



# BIGGIN HILL AIRPORT BUGLE

News from our Airport at Biggin Hill - established 2005



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## AIRFIELD PERSONALITIES:



**PETER JACKSON** – pictured above disguised as an articulate, eloquent civilian has been flying since 1964 whence he first came to Biggin Hill, stumbling upon Flairavia Flying Club in the process and the many pilots that frequented the tiny compact bar run by David Porter (standing room only) most nights listening to Trini Lopez music which blared out until somewhere around 0300 hrs They all drove home in those days after these sessions of joviality – drink drive laws hadn't been invented.



The original Flairavia Bar was situated in this small block next to the hangar. Interior measurements were about 18ft x 6ft for customers, but who cared.? This would be the beginning of his flying career, his early Instructors

he recalls were, John George, David Quirk, and David St Ledger on Aeronca 7FC Champion Tri Travelers one of which (G-ARAP) is still flying some 48 years on.

These were the halcyon days of Biggin Hill Airfield.



Peter also recalls that he had two other Instructors Dr Ian Dalziel and Tony Machin.

It seems like he had more instructors than the club had aircraft. (He would end up owning more aircraft than the club ever had).

He finally did his GFT with the renowned Trevor Prytherch. A school teacher, and author of some aviation text books for the Private Pilot.

It was around this period that Sir Robin Phillips appeared on the airfield in his Rolls Royce.

Robin eventually worked in the old tower (adjacent to 29/11 runway) along with Janet Hoare who would scold you if you did anything wrong. (*tremble, tremble*).

In amongst all this activity, Peter remembers Sue Sagers was

always on a tractor cutting the grass on the inactive grass runway.



Peter remembers John Willis, one of the earlier controllers in the tower, whom he describes as *'super slick'* the *'business'* at the time.



*"He was my hero in those far off days"*. JW also provided disco music for the home party, cool man, cool.

Later on Peter joined up with George Adams, an old Biggin Hill' ite South London Aero Club member, a real character at this

time in their evolution of flying with SLAC's Cherokee G-ATRU.



During this interview with the editor, Peter recalled how we flew parallel circuits on all runways (*see October issue, page 1, column 1*) an essential part of circuit flying, taught well, never forgotten.

This technique will prove a salvation in Peters life later on in this article with a serious engine failure (read on).

Back to reality, Peter tells of taking a 4 seat Piper Tri Pacer 160HP G-ARET (pictured below) to Gatwick occasionally when the landing fee was about 17s /6p for a light aircraft and then heading for the staff canteen (pilots welcome) for a cup of tea costing 5p or less and then flying back to Biggin.



Doing this today would devour any astute business man of his spoils, let alone obtaining a clearance to even enter their Control Zone.

The GAT (General Aviation Terminal) facility has long since gone and all privileges associated with it have gone too.

He remembers Surrey & Kent with their Aircoupes which sounded like a tin can being dropped when they landed.



The old Surrey & Kent bar visible (centre) in the background a much larger watering hole.

Surrey & Kent in those days had several aircraft. The Aircoupes being mainly used for Air Cadet flying training, Tiger Moths, Chipmunks, Cessna 150's made up the remainder of their fleet.

They also had a Link Trainer for Instrument Training,

Peter recalls attending a college at Blackfen with four other Students to further enhance their flying theory toward their PPL written exams armed with their ex Wartime Dalton Flight Computers, learning about ground speed, drift, true airspeed, the 1:60 Rule.

They all completed their theory followed by the standard cross country of the day, Biggin – Stapleford – Ipswich - Biggin completing their individual GFT's gaining their PPL's.

Soon after Peter decided he would progress toward an Instrument Rating and started using S&K's Link Trainer to gain experience with instrument flying.

He decided to join the Eric Thurston flight school at Stapleford Tawney aerodrome in Essex which conducted training for the much valued Instrument Rating flying their Piper Apache aircraft.

Finally, taking his IR test with a CAFU examiner in a Piper Apache at a deserted airfield called Stansted passing all 4 stages in one day. Stansted in those days was a CAA airfield which ran for 24 / 7 it was ideal for night training etc; as there almost no other aircraft operating. Today it is holiday departure terminal with hundreds of flights.

David Porter (Flairavia) imported a couple of Bolkow Juniors 208's whilst Peters association with the with the club continued – these little honeys were considered to be a little hot on the approach, but handled correctly were quite



normal if the correct approach speed was adhered to:

A bit cramped with the central control column. Care had to be exercised locking the canopy which hinged backwards. One also had to be careful climbing into this aircraft which had a very small single step, hardly wide enough for the average foot. A slip could bring tears to your eyes, if you slipped and straddled the edge of the narrow fuselage, far worse than slipping off the saddle of your bicycle onto the crossbar.

Later on Peter was checked out in a Tiger Moth (a real tail dragger) operated by the late Tim (Oily) Doyle of West Essex Flying Club who had appeared mysteriously overnight like a 'Geni' from a bottle. He seemed to arrive complete with a small clubhouse and aircraft.

Tim operated a fleet of Condor aircraft built by Rollason Aircraft at Croydon under licence.



Most Condors of the day were painted a simple yellow colour all over, not the best looking but easy to fly.



Venturing on with this new found aviation career Peter said he was sold a Piper Arrow by Ralph Scott

of Express Aviation saying, "I only went to look at it". It was a good aeroplane and he had a lot of fun with it.

1971 Capt George Dobson arrived



joining King Air flying club as their IR Simulator Instructor. He was an ex British Eagle Captain flying Viscount and Britannia aircraft.

Peter describes how George was unimpressed by pilots trying to get their IMC or Instrument Rating and how disgusted he was with their attempts. Mumbling aloud.

He says we all learned from these outbursts, George not only taught us respect, he improved our ability to fly by instruments, becoming mellowed with time and a true Icon at Biggin Hill, a lovely man.

Peter's next aircraft would be a Beech Baron 55, in which he flew around Europe with friends.



Whilst enjoying this aircraft he would eventually swop it for a Piper Navajo, which had a couple more seats.



The Navajo was followed by a Cessna 425 with PT6 turbine engines in 1987.



Makes you wonder if he had any time left for flying with all these different aircraft.

1987 Peter moved to live in Guernsey following the sale of his estate agent business to Halifax Building Society.

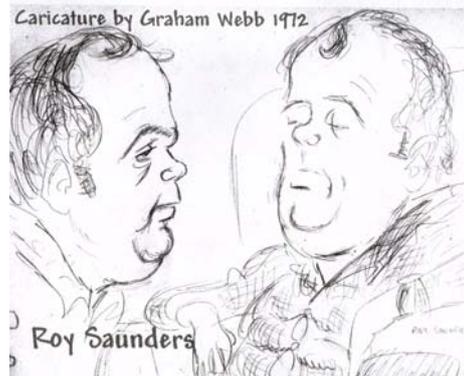
1992 saw Peter back in the UK and he would buy yet another aircraft, a Stampe, which he operated out of Redhill. He joined the Stampe Club and would fly to Antwerp once a year for their annual rallye whereupon, all entrants were entertained until most were unable to stand. They would be woken in the morning for an early breakfast followed by a briefing of how they would all form up and fly in formation above Antwerp. Most hadn't flown in formation before and had no knowledge of the other pilot's abilities.



He sold this aircraft and the new owner crashed it within 3 months. His next aircraft would be a Rockwell Commander. 114B



Flashback of memory, Peter recalls how Roy Saunders in the old Flairavia days was the life and soul of a party, always the centre of attraction.



This image was sketched in 1972 by Graham Webb and it took the editor another 32 years to obtain this treasured copy, such was Graham's protective nature of his artistic skill



Roy Saunders (pig) was a character larger than life. Roy possessed a repertoire of jokes and mimicry that was never ending.

Back to our current Personality flying a military jet an L29 Delfin, with Ted Girdler ex RAF Red Arrow who ran a flying school at Manston, East Kent.



Peter then bought a share in



another military jet the L39 Albatross. Peter was checked out in this aircraft by an ex RAF Harrier Pilot who taught him the *'the golden rule'* if you get a *'flame out - bang out'* as the sink rate without thrust was quite alarming.

Whilst he was flying in the circuit he experienced a flame out whilst flying the crosswind leg of the circuit and realised that he was low and committed to land, rather than 'bang out' and whilst he could see the airfield quite nicely, thought...! *"I can't afford to get involved in any turn or manoeuvre that will descimate his currently safe airspeed"* – land straight ahead, which is your next safest option which he did, into a ploughed field.

It didn't do the aircraft any good, but Peter walked away with muddy shoes...!!

*Refer back to page 2 column 1*

## TULSI INDIAN RESTAURANT 'Gentlemen Smoking Evening'

Another very successful annual get together was held at this famous restaurant in Westerham on the 10<sup>th</sup> October 2012.

Membership to this elite gathering is difficult to obtain – a sound background of aviation is a pre-requisite with your application.



2012 Left to Right: Steve Porter, Grant Dempster, John Bryan, Gary Duncan, Patrick Tricker, Lee Russell and Alan Taylor.

This restaurant was previously the 'Chapla' is now the 'Tulsi'.

The Head Chef has been in the kitchen covering these fabulous eating houses for 29 years, and we have been coming here 11 years which says something for the high quality of the food and the friendly expert service and pleasant décor.

*LDH serial continues.....*



**One of the drivers who overheard our conversation took me to one side afterwards and told me that in fact this conductor had been an RAF.....**

Lancaster rear gunner and was wounded on one raid, so the pilot decided to land at Manston airfield on the way back to drop him off. Churchill happened to be visiting the airfield at the time and pinned the DFM on him whilst he lay on the stretcher. When will I ever learn to keep my big mouth shut?

I was amazed also at the number of ex-aircrew that I met on the buses, many of them ex-pilots. I could only conclude that after the mind-boggling experiences endured during the war, they couldn't settle down to anything else. At least they were in control of something even if it was only a large red double-decker London bus.

There was one driver though I shall always remember. His name

was Joe Baleika and hailed from Czechoslovakia as I recall. He was reputed to be the very first pilot on record to have gone through the sound barrier in a piston-engined aircraft. I got the full story from the London Transport Sports Club magazine. It went something like this...

Joe was a Spitfire pilot during the Battle of Britain, and one day accompanied by others of his flight they were pounced on by a pack of Me 109s. The sky was full of aircraft wheeling around firing at one another, then suddenly, as often happened in those days, he found himself all alone in the sky. Being low on fuel and practically out of ammunition he decided to return back to base. Then out of the blue he was jumped on by two 'bandits' firing like fury. Being out-gunned and out-maneuvred he did the only thing possible and stuck the nose down in a vertical dive with the tap wide open to get away from them. As the sea came rushing up to meet him from the long dive he pulled back hard on the yoke and immediately blacked-out due to the 'G' forces. When his vision returned he was still climbing almost vertically with the Airspeed Indicator hard on the stop.

By the time he'd levelled off there was no sign of the enemy but his Spitfire was vibrating furiously and felt as if it was just about to fall apart. He gingerly set course for Manston just a short distance away and landed as soon as he could. On arrival they inspected the machine and found just about every rivet had popped and both the wings and fuselage were severely buckled. Some boffins came down from Boscombe Down to inspect it and after giving it a most thorough inspection came to the conclusion that it had possibly been through the sound barrier... I was proud to know Joe.

I had numerous amusing incidents on the buses and some not quite so funny. One of these

almost ended in tragedy. During the height of the rush hour they would turn us short at the Crown public house near Cricklewood Broadway with barely a few minutes waiting time before joining the fray once again. It was hardly worth climbing out of the cab. With nothing else better to do I would while-away the few minutes respite practicing trying to pre-select the gear lever into reverse by using my left hand and thumb only; quite a slick operation that normally requires two hands. One early morning it saved my life and many others as well. It happened during the early rush hour one dark cold winter's morning. Being a bit late on schedule due to the traffic, I came hurtling down Dollis Hill Road with a full load of passengers, trying to make up for lost time, intending to brake hard at the T-junction with the very busy Edgware Road at the end. However, on applying the brakes as I rapidly approached the junction, nothing happened. Unbeknown to me (and many others as it transpired later) the roads were covered with black ice – the first ice of the winter and I hadn't noticed. I was faced with two streams of traffic ahead of me and on the opposite side of the road a line of hoardings behind which lay a steep embankment to a large busy railway sidings. With locked wheels skidding on the ice, disaster stared me right in the face! I immediately snapped the gear control lever into reverse using my left hand only, as I had practiced so many times before, kicked the operating pedal and pressed hard on the throttle with my other foot to send the drive wheels spinning backwards. It didn't do the gearbox much good but at least it stopped the bus just short of the junction. If it hadn't been for all those practice sessions at Cricklewood Broadway it may well have resulted in a national disaster with possibly over seventy deaths.

There was also an occasion when I narrowly avoided having what would have been a tragic accident by the skin of my teeth. I was driving the bus at a moderate pace between two rows of parked vehicles when a large pram appeared from behind one of them. With no room to swerve I stood on the brakes and pulled-up inches short of smashing into both the pram and its tiny occupant. The idiot woman pushing the pram was quite oblivious of what she'd just done.

A friend of mine who'd previously drove the diesel buses, but later transferred on the electric trolleybuses, was approaching Cricklewood Broadway one evening. It was a very busy four-way intersection with masses of overhead electric cables strung right across the junction. Completely forgetting that he was now driving a trolleybus instead of a diesel one, he absent-mindedly tried to overtake the stationary trolley in front of him with disastrous results. His overhead pole arms clashed with the other trolley's ones which in turn fetched down the whole network of cables at the busy junction and caused one of the biggest traffic jams North London had known for years.

On the lighter side, during one hot summer, a particular traffic cop always seemed to pick on me when he wanted to halt the line of traffic in Park Lane to let the other waiting traffic cross. Sitting higher up than the average driver the traffic cops normally stop the buses first. This made me late on schedule, giving my clippie a hard time. I got fed-up with it and when it happened on the fourth day running of that particular week's schedule I decided to do something about it.

Having stopped our line of traffic he would then turn his back on us, holding up his left arm straight out in the horizontal position whilst beckoning the

crosswise traffic with his other hand.

Now a bus radiator is very hot to touch, especially during the summer and I had noticed this policeman's left hand was very close to my radiator, so very gingerly I inched the bus forward in gear against the handbrake until the hot radiator touched the back of his hand. He leapt up in the air with a great yelp and came striding around the side of my cab rubbing his left hand shouting "*I suppose you think that's bloody funny*". Of course I protested my innocence and blamed the weak handbrake for the problem. He never stopped me again though!

About every three months we were obliged to do a week's duty on the night bus from Cricklewood to Liverpool Street railway station. On each of the second runs at about 3am there were normally very few people about and often we'd be empty for the whole trip. Once when it was bitterly cold I invited my clippie to come up and sit up in the large cab with me whilst I was driving to share the warmth of the heater; the only one on the bus. We had been doing this every night and on one occasion, just to relieve the boredom, I offered to show her how to drive it. There was nobody around so we changed seats and went gaily off weaving our merry way down the Queen's Highway with little Nancy at the helm, hardly able to reach the large pedals. She had some knowledge of driving and was coping quite well so for a laugh I went round the back and pretended to be the conductor. At the next bus stop who should pop out of the shadow of a shop doorway was an Inspector. He couldn't believe his eyes! There were no female bus drivers in those days of course. Anyway, after lots of grovelling apologies on my part he gave me the biggest wiggling of my life but being a good sport decided not to report the matter, which of course

would have led to my instant dismissal.

Once whilst doing the night run I briefly met the famous singer Matt Monroe. He was also driving the night buses from another depot in the south of London. Totally unknown then outside of London Transport of course but was beginning to make a name for himself singing in various talent contests. Many years later, a good friend of mine, David St Leger, who I taught to fly and was by this time a co-pilot on a Danair Boeing 727, flew Matt Monroe up to Manchester on his aircraft. My friend approached Matt and asked if he remembered me. He couldn't but that evening they night-stopped in the same hotel together and Matt was singing at the night club where David and the rest of the crew were enjoying themselves. He noticed them and sent a bottle of champagne over to the crew. Nice guy was Matt and I was very sorry to hear of his death from cancer much later.

One of the Inspectors at our garage became a friend of mine whom I took flying sometimes. He was a fit, suntanned and lean person who had been a 'guest' of the Japanese during the war, having been taken prisoner in Dutch East Indies and was slave-working down a salt mine barely fifty miles away from where the first Atom Bomb had been exploded at Hiroshima. He knew nothing about it until he was on a hospital ship homeward bound after the war!

So the months rolled by but my regular visits to the LT Flying Club were getting a little frustrating because of the limited duration of the flights, generally only about twenty minutes or half-an-hour at the most. My flying hours were building up slowly, but much too slowly for my liking. At that rate it would take me many years to accrue the minimum required hours for my Commercial Licence. So I came to the inevitable conclusion that the only

way I could further my ambitions was to earn lots more money and pay the full price for the flying at some other club. A bus driver's pay then would not allow for this so I started looking elsewhere. A friend of mine suggested that I go out to Canada where I heard that many well-paid opportunities presented themselves. Flying was also much cheaper there.

Another friend of mine, Johnny Gosling, was quite an adept sailor and had his own sturdy little 32-foot gaff-rigged 50/50 motor-sailer. It was built in 1930, the year I was born, and had a Gray Marine diesel engine. We spend a few very enjoyable days on it with my other friend Ron Springford whom I mentioned earlier from my parachuting days. John's wife Rose was a bubbly character but had an insatiable appetite for sex which John had difficulty satisfying. She called it 'her medicine' and couldn't go to sleep without it! He hinted strongly for Ron and myself to help him out of his dilemma being good friends, but I declined myself (honest). I believe Ron obliged occasionally though!

We all wanted to better ourselves in life and yearned for some adventure so John thought of this brilliant idea of us all sailing his boat, called the 'Belle', across the Atlantic Ocean to the Caribbean, then through the Panama Canal and follow the western seaboard of the USA to Vancouver. There we would dock the boat for a period and look for work. It didn't sound such a crazy idea at the time as John was quite an accomplished sailor and we expected to learn fast under his able and experienced leadership.

We began making all the preparations necessary including getting work passes for Canada and I was getting very excited at the thought of it all. Rose would have done all the cooking and promised us she would '*take care of our every need*' so everything began to look very inviting.

In the long run John chickened out as he began to realise the enormity of the task. Ron and I never really forgave him as it completely shattered all our dreams. My hopes and aspirations of sailing beyond the blue horizon to pastures new faded into oblivion once more. Following this a stroke of good luck compensated for my disappointment which eventually led me into the world of Commercial Aviation.

One day, another good friend of mine at the LTFC, a chap named Jeff Cartner, told me that a group of fellows he knew at Croydon Airport were contemplating buying a second-hand cabin aircraft called an Auster Autocrat for £350 and asked me if I would be interested in taking a one seventh share? I was very interested but at the time I didn't have two beans to rub together so he lent me the £50 which I paid back at about a £5 a week as I recall.

So it was that I became a one-seventh shareholder of a clapped-out old Auster Autocrat that badly needed to be re-fabricated and was well overdue for a full C of A check, in other words unflyable in its present condition. However we were full of enthusiasm and I devoted all my spare time setting about the task of making it airworthy again. Our group leader, Bob Cleary, was friendly with an ARB Inspector called Bill Brewer who very kindly agreed to supervise and sign-out the work. As I couldn't afford to contribute anything I compensated for it by all the work I did. By this time Bob suggested that we form our own flying club to help defray the cost of operating it – on reflection I think this was his intention all along. We all agreed of course and came up with the name 'Air Touring Club' of which we were all made directors. We had no club house, utilising Sid Filmer's bar at Croydon Airport main building instead, and no other

assets apart from our boundless enthusiasm.

Eventually after a few months the task had been completed and I sprayed the newly canvas-covered aircraft in a pale yellow outlined in black – it looked superb! I had the greatest delight in taking it up for its test flight for the issue of a new C of A and I fell in love with her immediately! The previous owner had named her ‘*Spooky Darling*’ because every time he flew her it gave him the ‘spooks’ but he loved her all the same. It had two seats alongside each other and a third much smaller ‘dickie’ seat at the rear.



‘Spooky Darling’ after I’d sprayed her in pale yellow and black

To cover the operating costs we charged ourselves the barest minimum which even so stretched my meagre finances to the limit. The other shareholders were more affluent than myself and could afford to fly her regularly and I would just string along with them for the ride. Although I appreciated their kind offers I champed at the bit in frustration at not being able to clock the hours myself. I was still driving London buses at this stage and only doing the occasional trip in the LT Club’s Tiger Moths but nowhere near enough to satisfy my ambitions. Gradually I became more and more dissatisfied with my lot.

It all came to a head one Sunday after I had been to Fair Oaks in the morning on a busman’s family day out. Ted Baker had detailed me to do a few ‘free’ joyrides with various member’s families, being his trusted star pilot. It had been a really glorious sunny morning but I was

reluctantly forced to leave them all in the early afternoon to return to my duty at the depot. I wasn’t looking forward to doing battle with the masses of weekend drivers returning home from the coast. It was much too late by the time I arrived at the depot to get anything to eat at the staff canteen and had to take my bus straight out on service, so I wasn’t in the calmest frame of mind.

It was a long spell of duty and as the evening wore on so the weather became dull and rainy. The euphoria of the morning’s excitement quickly wore off. The cars filled the roads and made it too late to even grab a quick bite or cup of tea between turn-arounds and I became very hungry, thirsty and tired. As the long day’s duty dragged on into the night I grew more despondent. Suddenly, at the height of my deep depression I flipped! At the next turn-around point I told Nancy to roll ‘Garage’ up on the destination blinds and drove the bus non-stop at full speed back to the bus depot, giving all waiting passengers at the request stops the two-fingered Roman Salute as I sped by. Nancy was terrified and on arrival back at the depot came running around the front to find out what the problem was! I told her “*Sorry Nancy love but that’s it – I’ve had all this rubbish up to my ears – I’m quitting*”. She burst into tears and begged me not to. We had grown very close to each other by now, but with the grass growing under my feet I just had to keep moving and find a quicker way of ascending the aviation ladder.

The next day I walked into the Chief Depot Inspector’s office and threw my uniform bundle on his desk. The bald-headed bespectacled old Welsh chap Mr Jones looked over his glasses at me and said in a dour voice “*I take it you want to quit*”. At that rhetorical question my days driving on the ‘Transport of Delight’ as Flanders and Swan called it in their

famous song, came to an end. It had many ups and downs, but overall I look back on that era as a rather pleasurable experience and have never regretted it. After all, it fulfilled my yearning ambition to learn to fly; for that I will always be eternally grateful. It had served its purpose for me but it was now time to move on. I had no idea where to but I simply had to start looking elsewhere.

My biggest regret was that I never managed to get back to see dear old Ted Baker again, the man who made all my dreams come true. I always intended to but somehow never got around to it. Later on I heard from a friend that at the age of eighty eight he passed away. I shall always remember him for what he did for me where the others before him has so abysmally failed.

So that period of my life came to an end – it was time to weigh anchor once again and seek horizons new. A fresh beginning now awaited me elsewhere...

The big question was ‘what to do now?’ At the time I was living in a large boarding house at Hendon in North London run by a most charming and happy-go-lucky Jewish girl in her late twenties called Mary Betts. Mary and I were on very friendly terms with each other and I occasionally took her flying. Sharing the same house were about a dozen Irish girls that I was also on very close terms with. A great bunch of girls and we had heaps of fun together.

I pondered my predicament at large and decided to try my hand at a bit of freelance painting and decorating, the only thing I was really any good at, in a get-rich quick scheme. It didn’t take me long to change my plans and very soon I was out driving again. This time for a company called ‘Dealers Deliveries’ based in Kilburn, North London, whose speciality was collecting brand new vehicles from the various manufacturers around the country, or the dock areas, and

delivering them to their destinations.

We would queue up at the converted house-cum-office to collect our warrants and then get ourselves by the fastest possible means to the point of collection, which could be anywhere in the British Isles. It quickly dawned on me that the manager had his clique of favourite cronies, who no doubt paid him an appropriate percentage to acquire the best paid trips. This needled me somewhat but as a new boy I was in no position at the time to speak up. The work was hard and entailed early morning starts with equally late finishes. One day I would be driving a Bentley or a Jaguar and then on another day it would be a large chassis or a Continental bus. 'Anything-Anywhere' was their motto. They gave me more than my fair share of chassis' to deliver which were most unpopular with the drivers, being fully exposed to the elements and freezing cold in the winter without any sort of protection except a windscreen in front. The crosswinds I experienced at times almost blow me sideways off the temporary soapbox-type seat I was sitting on. One day as I pulled into a roadside café to warm myself up a comedian called out "*hey mate, when yer going to pay the next instalment*"?

Sometimes we would have to find our way to a collection depot at Margate and pick up one of the new Volkswagen Beetles, then drive it right across country to Cardiff docks for re-exporting abroad. Needless to say, being paid on a trip-basis we didn't hang around very much and it would be 'foot to the floor' all the way. I hasten to add that cars in those days were normally run-in at only 30mph. Many complaints would come in about the way we drove these new cars but the Volkswagen distributors welcomed them, explaining that the Beetles needed to be driven hard from the word go to run them in. Apparently our

driving resulted in more sales than any rep could do. The work was hard and the hours long but what got to me most was the blatant favouritism the Manager displayed to his cronies. One day, unable to take any more, I confronted him about it. A ferocious argument ensued that stopped short of fisticuffs, seeing as how he was a lot bigger than me. I contemplated planting him one then showing a clean pair of heels but wisely decided that maybe discretion was the better part of valour after all. Anyhow, I told him what to do with his job and walked out.

A lady friend of someone I knew wanted her new Austin car to be picked up at Coventry by someone she could trust, and hearing about my recent employment with Dealers Deliveries, approached me to do it for her to save delivery costs. I duly collected it and after a long drive was within a mile of reaching my destination when the loaded lorry I was following, which had a big sign 'Beware of Air Brakes' on the back, suddenly slammed on his anchors at one of the new-type zebra crossings to let a woman cross the road. It was raining at the time and being a cobble-stoned road with a lightly loaded car I was unable to stop and skidded into the back of the vehicle. The ensuing crash threw me forward and, having no seat belts in those days, smashed my face into the steering wheel with my nose, bending it at an angle. Just as well really because had I been equipped with a seat belt and been held rigidly upright I would most certainly have been decapitated by the back of the lorry which had ripped the top off the Austin. There was blood, steam and broken glass all over the road. Some Good Samaritans helped me out of the wreck and took me into a café close-by where I held my head over a bowl, almost filling it with gore, until the ambulance arrived. The Austin was a complete write-off of course but apart from a

broken nose and damaged ego I was non-the-worse for wear except a fully bandaged face and a fair amount of pain.

Having left my previous job of my own accord I was not entitled to any unemployment benefit for six weeks. Being in no state to seek other employment in the condition I was in, I very soon ran out of money. My landlady Mary was sympathetic to a point but she had a business to run. I quickly realised that if I didn't get organised really soon I would shortly be in serious trouble.

Having run out of money I could not even get a meal and being too proud to beg a crust from Mary I went for three days without a single bite to eat. If anyone has ever been through that experience themselves they would appreciate the desperation that overrides common sense and drives one to a life of crime. In short, I stole a ten shilling note from under the clock on the mantelpiece of Mary's room and fled off to the nearest café to gorge myself on the largest and most tasty nosh-up of my life, albeit with an acute sense of guilt.

Nothing was said at the time and I naturally assumed that Mary either didn't miss the ten shilling note or more likely had no idea who'd taken it. When I finally did get some money later on I popped a ten bob note back from where I stole it under the clock on her mantelpiece.

Months later, in order to clear my conscience, I blabbed the truth to Mary having by then of course amply repaid her in kind. She said "*Yes, I knew it was you but didn't say anything at the time because I realised the desperate state you was in*"...There are some really nice people in this world and I counted Mary Betts as one of them.

Despite my poverty I was still a director of the Air Touring Club which by this time was attracting more and more people to fly our 'Spooky Darling'. I could

hardly afford the petrol, cheap as it was then, to drive down to Croydon in my battered old jalopy and could only watch in envy as the others flew around the skies. However, I would frequently find myself accompanying some of them on local flights. I strongly suspected though that they welcomed the company of a 'more experienced' pilot like myself, who let's face it had nearly one hundred hours by this time, to save them from getting into trouble.

One fine summer's evening I was talked into flying from Croydon, out across the Thames estuary, to Maldon in Essex and back so this fellow could take photos of his girlfriend's house from the air. I had reservations about the lateness but as the weather was excellent, and according to his calculations, we would have been due back to Croydon long before sunset. It failed to work out like that though, possibly because we spent too much time stooing around looking for her house, or maybe due to headwinds, I know not. Halfway back it started to grow darker with lights going on around the built-up areas. By the time we arrived back in the vicinity of Croydon it was already fully dark and the airport, which was readily identified by its flashing green beacon was a black void surrounded by the lights of housing.

Croydon of course was a grass airfield with no landing lights. Our Auster was not equipped for night flying, and neither were we, nor did we have any radio to seek assistance.

By now I had taken over control from the hysterical pilot and was getting him to strike matches and read off the airspeed and altitude as I sank into the black void, holding the nose up slightly with just a trickle of power on in a seaplane-type approach. By some miraculous and quite unintentional means I did a perfect three-point landing to the intense admiration of

my quivering companion. We taxied slowly towards the lighted hangar, stopped short and shut down the engine. Then we pushed it the rest of the way into the hangar. In those days there was no requirement to book in or out so nobody was any wiser. We sank a couple of large beers at the airport bar (for which my grateful companion paid of course) with me at least feeling as if I had just made my first public speech... My learning curve was very steep in those days!

It was during this period at Croydon that I was to undertake my first flight abroad. One of the other directors invited me to accompany him on a trip to Rotterdam in Holland. We flew down to Lympne Airport near Folkestone in Kent to clear Customs and then set forth across the English Channel (no life jackets of course). It was a fine clear day and we could see Calais clearly before even crossing Dover. On reaching the French coast we descended to fly at low level along the sandy beaches near Dunkirk, so quiet and peaceful now compared to the chaos of the historic battle area of the previous war.

Before long we were landing at the grass airfield of Knocke-le-Zoute, bordering the coastline, for lunch and refuelling. It was a delightful setting and I was sorry to hear that years later the airfield was closed down to make way for a luxurious millionaire's residential area.

Flying across the Zuider Zee was an exhilarating experience for us, skimming low over the dykes and inland waterways, rocking our wings in response to the waves from the Dutch workers in the tulip fields. As we neared the large dock area of Rotterdam we climbed up to a respectable height to search for the airport. It was clearly visible though and so without further ado we joined the circuit and on receiving a green light from the control tower came in and landed.

We spent less than an hour there because time was getting on and after clearing formalities took to the skies again for the return trip home. It was late in the day when we landed back at Croydon after a most memorable first flight abroad.

Sadly our beloved 'Spooky' was lost in a tragic accident off the French coast near Berk-sur-Mer.

#### *Berk surMer Accident Report.*

*The official French report on the accidents to Auster 5 G-AHHS and Turbulent G-APBZ at Berk sur Mer on the 15<sup>th</sup> April 1963, has now been published by the Ministry of Aviation. Operated by Air Touring Club, the aircraft were flying in formation with a third machine from Rouen to Berk-sur-Mer when they encountered thick fog. When the aircraft arrived off Berk, G-AHHS made a turn at low altitude and crashed into the sea; G-APBZ was severely damaged on attempting a landing on the sand dunes, and the third aircraft, the only one of three to carry radio equipment landed normally at Le Treport aerodrome.*

*The pilot of the Auster Mr C. A Brackpool, and his wife were drowned; Mr Brackpool's other passenger, Mr A. W. Downs, and the pilot of the Turbulent were Mr J. Murphy were injured.*

*The report states that the meteorological forecast for the route, given by given by telephone to Mr Brackpool and Mr Tyrell, the pilot of the third aircraft, "apparently was not understood correctly". The British pilots did not speak French and the meteorological officer did not speak English.*

*The conditions in which G-AHHS was flying "the report concludes" – a turn at very altitude over the sea, in mist and drizzle, with no horizon – explain how even a relatively experienced pilot would have struck the water. Such conditions would also lead to an accident in the case of a pilot with less than 200 hours flight time who was attempting an emergency landing on unsuitable ground after passing low over the hospital buildings.*

*"There seems no doubt that the imprudent decision to depart from Rouen (perhaps excusable in view of the language difficulties), then the decision to continue to Berk in spite of the clear deterioration observed in the weather conditions (and infringement of the regulations) were the underlying causes of these accidents.*

*(Reproduced from Flight International, issue dated 16<sup>th</sup> April 1964*