

Aerodromes – AOPA's front line

Pressure on aerodromes is alleviated but little by the economic downturn, says David Ogilvy

Aerodromes – and the problems surrounding their continued availability for general aviation users – continue to occupy a considerable amount of AOPA's time and attention. Several years ago the Association declared a policy that suitable sites must be readily available within easy reach of all centre of population, commerce or industry; this statement still stands but, in view of recent threats, we have added 'tourism'.

While not all changes are detrimental to the cause, we need to keep our fingers on the pulses of all proposed developments and endeavour to catch the threads before they are tied too tightly. Many people approach us when a situation has gone beyond repair, so now I am repeating an earlier request to get in touch at the earliest opportunity. Whilst from the office we endeavour to find out what is going on throughout the UK, we cannot have eyes and ears everywhere; we must depend on others to put us in the loop so that we can spring into action when a project is still in its youth. Whether that project seems likely to be beneficial or harmful to GA, we need to know, for sometimes an initial assessment can be wrong. Early warning gives us time to investigate.

A welcome example of a case causing concern turning into one of support relates to proposed changes at **Gloucestershire Airport** – still known to many as Staverton. Several people contacted AOPA expressing worries about plans to clear the ends of the main runway, on the grounds that this was to enable larger and heavier aircraft to use the airport, to the possible disadvantage of GA. We have all seen regional airports discouraging the lighter side of aviation – especially the important role of pilot training – in the hope that they can survive mainly on a few scheduled services. Some, though, appreciate the significance of GA to the longer term future of both aviation

Right: Gloucestershire Airport – "scheduled services are restricted and GA is our bread and butter"

and of the airports themselves. I am pleased, therefore, to quote from a letter that I have received from Mark Ryan, Gloucestershire's Airport Director, in response to some direct questions:

'I acknowledge your concerns and would like to assure that that the implementation of our Runway Safety Project will not have any adverse effect on General Aviation. Gloucestershire Airport prides itself on being the premier General Aviation centre in the South West and, with the significant operational enhancements we are making, we will continue to do so.

Historically, we have always attracted and accommodated a wide variety of aircraft types

and operations, including limited scheduled services. However, scheduled services operating from Gloucestershire Airport are extremely restricted and can only offer a profitable service to a very niche market, hence their exclusion from our future business model. Even with the successful completion of the project, they would still be performance limited and when coupled with the fact that we are located directly between Bristol and Birmingham, it would be hard to justify a reason for us to take this route.

In essence, GA is very much our bread and butter and will remain so for the foreseeable future. In recent months, we have proactively introduced a new fee structure, reflecting the shift towards VLA and sport flying, and substantially reduced our avgas prices. We continue to maintain our three-runway configuration, invest in nav aids, ATC and airfield lighting and CAA approval of our GPS approaches is imminent. We recognise the shortage of high quality facilities nationally, and I would therefore welcome your support in promoting Gloucestershire Airport as leading the way in GA.'

This we are happy to provide. What a pleasant relief it is to find an aerodrome today with three usable runways.

A regional airport that has been causing concern to many is **Southend**. An extensive development plan includes destruction of the area that provides bases for flying training establishments and there is no sign of space that offers fresh accommodation. Although we have received only silence from the airport management, Southend-on-Sea Borough Council have placed the AOPA case in full in the general policy section of their London Southend Airport and Business Joint Area Action Plan Preferred Options document.

Our submission is:

'On behalf of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) I am writing with regard to the reference on page 15 to the Flying Club strip. Whilst I understand that this is geographically well positioned for the railway station and new terminal, there is no reference in the document for provision for flying training organisations.

Is it a part of the plan that all flying schools and/or clubs should cease to operate from the airport? If so, this could be detrimental to the proposed expansion of commercial air transport activity.

Although there is a temporary downturn in demand for airline travel, when the economic situation improves there will be an increase in activity. This will create a need for more pilots, many of whom begin their flying at schools or clubs within reasonable reach of their homes or workplaces. If this facility is removed from the locality, many people who might wish to fly will take up other pastimes and will be lost as prospective newcomers to the flying profession.

Before the credit crunch there was a shortage of new pilots and this situation will recur. Within AOPA we have considerable experience in the field of pilot training and I suggest that this potential problem should be considered in the overall planning process.'



Ross Younger



Terry Fletcher

Richard Morrissey



Largely because of lack of finance, there has been a slight reduction in the number of planning applications for wind farms. In one case, though, AOPA has been involved in the interests of safety relating to aircraft flying to **Rush Green**, near Hitchin. Although the proposed position was some distance from the airstrip, both sites are under airspace controlled by Luton Airport and there are height limitations for flights in the vicinity. There were many objections on other grounds from local organisations, but AOPA put the aviation case and the application was turned down by North Herts District Council. Sensibly, the landowner is taking advice before deciding whether to lodge an appeal, but to quote from a report in the local paper he has stated - 'We seem to be on a hiding to nothing'. Time will tell.

Despite the economic situation, one extensive wind farm project is under way. A very large offshore complex is destined to cover a substantial chunk of the Bristol Channel. AOPA has been contacted by agents for the developers, sensibly asking whether we are likely to object 'in principle'. We have been unable (yet) to see the detailed positions of the proposed turbines, so we are unable to go firm on a view. If there is no obstruction that would affect the safety of GA we have no cause to complain, but we have made clear that we reserve the right to express our concerns if we find that flying operations are likely to be adversely affected. Precise details of locations may be available soon after this magazine is published, so if any member finds that the planned scheme would impose a handicap on his or her operations, please make early contact with me, providing enough information on which we can put forward a case.

Eaglescott in North Devon is one of several small aerodromes troubled by the CAA's increases in charges for aerodrome licences. Although in the special category – valid for flying training only – the fee has risen from £600 in 2007 to £1,220 last year to a current figure of £2,025. Not surprisingly this has created considerable unrest and may cause closure of some places. AOPA has taken up the case with the Head of Aerodrome Standards at the CAA who has passed it to the Finance Department for consideration. We await a result. Whilst these figures may appear to be small when considered in relation to the overall costs of running an aerodrome, if unchecked, they could lead to further sharp increases that the industry cannot absorb. In Eaglescott's case, flying training for the PPL takes place on only two days a week and the operator has only five students, which means a cost of more than £400 for each trainee! We are fully aware, of course, that eventually

training may be allowed from unlicensed aerodromes but that provides no comfort for those facing problems today.

Sandown on the Isle of Wight has been the subject of previous concerns. It has suffered numerous hiccups in its recent past and its purchase by a property developer has not added confidence for anyone pursuing the aviation case.

Although not directly related to the change of ownership but, due to the encroachment of trees and buildings into the flight paths, the single grass runway is reduced from 799 to 350 metres on 23 and has become unlicensed on the reciprocal heading 05. Permission for two houses was granted some time ago by the local planning authority without due consultation with the airport representatives. The new owner has declared that he has not yet decided what site development will take place but, due to the economic situation, he is taking no immediate action. AOPA approached the Isle of Wight Council to find out what changes they will or will not accept and we are pleased to record that 'leisure flying' remains on the list of activities planned for the Bay Key Regeneration Area. This does not provide as much detail as we would wish, but it does ensure some form of aviation activity. We will

Right: Sandown's 23 runway has been reduced from 799 metres to 350

Below: on the reciprocal 05 heading the runway has become unlicensed

Above: development plans for Southend include destruction of FTO accommodation

keep watching.

Airspace problems continue to haunt us. In particular, smaller airports seem to claim rights to extend their protected areas with little, if any evidence of need. Some of these proposals are based on central Government's requirement for airports to put forward their proposals for handling a projected increase in commercial air transport activity, so this artificial incentive gave some places ideas that otherwise they might not have considered. We are not sure whether this is the case with **Norwich** or whether this is based on the operators' own initiative, but there is some strong collective concern among users in the area, who make clear that proposals to increase controlled airspace fail to provide for the broader needs of GA. Although at first some users felt that the initial proposals put forward by the airport



Darren Clements



Dave Anderson



Left: proposals for more controlled airspace around Norwich fail to take account of the needs of GA

were reasonably tolerable, these plans have been revised and the objections have re-arisen.

The following are extracts from the latest objections on which AOPA has been asked to act:

'There is a lot of concern in the local flying clubs and schools that NIA Air Traffic Control (ATC) is being far too ambitious with these proposals. Commendable concern is shown for scheduled traffic, but very little, or none, for the many GA aviators who fly in Norfolk. The proposals as they stand will create a choke point on the north east Norfolk coast where the CTA brushes the coast. While the proposal allows for aircraft to transit the CAS as long as the pilot is in RT contact with Norwich, there will inevitably be clashes of workload in the Tower when GA pilots will be forced to 'stand by'. If the controller is busy this could be some time, forcing the impatient and cost-aware GA

pilot to push on through the choke point to complete his sortie – there to meet others in similar situations?

The CTR is from the surface to 6000ft, with a CTA base 1500ft. While the base of the CTA is at 1500ft GA pilots will be obliged to remain at 1400ft or lower below the proposed CAS. This gives few options in the event of an engine failure and most GA pilots prefer to cruise around at 2000ft or higher in order to give themselves a better chance in the event of an engine failure. The area immediately round Norwich – the proposed CTR – does not attract a large amount of GA, but further out there are a number of airfields and common transit routes that will be affected by the CAS. GA pilots are aware of the penalties of infringing CAS and most elect to remain well clear.

We believe that NIA can achieve their desired aim with considerably less CAS. A CTR

the size of a military MATZ with a panhandle at either end would offer all the protection needed. We cannot possibly see a need for a CTR of the size proposed or a CTA base 1500ft taking up most of east and central Norfolk.'

As is always the case, we have taken appropriate action and await responses from both the airport and the CAA's Directorate of Airspace Policy.

There is the usual run of routine issues relating to flying sites on which we are asked to act, but this report gives an insight into some of the key points affecting a broad spread of the AOPA membership. If you are a member we aim to tackle your problems, too, but please remember that we must be advised of proposed developments as soon as they are known. In this way you can help us and, more importantly, we can help you!

Finally, in June there was a touch of alarm among some airstrip owners because of a report in the Light Aircraft Association's house journal to the effect that the operator of any flying site – licensed or unlicensed – must create and abide by a Safety Management System. We knew this to be untrue and we were able to ease the minds of AOPA members who were concerned; however, to check the facts we contacted the Aerodromes Standards Department of the CAA and they confirmed that they recommend an SMS, especially for a busy site, but that there is not – and cannot be – a statutory requirement in the case of an unlicensed aerodrome or airstrip. ■

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