



In the type's 80th anniversary year, the new market for flights in — and with — Spitfires is doing very nicely indeed. *Aeroplane* visited the UK's different operators to find out about their current programmes and future plans

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD PAVER

Experiencing the **SPITFIRE**



ABOVE: The Biggin Hill Heritage Hangar's Spitfire IXT MJ627 being flown by Richard Verrall.

The popularity of the Supermarine Spitfire seems to increase year on year. Despite the fact that, as time passes, there are inevitably fewer veterans around who flew, maintained or built Spitfires, public interest continues unabated.

As reported in *Aeroplane* during late 2014, after extensive consultation with the historic aircraft community the Civil Aviation Authority has changed the previous regulations which prohibited the carrying of fare-paying passengers in permit to fly aircraft (including all UK-registered warbirds), and at the same time introduced the principle of 'informed consent', which has opened the door to allow paying customers legally to be flown in those aircraft types on British shores. This new process is known as

Safety Standards Acknowledgement and Consent (SSAC), and fare-paying Spitfire passenger flights in the UK are conducted under these rules.

As a result, there are a number of places where the enthusiast can go in order to buy a passenger ride in a two-seat Spitfire — Biggin Hill, Duxford, Goodwood, Headcorn and Sywell. In addition, various other 'Spitfire experiences' are offered, providing the chance to sit in a Spitfire, participate in restoration hangar tours, or fly alongside and photograph a Spitfire air-to-air. Full Spitfire conversion training programmes for pilots are still available too, as pioneered by the Boulton Flight Academy when it opened in 2011. These courses remain very popular, but they have now been augmented by experiences to suit every taste.

CLASSIC WINGS



TOP: Stu Goldspink piloting Spitfire LFIX MH434 on a 'Wing-to-Wing' flight with Dragon Rapide G-AKIF, in the hands of Glen Fricker. DENIS J. CALVERT

ABOVE: Spitfire passenger flying under way this spring with Duxford-based Classic Wings, former RNHF pilot Don Sigournay at the helm of MJ627. DAVID WHITWORTH

Featured in the August 2015 *Aeroplane*, Classic Wings has been operating at IWM Duxford since 1990, providing pleasure flights with two de Havilland DH89A Dragon Rapides (HG691/G-AIYR and G-AKIF) and four DH82A Tiger Moths. For the 2016 season it has added a further Rapide, TX310/G-AIDL, purchased from the Classic Air Force at Coventry.

Classic Wings offers opportunities to fly alongside a Spitfire, as well as rides in a two-seat Spitfire IXT, currently MJ627 through a collaboration with the Biggin Hill Heritage Hangar. In the 'Wing-to-Wing with a Spitfire' programme, customers are given the opportunity

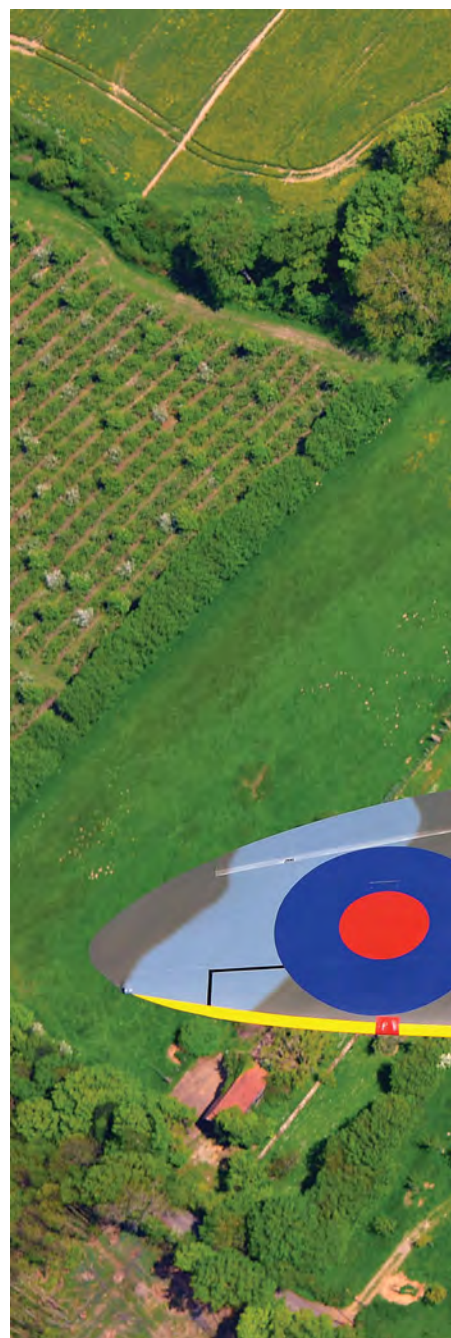
to ride in one of the Rapides in close formation with the Old Flying Machine Company's famous MkIX MH434.

The OFMC's Sarah Hanna says: "MH434 is an extremely precious aeroplane and as such we try to conserve the hours flown on her every year to ensure that the aeroplane doesn't get over-used, and also to conserve engine and prop hours to manageable amounts. We therefore expect that the aircraft will be flown for something between 30 and 35 hours in 2016, which is about a typical season for MH434. In 2015 we flew considerably more, something like 45 hours due to participation at various Battle of Britain 75th anniversary commemorative events, and so we are deliberately aiming to do less in 2016."

Classic Wings' managing director Trevor Butcher added: "Our Spitfire 'Wing-to-Wing' experience, which is run in co-operation with OFMC, is one of our most popular flights. As we are based at Duxford there is a lot more for everyone to see and we aim to make it a whole family experience. We fly something like 48 people in a weekend and they will all come with family and friends. On any one day we could have up to 250 people visiting us, and we aim to make it a great, memorable day for them all."

"We also offer Spitfire customer flights in MJ627 in joint co-operation with the Biggin Hill Heritage Hangar, and if we ever have a tech issue with the OFMC's MH434 on a 'Wing-to-Wing' flying day they will always make an alternative Spitfire available. Thankfully MH434 has proven to be very reliable, and it is of course such a famous aircraft — arguably the most famous Spitfire still flying today."

• See www.classicwings.co.uk



The Biggin Hill Heritage Hangar (BHHH) was established in early 2011 as a base for the operations of The Spitfire Company (Biggin Hill) Ltd. Its business has quickly expanded, and today the Heritage Hangar has evolved into the world's largest Spitfire restoration, maintenance and flight operations facility. BHHH has recently moved into very impressive new premises, which take in two large hangars, workshops, stores, offices and a customer reception centre.

At the time of my visit there were 13 Spitfires present, which included four two-seaters, with a number of superb restoration projects at various stages of completion in the hands

BIGGIN HILL HERITAGE HANGAR



of the engineering team. MkIXT BS410 and single-seat MkIXs BR601 and LZ842 were all being restored to airworthy condition, while LFXVIE TB885 is due to arrive shortly, again for a return to flight.

The design and layout of the new buildings has been optimised to provide world-class facilities for the operation and maintenance of Spitfires and, at the same time, to have high-quality reception and viewing rooms alongside the workshops for customers to base themselves in when visiting. Included in this is a large first-floor balcony viewing area from where family and friends can watch and photograph a Spitfire customer flight in comfort, with an unobstructed view across the

airfield and main runway. What better surroundings could there be than this most famous former RAF fighter station, forever associated with the Spitfire and the Battle of Britain?

BHHH offers a wide variety of customer experiences: guided hangar tours, two-seat Spitfire flights, 'sit-

seater have now commenced, MkVIII MT818/G-AIDN (see last month's news pages) having arrived at Biggin on 31 March and been certified to commence passenger sorties. *Aeroplane* will be featuring this very famous aircraft, G-AIDN having been the prototype Spitfire trainer, in greater

ABOVE: MJ627 over Kent's green and pleasant land.

'Family and friends can watch and photograph a customer flight in comfort'

in' opportunities and bespoke 'fly alongside' sorties, which can include a Hurricane or another Spitfire in formation. The major news is that flight operations with a second two-

depth in a future issue. Sister-ship IXT MJ627 is a highly historic machine in its own right, a combat veteran with No 441 Squadron of the Royal Canadian Air Force, credited with



ABOVE: Work is well under way at Biggin Hill on Martin Phillips' Spitfire IX BS410, being completed as a two-seater.

ABOVE RIGHT: The customer viewing area at Biggin Hill provides nice surroundings for those accompanying Spitfire passengers to watch the flying.

BELOW: A first look at the two BHHH-operated two-seat Spitfires together at Biggin Hill, with recently-arrived MkVIII MT818/G-AIDN in the foreground of IXT MJ627.



shooting down a Bf 109 over Arnhem on 27 September 1944 while being flown by Plt Off Sidney Bregman.

For all who book to fly in one of the Biggin Hill-based two-seat Spitfires, included in the package is a full guided and escorted workshop tour for the customer and accompanying family and friends. Run and managed by Paul Campbell, these very popular tours are available separately (so they don't have to be purchased as part of a flight package) and happen twice a day. They last about 90 minutes, including a talk by Paul about the projects under way in the restoration facility and a visit to the flight operations hangar where the airworthy aircraft are kept. For the enthusiast who doesn't have the budget to fly in a Spitfire, this offers the chance to photograph and be guided through Spitfire restorations and regular maintenance work, a unique experience at such close quarters.

The regular pilots for flights in MJ627 are Richard Verrall, Pete Kynsey, Don Sigournay and Dan

Griffith. Up to eight trips per day are possible depending on weather and pilot availability. MJ627 is fitted with a cockpit video camera, and the customer is presented with a video record of the entire flight from start-up to shut-down. Standard flights are approximately half an hour in length with a minimum of 20 minutes airborne — this can be longer depending on the air traffic conditions on returning to Biggin Hill.

BHHH now houses another two-seat Spitfire in the form of IXT MJ772, previously owned and operated by the Air Fighter Academy at Heringsdorf in Germany. This aircraft was flown to the UK last September to participate in Battle of Britain anniversary commemorations. Sadly, during its visit it suffered engine problems and was damaged in a forced landing in a field near Woodchurch in Kent. The airframe was dismantled and recovered by road by the BHHH engineering team, and repairs are due to commence shortly.

Since the accident MJ772 has been sold to Warbird Experiences Ltd — also the registered owner of MJ627 — and, once returned to flight, will join the passenger ride line-up. This Spitfire is another significant airframe, with 50 World War Two operational sorties to its credit while on the strength of Nos 341 (Alsace) and 340 (Île-de-France) Squadrons, including a number over the Normandy beach-head.

Among the other Biggin Hill-based Spitfire restorations, MkIX BS410/G-TCHI is being completed as a IXT for its owner Martin Phillips. This project is available for hangar tour customers to see, the fuselage having arrived at Biggin in January 2016 from Airframe Assemblies on the Isle of Wight. BS410 was shot down over France in May 1943 and lay buried in a marsh until December 2005, when it was recovered.

• See www.bigginhillheritagehangar.co.uk and www.flyspitfire.co.uk



BOULTBEE FLIGHT ACADEMY



Aeroplane first reported in the November 2014 issue on the Boulton Flight Academy's start of fare-paying passenger flights at Goodwood in Spitfire IXT SM520/G-ILDA. Talking recently with the BFA's managing director Matt Jones to discuss the company's plans for 2016 and beyond, he enthused: "In 2015 we had a very successful year operating G-ILDA at Goodwood for both pilot training and our customer rides programme. Our Spitfire continues to prove itself to be a very reliable and dependable machine, and we logged over 260 hours in it during 2015, which must be something of a record for an historic warbird. This is a great tribute to the very high quality of its original restoration at Thruxton, from where it first flew in 2009.

"We have taken advantage of the 2015-16 winter to complete a major overhaul with the Aircraft Restoration Company at Duxford, which has included fitting a new engine from Eye Tech Engineering and an overhauled prop. For 2016 we will continue to offer Spitfire training flights for pilots and passenger rides, both in G-ILDA, but we have also

started a new business — Flying with Spitfires, which will enable customers to fly alongside a Spitfire in a modern helicopter. For these flights we will be using a Bell 206L [LongRanger], which can take up to six passengers,

and the Spitfire alongside will be Martin Phillips' Mk IX RR232 *City of Exeter*. We feel that it is very important for these Spitfire experiences to [use] a single-seat fighter variant [...] as the photographic element

ABOVE: Matt Jones flying Martin Phillips' Mk IX RR232 *City of Exeter* on its debut air-to-air sortie.



ABOVE: A typical scene from a Flying with Spitfires sortie out of Goodwood, involving RR232 in formation with Bell 206L-3 LongRanger III G-LVDC.

is very important to get right for the customers, who will want to photograph and video a fighter variant.

“The management of this business is being headed up by Charles Osborne, and our first Flying with Spitfires

weekend is planned to take place over the weekend of 7-8 May. We will fly various routes with the Spitfire in close formation with the Bell 206, including the scenic Chichester harbour, the Arundel gap, Portsmouth and of course

the Isle of Wight, flying around the whole island and over the Needles.”

• See www.boulbeeflightacademy.co.uk and www.flyingwithspitfires.co.uk

SPITFIRE RR232: THE HISTORY

RR232 was built at Castle Bromwich in late 1944. It was originally taken on by No 45 Maintenance Unit at Kinloss and served with the Empire Central Flying School at Hullavington and Boscombe Down. After accident damage repairs it went into storage at Lyneham in September 1945 and was then acquired by the South African Air Force during January 1949. Serialled 5632, it served with the SAAF (suffering a couple of landing accidents) until 1954, when it was struck off charge and sold to Harold Barnett of Cape Town.

Peter Sledge acquired the Spitfire in December 1975 and shipped it to Australia, where it was statically restored at RAAF Point Cook between 1978 and 1981. The airframe was then moved to Bankstown Airport, where the restoration was completed, the Spitfire being rolled out as a non-flyer in October 1984. For a short period, it was on static display at the Royal Australian Navy Museum at Nowra, but in late 1985 it was bought by Charles Church and shipped to the UK.

Exeter businessman Martin Phillips purchased the project (registered as G-BRSF) in January 2000, and work towards an

airworthy rebuild commenced at Newton St Cyres in Devon. Much of the structural side was seen to by Airframe Assemblies between 2002 and 2005, and in the owner's Bristol workshop, before final assembly took place at Filton.

In the hands of Bill Perrins, RR232 made its maiden post-restoration flight from Filton on 18 December 2012, the day the historic Bristol airfield was closed to flight operations. Since then the fighter has been based at Colerne in Wiltshire, where it is looked after by former Rolls-Royce Spitfire chief engineer John Hart. It has been flown sparingly, but in 2015 received its full permit to fly and took part in a number of the Battle of Britain 75th anniversary commemorative events including the flypast at Goodwood on 15 September, when it was flown by 'Willy' Hackett, and the following weekend's IWM Duxford display.

RR232 is finished to represent a 1944 Castle Bromwich factory-fresh MkIX with no codes, but it does now wear the name *City of Exeter* on both sides of the nose to depict a wartime presentation Spitfire, Exeter being the owner's home town.



ABOVE: Flying with Spitfires trips alongside RR232 will pass by the Needles, among other photogenic locations.



ABOVE: One of the ride packages offered by the Boulton Flight Academy involves its well-known Spitfire IXT SM520 flying with the Norwegian Spitfire Foundation-operated P-51D Mustang 'KH774'/G-SHWN. The latter is also available for passenger flights.

AERO LEGENDS

Aero Legends is the brainchild of Kent businessman Keith Perkins. The company has recently acquired the business of Go Action Stations, which had offered customer 'fly alongside' trips at Lydd. This new venture now combines Go Action Stations with Aero Legends in order to provide a wider range of experiences at both Headcorn, Kent and Sywell, Northamptonshire.

The collection of two Spitfires (an HFIX and a IXT), a T-6G Texan, three Tiger Moths and a very rare Thrupton Jackaroo has been augmented by two further types for the 2016 season, now that Aero Legends has purchased de Havilland Devon C2 VP981/G-DHDV and Percival Prentice T1 VR259/G-APJB from the Classic Air Force at Coventry. The Prentice was delivered to Headcorn in late 2015, while the Devon joined the fleet in March 2016 and will be based at Duxford but will also operate out of Headcorn and Sywell. Both will conduct passenger flights, and the Devon will be used to fly alongside the Spitfire IX at Headcorn.

Last September a trial flying weekend was run at Headcorn with the Devon, in order to assess customer interest in flying in it alongside the Spitfire. It proved a huge success, and as a result G-DHDV was acquired. Upon completion of a full service

and check it was flown to Duxford in March 2016.

The Aero Legends single-seat Spitfire is HFIX TD314, based at Duxford and maintained by the Aircraft Restoration Company. It was restored to airworthiness at Biggin Hill, with its first flight taking place on 7 December

2013. The machine is finished in the colours of No 234 Squadron, with which it served in July 1945.

The Spitfire IXT presently being used for Aero Legends' customer flights is the very well-known Duxford-based PV202/G-CCCA, operated via an arrangement with ARC, but Aero

BELOW: On the ground at Headcorn, Aero Legends customers queue for the chance to inspect and sit in TD314's cockpit.





ABOVE: John Romain of the Aircraft Restoration Company above the clouds in Aero Legends' Spitfire HFIX TD314.

Legends also has its own IXT project. This is NH341, built as a single-seat LFIXe. It is at Duxford with Historic Flying Ltd, being fully restored to airworthy condition in two-seat configuration with the objective of having it flying in time for the 2017 season.

Parr. The fuselage of NH341 was proceeding very well, with detailed fitting-out now under way; the wings were in the jigs at an advanced stage, and a newly-overhauled, zero-timed engine had been delivered and bench-tested. Final assembly is expected to commence later this year, with

This Spitfire served with No 441 Squadron, RCAF, and is credited with downing two Bf 109s when being flown by Flt Lt Hugh Charles Trainor during June 1944. It was lost in combat with Fw 190s on 2 July that year. The substantial remains were found and acquired by the Musée Mémorial de la Bataille de Normandie in Bayeux, and placed on display in 1996. The aircraft was acquired by Keith in 2011 and moved to HFL at Duxford for its rebuild as a IXT.

Keith says that it is his intention to finish the Spitfire in its authentic No 441 Squadron colours on completion. He has been in touch with one of NH341's wartime Canadian pilots, Tommy Wheler, who flew it on a combat sortie on 24 June 1944.

'There was a stunning view of the Spitfire in head-on curving attack mode'

Thanks to Keith Perkins and the HFL team at Duxford, in April I was able to see progress on the restoration and meet those undertaking it, headed by HFL project director Martin Overall and project engineer Mark

ground runs being targeted for early 2017 in anticipation of the aircraft's first post-restoration flight soon after. NH341 will be fitted with a number of video cameras for the passenger rides programme.



Wheler was invited over to the UK in July 2015, when he was the guest of honour at Aero Legends' Battle of Britain airshow at Headcorn and travelled to Duxford to view the work on his former mount.

While a flight in a two-seater is understandably the most expensive Spitfire experience, a superb alternative offered by Aero Legends is a trip in the Devon — itself a lovely historic aeroplane — joined in close formation by TD314. I met with Elliot Styles, who heads up Headcorn operations for Aero Legends, and after a safety briefing was invited aboard G-DHDV in order to participate in the inaugural 'Gold' flight. Apart from being a delightful run along the south coast of England, we would formate with



LEFT: Project engineer Mark Parr at work on Aero Legends' Spitfire NH341 in the Historic Flying facility at Duxford.

RIGHT: The latest addition to the Aero Legends fleet is ex-Battle of Britain Memorial Flight and Air Atlantique/Classic Air Force Devon C2 VP981/G-DHDV, pictured during April.



the Spitfire and fly together along the white cliffs of Dover and overhead the Battle of Britain memorial on the cliff-tops at Capel-le-Ferne near Folkestone. As an elliptical-wing, single-seat MkIX, TD314 represents a perfect example for anyone wanting to shoot air-to-air pictures of a 'typical' Spitfire.

BELOW: Brian Smith holds Spitfire TD314 in close formation with the Devon over the white cliffs of Dover.

Both aircraft were operating out of Headcorn, so before the flight all the passengers were able to take a very close look and photograph them on the ground. Plenty of time was made available to meet the pilots — on this occasion Ben Cox was flying the

Devon and Brian Smith the Spitfire. Thankfully the weather was perfect, and it was agreed that after take-off the Devon would transit down the coast and meet the Spitfire as we approached Dover.



The de Havilland twin has eight very comfy seats, each with its own panoramic window affording a fantastic view so everyone can sit back and enjoy the scenery. The windows are well-maintained and largely clean

and scratch-free, ideal for shooting either stills or video. The two pilots had carefully briefed a flight pattern which passed both ways across the white cliffs and the Capel memorial, so it didn't matter which side you sat on — everyone got to see the Spitfire for the same amount of time. When Brian Smith formed up, he flew in echelon with the Devon and then moved the Spitfire forward, back, up and down smoothly and progressively, offering various views.

After a number of close formation passes over the cliffs and the memorial, the pair headed inland, back towards Headcorn. For this sector of the trip Brian expertly positioned TD314 further out from the Devon and began a series of spectacular break manoeuvres, demonstrating the aircraft's agility and giving a stunning view of a Spitfire in head-on curving attack mode as it passed by underneath. My advice for this portion of the flight would be to put your camera down and simply sit, watch and marvel — the dynamic aerial display of the Spitfire chasing your aircraft and the view you get in the air is something that simply cannot be experienced from the ground.

• See www.aerolegends.co.uk



The expansion of opportunities to fly in, or with, Spitfires in Britain has proceeded at a tremendous pace and shows absolutely no signs of abating. Within the next few years the UK could see seven or eight two-seat examples of the type being flown regularly. The welcome change in the CAA rules

which has created these new flight opportunities can also be applied to other two-seat warbirds, such as the P-51 Mustang. However, for Britain at least, all the indications are very clear that the biggest market demand revolves around Mitchell's masterpiece.



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