



Corporate Member Profile: Eaglescott Aerodrome

# Soaring with Eagles



*Eaglescott welcomes careful pilots and promises you won't be shot at. Pat Malone reports*

It takes a peculiar sort of passion to establish an airfield in virgin territory in modern times; so many forces are ranged against you that unless you are fired with tireless zeal, and perhaps a little bit mad, you'll go and waste your time doing something else. Each airfield needs a single driving force, a man or woman who is hopelessly committed to this small world – someone to cajole others into doing things, find ways around problems, dig ditches, make tea, paint signs, cadge stuff, face the new challenges that make life less predictable every day.

At Eaglescott in Devon, that person is Barry Pearson – the man who not only keeps the flying club going but actually founded the airfield, laid out the runways, attracted the members, hand-built the first shed, fought off the bureaucrats and the planning people and even faced down the heavily-armed old biddy who kept firing her shotgun at gliders because their pilots were looking in through her bathroom window. Barry has a profoundly emotional connection with his airfield, reinforced by the fact that his mum and dad are buried under a plum tree in a garden at the edge of the airfield.

Eaglescott isn't near anywhere, it isn't even on the way to anywhere; it's just a fantastic place to go if you want to wallow in general aviation as it should be. There can be few airfields with such a diverse range of aircraft in residence; Eaglescott has 41 different types on the premises, ranging from the Air Ambulance's Eurocopter EC135, the Tiger Moth, the Auster and the Piper Cub to the 172s, Warriors, Europas, the Citabria, the microlights, the gliders, even an RAF 2000 gyro. And behind every aircraft is a unique story. There's a Currie Wot that's being tricked out to look like a Pfalz, a pair of Turbulents under reconstruction, a Pitts Special that came from the Turkish military and still carries the flag, and a Hamble Cherokee with the coat of arms in faded original paint on the rear fuselage. Nine of the members visit in helicopters, 40 have their own aircraft, ten are aeromodellers, eight are glider pilots and five fly weightshift microlights. On a decent day you might see gliders being aerotowed off, Tomahawks in the circuit, a Pitts doing aerobatics and a military helicopter practising sloping ground landings on the Bronze Age burial mound in the middle of the airfield. And Barry will be in the clubhouse – where every item of furniture has been donated by

someone – making the tea, answering the phone, his fireman's boots ready at the door for instant action. Everyone is welcome, the landing fee is a fiver an engine, and you can't miss it because it's right next door to the golf ball radar that guards the Western Approaches for NATS.

Barry himself started flying with the Air Cadets at 624 Gliding School at Chivenor in Slingsby T31 and T21 Sedbergh gliders. When the Hunters left in 1974 the school wound down, and Barry and some fellow pilots decided to start their own gliding site at Chivenor. Barry contacted the Property Services Agency, who granted him a licence to operate for the princely sum of £50 a year. A Bergfalke was bought for £1,500 and a Rover 100 to tow it for another £100, this cash being the proceeds of the sale of Barry's boat. The tow hook was bolted to the Rover's roof and everybody had a good time until the Hawks came back to Chivenor in 1978 and the gliders were rendered homeless.

After a false start close by, Barry formed a partnership with Brian Fraser-Smith, a Devon farmer, and got some land with an agricultural mortgage on which they began winch-towing gliders, while investing in a Grob 109A motor glider – they had one of only two outfits in the country offering a motor glider PPL. Casting around for a name for their field, they discovered that the nearby area had been called Aylescott by the monks of Tavistock



**Top: Eaglescott aerodrome in North Devon welcomes all careful fliers**

**Above: pilot, owner, cleaner, digger driver and cadger-in-chief Barry Pearson**

**Below: recognise this? In its glory days it was Hut A1 at Chivenor**







because there were eagles in the area (ayles were eagles), so Eaglescott it was.

Barry started Devon Airsports in 1984 with a view to offering every type of flying imaginable, and one day a retired Royal Marine looked over a fence at where Barry was digging a hole and asked whether he could parachute from here... so the parachute club came along, using a Cessna 170, G-AORB, and a 180, G-ARAT, which were pretty tatty in those days but are now beautifully kept and fly from Popham. Between 1984 and 1988 work progressed on licensing the airfield, and in the meantime they got really busy when the adventure holiday business started.

Says Barry: "I was cycling along the seafront at Instow one day when I saw an adventure holiday centre van and asked the driver whether he'd ever thought of offering gliding? He turned out to be the owner, Alan Holgate, and he said he thought he could probably send me 200 people. I thought he meant 200 a year but he meant 200 a week. He called one day and asked if I could start on



**Top left: Eaglescott's fire chief with his firefighting equipment**

**Left: ex-Hamble Cherokee still carries faded coat of arms. Plenty of variety in the packed hangar**

**Bottom left: Citabria is used for glider towing**

Tuesday because he had some Yorkshire mining families coming down; he sent 40 youngsters every day, and with only two gliders and a motor glider we were pretty busy.

"We charged the kids £2:50 each for the whole day, which included grass skiing, archery and air gun shooting on the airfield, and we had to accept that these were inner city kids and occasionally we'd get pellets coming up through the glider floor. Many of them had never been in the country before and I used to point out the cows, the postman's van and the tanker coming for the milk, and they were completely wide-eyed."

Barry had flown the glider tug at Aboyne in Scotland, instructed at Guernsey and Manchester Ringway and in 1980 gained a CPL. At the time he was employed flying the night mail from Exeter to East Midlands in a Partenavia. "I would take kids for four-minute flights all day, then my normal students in the evening from five to eight, then I'd dash down to Exeter to fly the night mail in the Partenavia, then get back in the early hours of the morning," he says. "I used to take one of my Grob students along to do the flying and drive me to Exeter and back, and it was a bit hectic but it all worked out very well. I was only getting £30 a night for flying the mail, but I used to get £40 a week from a government enterprise scheme, which helped keep the airfield afloat."

The adventure gliding came to a screeching halt in 1990 after three children drowned in an incident at Lands End. Teachers and volunteers were sued, and the whole adventure holiday system rapidly collapsed. Now, kids play video games.

By the mid 1980s Eaglescott was training six to eight pilots a year on Grob motorgliders. New aircraft came and went. Members wanted to soar, so about ten pilots clubbed together and bought a Citabria, then they sold the Grob 109A and bought three Tomahawks. A Chipmunk was acquired in an Army sale, a member brought in a Tiger Moth, and as there was only Barry and no staff, overheads were





low. "I was an examiner in microlights, motor gliders and powered aircraft," Barry says, "but JAR killed that stone dead overnight because you couldn't examine your own students."

Being well out in the sticks – there's nobody living within a mile of any threshold – Eaglescott had little trouble from neighbours, with one exception, a lady who lived in the village of Dolton a couple of miles away. "From 1984 to 1993 this lady was suing me for noise, trespass and nuisance – only the third such suit in all of history," says Barry. "Luckily

my girlfriend at the time was a solicitor and was able to do a lot of work. The lady was claiming for loss of goats milk yield and devaluation of her property, and in her court documents she admitted shooting at gliders on 22 occasions with a 12-bore shotgun.

"I mentioned this to the CAA and they simply weren't interested – a matter for the police, they said. I discovered later that the police had come and taken the lady's shotguns away, but it rather surprised me that they took no further action.

"The judge in the case, when it finally came to court, was a pilot who'd learned on Tigers in the Navy. I took him for flights around the circuit and in the local area, but the lady wouldn't let him into her house and refused to produce any statistics for goats milk yield during the 1970s, or indeed the alleged goat. AOPA was very helpful and David Ogilvy came down and made a presentation in court, and we won, with costs against the complainant. But it went on for nine years, and I have to say it was very wearing."

In the late 80s Barry's commercial work took him on to the Aztec and the Navajo, then he did a Shorts 330 course in 1987 and got

his command in 1988. The Post Office mail contract was taken over by Jersey European, later to become Flybe, for whom Barry flew the Shorts 360 – the 'Shed' – until 2002 when he moved to the Dash 8 Q300 and Q400, then on to the Embraer 195. He's got perhaps 20,000 hours in total, and 15,000 glider launches. Earlier this year he requested four months unpaid leave from the airline in order to devote more time to the airfield, and when he goes back to work in September it'll be part-time.

Drainage has been a problem during recent winters – and indeed, summers – but the discovery that a neighbouring farmer's drains were blocked and the investment of a lot of time and effort with a borrowed JCB has resolved most of the issues. The airfield has no electricity supply – Barry erected a wind turbine at a cost of some £2,000, with another £1,000 for batteries and ancillary equipment, and it does the business. "We are severely hampered in that we have to do the hoovering on a windy day," says Barry, "but the wind turbine is worth its weight in gold. I thought we'd have to do a lot of work on it, but I've called the manufacturers and asked what servicing it needs and they say 'Aren't you the chap who called us two years ago? Stop bothering us!'"

In the beginning the only building at Eaglescott was the former Hut A1 from Chivenor, originally 75 feet long but now 45 feet long from having been dismantled and moved so often. It's now in a state of extreme disrepair but Barry doesn't want to knock it down in case he won't be allowed to put up another building in its place. The first hangar at Eaglescott was erected in 1984, and five years ago they erected a new one, with members paying five years' hangarage fees up front in order to fund it. After two years of dicing with the local planning authorities, permission has been granted to Devon Air Ambulance to erect a hangar on land at Eaglescott. Says Barry: "They have two EC135s. Bond Helicopters own one and the Trust own the other, but in September 2010 the Trust hopes to purchase the second helicopter. It was costing them around £125,000 a year to be based at Exeter, but not only does Eaglescott charge them nothing, but we've gifted the Devon Air Ambulance Trust a free 125-year lease on a piece of land on which they'll build their hangar. That's got to be worth a lot of jumble sales."

A serious cloud on the horizon for Eaglescott is the cost of CAA licensing, which is currently required to allow flight training. Barry says:

"The CAA finance department announced the licence fee would go up from £150 to £3,600 in five years, and although there has been some success in staving that off, my fee last year was £1,227 and is £2,025 this year. We're in a particularly bad position down here in the south west, where Lands End flying club has closed, Truro has been forced to go non-licensed and others are struggling. I believe the solution is for AOPA to take over licensing inspections from the CAA and charge a fee that reflects the service provided; the BMAA performs that service for microlight training, the BGA for gliding and the BPA for parachuting, so there's no reason why it shouldn't be extended." ■



**Left: Pitts Special acquired from the Turkish military still carries its original flag**  
**Below: Chipmunk acquired in an Army sale**  
**Bottom: Devon Air Ambulance has free use of the airfield**

