

Aerodromes update

*Here we bring together the current situation relating to a number of general aviation aerodromes and private airstrips. There are worrying threats to the futures of several long-established bases, yet planning permission has been granted to some smaller sites. By **David Ogilvy***

As we go to press, AOPA has been involved with 608 planning and/or operational issues relating to GA aerodromes and airstrips. This figure applies to cases handled since we started keeping records in 1988. 44 of these occurred in 2007. The extent of the Association's involvement varies immensely between one case and another, ranging from, occasionally, just a single letter or email, to action continuing over several years. The record in time, complexity and the depth of the file falls to **Lee-on-Solent**, on which there has been AOPA action since April 1993, when it was known that the Royal Navy would be vacating the site. Reports by John Walker appeared in the December and February issues, so here I will just summarise that GA has a stay of execution until May this year, by which time we hope that some sense will have been infused into a situation involving the Department for Transport, South-East England Development Agency, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, and Hampshire Air Support Unit, the last of which is the main objector to widespread aviation use of this most desirable site. Although the relevant local authorities - Gosport and Fareham Borough Councils - have issued a joint planning statement 'future development should seek to maximize the benefit of the existing runways for general and private aviation use', this

Right: erection of four new hangars, an administration building and a control tower, with hard standing has been approved at Tatenhill

Below right: Clacton, threatened by a wind turbine. The local authority has declined to accept advice from the aerodrome management, AOPA or other experienced sources

appears to have little weight in the current thinking. Although in the early battle stages there was little coordinated action by users, today Lee Flying Association is taking a key role in fighting for its members' futures at the base. Lee remains one of the most suitable GA aerodromes in the south at a time when there is a positive demand, so AOPA will remain in the front line of action. At the present stage of confusion and uncertainty, though, the eventual solution remains little better than anyone's guess.

More encouraging information comes from **Tatenhill**, where an application for essential improvements was turned down by East Staffordshire Borough Council, but most of which were allowed on appeal. The Inspector approved erection of four new hangars, an administration building and a control tower, with hard standings, improved highway access and associated landscaping. Interestingly, he laid down that the buildings must be used only for aviation purposes and he was convinced

that the development would be of importance to the economy of the area. Although the initial application was to include eight hangars, the Inspector concluded that at this stage there was insufficient evidence to justify all these. The overall result, though, means that the owners, the Duchy of Lancaster, will be able to create a much-needed expansion and improvement to the currently dreary site.

North Coates, in Lincolnshire, has suffered from several applications for erection of wind turbines, despite some of these being within the area that was safeguarded several years previously. One proposal, submitted in April 2007, is by Novera Energy for four turbines with base to blade tip height of 125 metres, a little over a mile from the runway threshold. As the circuit height is restricted to 500 feet AGL because of the nearby bombing range, the proposal has a strong safety element and would be detrimental to the operation of the airfield. As though this is not sufficient of a problem, as recently as February this year a

proposal by another company for a single turbine, a little further away, is on the horizon.

An equally serious wind turbine application, this time for a single unit, concerns **Clacton** in Essex. The offending turbine would be only just outside the preferred track of the base leg for an approach to 18. Although it is a licensed aerodrome at which pilot training takes place, the local authority (Tendring District Council), is unable - or perhaps conveniently unwilling - to understand that a student must be able to stray from a precise circuit pattern as an essential part of the learning process. Fortunately Harry Siepmann of the Aerodrome Standards Department of the CAA has produced a very helpful letter, brief extracts from which are:

- i) 'As part of the aerodrome audit process the aerodrome inspector will require assurance that a licence holder is able to protect the aerodrome's airspace... safeguarding... based on constructive dialogue between aerodromes and planning departments, in which the licence holder or his representative provides expert advice on the safety aspects of proposals.'
- ii) '...a planning authority needs to include expert advice in cases where technical matters are involved... such expertise is not normally available within planning departments. They must, therefore, avail themselves of such advice.'
- iii) The CAA considers that if the aerodrome manager advises that the established amenity would be affected by certain development his advice may be considered as expert testimony... It has been



established in previous determinations of the Planning Inspectorate that safety management at a general aviation aerodrome is a matter of public interest.' Despite this, the local authority has declined to accept advice from the aerodrome management, AOPA or other experienced sources.

In an endeavour to support the entire GA spectrum, AOPA has provided first-aid help for the Highland Gliding Club at **Easterton**, which not only has the threat of wind turbines, but is understandably worried about the possibility of advisory route N560 becoming an airway and Inverness hoping to establish a TMA. Both developments would impose heavy constraints on the club's activities. Also north of the border, **Portmoak** Gliding Club seeks protection from over-zealous developers who propose to erect 13 new houses, the nearest of which would be only 150 metres from the aerodrome. The Club has sought confirmation that the new site would not be classified as a 'congested area' with the constraints that this would impose on flying activity, but so far such definitive assurances seem to be in short supply.

Several well-established and much-needed licensed aerodromes are in various stages of threats to their futures. **Leicester's** site, owned by the Co-operative Wholesale Society, has been nominated as part of a vast development of 15-20,000 houses to form an Eco Town. This is one of many bids submitted to the Government and a decision is expected at about the time that this appears in print. Leicestershire Aero Club is owned by its 500 members, there are 80 home-based aircraft and about 30 people are employed at the aerodrome. I remember when there were three civil airfields in the Leicester area, so every possible effort must be made to prevent the destruction of this sole remaining site.

Redhill aerodrome in Surrey has been the subject of several planning applications, including one for its expansion into a regional airport, another for a vast housing development and the latest to convert the site into an equestrian centre; almost certainly the last of these was an attempt to have the land converted from a green to a brownfield site. All have been refused by Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, but two further proposals are likely to have been submitted before this appears in print. We have not been able to see the precise details, but they are for a hard runway to permit year-round flying operations and for a surrounding housing development, which seem mutually incompatible. AOPA will be following progress in an attempt to ensure that Redhill will remain available as a GA aerodrome.

As a change, it is encouraging to be able to support a few positive items. Air Westward at **Dunkeswell** has obtained planning permission for three new hangars, each of 30,000 square feet, on which building work will start shortly. The aerodrome and its near neighbours, the Devon and Somerset Gliding Club at **North Hill** airfield work in close harmony and make energetic efforts to operate in peace with the neighbours. On a much smaller scale, Mark Newman has been granted permission for **Lains Farm** airstrip, together with a small hangar. However, as the consent is for the owner's use only and the site is within the

Thrupton ATZ, understandably Mr Newman stresses that it is not available for other users, so please honour his request. It is good to hear from Dick Richardson that Popham has built up good relationships with local residents, who are welcome to telephone or call in to chat if they perceive any problems, therefore resolving them before they develop.

Garton airfield in East Yorkshire obtained full planning permission, with no restrictions, in 1990, but early in 2007 an application was submitted for gas storage caverns to the north, with natural gas venting pipes, which could not be overflowed. Despite valid objections, the application was approved, restricting circuit flying to the south side of the east-west runway. Within four months an application was submitted for wind turbines, 400 feet high, on the southern side, under the only available circuit. As with Clacton, the CAA provided strong written support for the aerodrome and AOPA did likewise, as a result of which the application was refused. Also, among the ever-growing applications for wind turbines, **Benington**, in the narrow air corridor between the approach pattern to Luton and Stansted, has threats to a safe future. The most recent information received concerns the North Moor Aero Club at Messingham, in North Lincolnshire, which is facing the threat of a wind turbine within the aerodrome circuit. Currently AOPA is pursuing both these.

For many years AOPA has sought the reinstatement of **Weston super Mare** as an active GA aerodrome. At present, helicopter operations attached to the Helicopter Museum are threatened by proposed building development that could lead to congested area problems. This is despite the site having a safeguarding agreement with the local authority but, although Government advice calls for planning officers to abide by laid-down principles, they are not legally obliged to do so.

I could write much more about these aerodromes and airstrips, but the operators of six other flying sites for which AOPA is providing help have asked us not to mention them at present, as developments or plans are in sensitive stages. I finish, therefore, with some general words that may help to round-off the picture.

For the benefit of any readers who may not be fully aware of the relevant planning procedures, it may be worth adding that, normally, an application is submitted to the local planning authority (usually the District or Borough Council or, in some places, the

Unitary Authority); then the officers make a recommendation to the members of the relevant committees, who then decide whether to grant or refuse permission. In recent years, though, there has been a tendency to short-circuit the process by giving the employed officers the authority to make a decision. There are some exceptions to this procedure as, for example, an application for a wind farm that is designed to generate more than 50Mw is decided by central Government and not by the local council.

If an application is refused, the developer has the right to lodge an appeal. This may be handled by an exchange of written statements between the appellant and the local authority, while a more sensitive case may lead to a local or public inquiry with an Inspector appointed by central Government. This can be a long-winded and very expensive process involving barristers and expert witnesses, delaying a decision by many months. I write this very simplified explanation in the hope that it may be useful for someone facing the planning world for the first time.

General aviation continually faces threats to its longer term health and these come in many forms. The two major issues are the Government's plans for vast new housing estates in many areas of open country, which could involve the loss of several existing aerodromes, and the growing demand for wind turbines as part of a plan to generate electricity from sustainable sources. We must all be interested, though, in the new Wave Hub project, for which planning permission has been granted for the world's first large-scale wave farm off the coast of Cornwall. Whilst this may cause concern among nautical and fishery people, it has no detrimental effect on flight safety, so clearly we will keep our fingers on the development pulse.

The overall need for suitable flying sites to be available within reasonable reach of all centres of population, commerce or industry remains a key feature in AOPA's work programme. As many threats are started by stealth, all members are advised to keep checks on what goes on in their areas. Your Association continues to provide free first-aid help, so if you seek guidance make contact with me at david@aopa.co.uk or write to David Ogilvy, AOPA, 50a Cambridge Street, London SW1V 4QQ. Please, though, give me enough relevant information on which to act – and do so long before a threat becomes a development! ■



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