



Andy's fascinating account details the struggles club members through the ages have undergone to keep flying. Some things never change. At first glance paying £400 for a DH 60 Gipsy Moth seems very reasonable. However, this was in 1933, when this would have been a small fortune to most ordinary working people. Other figures make interesting reading: total club flying hours between September 1935 and August 1936 were 989 hours and 50 minutes over 2,461 flights. To put that into context, Andy told me that he'd like to see the club have 800 flying hours this year.

The lean years

Of course, pilots in the 1930s did have issues to contend with that are thankfully unheard of today. When the Second World War broke out the Air Ministry requisitioned aircraft from flying clubs all over the country and LTFC did not escape. On the plus side, these years saw the creation of the Civil Air Guard (CAG) scheme, which enabled the club to fly more hours and train more pilots. One name on the CAG board from that time is the club's first female pilot, Molly Calver, who was a cook.

Despite the war, members were certain they were going to resume flying one day. Andy has special fondness for the people who "kept the faith throughout this time of conflict: they kept the club going, when all around must have seemed chaotic, with the ever present threat to their life and liberty".

In 1946 the club started up again in its present home at Fair Oaks in Surrey with two Tiger Moths. Lord Ashfield formally opened the club saying: "The London busman has always had a reputation of taking everything in his stride. Not content with piloting buses through the congested streets of London, he must needs conquer the air and become a pilot in a new element." Lord Ashfield was so impressed with the club's ethos that he and his wife became members.

It is evident throughout Andy's book that flying has always been costly and several times throughout the club's history, it has been in a shaky financial position. What is also apparent is that there has always been a solid core of members who just love to fly. It is their determination to stay airborne that has kept the club going.

For example, a major crisis occurred in 1991, when then club secretary Dave Henshall



The first Airbus...

75 years on and the flying club founded by a group of bus drivers in 1931 is still going strong. Liz Moscrop reports

This Christmas Andy Raymond and Bernie Newham would like to see their fellow London Transport Flying Club (LTFC) members ditch the lame celebrity offerings out there and invest in a rather special book and DVD. Andy has written a history of the club, "The Sixpenny Pilots", and BBC producer Bernie has created a film to celebrate LTFC's 75th anniversary. Profits will go to the club, which – according to Andy – is the oldest continuous flying club in the UK.

The Fair Oaks-based 84-member club is a pretty special organisation and Andy was quick to distance it from commercial schools and clubs, saying: "We don't sell flying. We provide a way where people who love to fly can fly at a reasonable cost. We are not allowed to advertise. The club is for family and friends only, so members find us. We have more than enough applications to keep us going." Members book time on the club aircraft online and turn up whenever they want, even if it is just to hang out. On the morning I visited five people dropped in. Access is via a coded panel and members can avail themselves of tea, coffee, internet and a TV.

Although members 75 years ago would be mystified by the technology in the room, they might recognise something about the atmosphere. As Andy writes in his book: "The club was founded in 1931... by a London busman with no money to invest, no

aeroplanes to fly and very little idea as to how to make it all work. All this only twenty-eight years after man's first powered flight."

The story goes that a group of London bus drivers decided to form a flying club after taking spectators to an airshow at Croydon. Bernie's DVD includes archive footage of a group of drivers taking a flight over London in an Armstrong Whitworth Argosy II. Backed by London Transport's sports association, the leader of the group Mr. Godwin subsequently set up the LTFC with a Redwing biplane at Broxbourne. He was a determined man and drove a borrowed Redwing around London bus garages mounted on a lorry, in order to drum up support. This drew in over a thousand members, paying sixpence each a week each, which financed the club.



Top: Andy with G-LTFC, a club aircraft for 33 years and now leased back
Right: the original clubhouse - the man standing is long-term CFI Ted Baker
Inset: Bernie Newham and Andy Raymond display the club's original sign

reported that the sports association was closing the flying club. However, it allowed the club to continue to operate and maintain its two Cherokee aeroplanes. To cope with the changes the flying club became a limited company and is now run by volunteers with three part time instructors, whom the students pay directly.

LTFC Today

Dave Henshall and Brian Brown were setting off for France as I arrived. Both were beneficiaries of the "sixpenny pilots club". Brian used to drive buses in Uxbridge and has been a member for 39 years. Dave is an ex-London Underground engineer with 19 years of membership. He explained: "I like to hang round here – it's free and easy with everything on trust. I've always been interested in flying and learned once the kids were off my hands. I'm 72 years old and would go flying more if I could. Get the gov'nor to give me a bigger pension – that might help!"

Bernie Newham had dropped in for a few minutes several hours earlier. He described his DVD. "It's a half hour history of the club. Half is history with some archive footage and half is what it is like in 2006 to go flying with the members." Bernie has been a member for 10 years and



Flying Services is renovating another Cherokee which it will lease back to LTFC, and the club has just invested in a new Polish Aero AT3, which falls into the 'Very Light Aircraft' category.

Said Bernie: "We looked at aircraft that you could fly two up or solo. We tried out two, the Tecnam Sierra and the AT3. The members'

Thanks to its recent decisions, LTFC is now solvent and has used £2,000 profits from its "Prang club" to fund the anniversary celebrations, which took place on 17 September.

Future plans

So what next for LTFC? Andy and Bernie say they'd like it to "be here in 75 years". If it attracts many more members it may need to pay someone to do the administration. According to Andy, it is a club for pilots who like to fly regularly, so social activities tend to



consensus was to opt for the AT3, which costs around £25 per hour less in fuel. And because it is a new aircraft, we won't have as

*Top: Tiger over the old clubhouse - and fittingly, the back of a London bus
Above: advertising flyer touts Andy's book and Bernie's DVD*

*Left: members Brian Powell, Frank Cavanaugh, Andy Raymond and Peter Lennard
Right: LTFC's new aircraft, the delightful and cost-effective Aero ATC*



came in via the friend and family route.

According to Andy there is no such thing as a typical LTFC member. He said: "Our group includes all sorts of people from multi-millionaires to the unemployed. The oldest member is Basil Deakin, who is 88. He flies regularly with some younger men in their 70s. Our youngest is 18 years old and still at school." Members who come in via the family and friends route have to attend a club meeting and speak for two minutes about why they would like to join. Although this sounds daunting Andy says he has never heard of anyone being refused entry.

One of the reasons the club has lasted so long is the flexibility of its members to adapt to changing circumstances. Throughout its history it has brought itself from the brink of ruin to solvency by embracing new technology. Last year the club was running at a loss of £22,000, so it sold its elderly costly Cherokee G-LTFC to Falcon Flying Services at Biggin Hill and now leases it back, paying an agreed amount for maintenance per hour. Falcon

many maintenance problems." The VLA will cater for the average club flight of 38 minutes and is quieter, which will please local residents.

Pilot's "A" licence requirements in the 1930s

- Be at least seventeen years of age.
- Pass a medical examination.
- Produce log book evidence of having flown at least three hours as the sole occupant of an aeroplane.
- Demonstrate piloting ability by passing two practical flying tests.
- Pass an oral examination in the rules governing air navigation and international air legislation.

Gaining an 'A' licence would entitle a pilot to fly 'all types of land aeroplanes' of any weight, with any number of engines as long as it was not for hire and reward or commercial use.

focus on ground based activities rather than fly-outs, as many members are very experienced and prefer not to fly in groups. He said: "Our aim is 800 hours overall for two aircraft in a year. I'd rather see 40 members doing 20 hours than 800 doing one hour. We run the club so that people can enjoy flying. We are careful to nurture and foster that atmosphere. We want to provide flying for existing members and are here for flying not for business. We welcome anyone interested in flying."

The club also welcomes visitors, although to fly one of its aircraft you must be a member. It offers daily temporary membership. Full membership costs £130 per year and unusually, it has just reduced its hourly charges, passing on the benefits of its recent savings directly to members. If you're in the area, it's a delightful place to drop into, with a shed load of interesting memorabilia in the clubhouse. Alternatively, there are a couple of great Christmas presents on offer from two of the club's most stalwart members... ■