

The bridge at Marlow, crossing the Thames. A copy spans the Danube.

>> AIRFIELD

White Waltham

A spacious, thriving, historic airfield, with a unique club, near Thames-side charms

By Bob Davy

WHITE WALTHAM DEFIES a simple description: it has a rich aviation history including its role as a major WWII airfield; it is the largest grass airfield in civilian use in Europe; it is one of the main centres of UK aerobatics; and it is home to West London Aero Club, which, with nearly 1,000 members, is the largest flying club in Britain.

More than the sum of its parts, White Waltham has a truly unique atmosphere. Many of my friends have readily fallen victim to what we call the 'Waltham Triangle'. One example was flying in for a quick cup of tea and still being there many hours later with a bunch of pilots over a pint at the bar having organised a night at Glebe Cottage B&B. Another instance was starting with the intention of a couple of circuits and ending up in a four-ship dogfight at 4,500 ft over nearby Greenham Common.

There is a downside to the Waltham

addiction: a friend of mine was standing at the bar a couple of years ago when a woman walked in with her two daughters and said, "Take a good look, children. This is where your father lives."

But if you think that Waltham is a testosterone-fuelled, male-only preserve you'd be wrong. Way back in WWII, White Waltham was home of the ATA, including its many women pilots - their portraits adorn the walls of the clubhouse. Nowadays, this tradition continues; White Waltham has one of the highest numbers of female pilots in the UK.

The field was established well before WWII. In 1928, the de Havilland family acquired 196 acres of grassland and began the de Havilland Flying School. The government took over the airfield in 1938. Waltham was home to Fairey Aviation, constructor of the Fairey and Gannet - and Rotodyne, the world's first VTOL airliner. Nothing remains of that factory or the 1930s

airport terminal, except the art deco Fairey signs which adorned the gates - they now hang over the fireplaces in the club bar.

The airfield remained under the control of the RAF until 1982 when it was bought by the present owners.

White Waltham is easily found on a map - just look for Heathrow's TMA and you can find the airfield embedded at its westernmost point. Despite the proximity of Heathrow, the circuit patterns are relatively straightforward, and an overhead join is preferred. The ceiling over the airfield is 2,500 feet amsl, due to the London LTMA, dropping to 1,500 feet over its eastern half. If you fly using standard joining and circuit procedures you won't get into trouble. The specific patterns can be downloaded from the official website www.wlac.co.uk

There are plenty of landmarks to enable VFR pilots to fly into Waltham, and you don't even need a radio to land there, providing you've →

The railway line roughly parallel with Runway 07/25 is a great sighting point for locating the airfield

1

Hangars off the end of Runway 03 are used by locally based aircraft including some helicopters

4

CONTROL

Air traffic control is normally from the wooden building on the lower right of this photograph - and that is where visiting pilots need to book in and out and pay their landing fees.

The structure on top of the scaffolding gives a higher vantage point and is used when the airfield is particularly busy.

White Waltham is still one of the increasingly shrinking number of airfields that accept non-radio aircraft, but whether you have a radio or not, it is vital to obtain a prior briefing by telephone - don't leave it until you're in the air.



obtained permission before departure. To the west is the city of Reading - you can't go wrong if you follow the arrow-straight railway lines which exit the town heading north-east, as these form the northern boundary of the airfield. If you are joining from the west, call at point 'Whisky' which is adjacent to the flooded gravel pits north of the town. From the north you will probably find High Wycombe and then the Thames before happening across White Waltham. Call at point 'November' where the Thames hooks through 90° to the north of Henley. From the south, Bracknell stands out in white relief amongst its surrounding trees -

head north and you will see the airfield after passing over the M4. The VRP from this direction is 'Sierra' which is junction 10 of the M4. The field cannot be approached from the east unless an IFR or SVFR clearance has been obtained.

There is just one frequency for Waltham and that's Waltham Radio on 122.6. If you are non-radio call ops on 01628 823272 before you take off.

SUNSET STRIP

Waltham's social life is legendary. The clubhouse is an original wartime building which was moved from the other side of the airfield



The approach to Runway 25 takes you low over these houses, a bad time to lose your engine

2

Reporting point, fuel, clubhouse and hangars are all here. In winter be careful how you taxi over the grass

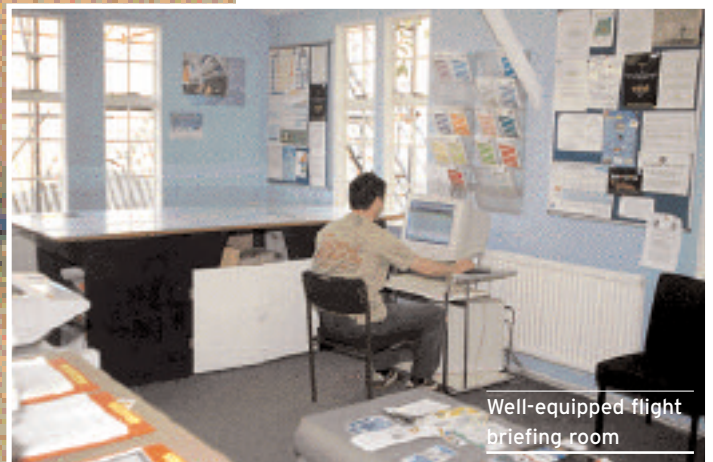
3



In summer there are usually lots of people sipping drinks on the lawn



The restaurant serves excellent food and the bar is nearly always busy



Well-equipped flight briefing room

decades ago. It retains a club atmosphere something akin to a wartime officers' mess. An air of relaxed sophistication pervades the building during the daytime but in the evening the bar can get very lively and a number of great parties and balls are held.

The bar food is excellent. You might find yourself sharing the facilities with a local business lunch or a party, which adds diversity to the flying chat. In the summer, the action spills out onto the extensive lawn. The unobstructed view at sunset across the airfield to the Chiltern Hills is one of the best I've seen.

More than 150 light aircraft of all shapes and sizes are based at White Waltham. That sounds

like a lot and it is, but the place isn't crowded. There's less than one aircraft per acre - I told you it was big. There are four large storage hangars brimming with a variety of old and antique aeroplanes, and an equal number of more modern aircraft are parked outside. At the time of writing the largest flying machine is an immaculate Harvard, the smallest an extremely rare Chilton DW1.

The airfield is home to a number of Yaks and Sukhois (including Paul Bonhomme's Sukhoi 26) and their western counterparts such as Pitts and Extras. The airfield's overhead can be used by members for aeros practice three times a day on weekdays and this makes

Waltham particularly popular for pilots undertaking display and competition training. Alan Cassidy is based at Waltham and on any particular day there are usually several members of the British Aerobatics Team flying, if the weather is suitable.

Primary flying training is courtesy of West London Aero Club; the fleet includes a Piper Super Cub, an assortment of PA-28s, and a new Cessna 182 and Piper Saratoga for serious touring. The club has recently been approved for MEP training and a Cougar is on the way. Every Friday during the summer, the club organises an away day to encourage new pilots to explore something outside the circuit. →

White Waltham is home to both old, slow aircraft, like this Tiger Moth and L-4 Cub and slick aerobatic hotrods, like the Extra 230.

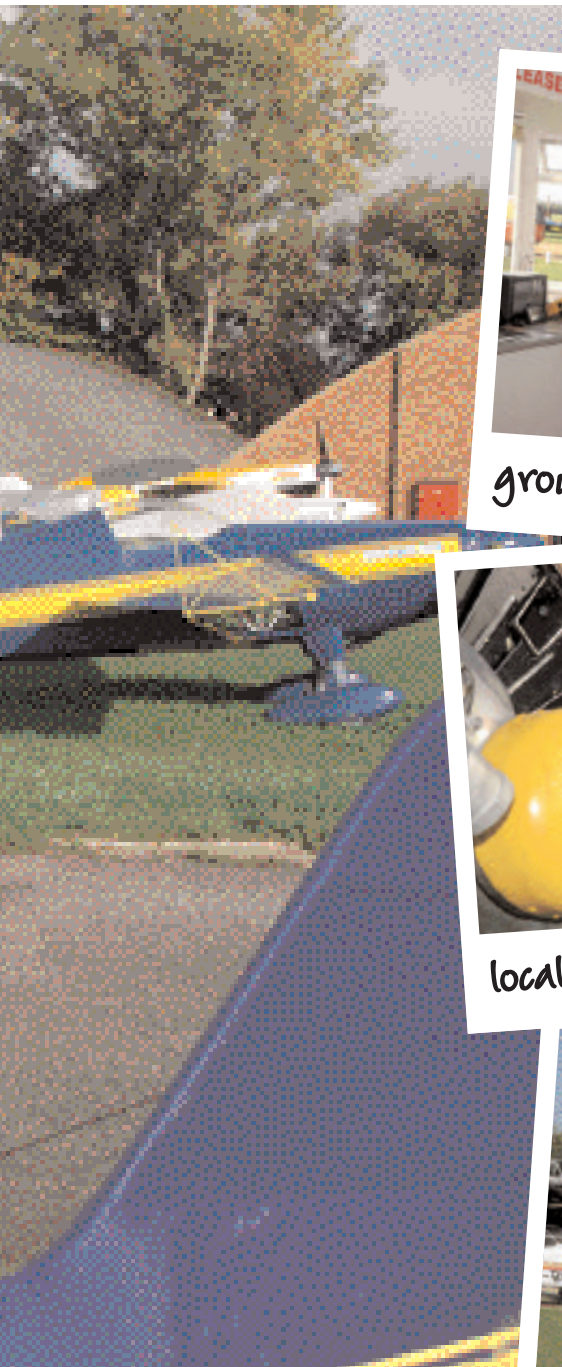


White Waltham's most prized asset

Last year they took it one stage further and nine aircraft and 23 members flew to Marrakech! This year eleven planes and 26 pilots flew to Corsica.

To keep the noise down, there is no longer any helicopter training or hire at Waltham, but the airfield is home to a small number of privately-owned helicopters in addition to the Thames Valley & Chiltern Air Ambulance, far and away Waltham's most prized asset.

The surrounding area is steeped in history. During this last, hot summer, the footings of a Saxon enclosure became clearly visible in the grass just a few fields away to the west. The local parish church of St Mary The Virgin dates back nearly 1,000 years. The name 'Waltham' is derived from 'wealt-ham' which means dilapidated home, probably named after the



ground floor control



local pilot, Ed Harding



on-site maintenance

>> FURTHER INFORMATION



■ CONTACTS

PPR by telephone on 01628 823272 or on Waltham Radio 122.6. There is also a good website, www.wlac.co.uk

■ RUNWAYS

03/21 1,025m x 45m grass; 07/25 1,110m x 45m grass; 11/29 930m x 30m grass. All circuits start with an overhead join from 1,500ft QNH, or 1,300ft QFE, and the circuit is flown at 1,000 ft QNH or 800 ft QFE. Runway 25 has a ski-jump bump which is best avoided if you have limited prop clearance. All runways are quite bumpy due to the metal reinforcement grid under the grass but at least it means that the airfield stays open all year.

■ NOISE ABATEMENT

All of the surrounding villages and major farms are noise-sensitive and the circuit patterns reflect this. Don't be tempted to join the patterns from downwind, crosswind etc. Stick to the overhead joins.

■ OPERATING HOURS

Summer 0800-2000, unlicensed between 2000 and SS+30. Winter 0800-SS+30.

■ ATC & NAVAIDS

Waltham Radio 122.60
Farnborough 125.25
Blackbushe Radio 122.30
Wycombe Tower 126.55
Woodley 'WOD' NDB 352, 5 miles
Compton 'CPT' VOR 114.35 094R 16.5

■ FACILITIES

Landings: £10 single, £15 twins.
Fuel: jet A-1, avgas.
Customs: by arrangement (4 hrs notice).
West London Aero Club, tel: 01628 823272, bar/restaurant, 823799 www.wlac.co.uk

■ PLACES TO STAY

5 minutes walk: Glebe Cottage B&B 01628 823962.
Nicer but pricier: The Compleat Angler, Marlow-on-Thames 0870 830 4817, www.thecompleteangler.com

original Waltham Manor which lay in decay for many centuries.

A fifteen-minute taxi ride will take you to Marlow-on-Thames, a beautiful Buckinghamshire town with an historic suspension bridge, which was copied by the Hungarian government and which spans the Danube at Budapest. Henley-on-Thames is 15-20 minutes away. To the east, on the other side of Maidenhead, is the fabulous estate and hotel at Cliveden. If you like walking then a tour of the grounds is highly recommended... and you can see the swimming pool where John Profumo met Christine Keeler. Windsor is a similar distance.

Michelin-starred dining is possible within a ten-mile radius of White Waltham; the Fat Duck and the Waterside Inn at Bray and The

Compleat Angler in Marlow are all just minutes away.

Certainly, my fellow professional pilot friends and I think that White Waltham airfield and its flying club stands head and shoulders above anything else in the world. You might call that a ludicrous boast but bear in mind that the proximity of Heathrow, Luton and Gatwick means that Waltham has way more than its fair share of airline crew and regular long-distance travellers as members. Having visited flying clubs the world over, Waltham consistently gets the gold award. 