M.11 Miles Whitney Straight
Casualty of war

Ahead of its time in 1936, the Whitney Straight could still hold its own today says ***David Ogilvy***

Not only was the Miles Whitney Straight one of many good British touring aeroplanes of the nineteen thirties; it was one of the very best. Yet its original concept came not from its designers and builders but because Whitney Straight, as the owner of five flying schools, sought something for his former students that would be more comfortable than the open-cockpit Miles Hawks on which they had learnt to fly. He put his requirements to the indefatigable Miles brothers, who burst into action and produced the right answer.

That answer was a roomy side-by-side cabin two-seater that emerged early in 1936. As a clean low-wing cantilever monoplane it led the field in appearance and performance compared with the biplanes to which many other manufacturers were clinging. Quickly the prototype, G-AECT, proved the point, with just a few modifications before the type entered production as the M.11A; the most significant of these was a change of windscreen to a seamless design that offered several airflow advantages.

By this time the Miles brothers (Fred and George) had become well recognised as designers and producers of light aeroplanes. Although previously they had created biplanes, a meeting with Charles Powis (a garage owner) in October 1932 enabled them to settle into a hangar at Woodley Aerodrome, Reading; there they started on a series of low-wing monoplanes that opened a new era at a time when other manufacturers tended to hang on to struts and wires. An interesting comparison with the M.11A was de Havilland's competitor the DH 87 Hornet Moth. Both were ahead of their time in comfort and very successful, but the sleek Miles machine was almost 20 mph faster, which can be significant on the long hauls of which they were capable.

As with several other good light aeroplanes in the thirties, the Whitney Straight was well established in production when the threat of World War 2 caused several manufacturers to switch from the civil market to the urgent needs of the time. Only 50 M.11As were completed, but its popularity had led to orders from overseas as well as from home; it was not long before the factory facilities were turned over to the M.14 Magister, 1300 of which were built to help equip the RAF's rapidly growing number of elementary flying training schools. The Whitney Straight, though, earned its fuel and oil during the war, as 21 were impressed into military service as communications machines. Not surprisingly, their civil comfort levels made them very popular!

My introduction to the Whitney Straight was in the late nineteen fifties when G-AFGK (the last of the type to be built) was based, in private hands, at Elstree. In post-war years this has been the specimen of the type that has been the best known, for it has had a handful of owners, has operated from several aerodromes and has been the subject of various press reports. Unfortunately it has been removed from

Photo: via Philip Jarrett

Above: photo of Whitney Straight G-AERV taken soon after it was built in 1936
Main photo: the same aircraft today, owned by London enthusiast Richard Allen Seeley

Photo: Rob Leigh - Aeroplanepix.com

the CAA register, although I understand that it remains reasonably intact. Two others, though, survive in airworthy condition.

Visually attractive and not appearing old even today, the M.11A is entered via a single door on the port side, but perhaps the other side would have been preferable for changing passengers or for an instructor to step out after a dual check. The cockpit is wide and comfortable, fortunately with two individual stick-type control columns. The internal layout is pleasantly uncomplicated, with a basic instrument panel, below which is a control for the vacuum operated flaps. An electric fuel gauge with a left/right switch indicates the contents of the two generous 15-gallon tanks and a spring-loaded control for elevator trim is centrally mounted within easy reach of each occupant. Behind all this is a shelf to take 115 lbs of luggage.

The early stages of a flight reveal two old-fashioned features; starting calls for external hand priming and the brakes are typical of the time. They are cable operated via a large lever on the left and not very efficient. Very few pre-war light aircraft had good brakes and I can confirm that the 1937 Magister had similar weaknesses. I spent some time instructing on Maggies from a hard runway (for which they were not designed) and fading occurred quite early on a circuit session. Apart from the need to weave while taxying – a feature of all tail-draggers – the qualities of the M.11A that followed were much more than just acceptable.

The makers' promotional publicity claimed that the take-off run into a 5 mph wind was only 145 yards and I have no reason to dissent from this. By standards of the time there was little tendency to swing, with a subsequent climb rate that according the makers again would be a creditable 850 feet per minute. I found this to be a very slight overstatement of fact, but it is the stage at which numerous variables, such as propeller type and pitch and age of engine make their marks. The get-away rate, though, was wholly satisfactory.

From the start the general handling on the climb proved to be pleasantly smooth and, as expected, even this improved with an increase in airspeed to the recommended 130 mph and 2100 rpm, although I have tended to cruise a 130 hp Gipsy Major 1 at a slightly lower power setting. Without doubt the Whitney Straight was and, if available today, would be a

Photo: via Philip Jarrett

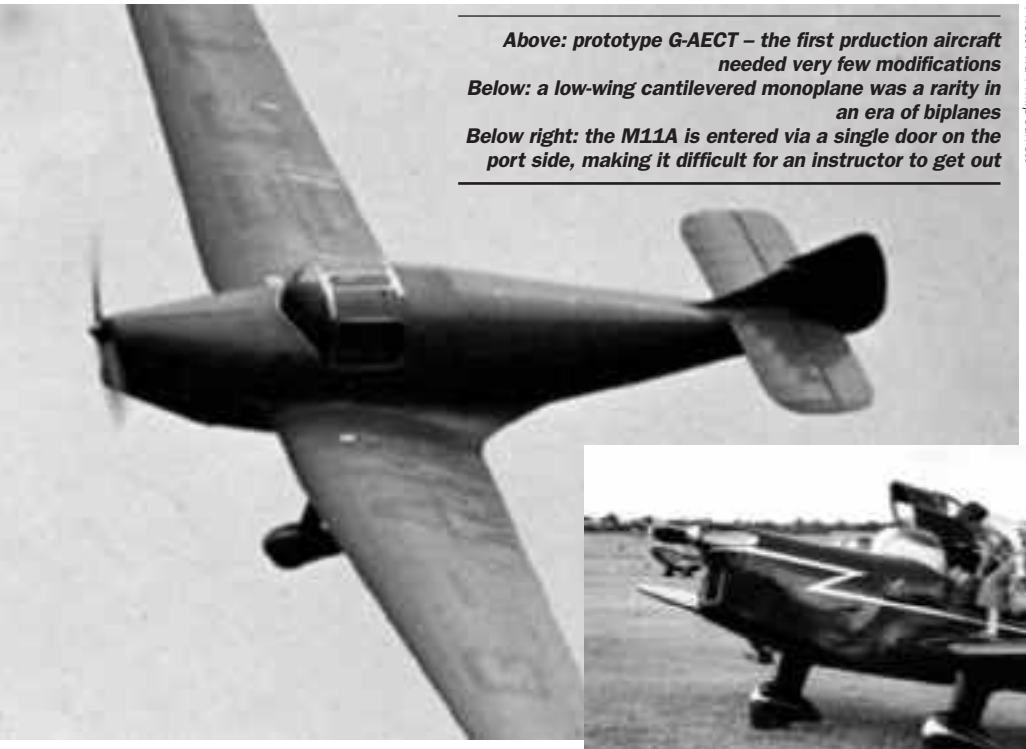

Photo: via Philip Jarrett

Above: prototype G-AECT – the first prduction aircraft needed very few modifications
Below: a low-wing cantilevered monoplane was a rarity in an era of biplanes
Below right: the M11A is entered via a single door on the port side, making it difficult for an instructor to get out

Photo: via Philip Jarrett

very practical (and comfortable) machine to choose for long-distance travel, with a more-than-useful published range of 570 miles.

Low-speed handling plays a key part in evaluation of any aeroplane and here the M.11A holds its own. The ailerons continue to work down to the stall, which in clear configuration occurs at just below 50 mph, while having the flaps fully lowered delays the break-away by as much as 10 mph. In all circumstances the behaviour is as benign as any among conventional aeroplanes.

After some time cruising contentedly on a calm day I felt no desire to return to base, but all good things must end sometime and most certainly I was not disappointed in the M.11A's qualities in the circuit. Although there was a blind area (more than a spot) behind, in other directions the view was good and the available range of flap settings made a variety of speeds practicable to suit the situation in the pattern. With a preferred initial approach at 70 mph IAS, if not dictated by other traffic the angle of descent can be a matter of choice, with a very steep full-flap line possible, but perhaps this would not be advisable in normal circumstances. Once more quoting from the makers' claims, the touch-down speed is 38 mph (although not checkable from within the cockpit) leading to a stated run of just 100 yards. I have no reason to dispute these figures, but I can confirm that judging the landing itself is not difficult and there is not much tendency to swing, all of which is made more pleasant by the softness of the oleo undercarriage legs.

The Miles family designed and built more individual (and some extremely interesting) types of light aircraft than the de Havilland organisation, which most people consider as the main creators of the class. In the nineteen thirties the British light aircraft industry was the world leader in the field and more than a dozen companies were active. While some of these failed through natural causes, the civil activities of several others were curtailed by the threat of war and the Whitney Straight was not the only type to suffer.

I am one of those people whose minds retain much useless information, but unintentionally rejecting some of the more valuable material. Never will I forget my visit to the house of Richard Riding, one-time editor of *Aeroplane* magazine and a registration buff, who sought a little help in writing his book on the history of Elstree aerodrome. I rang the doorbell to receive the response 'G-AFGK?' Fortunately I could reply 'Whitney Straight' to which the distant voice came back with 'Right; you may come in.'

Unhappily for GA the M.11A today is a rarity, with just G-AEUJ and G-AERV (owned by AOPA member Richard Allen Seeley) on the active list. My old friend of the fifties G-AFGK has been removed from the UK register, but I believe that it remains in existence, so if any reader knows its current whereabouts and/or state of health I would like to know, please. The type's virtual demise is sad, for here was a machine that deserved a numerically stronger and longer life than circumstances allowed. We must hope for a sustained future for the two living survivors. ■

Photo: Rob Leigh - Aeroplanepix.com

Below: AERV is 75 years old but doesn't look her age
Right: G-AFGK, the aircraft the author flew at Elstree