

Long Ago, and Far Away: Model Flying Memories, Part 2: “There wasn’t very much inside “
by Eric Humphrey, 2nd February 2021

It’s March, 1956, and I’ve just returned home from a significant, long-anticipated visit to my local model shop in Dewsbury. I’m gazing in awe at my purchases...

I’ve just become the proud owner of my very first radio control gear.

I unwrapped the largest parcel first, to reveal a square black box with a lid, about the size of a hat box, with black crinkle finish. This had to be the transmitter. I opened the lid. There wasn’t very much inside: lots of space for the dry batteries, some wires, and a single valve, mounted on an aluminium bracket, cowering in a corner...

I just hope you know what you’re supposed to do...”

S-s-so do I, s-so do I.....”

There was a long fly-lead, with a micro switch at one end, and a two pin plug at the other.

“I think I fit into that socket, just there...”.

“You’d better be right...”

Also at the side, the bracket for the 5ft aerial, and the name of the manufacturer: ED, Electronic Developments. Leaders then, in their field.

A separate package held the receiver, and a smaller one, the ‘actuator’, - of which more later.

My model was the tried and trusted Junior 60, a stable, gentle design from the 1940s, and power was a new Mills 2.4 diesel - one of the most reliable engines on the market. So, into the airframe went the ‘gear’, as we call the radio.

The receiver was encased in foam rubber, and suspended in the cabin area between four rubber bands...

“Ah, excuse me...should I be bouncing up and down like this?...”

“Oh, sure. That’s the idea. It helps to absorb all the vibrations and the shocks...”

“Shocks?!”

“Oh, just ree-lax. Play it cool...”

This, of course, really was just basic ‘Single channel’. No elevator, no throttle, just left-centre-right-centre- You can guess the rest.....

The actuator, rubber-driven, rotating through 360 degrees, was usually fitted in the rear of the fuselage, and connected to the rudder by a wire crank, to give those basic control positions.

Sunday afternoon. Three of us join Ken - “Kef” - Lees in his delightful little Ford 8.

Sandwiches and flasks are packed. Next stop : Baildon Moor.

With four enthusiasts crammed into the tiny vehicle, there was no room for models...

These went into an enormous blue box, longer than the car, which was strapped to the roof...

Curious scrutiny from passing police....

In 1956 there was only one authorised frequency for model flying: 27Mhz. If many other flyers were there, it could be a long wait before making the essential “Range Check”.

Equipment: One fuselage. One handkerchief, large, white, waving frantically for use of, and one non-metallic ‘twiddler’.

Some 2-300 yards from the Tx, a raised arm meant, “Transmit”. A wave of the hankie, “Hold signal!” Readings were taken from a 0-5ma milliammeter plugged into the fuselage side, and the primary and secondary tuning coils were “Tuned” with the twiddler. This could easily take 15 minutes. The milliammeter would be then replaced with a two-pin ‘shorting plug’ - and all the settings could change....

Ken “Kef” Lees flew an American Model. The 6ft span “Rudderbug”, designed by

Walter Good in 1949, was an outstanding creation. Very stable, light wing loading. Ken powered his with a raucous Frog 500 glow plug motor.

Poor Kef... He could build them, but he often had trouble flying them! Somehow, he never quite mastered that reverse of control when the model is coming towards you.

Flying single channel: KEEP UPWIND at first! If the wind gradient (What?) is strong, and the model is allowed to go too far down wind - there's no way back...

Sometimes, when that happened, one guy would pick up the transmitter and, with the model's owner pounding on the micro switch, off they would go, clicking away into the sunset.....

One cold, memorable winter afternoon, Junior 60 finally decided to leave home, ignoring all signals, and disappearing in the direction of some distant houses.....

Mum and her three children were just sitting down to enjoy their afternoon tea, when one of the boys happened to glance outside:

"Mum! Mum! There's an aeroplane!"

"Haven't you seen an aeroplane before?"

"But Mum! It's coming inside! Mum! Mum!"

"Don't be so silly! Eat your bread and jam..."

Carried down wind by the fast-moving snow shower, Junior 60 hit the window like a small bomb. The wings stayed outside. Mum and her three children all dived under the table in perfect formation, as the fuselage hurtled across the room in a shower of shards of glass, and ended up sitting on the sideboard. Miraculously, they were unharmed.

I apologised profusely, but she took it all very well:

"You know, luv, I've got three kids—and if I'd been expecting another, I'd have had it then! My husband's a long distance lorry driver. He's away at the moment.."

"Oh. Well, thank Go... er, I mean, - Right! "

A quick trip to the nearby DIY store for sheets of hardboard, hammer and nails. An emergency call to a local joiner....Job done...No traumas, compensations or counselling... Junior 60 survived, to be fitted with Skyleader proportional radio in the 1960s. Wonderful - but somehow, some of the fun, the sense of achievement, had gone....

I wouldn't have missed those days! You see, we had no means of knowing just how rudimentary and basic everything was. How could we have known what astounding progress was about to be made in model aviation?

Looking back on my 65 years in radio controlled flying, I can actually recall only one complete "write-off" ...My Kamco Kavalier, going flat-out, inverted, over tarmac, at a height of about two feet. I gently applied up elevator....

So.- It's all been done, hasn't it? I mean, why would the next generation of amazing virtuosos have any interest in how r/c began, still less in the era of free flight? What might possibly appeal to them? What might they be looking for? What could they, perhaps, still be seeking?

I'm working on it.....

Eric.