

# Rural bliss

**Midway between airport and farm strip, this Bedfordshire home-from-home for aviators is stuffed with treasures**

**Words and photographs Nick Bloom**

**T**here's no restaurant and you can't buy fuel at weekends – except in emergencies – yet Gransden is high on many pilots' list of places to visit. The attractions include the rare old aircraft based on the airfield and the likelihood of seeing Unlimited-level aerobatics displays in the overhead. World-leading restoration specialist Vintage Engine Technology Ltd (Vintech) is based here, and so are Yak UK and engineer and Stampe specialist Andy McLuskie. With ground-to-air radio (usually unmanned) no resident flying school and light-handed management, Gransden is blissfully informal. You just have to use your common sense, don't frighten the horses grazing in a paddock next to the runway – they're difficult to frighten as they're thoroughly used to aeroplanes – and remember to sign in and leave a tenner in the tin in the Swiss-style chalet that serves as a clubhouse.

Typical of the style of the place, this small wooden building was designed and constructed by the airfield's owner, Mark Jefferies, from materials and fittings donated by the resident pilots. Make yourself a coffee, help yourself to the snacks on offer and leave the appropriate sum in the

honesty box. Linger on the chalet's veranda; you're sure to see something interesting. You might also make some new friends and perhaps even be invited to take the passenger seat in something interesting, like one of the three-axis microlights or the Stampe biplanes based here.

My visit begins with a journey up the A1 and then through open countryside, an hour's drive from Hemel Hempstead, perhaps a little more from north London. It's a journey I've made many times in the days when I shared a Laser based at Gransden with Steve Jones (later a Red Bull pilot) and Nick Wakefield, who flew with Brian Lecomber. We used to take it in turns to fly an aerobatic sequence while the other two critiqued from below. I also worked for Andy McLuskie at Gransden for a while as an apprentice engineer. This was before the

chalet was built, so I used to bring tea bags and an electric kettle. One day, when I forgot my sandwiches, I sneaked two eggs from Mark's wife Cathy's free-range chickens behind the hangars and boiled them in the kettle.

Arriving at Mark's office in the Yak UK hangar, I ask if the chickens are still there. "Nope," says Mark. "The fox got them." It's that kind of airfield, you see: rural and they just get on with things.

Mark tells me there are currently sixty aircraft at Gransden. Since some of them are group-owned, there are perhaps eighty pilots based on the airfield. Hangarage is £150 a month plus VAT, and tie-down outside on the grass £65 plus VAT. There are currently a few vacancies for both. Mark says: "We're outside the Olympics restricted zone and will have a special deal for anyone who →





wants to park their aircraft here temporarily." The landing fee for visitors is £10, and avgas ("Tell them the price has just dropped," says Mark) is £1.55 a litre plus VAT. It's on sale to visitors during the week, but only in emergencies at weekends. This isn't a particularly busy airfield, with an average of perhaps a dozen movements during a flyable weekday.

"At weekends we generally reach the maximum of thirty movements permitted by South Cambridgeshire Council," says Mark. He and his brother John had a massive battle with objectors 18 years ago over planning permission, which they won on appeal, but with this restriction, plus a few other, less important ones.

Mark's father, Len, first landed his Tiger Moth in rough pasture on his 300-acre farm (now 1,200 acres) in 1963. He levelled and surfaced a grass runway in 1966, establishing a private airstrip. Len's sons, Mark and John, inherited the farm – which they still run – and airstrip when Mark was in his twenties, a newly qualified pilot who had restored a Bücker Jungmann and was making a name for himself in aerobatic competitions. This was when I met him, and I have fond memories of flying to Gransden in a Turbulent in the early 1980s and drinking powdered coffee made with hot water from a thermos in a disused railway carriage on the airfield.

Rare aircraft currently based at Gransden include two Spartan Executives, a Yak-11 and two WACO biplanes, one cabin and one open cockpit. Other biplanes include a Stearman and two Stampes, and other vintage types, a Chipmunk and Auster. Aerobatic aircraft include three Extras, an Edge 540, a Laser and various Pitts Specials and Yaks. There is also a variety of home-builts, including an RV-7, a Turbulent, a Currie Wot and a Taylor Monoplane, and

a selection of three-axis microlights, some constructed from kits.

The brothers steadily expanded the airfield they inherited from Len, laying drainage under the runway in 1986, erecting several large hangars and introducing Vintech (Mark is the majority shareholder) and Yak UK, an importing, sales and maintenance company specialising in Russian aerobatic aeroplanes.

I ask Mark why there is no flying school at Gransden. "It's purely a matter of economics," he says. "It's difficult enough to turn a profit on airfields close to big towns, let alone out here. We've had people set up flying schools on the airfield, but they all went bust. Actually there is quite a lot of flying training that goes on here, with instructors who live nearby coming in on an *ad hoc* basis. It's nearly always the student's own aircraft, though, and the instructor charging for his time."

## Aerobatics and charity events

The airfield is allowed to exceed the maximum number of movements several times a year, notably on the British Aerobatics Association Beginners Day, which will be held on 18 August this year. Eight pilots entered in 2011. Also the Children In Need Day, which was attended by 5,000 to 6,000 people in 2011, raising £8,000 for the charity. This year it will be held on 26 August. The attractions will include Mark in the Abarth Extra, the BBMF Spitfire, Hurricane and Lancaster trio, an RAF Tucano and Kingair, the Red Sparrows, Captain Neville's Flying Circus and 250 classic cars, with a barbeque party in the evening. (Go to [www.littlegransdenshow.co.uk](http://www.littlegransdenshow.co.uk) for details)

Mark is called away to help engineers Bryan and Andy, who are in the hangar servicing three Yaks, so I go outside where



I can see someone on the side of the runway watching a Cherokee flying circuit. From the way he's standing, I guess that he's an instructor and, sure enough, when I ask him, he is – and his name is Terry Akeroyd. Terry's student is Rob Hubbard, a locally-based pilot with a newly-acquired share in the Cherokee that lives outside on the grass.

Rob is a low-hour pilot who learned to fly at Cranfield, then did some training with Richard Rogers in his Pitts S-2C and has now moved to Gransden. Terry (who is a Class Rating Instructor, so isn't being paid) is converting him to the Cherokee and to grass-strip operation.

"We just did five circuits together, and now I'm watching him fly three without me," says Terry. "Whether pilots are doing their biennial or a conversion like Rob, I find it's good practice to get them to close the throttle downwind, then land without touching the throttle lever. The test is to bring the aircraft to a full stop before it's half-way down the runway," he adds. "It's a confidence-builder, really, so they can cope if their engine fails."

Mark comes out to join me and we head for the Swiss chalet, where his current aerobatic protégée is due to meet him. Amelie is a 21-year-old software developer who tells me she would like to earn a living as an aerobatic display pilot. She learned to fly in Morocco, where she has family, getting her licence on her 17th birthday. She has now flown 300 hours, of which roughly



**Opposite:** Eclectic mix of resident aircraft includes Abarth-liveried Extra 300L (foreground) homebuilt Pietenpol and Turbulent. **Clockwise from below:** aerobatic pilot Amelie, and her Laser 230 single-seater; the Swiss chalet built by Gransden's owner, Mark Jefferies; Yak UK's maintenance team in the hangar; and a pair of their taildragger Yak-50 charges parked outside



near to the airfield. Mark says: "At Gransden we like pilots to broadcast what they are doing, even if no one answers."

I ask if he has any other tips for visitors. "Don't forget to leave £10 for the landing fee in the tin. And sign in, which is really important here because the local authority keeps tabs on the number of movements." Amelie – whose shoulder-wing Laser must have plenty of blind spots – says: "Visitors do have a habit of dropping below the circuit height of 800ft, where I can't see them."

Mark says: "We prefer people not to fly in short of fuel at weekends, because there are no airfield staff. One of the local pilots will sort you out, but there may not be anyone about. During the week it's different because the two guys at Yak UK are here to get you refuelled." I ask if there's anything else, and after a pause, Mark says: "Don't tread on my daffodils" – which turns out to be the reason for the ribbon on steel rods round the chalet. "They'll be coming through any day now," he adds.

Someone outside is opening one of the hangars. It's Peter Maller, a retired farmer. He's been flying microlights for the past dozen years, first flexwings, and then four years ago the Skyranger that he's pulling out of the hangar now. Peter, 67, is still keen to learn new things, and has just got his JAA PPL and bought a share in a group-owned Cherokee. So now he flies microlights and Group A aircraft. He's very keen, is Peter: he reckons he currently flies 150hr a year. ➔

a third were aerobatics, and last year she won two Standard aerobatics contests in a two-seater, an Extra 200. This year, in her Laser 230 single-seater, she plans to move up to Intermediate and Advanced.

I ask Amelie what she thinks of Gransden. "It's a fantastic airfield," she says. "There's no flying school, so no worries about nervous students possibly on their first solo, like I had when I flew from Panshangar before coming here. I find everyone being a private owner does make for more depth of expertise than at airfields where people hire club aircraft or are learning. So there's a community feel here and lots of sharing of hints and tips. It's been particularly good for me to have so many aerobatic pilots in one place. There's no shortage of practice areas – I fly over a disused RAF base, and we're outside controlled airspace. To sum up Gransden, I'd say there is less sitting

around and gossiping and more flying."

Terry and Rob come to join us. Terry says: "I've been flying from here for 30 years and what I think distinguishes it is that it's a robin's nest – so many gorgeous aeroplanes and engines in the hangars."

His student, Rob, a newcomer to the airfield, says: "Every time I come here I see some wonderful new aircraft I've never seen before. It's a magical place. And driving past, you wouldn't know it was here."

"Nor would you know from the air," adds Amelie. In fact, one slight drawback to Gransden is that, even after decades of flying in, I still find it hard to spot from the cockpit. There's an 800-foot mast a couple of miles south-west of the airfield, which helps.

The airfield radio is on a shelf in the chalet. The airfield has an air-to-ground service on 130.85. We hear a blind transmission now, from a pilot who's flying

I need to take overhead photographs, and local pilot Clare Parkinson, a microbiologist, has offered to take me up in the Skyranger she shares with her husband, Richard. They built the aeroplane in their garage, erecting it on the airfield. They are also very keen – this seems to go with Skyrangers – average 300hr a year and recently flew on holiday to the Orkneys, and last year to Norway.

While Clare pulls out and preflights her aeroplane she tells me why she loves Gransden: "It's a place where people are always willing to help each other out. We've often given people lifts back when they need to drop their aircraft off at other airfields, and we've always been able to hitch a ride at short notice if we find ourselves needing a spare part from Sywell, for instance."

I ask about fly-outs. "There are no formally organised fly-outs," she says, "but often groups of two or three aircraft will fly off somewhere. For example, last weekend we went off with an RV-6 and an Extra to Panshanger and Nuthampstead, but it took us a while to catch up with the others!"

My visit is only a fortnight after the great freeze that buried the country in snow in early 2012. Gransden is one of two airfields I know of that seem to look on snow as a challenge rather than a hazard. (The other one is the Tiger Club's home at Headcorn, where they fit skis to one of the Turbulents.) I ask Clare if she managed any flying.

"Oh, we had an excellent week when it snowed," she says. "We never seem to get snow in this area deep enough to stop flying – just enough to make the landscape look stunning. After the snowfall, I ended up taking four different people from the airfield for flights in the Skyranger to see the view."

Her aeroplane's ready, so we take off, climb overhead and I take my photos. One thing you have to look out for at Gransden is the proximity of a very active gliding centre, Gransden Lodge, which is a couple of miles to the north-east. The circling glider pilots understandably take a dim view of powered aircraft straying into their path. Overflying the local villages is another no-no; the yakuk.com website has instructions to

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visiting pilots, which are basically just a general instruction to steer clear of any large houses or clusters of buildings in the area.

There is also a public footpath crossing the runway. It's rare, but pedestrians and horses do occasionally cross, and they have right of way. A final possible hazard (also rare) is that very slow aircraft that must land into wind sometimes land on the short cross-runway – so keep a lookout while taxiing and before take off and landing.

Mark and I drop in on engine specialists Vintech. I'm always torn once I walk through their front door – wanting to examine all the beautiful old engines but not wishing to hold them up because they always seem to be overwhelmed with work.

Mark takes me to see his latest business venture on the airfield: the construction of four holiday cottages and the conversion of

a barn into office accommodation. The holiday-let cottages, which should be ready in July, are particularly targeted at pilots.

"We're very well placed here," says Mark. "Twenty minutes from Cambridge by taxi and 50 from London by train. Duxford and Old Warden aviation museums are only 20 minutes away. Gamlingay, which has nice pubs and a village shop is a 20-minute walk."

You can easily walk to what sounds like a great place for a good cooked lunch, the Duncombe Arms in Waresley. The spire of the church in Waresley is a mile or so from the airfield, roughly a quarter-of-an-hour's walk across the fields, and easily visible. An airfield rule of thumb is, if you can't see the church spire, it isn't VFR.

I was hoping to meet an old friend who's often at Gransden, Andy McLuskie, and sure enough, he drives up just as Mark and I are leaving the construction site. There was talk of him taking me up in his Aeronca Champ, but while the stiff wind was just about acceptable for the nosewheel Skyranger, it's a little too strong for the tailwheel Champ. He takes me to see the latest of the aircraft he's working on at Gransden – he looks after eight on the airfield – a 1940s two-seater with a radial engine, which is still at the hush-hush stage: I mustn't name or photograph it. The engine looks like it has just left the factory, which it has in a sense, since it's fresh from overhaul by Vintech.

Andy sums up his feelings about Gransden. "With me and Vintech, it's a one-stop-shop for vintage aircraft restoration. It's an informal place, even compared to somewhere like White Waltham, and that might not suit everyone – you don't get strict rules or uniforms with gold braid. One of Gransden's virtues, especially with tricky taildraggers, is the very wide runway, which means you can angle into wind and if you do groundloop, you've room to do it without damaging anything."

Andy has converted his garage and most of his garden into a set of aircraft workshops. He lives five minutes away, so we go there for a cup of tea and a look at what he's currently working on. There are two Stampe restorations under way, a motorbike that his 14-year-old son Angus is rebuilding, a new loft conversion (a recording studio plus half a dozen vintage Les Paul guitars) and plans to extend the garage. "That's so I can work on longer wings, like Jodels have," he says.

I take a photo of him in his garage next to one of the stripped Stampe fuselages, say my goodbyes and set off home.

Gransden is a unique airfield and it's one that's played quite a large part in my life. It's great to see youngsters like Amelie and Rob discovering it anew. ■



Resident vintage aircraft restorer Andy McLuskie, with WACO biplane