

Long Ago, and Far Away: Model Flying Memories, Part 1: 1947- 1955

Early summer, 1947... It was often a cold, crowded journey on that old, rattling double-decker bus to Batley. Usually, standing room only. I would cling grimly to the wings and fuselage of my latest pride and joy, trying to pay my fare:

“Eee! It’s a model airplane! Will it fly, luv?”

“Well, if I can get it off this bus in one piece, it might...”

Then, the fifty minute walk to the flying field at Howley, to meet familiar faces: members of the West Yorkshire Model Aeronautical Society, all now long gone to fly their “Slickers”, “Banshees” and elegant “Wakefield” rubber-driven designs up there in the Great Flying Field in the Sky, where the breeze is always a friend and wings never fold.....

I would arrive at the field, hot and very tired. You see, it wasn’t only model aviation that hadn’t made much progress in those days... Despite the changes brought about by two world wars, opinions and attitudes were, fundamentally, often still Victorian:

“Flying model aeroplanes on a SUNDAY! Never heard of such a thing!

Mmm...

Well, you’re not going out looking like THAT! So - put a tie on. Clean your shoes. You need a clean collar. Fasten your raincoat. Where’s your scarf?”

Life for one 14 year old model aviation enthusiast in the mid-1940s.....

If the model was new, unflown, the first few moments were always critical.. Apart from control-line, where the model was manoeuvred on lines, all others were “Free-Flight”, which means exactly what it says: the model, once released, is on its own... “In Free-Flight, it has to be Right”... any warps, misalignments, angles of incidence or centre of gravity errors, and that first flight could very well be the last... The skills of ‘Trimming’ a model are mostly redundant with modern, radio-controlled designs, but “Free Flight” does still have a dedicated following by enthusiasts. They find great satisfaction in seeing something they have created and accurately prepared, flying beautifully, just as they had planned.....

So. The Moment of Truth... Throw some grass in the air to check the wind direction.....down on one knee, over long grass.....

And all too often, collect the bits and pieces....back on the old bus... why am I DOING this..!..

“Eh, deary deary me...’as it crashed, luv?”

“No, no! It’s my new design...It always looks like this...”

Then, those first control-liners, c.1948. I remember the shout of excitement when Bob Whittingham performed the very first loop with his “Kan Do”...

It took many weeks of dedicated saving to buy my first engine, an Amco 0.87 diesel.. This unfortunate little thing lived, for a long time, still bolted to a piece of wood. I was a very slow builder...It flew my little “Phantom Mite” very sedately.... We would often mix our own fuel. I clearly remember taking my little brown bottle into the local chemist’s shop:

“Could I have half a pint of ether, please?”

“There you are, lad. That’ll be 2/6.”

I mean, can you just IMAGINE walking into a pharmacy today.....

One afternoon, there on the old bus:l

“Ah say, Lily, can yer smell somethin.?”

“Aye, ah can! What ivver is it? It smells like an ‘ospital... “

My fuel can was leaking.....

Model flying club, 1940s... Very few cars. Members would often arrive on push bikes, towing coffin-like boxes mounted on twin pram wheels. Cigarettes, pipes, everywhere. Woolly hats, wide, turn-up trousers....

There came the highlights of our year, the rallies and competitions. Our communal transport was a large furniture van. On the tailboard, in large letters, it read, “FARRANCE FOR FIREWOOD!”, and on the way home, that’s more or less what it contained...

I shall never forget Bill and Ernie Farrance... They built the most beautiful orange and white “Slicker 60”s purely for competition flying. The engine run was limited to so many seconds. In that time, the aim was to simply gain as much height as possible, and achieve the longest flight. This meant installing the most powerful engine that the airframe could take. Great! Under the massive thrust of an ETA glo-plug , their Slicker 60s could scream up to almost cloud base in a few seconds. Fine. But remember: these were FREE FLIGHT... If not built and trimmed absolutely spot on there was nothing anyone could do. I still have the distressing images of Bill or Ernie covering their eyes and turning away as yet another of their lovely creations smashed to matchwood.....

The last Sunday in April, 1951, and I’m flying with West Yorks for the last time before joining the Regular RAF at Cardington. A perfect afternoon. Both of my two gliders realised I might not be around any more, and vanished through cloud in search of new homes. One might have succeeded, for it was never returned. The second, 50 inch span ‘Lulu’, turned up six miles away near Mirfield.

On my first leave, I collected her, took her to my new base at RAF Credenhill, and gained 3rd place at the RAFMA Championships with her, flying from RAF Ternhill.

RAF Rufforth, near York, had a very active aeromodelling section. We were fortunate; the airfield was never really busy, and we often had clearance to use it . There at Rufforth I built the control-line twin-engined Douglas A26 Invader. Quite how I got it home by bus and train, I really don’t remember, but a few weeks after leaving the RAF in March, 1954, it was ready to fly. We laid out the twin 65ft. lines.....

I can still see all those doors opening, that Sunday morning in the local park... The noise from the two unsilenced 3.5 cc diesels was truly horrendous, but nobody came over to complain. Try that today.....

1955, and now the wonderful world of radio control was beckoning....

Ah, so is Cath, now. I think I am about to close the hangar doors and be refuelled.

Stay tuned!

Eric.

