



# BIGGIN HILL AIRPORT BUGLE

*News from our Airport at Biggin Hill - established 2005*



CLUB AND AIRPORT NEWS

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## FOURNIERS & REMY MARTIN

At Sportair Flying Club in the early 70's we operated amongst other aircraft, the Fournier RF5 two seat and the single seat RF4 aircraft.



The latter was cheap to operate and therefore available to the members at very attractive hire rates. One member, a croupier at a London club who's name escapes me. (probably just as well) booked an RF4 to fly to Ireland for a few days. That evening I departed the Club after my usual pint or three in the bar and disappeared off home. Later after dark, I had a call from Sqn Ldr John Waters one of our part-time instructors from the RAF Aircrew Selection Centre, then on the other side of the airfield. He explained that he had been alerted by the distinctive sound of an RF4 engine overhead Sevenoaks and believed he could identify its silhouette against the 1,000ft cloud base which was well illuminated by the sodium street lighting. John Willis was our CFI and, having managed to contact him at the Club where he was assisting one or two stalwarts who liked to make sure our bar made a profit, I hurried back there myself. Telephone calls to London Radar and Kent Radar established that indeed there was an unidentified light aircraft wandering around the area. A call to Cardiff or maybe it was Swansea, also established that our

RF4 had landed to refuel and clear Customs, early in the day but the pilot had spent many fruitless hours trying to restart the engine. The RF4 could be very awkward to start when hot, AND tiring too as it had to be hand-swung. One needed to get the mixture just right to avoid flooding the VW engine. Furthermore, it had no electrical system other than a re-chargeable battery for the radio. Eventually our hero was successful in re-starting, but as it was now too late to continue across the Irish Sea, he had apparently informed Air Traffic he was returning to Biggin Hill. He must have run out of daylight well before reaching the London area and, with no lighting, would have been unable to read his map, his instruments, or his external fuel gauge. Furthermore the radio battery must have rundown. John and I spent what seemed like hours waiting for a call from the Police to go and identify a body. Thank God, things didn't turn out like that. Our hero eventually made an intelligent decision. He found the Thames, followed it to Southend, waited until he saw a commercial flight land and then quickly followed that aircraft onto the runway. Such was our relief on getting the call from Southend that three or four of us who had witnessed this little drama knocked off a bottle of Remy Martin in the bar and then broke out another from the stock cupboard which we also consumed. The next day I had to demonstrate an RF5 down at Thruxton, and on the way down I had never come so

close to throwing up in the air. All I had for this purpose, was my brief case. Incidentally, our Croupier friend found that the hire of the RF4 included the cost of two bottles of Remy Martin. He settled without a murmur. One cannot help thinking that the CAA would be asking many awkward questions if this episode were to be repeated today. Author Neil Jensen



## FOURNIER ATLANTIQUE



The picture of Mira Slovak was taken by the editor in 1969 at the end of the Atlantic crossing in time for the Biggin Hill Air Fair. (A young Paul Shires stands behind). Mira who was known as the 'Flying Czech,' escaped from the oppression of Czechoslovakia in 1953 flying a commercial DC3.



Not only was he known for his Fournier exploits, he was also a professional power boat racer and a commercial pilot for United Airlines. Soon after this the Sportair Flying Club was formed and got off to a flying start ...!!



Slovak's Fournier, Is displayed at the Biggin Hill Air Show, in conjunction with the UK VW dealership. The first Fourniers (RF3) were produced at Gap (Tallard) airfield in the French Alps almost 40 years ago at the René Fournier hangar which is still there to this day. Fournier's are flown all around the world.

Two well known characters, from Biggin Hill, John Taylor and Brendan O'Brien performed at many air shows throughout the UK and Europe in their RF4's seen at



start up through the lens of the editors camera at Biggin Hill in 1984. They were the 'Skyhawks' aerobatic duo, a graceful and charismatic pair, flying their routine to the musical background of the famous Pink Floyd Band.

### DINNER EN PARIS CE'SOIR

The phone rings – an invitation to a free meal in Paris – great..! With Customs at Biggin Hill, the RF4 is just a tank full of fuel away, and the RF4 tank is very small, so an invitation like this is not be refused. Tidy the desk, grab some clean clothes (not many) and in no time we are winging over the English Channel on a lovely summers evening. With only the half million map, a watch and a compass, navigation needs some attention and as the French country side slides below at a comfortable hundred miles per hour I am already thinking of dinner awaiting in Paris. Damn, that thunderstorm is right on track and the wind is all over the place. Quite a big diversion is needed and, to be honest, I am not absolutely sure of my position. Ten minutes later I am certain that I am LOST ! Paris is getting closer and the fuel and daylight give me no options.....Paris control, this is G-LOST, over. Five minutes later after flying some triangles Paris control has me located and offers to guide me to Toussus le Noble. What a relief and just look below, straight over Paris Orly and a little later the centre of Paris is a thousand feet below. What a beautiful evening with the sun low on the horizon and everything gleaming from that recent rain storm. (That was a big storm). The Eifel Tower and all the sights of Paris for me to enjoy and, really, I didn't mean to get lost. Safely on the ground, my first thought was to ring Paris control and apologise. The controller was understanding, asked if I enjoyed the flight...! Always remember, a simple journey can be fraught with disaster when least expected...!

### NEW 'RIZON / OLD 'ORIZON

Whilst the naming of 'Maitland View' was being celebrated last month, one new building under construction was taking shape rapidly and the other was being demolished slightly faster.



The Rizon hangar grows on the horizon and the old flying club building formerly Whitmores / Kingair and Cabair is demolished from the horizon – just a memory..!



These old buildings were a hive of activity and a good meeting point for all the participants / ground staff during the many Air Show evenings over the past 46 years where these people could meet 'like people' who were involved in aviation and their personalities. These were all very good people and sadly due to advancement on the airfield, it spells the end of an era and some wonderful times..!

### HOTEL PROPOSAL LATEST



A bold new hotel proposal was presented to the public and airfield businesses alike on the 25<sup>th</sup> March at St Marks Church Hall for a 76 room building with associated restaurant and viewing area across the airfield, this would also include a dedicated pilot's lounge.

## AIRFIELD PERSONALITIES



John Willis, was born on the 27<sup>th</sup> June 1947 and spent his formative years living in Orpington. He started regularly cycling up to Biggin Hill in the mid to late 50's to watch the RAF's Meteors and Hunters arriving and departing, and developed a yearning of becoming a pilot. So, on a sunny day early in 1959, now 11 years old, he boldly walked into the largest flying club (Surrey & Kent) at the now civil airport, approached the counter and told the man inside he wanted to go flying. The man looked down on John and grunted..! "you have to be a member, you'll need to fill in this form and get your parents signature, and it will cost you five bob". He rushed home excitedly, returning the next weekend with the signed document, which he duly handed to a pompous individual, and handed over his five bob, then asked if he could go flying now. The immediate response was **no**, not unless you know a member! Disillusioned, depressed, head down he wandered off, his aviation career in tatters. An unknown man outside a place called Vendair, asked what was wrong – he explained how he had just been treated. The man asked if he had any money "10 bob" he replied. He took JW for his first flight in an Auster, he was elated... But when returning to the airfield the next weekend this friendly pilot was not around. He wandered around and knocked on the door of

a place called 'Experimental Flying Group'. The door opened, and explained his desire to fly "please mister I want to be a pilot" the member from within invited him in and gave him a cup of tea and then showed him over their aircraft. Afterwards they asked if he would like to go flying and gave him another form to fill in, and to take it home for yet another signature. JW's return to the airfield the next weekend would be the beginning of his flying career. Training first in a Miles Messenger and later an Auster, all of his training was done with Rex Nicholls and the late Peter Elliott. His flying training continued whilst still at school, and he supplemented his expenses with a job at a garage on Saturday and spending this money flying on the Sunday. (and, much later as a book keeper in the old control tower at Biggin, plus school holiday jobs with Air Couriers, later on). During one of his school holidays in the 60's whilst standing on the South East apron watching the aircraft come and go, a posh new twin Aztec taxied by, parked up, and a uniformed pilot walked past on his way to Dillows Café for some refreshment. On his return to the aircraft, John was still staring in awe at this, and the other machines on the apron, he invited John to come and look over his aircraft – WOW..!! The pilot was Ken Sirrett who worked for Air Couriers at Gatwick. Because John showed such an interest in the aircraft, Ken invited him to Gatwick to look over their operations. A few weeks later he caught a bus to Gatwick from Orpington, and spent the whole day looking around the hangars. He was introduced to a man called Ali Khan who ran several aircraft and would be offered a ride in the jump seat of a Bristol Freighter which was going on a test flight. All very inspiring for a young lad. (a few years later on, Ken Sirrett would train John for his twin rating-1966). Later on John learned that

Jock Maitland was the operator of the airfield, as well as Maitland Drewery Air Charter. (Ted Drewery was an Orpington based millionaire), which gave John an excuse to knock on Jock's door, saying he knew Mr. Drewery, and his family, and did he have any weekend jobs. (This was only a slight embellishment of the truth, as everyone in Orpington knew the family, because they were always in the newspaper!) The answer of course was an emphatic no! But, after much perseverance, and several visits, Jock relented and he got a job in the old tower as a book keeper under 'Nobby Clarke' who was the first Controller in those days. He kept this job for several years, working weekends and school holidays. As mentioned during, one school summer holiday, John was doing odd graunching and cleaning jobs with the Biggin Hill arm of Air Couriers, before returning to school, CSE (who were the new Piper Distributors prior to their move to Oxford) were also based here and run by Lord Waterpark and Lord Kildare. One unusual job that John had during this period, was to stand by the edge of runway 21 at Biggin, whilst Lord Waterpark, flew a brand new Piper Aztec G-ARYF. John would note the exact position it left the ground and observe the touch down point and where it finally stopped. All these flights were at various weights and configurations formed the basis of the aircraft's first UK Flight Manual. (The same aircraft would be operated by John years later). On returning to school at the end of the summer holidays, where the intention was to re-take a couple of GCE's and also do a GCE in Aerial Navigation and Meterology (which had been pre-arranged by the school), he found also he still had to suffer religious education and physical education and games. None of which were in John's personal curriculum – he walked out of

school and never went back..!! He returned temporarily to Air Couriers full time. After a couple of months he landed a job in the tower, as an assistant controller with Stan Lee. (Another oldie from Biggin Hill) During this whole period John continued his flying with EFG every Sunday as much as he could afford. The club was trying to get John solo for his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, (the youngest age it could then be done), but he simply didn't have the funds to do it in the time. The club apparently had a meeting and agreed to assist John in this quest and let him finish his PPL, and pay them back later. This



was very unusual, as the club was a group, not a business, so it must have been an act of faith in his flying ability. John climbs out of the Auster after his first solo

Harry Croft, the entrepreneur manager of Surrey and Kent Flying Club, that had amongst other things a D4 Link Trainer, (an early version of a Flight Simulator). With this in mind, he proposed to hire this machine from them and run it full time for anyone who wanted instrument training. He was only 18 at this time and they probably thought he had a lot of cheek and it probably wouldn't last. But it was actually very successful and resulted in John being approached by Harry Croft for the club to sponsor him for an Assistant Instructors Rating, which he subsequently achieved, training with the late Peter Chinn. 1967, now a Full Instructor he was told he was too young to instruct the

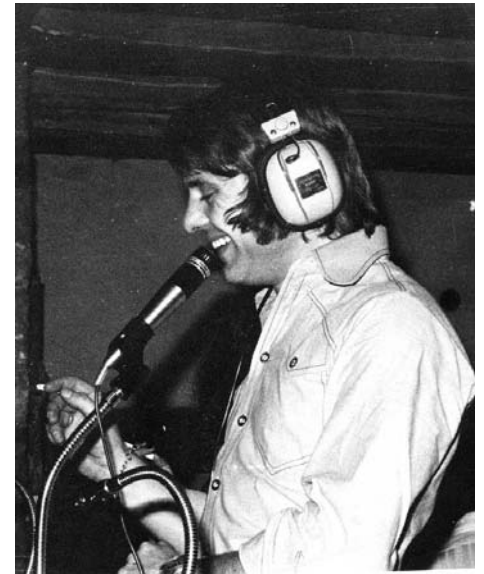


ATC Cadets for their PPL. This was a bit of a ruse, because Harry knew John was rather nervous at having to take lengthy CFS Flight tests and oral examinations that the older and more experienced Instructors were taking during their renewals. Without any pre-warning John was dispatched on an errand to another office, only to be confronted by three CFS (Trappers, as they were known) and given no time to become nervous, after a long grilling and a 'flight test' he became a CFS approved instructor for the club – Phew..!!!

Surrey & Kent were the biggest club in the South East and they had the contract for training these cadets. One of John's cadets, would be Rhys Perraton, who is a

very well respected Biggin Hill'ite and professional pilot, now living in Canada. In 68 a successful S&K member approached John with regard to operating an aircraft for him – this led to the formation of Southern Air Charter. They operated a leased Twin Comanche and two Aztec's. One was the G-ARYF that John had worked with, measuring the performance all those years ago. Whilst running this business, John did many hours flying in twins all over Europe and North Africa.

It was during this period that John started a Mobile Disco and became



a part time Disc Jockey, in an attempt to overcome, what he felt at the time was his shyness. Biggin Hill's current SATCO, Bill Robinson was one of his earliest 'roadies'. Some really good monthly parties were arranged by JB when he operated BHFC and JW provided the musical backing. Glorious days..!!

1971 John joined the rapidly expanding Sportair Flying Club owned by Brian Stevens and Neil Jensen as their CFI. (his – now friend, Roy Taylor the Airport Manager, called him to a meeting on the first day – pointing out that Sportair generated about 20% of Biggin Hill's movements and 66% of its accidents – he was given an ultimatum to improve matters....!). He and the other team members at the club did. *Sportair had so many prop incidents as the result of the*



THIS WEEK the "Sevenoaks Chronicle" begins a new regular feature which it believes will be of immense interest to the majority of its readers. Entitled "News in the Air," it will appear each week. And, this week can be found on Page 10. Although, basically it will concern itself with the personalities, and activities of the numerous flying clubs which use Biggin Hill aerodrome. It will also include general notes on flying, learning to pilot an aircraft, and anything of interest to those who fly or who want to fly. Pictured above is a man known to all the Biggin Hill clubmen. He is Mr. John Willis, the assistant aerodrome controller. Sevenoaks Chronicle 8<sup>th</sup> Jan 65

John continued to work in the tower until mid 1965, following a dispute with Roy Taylor (who became a good friend later on) he left that job, although returned for many years to serve as Jocks "Tower Controller" at the Air Fair But, at that time, not having any source of income, he approached

*undercarriage being retracted on landing, due mainly to pilot mis-management, (failing to retract after take-off and conversely retracting during downwind checks) which allowed the wooden prop to strike the ground and smash the ends off. The errant pilot would buy a new prop and no doubt some of these props adorn the walls of many a garage, or work place. Editor.....*

1972, John teamed up with the late Stuart Patterson and formed Trans Europe Air Charter, as a busy air taxi company using John's earlier contacts, and in 1974 John moved to the larger Fairflight company at Biggin, as Operations Manager.



Hankering for his own business again, in 1978 he joined the Vipond family as MD of their newly acquired purchase of Air Touring Charter, operating Cessna 310's and an Apache. The name was changed to Centreline Air Services and a new Navajo Chieftan was added to the fleet, with two Embraer Bandeirante's a couple of years later. A joint



Dan Air venture later on would be the downfall of this company during the recession of 1983. Not to be swayed by this, John moved to Euroair at Gatwick as MD, of their fleet of Bandeirante's, HS748's, Viscount and HS125 along with an Islander, and Aztec.



John became bored with aviation in 1986 due to lack of security and money; he joined the financial services industry. Eventually forming a partnership with a colleague which continued until 2006 when he sold out of the practice. In late 2000, he also started a mortgage website business, which he went on to sell in 2005 after it became the UK's most successful mortgage site of its day. After selling the business, John became a part owner of a Biggin Hill based Twin Comanche, which he still flies regularly. In 2008, to enable him to return working with aircraft again, John went to Crystal River in Florida and completed a FAA Commercial and Instrument Rating for single and twin engine aircraft.

During all this time, JW found time to get married twice, produce three daughters, the eldest holding a PPL A&H and ATCO licence, his current wife Christina also holds a PPL – it seems that flying is rather contagious within this family.

*(Editors comment – the younger daughters have to qualify for PPL's before their identities can be published).*



The story doesn't end here, because no mention has been made so far of the two very successful 'Biggin Hill Reunions' (1998 & 2003) with John as the team leader. This all came about whilst celebrating a well known pilot's birthday (the late Bill Webb) at the Pilots Pals bar. A middle aged woman was

sitting alone at this time (prior 1998 reunion) when she suddenly remarked, out loud, "I don't know why I bother to come up here, there is nobody I know anymore". JW and others present, enquired as to her spontaneous remark and who she was. Her name of course was Daphne Harris a past Biggin Hill 'ite.(see Bugle issue 4 / 2005) sadly Daphne died in that year. She was Flt Sgt Harris of the Women's Junior Air Corps from the early days at Biggin Hill. This chance encounter prompted the idea of a re-union as most of the people that hung around the bars and clubs of Biggin Hill, who had been associated with the airfield for almost 40 years, weren't getting any younger. The first Biggin Hill Re-union took place in September 1998 with a second (for old times sake) in 2003. Both were a huge success and sadly, may not be repeated, unless John can be persuaded otherwise.! – But, it had to be done and both events were a credit to John's ability to organise. The first re-union required a month of almost full time research, (police, airlines, pension funds, etc.) to trace old Biggin Hill 'ites which lead to the formation of the website ([bigginhillreunited.co.uk](http://bigginhillreunited.co.uk)) and the database of airport users that John has run since 1998 for the airport and the community. The social club website was also introduced by John, largely as a publishing platform for his own monthly Airport Newsletter and the 'Bugle' produced by John Bryan.



Above is a general scene from the last successful re-union held in the Quantel Hangar, some 800 people attended this event which started around midday and finished after midnight, with food, plenty of drink and many old flying tales..JB