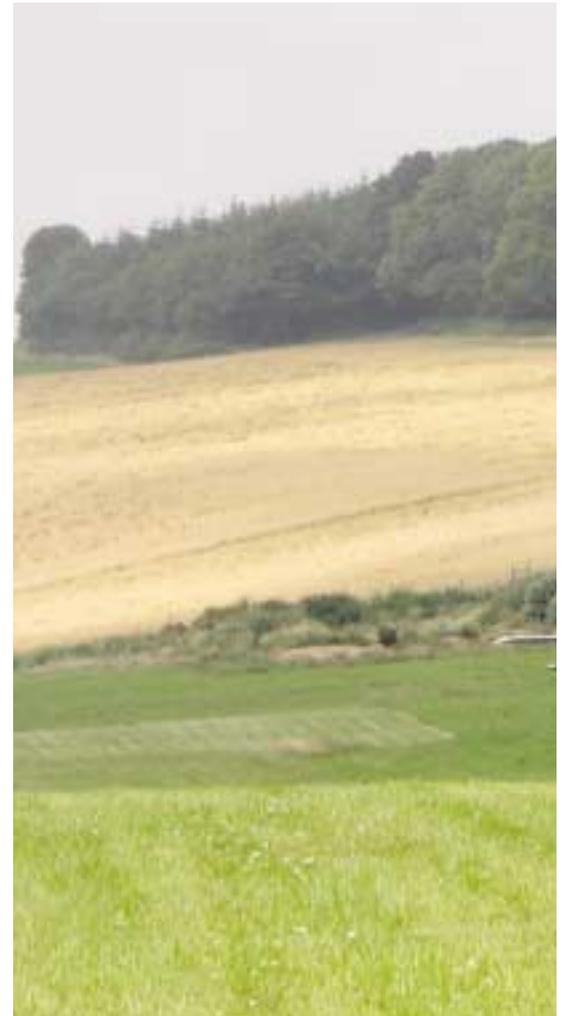
Eggesford, an unlicensed airfield not far from Eaglescott, has a hangar full of lovingly restored and beautifully-kept Austers – 17 of them at the last count – including some of the most important examples of this British success story. The Auster is an unfashionable aircraft to own and fly these days, which means they're pretty cheap, and restoring one can cost more (far more) than it is worth in monetary terms – yet there is a dedicated group of pilots at Eggesford who love the Auster to an almost batty degree, and who have given over a large part of their lives to keeping the name flying.

Here is the world's largest collection of

What's the difference between driving an aeroplane and being a pilot? They'll tell you at Eggesford.
Pat Malone reports

flyable Austers of all marks, each with a fascinating operational history – machines with service in Malaya and Korea, Germany, Aden and Singapore, machines rescued from Australia and New Zealand, machines which in some cases are the only flying example of their type. If you love flying things and you appreciate the enthusiasm of genuine aviation people, Eggesford needs to be added to your must-visit list.

Easier said than done, though. Eggesford is difficult to spot from the air and virtually impossible to find on the ground. There are no



Left: Richard Webber and Nigel Skinner in a corner of the Eggesford hangar
Bottom left: Cub lines up - the runway goes straight up the hill
Right: Richard with his first Auster - he's flown it to Corsica and Slovakia
Below: Eggesford hangar from the runway summit, with Broussard at right

signposts to it, and the usual giveaway for an airfield – a bit of flat ground – is wholly absent. Like Rome, Eggesford is built on seven hills, and there can be few airfields in Britain that offer such a scenic switchback on take-off and landing. The runway lies roughly east-west, and it pays to land long if approaching from the east – try to touch down abeam the windsock – because the first part of the runway is of altiport profile. Slow down on the relatively flat bit in the middle, where there are only two humps, because if you go over the second crest at speed you're on a slippery slope to perdition. Landing towards the east, some aircraft can register a 300 fpm climb while on the ground.

Eggesford is owned by farmer Nigel Skinner, and at its heart is retired farmer Richard Webber, a man with Austers in his soul. Richard has been known to spend a full year – eight hours a day, six days a week – and £25,000 in cash restoring an Auster that might be worth £20,000 when he's finished. But it's enough for him to stand back and admire the end product, and know that it is good.

"This is an important part of Britain's aviation heritage, and nobody seems to be bothered about it," says Richard. "Austers were the trainers of choice until the 1960s, when the nosewheel Cessnas appeared and cleaned up. Many Austers were dumped, or not looked after. They were the bottom of the heap in the aviation pecking order. If you'd told someone then you were learning on an Auster, they'd have said you were scraping the barrel.



"If you ask any Briton to name some aircraft they'll probably say the Tiger Moth, the Spitfire and Concorde – but there are aircraft like the Auster which are every bit as much a part of our aviation heritage. In years to come we will regret it if we continue to allow these aircraft to deteriorate and disappear."

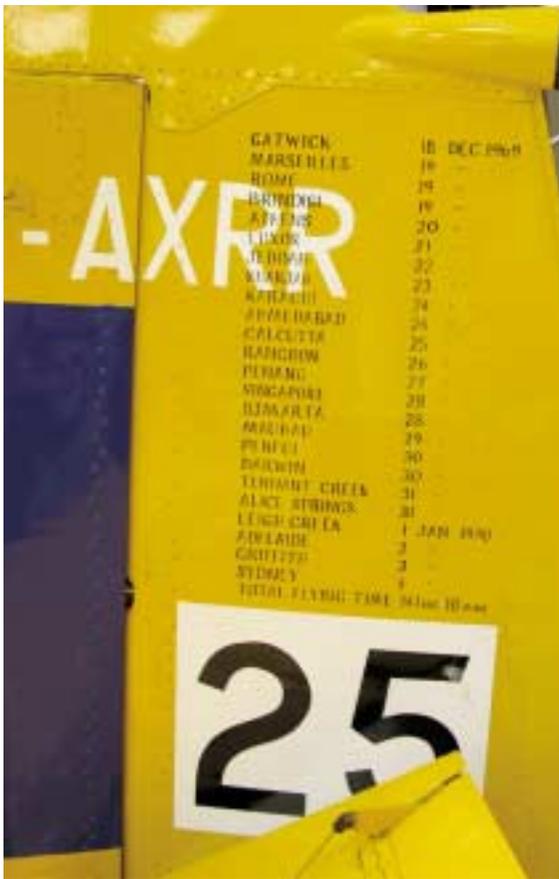
Thanks to Richard, Nigel and other enthusiasts, the tide is turning in favour of the Auster. The national fleet is bigger and in better condition than it was 20 years ago, and Eggesford has become a centre of engineering excellence and know-how on the type. In this Noah's Ark of Austers they have brought together some of the most important examples of the type. Of the seven airworthy Mark 9s in the world, four are at Eggesford. The only airworthy Mark 3 in Europe is here, as is the factory demonstrator in which test pilot Ronald Porteous discovered the avalanche, or Porteous Loop – Auster executives didn't believe he'd done it on purpose until he

demonstrated that he could repeat the feat. VX113, the Army's entry in the Kings Cup in 1939, flies from Eggesford – although it didn't win the Kings Cup itself that year, it won trophies that 70 years later are displayed at the Museum of Army Flying at Middle Wallop, together with its oil painting. Eggesford has the real thing, and keeps it flying.

Every machine has a fascinating story to tell. G-AXRR was flown by Major Michael Somerton-Rayner in the England-Australia Air Race in 1969, and on the way back the intrepid Major picked up the Mark 3, MT 438, in the Far East and flew it home. Says Richard: "There can't be many GA aircraft in Britain with places like Calcutta, Bhopal and Baghdad in the log book." In fact, Richard won't take on a restoration project unless the aircraft has a history – too much work, too little time.

The Auster began life as a British-built Taylorcraft to which different engines were added – the Blackburn Cirrus Minor 1 and 2,





Above: tail of RR bears the name of every stop it made in the 1969 England-Australia air race
 Top right: VX-113 was the Army's entry in the King's Cup in 1939
 Right: Mk 9 Auster mainwheels were supernumerary Dakota tailwheels
 Below: restoration project with a year or more's work left in it - some jobs cost far more than the value of the aircraft



the 130 hp Lycoming flat four, the Gypsy Major 1. More than 1600 Austers were made for the RAF, and they were prized for their good short-field performance, ruggedness and ease of maintenance. The Mark 5 had a placarded stall speed of 24 knots, although in the right circumstances it would float for a week then drop you through ground effect like a manhole cover. The Auster is a difficult aircraft to get right. Richard says: "I wouldn't let a Cub pilot fly an Auster, but an Auster pilot could fly a Cub. Same goes for the Tiger Moth - an Auster pilot can climb straight into a Tiger cockpit and take it away safely. If you're not on top of an Auster it can bite you very quickly, but if you can fly an Auster well, you can pretty much handle anything."

"It's particularly hard to land. You have to get your speeds absolutely spot on - and even then, it's very easy to bounce and it prefers ground-looping to going straight. Moreover, there are differences between marks, and even between individual machines."

Nigel Skinner, who believes he was the last student ever to learn to fly at Weston-super-Mare, says he'd had his licence for 15 years before he learned to fly - when he first climbed into an Auster. "Up to that time I'd just been driving aircraft around the sky," he says. "The Auster made a pilot of me."

Richard started on a 150 at Exeter in 1973, and later a fellow farmer suggested they buy an aircraft. "He wanted a Jodel, but this was at a time when the banks were dishing out money like it was going out of style, and there

were't many Jodels available," Richard says. "We even joined the Jodel Club, but there was an 11-month waiting list for aircraft. Then this Auster, G-ASZX, came up at Dunkeswell, and we thought it would tide us over. We paid about £8,000, from memory, and to tell the truth when I first flew it I didn't like it one bit.

"But two things happened. First, I started appreciating the aircraft. It's a pilot's machine, and it rewards accurate flying. Secondly, I joined the Auster Club, and they are the salt of the earth." Richard has since flown his first Auster, G-ASZX, as far afield as Slovakia, Hungary, Italy, Sweden and Corsica.

Richard used to have his own strip nearer Dartmoor, but when he retired he moved his Auster to Eggesford. The usual birds of a feather coalescence laws apply, and other Austers have gravitated to Eggesford because of its growing reputation. The presence of so many Austers has infected Nigel, who is now almost as committed a fan as Richard, who

stretcher case into it. They have a Luton Minor with a 37hp JAP engine – there's a tree within half a mile of the runway and you have to decide before take-off which side of it you're going to fly. They also have a Max Holste Broussard, beautifully restored to original French Army colours. It served in Algeria in the 1960s before suffering the indignity of being painted in garish day-glo colours for a yoghurt company. When asked why they bought the Broussard, Nigel says: "Because we couldn't get a Beaver, of course." Say no more.

The 600-yard strip at Eggesford was established in 1972 by Nigel's father Emerson, who wasn't going to let the fact that he lived among rolling Devon hills get in his way. Says Nigel: "Basil Pring, the instructor at Dunkeswell, said there was no such thing as a farm on which an aircraft could not be landed, although he almost had second thoughts when he came over here. He did in fact land, but my father very soon improved matters by taking



Above: rare Cob ambulance, with a hinged fuselage top for a stretcher

Left: Chrislea Skyjeep discovered in Australia and brought home to Devon

Below: Richard Webber with his severely power-challenged Luton Minor
Bottom: Max Holste Broussard stripped of day-glo paint and restored to French Army colours



will leave no stone unturned in his quest for knowledge about the aircraft. Several times a year he used to take the Auster designer Dickie Bird flying in order to hear him speak about why design decisions were taken. Know why the Mark 9 mainwheels are that size? Because there was a job lot of Dakota tailwheel tyres lying around begging to be used. Not many people know that. Richard completes his restorations with a pedantic degree of accuracy, redoing work already completed if new information shows it to be wrong in some minor detail.

There are important aircraft here that do not carry the Auster name, too. They have the only airworthy example of the Chrislea Skyjeep, of which three were built in Exeter in the 1950s. In some models Chrislea dispensed with the rudder pedals, and you moved the whole yoke in the direction you wanted to go, including up and down. This model has more conventional controls, but it didn't come along in time to save Chrislea from the fate of inspired but bonkers innovators everywhere. Of the three made, one went to French Indochina, one went to Uruguay and one to Australia, where it was discovered in 1997 with only 111 hours on the airframe. Richard explains: "It had a lot of accidents and spent most of its life being rebuilt after each flight."

They also have a selection of Chippies and Piper Cubs, including a rare example of a Cub ambulance, of which about 50 were made towards the end of the Second World War – the rear fuselage hinges up and you can slip a



out some hedges and filling in a little dip."

Despite the topography, in more than 30 years of operation Eggesford has only had two or three minor incidents. "I believe that is because it's a difficult airfield," says Nigel. "Everyone is on their mettle when they fly here. They have more accidents where it's easy to land because pilots lose concentration.

"I believe pilots are getting better at handling grass strips – they're getting more experience of them as general aviation is increasingly forced out of tarmac airfields. We still get pilots who don't know how to cope if there's no-one to give them orders on the radio, but it's improving. I believe grass strip operations ought to be taught at PPL level, not just in

theory but in practice."

Eggesford welcomes all visitors, and has had drop-ins from as far away as Australia and New Zealand – Auster fans who've heard about them, or seen them on various websites. They have embryonic plans to provide somewhere to sell visitors coffee, but much depends on the local planners.

There will come a time in future when the hard work and dedication of the Eggesford crew will be fully appreciated and we will have flying examples of a seminal British aircraft that would otherwise have been lost. Next year is the 50th anniversary of the Army Air Corps – perhaps a suitable time for that appreciation process to begin ■