



BIGGIN HILL AIRPORT BUGLE

News from our Airport at Biggin Hill - established 2005



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STOL: Short take-off and landing. It was 20th January 1972 at Biggin Hill airfield a beautiful sunny day with runway 29 (Tarmac & Grass) in use. In those far off days aircraft using the parallel grass runway did not have to use radio, whilst those using the tarmac runway were controlled by radio.

This system worked very well in those days – pilots learned the art of lookout..!! and most knew which ever aircraft they observed in the circuit, they had a good idea from its relative position if it would be using the grass runway, because those circuits were closer to the airfield – simple..!! Sadly this technique is not encouraged or allowed today with circuit control management procedure being lost for the training pilot, especially when the new pilot is confronted with a forced landing.

Back to January 1972 – the editor who was CFI at BHFC at this time was standing outside the club watching a demonstration of the STOL characteristics of the EP9 being demonstrated by a well known pilot character of Biggin Hill. The approach looked rather slow and perhaps a bit too high. Suddenly the aircraft descended rapidly, bounced high into the air with the stalky undercarriage broken and flailing beneath, then crashed heavily to the ground. After a few seconds the occupants extracted themselves.

This aircraft was the Edar Percival AusterJ (EP9) which was designed



primarily as an agricultural aircraft a rather ungainly looking machine. (Basically a very much modified Auster aircraft which had clam-shell doors at the rear of the cabin)



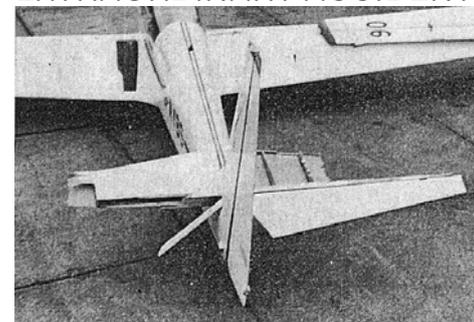
It was fitted with a 6 cylinder 295HP engine whilst some were fitted with 375HP Armstrong Siddley Cheetah engines.



With all this power available, care had to be exercised at low speeds, especially when loaded, any sudden reduction in power could lead to an alarming sink rate. Whilst this incident was being observed by the editor (the airfield alarm was activated) people began rushing to the upwind end of 29 and were looking over the perimeter fence which rather bemused the editor, as the accident was just a few yards away...!?

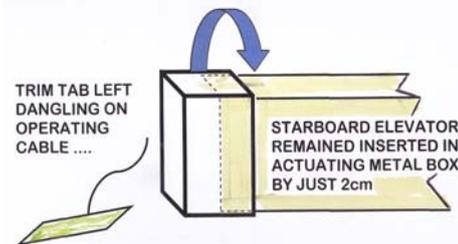
However, unnoticed was an RF5 of Sportair Flying Club being flown by a student practising circuits and landings on runway 29 tarmac.

EXTRAORDINARY ACCIDENT



at Biggin Hill. During one approach he had floated a little too far and left it a little bit late before initiating a go around, the aircraft sank toward the trees just off the end of the runway into the valley tearing off the port elevator and the associated, tail-plane spar, which previously held the hinge line of this elevator. (see picture).

The starboard tail-plane was ripped from the aircraft, and fortunately



the starboard tail-plane rear spar remained intact holding the hinged elevator in place with no more than 2cm (just slotted in) no screws, no nothing. (see above diagram, not to scale). The elevators were two individual units operated by a common box type crank which moved these elevator units as one.

The pilot's comments afterwards were *"it was a bit stiff, and I couldn't trim it"*. If only he had known how close he was to disaster. Despite all this he recovered his wits and completed a successful circuit and landed.

During this unobserved moment in time, the editor remained completely oblivious of what had really happened until some minutes later when the RF5 taxied casually past with half of its tail surfaces missing.

In fact, the alarm for the RF5 had alerted many and the editor became aware of something happening, but had in fact, only witnessed the EP9 crash, which was in the process of happening.

The editor, therefore totally mis-identified the actual situation ...!

ABOVE & BEYOND:

The following is a true story (written by an original 'Biggin Hill-ite' (LDH) and published in a serialised form:

Transport of delight

Whilst I was loafing around wondering what do with myself and devising different ways and means of how to earn a living now that I was unemployed, I happened to be having a beer with a friend of mine in a local pub and asked him if he knew of any jobs around.

He said "well what do you want to do"? I replied "become a pilot and fly aeroplanes like my big brother of course but a fat chance I have of doing that". He said "Then why don't you join the London Transport, they have the cheapest flying club in the UK, they only charge fifteen shillings per hour"!

Apparently the flying club had been started around 1930 and had been subsidised mainly by the sale of lost property, of which there were mountains of it being such a large organisation. By law London



Transport had to retain any lost property for a period of six months and if not claimed by then were allowed to auction it. They weren't allowed to profit from the sale though and the proceeds had to go to the LT Sports Association... That was how the flying club first started!

I knew nothing of this of course prior to my friend telling me and said "Great! How do I join London Transport"? He replied "Become a London bus driver I suppose"...

That was the best advice I have ever been given and became the turning point of my life...

The next day I went straight up to the Central Recruitment Office and offered my valuable services. Having a clean driving licence and heavy goods experience helped of course so the initial interview went as expected. The usual medical was no problem and before I knew it I was on my way to the training course at Chiswick.

I enjoyed the training, particularly on the skid patch which was great fun. This consisted of a large concreted area covered in oil with a man constantly spraying water on to make it greasy. Each instructor was allocated three students at a

time consigned to his charge. The training bus we used was slightly adapted from the average passenger-carrying type in that the window behind the driver had been removed and the handbrake was much larger than usual. The training bus was an AEC 97-horsepower diesel-engined one with an epicyclical pre-select gearbox. This meant that you selected the gear you needed by the control column with your left hand and then kicked the operating pedal with your left foot (where the clutch normally is) so as to activate the gear change.



We would come hurtling around the track as fast as we could; turning to the right as we approached the skid patch, then the instructor, seated in the front passenger seat, would lean over and pull the handbrake on hard. This would set the bus into a sharp clockwise skid with the rear tyres screeching sideways and the bus leaning over at a giddy angle. The learner-driver's task then of course was to recover from the situation. What fun! It was even more exciting sitting in the back of the bus on the periphery of the skid. The other two trainees with me didn't think so though and were petrified.

Another thing the instructor taught us was called 'peddling off'. This involved the technique of reducing the pressure on the pedal as you braked to a standstill so by the time you stopped there was hardly any pressure on the brakes at all. By this means it was possible to brake as hard as you liked within reason without throwing standing passengers. The secret was not to stab the brakes or use any sudden

movement but to apply the pressure firmly but gradually. I have used that technique on all types of vehicles ever since and particularly on aircraft fitted with air brakes. A period of training on the Queen's Highway followed this and we went over just about every bus route in London doing so.

About this time I was recalled back to HQ in Marylebone as there seemed to be a problem with my application. It appeared that they'd checked up on my previous employment with Titanine's and discovered that I was sacked for 'persistent bad time keeping'.

Not the best recommendation for a budding London bus driver! However, as I had already almost finished the course and was doing well, and with some fast talking and heaps of grovelling on my part, they decided to give me the benefit of the doubt, with a dire warning as to what would happen to me if I was but one minute late during my probationary period. With great relief I returned to finish the training.

The driving test for the coveted Passenger Service Vehicle Licence (PSV) was conducted by a Scotland Yard examiner. It was a strict test with numerous fail points; far more difficult than it is these days apparently. Both of the other two trainees with me flunked before my turn came so I wasn't in the calmest frame of mind. However the driving test went well. I was very careful turning from Oxford Street into New Bond Street, which was an obtuse-angled turn, not to touch the curb with the rear wheels which would have been an automatic fail point. The same problem occurred turning left from Trafalgar Square into St Martins Lane. However all went well and having successfully passed the driving part of the test the examiner then started quizzing me on the Highway Code, which we

had to know from cover to cover, including all the braking and stopping distances etc. This was followed by numerous general knowledge questions. All went well until he finally got to the last question which was "what road sign is it that a bus driver must take more notice of than most other drivers on the road?" My mind went completely blank... I stumbled through a few suggestions until he said impatiently "if you can't answer my question I'll have to fail you"...

At this point my instructor, who was sitting unobserved behind the examiner, started patting the top of his head – then I twigged! "Low bridge" I blurted out!

I passed and was sent to Cricklewood Bus Garage in northwest London with my brand new PSV licence and uniform to commence the Route Training.

Although my designated route was to be the No.16 there were possibly thirteen different routes that I could have been detailed to drive on. Therefore I had to sit on the top deck of each of the passenger buses noting every turning and stopping point. This covered a period of about ten days. I must confess that that sometimes I fell asleep with boredom.

I didn't take too much notice of the lengthy No.1 route, the longest in London, all the way from Willesden to Catford in South London, as it was most unlikely that I would be called upon to do that one anyway. The rather short No.16 route from Cricklewood to Victoria Station in Central London was the 'new boys' route and I knew it well.

Would you believe it but the very first day out on my own I was temporarily posted to Willesden Garage to operate the No.1 bus.

What a mess I made of it, and in the morning rush hour too! Eventually we arrived back at the depot one-and-a-half hours late; an utter disaster for my first days driving on my own. At one stage I was so lost that I found myself up a cul-de-sac and had to reverse the fully-laden bus with six strap-hanging standing passengers on the lower deck, into someone's front driveway to turn around. When we finally arrived back at the bus garage the poor frustrated clippie stormed off in a rage and never spoke to me again.

Anyway, next day I was back on the more familiar No.16 route, which in the rush hour had a peak frequency of about four buses per minute. I was just twenty five years old, which was the minimum age for a London bus driver and with gay abandon leapt into the task with gusto.

At the first opportunity I jumped on my little Francis Barnett motorbike and made a beeline for the Fairoaks Airfield in Surrey to join the London Transport Flying Club situated there.

Fairoaks was an all-grass airfield in those days and the famous 'Winco Arthur' who had been flying since the First World War, ran the main Fairoaks Flying Club whilst dear old Ted Baker, a real giant of a man (six-foot four inches tall) ran the LT Flying Club which was open for membership to anyone employed by the LT Road Services at a very much reduced rate of fifteen shillings per hour (£0.75 when decimalised today). The comfortable little wooden club house, an ex-RAF dispersal hut, was beautifully kept, situated halfway along the peri-track all on its own. They had three of the finest and best maintained Tiger Moths in all the country.

The LTFC had originally been started at Broxbourne north of London (now a gravel pit) but after

the war had relocated to Fair Oaks. Ted Baker, the CFI, was a London bus driver himself during the early 1930's and for the duration of the war had been made a Flight Lieutenant ab-initio Flying Instructor. Ted was based at Fair Oaks during the entire war and was no doubt instrumental in the club's move there after the war. He already had over 10,000 hours by the time I arrived on the scene in 1955.



The Club House still stands today, although much tidier, boasting a kettle a small fridge and a flight-planning area with a computer connection and a comfortable lounge.

Ted welcomed me straight away and I was suddenly engrossed with the feeling that 'this was it', at last my chance had come. He kept calling me John (obviously mistaking me for somebody else in the past) and took a shine to me straight away. From that day on I never looked back! My first lesson of about half-an-hour's endurance went by all too fast. Ted was a great man, very strict but very fair and I hung onto his every word of advice. Just a few weeks later with only 7hr 20min of instruction Ted sent me off solo to a perfect landing! At last I had found my niche in life... this was definitely for me.

As far as bus driving was concerned I acquitted myself well. I had been given a heaven-sent chance in life and I was not about to blow it. Every single opportunity that presented itself I would jump on my little 'Franny Banny' and scoot off to Fair Oaks, regardless of wind, rain, snow or sunshine. If I worked in the mornings I would be

down there in the afternoon or vice versa. If I was doing what they called a split-shift, designed to cover both the morning and evening rush hours, I would go down there in the middle, often skipping meals for the chance to get even a short twenty minute flight in. If the weather was too bad for flying Ted would give us some ground instruction and I hung onto his every word; avid to learn everything I could about flying.

The LTFC didn't encourage people to build-up flying hours for professional licences, it was meant solely for recreational purposes and were obliged to limit the annual flying hours to stay within the budget. This meant frequent visits in order to grab the odd half hour or so, but I didn't mind at the time, just as long as I could get close to aeroplanes. Flying, or anything remotely connected with it, dominated every thought I had. I felt at last my dreams had come true.



G-A11Z the Tiger Moth in which I did my first solo.

I would often take the hour-long bike ride down there in the early morning, waiting for Ted to arrive, and sit outside the closed clubhouse gazing at the silent dew-covered grass airfield and listening to a skylark singing its silly head off high in the early morning sky.

If it was a drizzly morning I would walk across the grass airfield to the canvas-covered blister hangar which housed one of our Tiger Moths and gaze wistfully at the silent aircraft inside, ecstatically taking in the combined smell of aero fuel and dope-covered fuselage listening to the rain drops

pattering on the roof of the canvas hangar above – to me it was sheer heaven!



(Ted Baker with 'clippie' Maureen Turner)

When Ted finally arrived, assuming the weather was fit for flying, I would always be first there to help him push the aircraft out of the hangar. He would then let me taxi it up to the clubhouse. If the weather was too bad for flying I would be helping tidy up the clubhouse or doing repairs. Ted would give a lecture on navigation or meteorology if there were enough of us with me being his most attentive student. I was agog to learn more...

It paid off for me because I was now his favourite star student and if there was a test flight going, or if more than one of us wanting instruction at the same time, somehow I was always manoeuvred to be head of the queue. Crawling? You bet I was! I now had this driving spirit inside of me that nothing or nobody was going to stop and heaven help anyone who tried!

The solo flights I thoroughly enjoyed. To be up there on my own in that open cockpit with the wind whistling around me, leather flying helmet and ex-RAF Mark VIII goggles on and neck-scarf blowing in the wind, feeling like the Red Baron, had me in raptures. I would be blissfully singing my head off with not a single care in the world.

Because I had put 100% effort into it I progressed very fast; my flying, and in particular my landings, were

M.C.A. Form 602

I. UNITED KINGDOM

II. STUDENT PILOT'S LICENCE
(Flying machines)

III. Number of Licence 32649

IV. Name of holder, in full:
HARRIS Lawrence David

V. Address of holder
78 Evelyn Avenue,
34, CLARENCE AVENUE,
Colindale, N.W.9,
Kentons,
Middlesex.

VI. Nationality of holder British.

VII. Signature of holder

(The beginning of my flying career)

perfection (most of the time anyway). Before the summer was out and in half hour stints, I had clocked up the bare minimum hours for my pilot's licence. Ted passed me out on my final check flight so there I was at last, a fully-qualified licensed 'veteran of the skies'. The total cost from start to finish was only £26, including all the fees which comprised flying, medical and issue of licence; the lot! Today you wouldn't even get a ten-minute joy ride for that.

All of this culminated from that chance remark by a friend over a beer which gave me this wonderful opportunity to become a pilot courtesy of the London Transport Flying Club...

I realised of course that I was still very inexperienced with only one foot on the bottom rung of a very long ladder. If I was to achieve my ultimate aim of becoming a Commercial Pilot I still had a long way to go but I least I had made a start. The rest was now up to me...

One of the pre-requisites of becoming a London Bus driver was the condition that I would agree to become, and remain, a member of

the Transport and General Workers Union in what was termed as a 'closed shop'. There was no way I could avoid it. My parents had always been staunch Conservatives and although this naturally rubbed off on the rest of us I really had no axe to grind either way. I did not feel comfortable though about being forced to join anything against my will. However, as my prime objective in becoming a London bus driver was to learn to fly at a cost that I was at long last able to afford, I was willing to string along with anything to achieve this ambition. With reservations I signed on the dotted line and queued-up every Friday with tongue in cheek to pay my union dues as was the ruling.

After a few months on the buses the whole of London Transport Road Services decided to go on strike. Being now a member of the TGWU I was obliged to strike with them also. I felt most uncomfortable about doing, this but had no choice in the matter being warned that failure to back the union by not striking would lead to cancellation of my membership, which in turn would automatically lead to immediate dismissal from London Transport. This would spell an end to my flying so Hobson's choice it was...

I had no real idea what the strike was all about and didn't care either. Something to do with money and conditions but not being unduly dissatisfied with either I had no real interest in the proceedings. To my eternal shame I was forced to do my stint of picket duties outside of the garage to prevent the so-called 'blacklegs' from taking buses out of the garage. Had I refused then I would not get any strike money. This in turn meant that I would starve or even worse, not being able to afford to go flying. We were also obliged to attend regular strike meetings where some loud-mouthed firebrand would stand up ranting

and raving calling us 'brother this' or 'brother that' – 'comrades' would have been more appropriate I felt.

However, I still travelled down to Fair Oaks as often as I could and volunteered to do 'hedging and ditching' for the local farmers to earn some extra money to go flying with of course. By this time I had progressed to owning a small battered Morris Eight and I would stop en-route from home to Fair Oaks to give as many people as I could lifts to work, explaining to them that although I was a bus driver myself I was against the strike taking place but couldn't do anything about it. Most of them were quite sympathetic.

When the strike was eventually settled some six weeks later, the few drivers that had refused to strike were forced by the London Transport Executive to leave the job as part of the Trade Union's terms of settlement – sacked by the very employers they were loyal to! Prior to that strike I was not politically motivated either way; I simply was not interested, but after that dispute ended I became a staunch anti-unionist and anti-Labourite and have been ever since.

From the days of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, where unscrupulous employers squeezed the last ounce from their starving workers, the unions had gained such a stranglehold over the bosses that the tail was now wagging the dog and I absolutely abhorred the situation.

Although Maggie Thatcher had her faults her greatest single achievement in my opinion was to curb the power of those unions and put a stop to those evil 'closed shop' practices.

Having obtained my Private Pilot's Licence I was now entitled to carry non-fare-paying passengers or 'not

for hire or reward' as they say, so at every opportunity I would take the clippies to the airfield in my old jalopy for a short joy-ride, then quietly charge them half the cost of the flying. This is legal these days but not so in the 1950s. There were very few licensed pilots among the drivers at that time and I was the only one at our particular Cricklewood garage. This caused considerable jealousy and resentment among a few of the other drivers, especially when I borrowed their clippies for the day, but I was above caring. On more than one occasion though, I had to do some fast talking, to avoid any nasty incidents.

One nice chap who worked in the LT offices in London would make regular appearances at the club and offered to share the cost of the flying with whoever was willing to take him up. Being a cripple he couldn't fly himself, but he loved to fly with others. I willingly obliged whenever I was asked to and then one day whilst we were merrily swanning around over the Hogsback area of Surrey, he asked me if I could do aerobatics? Like a fool I said yes! So in my first attempt at performing a loop, but having already previously read-up on the subject of course, I stuck the Tiger Moth's nose down to build up speed and then heaved back on the stick.

I'm not really sure to this day what happened but there we were upside down in a stalled condition and then the Tiger suddenly went into an inverted spin. Although of course I had previously taken the precaution to ensure that both our Sutton Harnesses were securely tightened before the manoeuvre, my one was obviously not tight enough. I was now spinning upside down and suspended to the full extent of the harness, with both feet off the rudders, hanging vertically onto the end of the joystick, with my chart, which had dropped out of the map compartment in front of

me, now opened up in the breeze and was fluttering around my face totally obscuring my vision. I somehow managed to pull myself up the stick from my inverted position with a panic-stricken superhuman effort until I could get one foot on the rudder and pushed like fury.

It did the trick and she came out of the inverted spin into a spiral dive from which, at about 500 feet, I finally recovered and climbed very meekly back to a safe altitude once more. My passenger, who had been very quiet throughout the attempted loop, then cheered through the Gosport tube and told me that was the greatest thrill he'd ever experienced! I strongly advised him not to mention a word of it to anyone at the club as any aerobatics were strictly forbidden by the CFI Ted Baker.

On another occasion I flew a girlfriend of mine called Penny down to Sandown airfield on the Isle of Wight. Flying across the Solent on the way back I caught sight of the famous passenger liner the 'Queen Mary' on her way from Southampton to the USA. It was too good an opportunity to miss! I eased the nose down and flew alongside her, below the level of the main deck then around the stern. What a fantastic sight to behold! The only problem though was when I banked the Tiger around behind the massive hulk, what I didn't bargain for was the turbulence it left in its wake. One minute I was looking at the name '**Queen Mary-Southampton**' in large letters at the rear of the ship, the next I was thrown all over the sky by the severe turbulence. It nearly turned me upside down into the frothing sea behind its propellers. Somehow I managed to recover just in time before hitting the water. Penny, oblivious of the near disaster, was most impressed with this performance!

During the time I spent at Fairoaks there were quite a number of flying accidents; none of them at our club though. Many were witnessed by myself but none of them fatal.

On one occasion I happened to look out of the club's window and saw a Tiger Moth cart-wheeling over, wing-tip to wing-tip. On another occasion I saw a Tiger land on top of another one but all the occupants survived without serious injury, which says a lot for that wonderful aircraft. Yet another time, an Indian chap as I recall, landed his Tiger on top of the Control Tower. He climbed down from the wreckage and then completely disappeared, never to be seen again!

Cricklewood bus garage was at the time staffed by about 90% Irish drivers and conductors. I liked the Irish and got on well with them, especially the rosy-cheeked green-eyed little Colleens. They have a sense of humour that I can readily identify with. Before long I could quickly tell the difference between not only the Northern Irish and the Southerners, which is quite obvious, but after a time I could almost pin-point the actual counties they hailed from. My own darling little clippie Nancy hailed from Pallas Green near Tipperary in Limerick.

Southern Ireland was neutral during the war and sometimes, if I thought the atmosphere was conducive, I would rib them about 'living off the fat of the land' whilst we in London were being bombed to blazes. I did this to one happy smiling conductor one day, who was a bit older than most of the others, and he just grinned and let me ramble on. **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.....** *to be continued:*