

The Story

ESSEX

& SUFFOLK

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Bob Adams

Essex & Suffolk Gliding Club

The Story

As told by Bob Adams



The Author toasts the President, Eric Richards, on his 80th Birthday 1997.

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Chapter 1. Founding Father

In the local paper, "Essex County Standard" of 5th August 1960, Tony Sutton describes Wing Commander Percy Hatfield as "Father of the Gliding Club".

Percy Hatfield had an extraordinary wartime flying career, as his medals confirm. I choose only one illustrative incident in 1941 when he was ordered to 'Find the Bismark' in his Catalina flying boat. At midnight, his crew spotted a huge naval force, so he sought cloud cover and took the Catalina in for a closer identification. On breaking cover, he was immediately above Germany's most powerful battleship and was met by a barrage of multi-coloured tracer. He took violent evasive action that threw the aircraft's fitter out of the rest bunk, which was just as well, as bullet holes appeared along the full length of the bunk. Hatfield got clear to relay confirmation of the sighting from a shadowing position and waited until the Royal Navy arrived to commence its final epic duel. The Bismark had been



sunk by the time Percy alighted back in Scotland after flying 27 hours, an endurance record to this day for a Catalina and crew. He flew anti-submarine patrols, VIP flights to Russia, survived 240 operational sorties, test flew 16 types of flying boats and floatplane Spitfires. Throughout his 20 years in the RAF he flew over 5000 hours taking every opportunity to fly almost every type of flying boat in addition to fighters and the early jets.

Percy had gained his gliding certificate in 1946 when still in the RAF. This original certificate is displayed with other archives in the clubhouse.

FÉDÉRATION AÉRONAUTIQUE
INTERNATIONALE

BRITISH EMPIRE

WE, THE UNDERSIGNED, RECOGNISED BY
THE FÉDÉRATION AÉRONAUTIQUE INTER-
NATIONALE AS THE SPORTING AUTHORITY
IN THE BRITISH EMPIRE, CERTIFY THAT

Percy Robert Hatfield
BORN ON *20 January 1916*
AT *Felixstowe*

HAVING FULFILLED ALL THE CONDITIONS
STIPULATED BY THE FÉDÉRATION AÉRO-
NAUTIQUE INTERNATIONALE HAS BEEN
GRANTED A

GLIDING CERTIFICATE

NO. *4448*
THE ROYAL AERO CLUB

Mr. Hatfield
PRESIDENT

119 PICCADILLY
LONDON, W.1

GLIDING CERTIFICATES

THE HOLDER HAS QUALIFIED FOR THE
FOLLOWING CERTIFICATES:

A. CERTIFICATE

DATE *15 May 1946*

ROYAL AERO CLUB

R. Preston
SECRETARY

B. CERTIFICATE

DATE *15 May 1946*

ROYAL AERO CLUB

R. Preston
SECRETARY

C. CERTIFICATE

DATE

ROYAL AERO CLUB

SECRETARY

PHOTOGRAPH OF HOLDER



Percy Robert Hatfield
SIGNATURE OF HOLDER

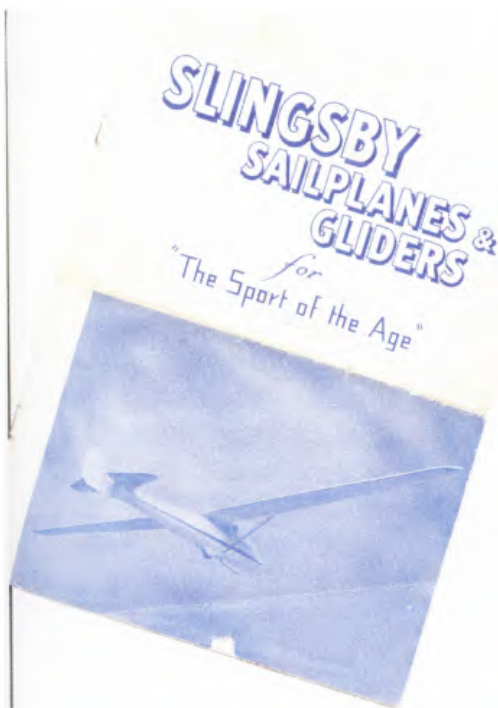


It was no surprise that within a month of his last RAF flight he was airborne again having started a crop spraying company, Airspray Ltd, with a Tiger Moth from Boxted in 1958.

It was to Boxted and Percy Hatfield that Tony Sutton and John Francis came looking for a gliding site.

Percy asked them where they were going to get a glider and how much more cash they needed. They only had £80 between them. "Give that to me" said Percy and in return gave them a cheque for the full cost of a glider and told them to go get a British Slingsby Cadet. That was within 5 minutes of their first meeting.

A 1946 catalogue cover and Cadet description is shown, and by 1960 the price would have risen considerably.



The Kirby Cadet The original Kirby Cadet was designed to meet the demand for a robust club type training machine to fill the gap between the Maceled Primary and the intermediate Sailplane.

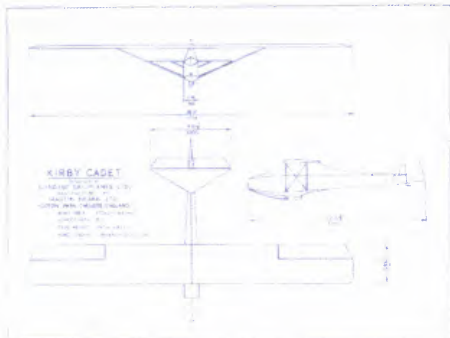
The aim was to construct a machine of low cost and of the utmost simplicity, so that repairs and replacements could be carried out by semi-skilled club members with limited workshop facilities.

A two-spar wing with diagonal bracing and braced by fixed carbon steel wing struts was chosen as the easiest form of construction. The fuselage and tail struts also were designed for robust simplicity rather than appearance.

Because of its high lift at low speeds and gentle stalling characteristics, as well as its suitability for twinger construction, Percival Science Gens. 438 was selected as the most suitable for this particular type.

During the last few years this machine has been in extensive use by the Air Training Corps and has been progressively modified and improved. As a result the 1946 Kirby Cadet, with its wing loading at 2.8 lbs. per sq. foot and aspect ratio of 8.5, is highly satisfactory for instruction in circuits and soaring. For those who prefer this type of ultimate training this machine is without equal. Gliding Angle 1 in 16.7. Sinking Speed at 32 mph is 3.5 f.p.s.

Price £295



Percy Hatfield enthusiastically supported them and housed their pride and joy, a single-seater silver and red Cadet glider, in one of his hangars.

The idea of gliding had come from John Fisher, a pilot with 9 years power flying experience, and Tony Sutton, a racing motorcyclist with none whatsoever. Launching was by wire behind one of Tony's vans, a Ford Prefect with side windows. Of the other original members, only Lionel Collins (tallest in photo) and John Osborne had any flying experience. Also in the photo are Vic Chilvers (2nd left), Harry Chilvers and John Fernley. Geoff Stacey, Percy's ground engineer may also have been a member.



Training of new pilots on the single-seater was by ground slides followed by successively higher hops and glides straight ahead. Tony Sutton was the only person to persevere and learn to fly in this way.

Just as the single-seater was unsuitable for teaching, so was the van impractical for launching experienced pilots. As soon as the glider got to even a modest height, it lifted the van's back driving wheels off the ground.

The 1960 newspaper report was headed and continues, **ONE PLANE, LITTLE CASH, BUT PLENTY OF ROOM IN THE SKY** *"Their current boast is one plane-wing span 39 feet, no money and a great deal of enthusiasm. The glider has a top speed of 62 knots, best gliding 35-40 knots. There are nine shares. The pilots, ages 16 to 60 have all been in the air. Expect a club will be officially formed in the near future. The next step would be to obtain a two-seater for instruction purposes. Confident that in years to come the sport will be well established in Colchester. Tony says, 'we believe that air travel is definitely a thing of the future, and there is certainly plenty of room in the air'."*

Seen behind another of Tony Sutton's vans and the landing Cadet is the Dolly onto which the glider was lifted to tow it back to the launch point.



A member who didn't attend often, Jim Appleby, had a heavy landing in the Cadet. He went through the seat leaving him with splintered plywood in his bottom. He had to drop his trousers for members to remove the splinters and were left with a written off glider.

When they told Percy that the club was finished, he asked "Why?"

"No money, it wasn't insured" they said.

"Don't worry" said Percy "You didn't know but I personally insured it for you".

Percy only flew it once, a perfect launch, a perfect circuit, a perfect landing.

Tragically, Percy Hatfield was killed on a crop-spraying sortie in 1965.

Chapter 2. Gliding Groups

On the fold of the 1963 Airmap, Boxted is seen four miles North of Colchester, as one of a number of disused airfields.



Boxted had been the American wartime fighter base of the famous 56th fighter group. The photo with the farm worker and his son at Boxted watching a Marauder is one of the well-known images of the war.



'When they did see action, they coped incredibly well . . . they became the top-scoring American squadron ever, shooting down 300 aircraft between them.'



The picture of the intersection of the runways shows it nearly at the end of its life, the last remaining buildings being used by non-flying firms.



As well as Percy Hatfield running his crop spraying company "Airspray Ltd", the machine tool company, "Woods of Colchester" based its business planes, a Beechcraft Travelair, a de-Havilland Dove and the Aero Commander, shown here, at Boxted.

The owner, Geoffrey Woods, also bought Wormingford Airfield, another Essex wartime airfield, six miles away. So, when harvesting was taking place at Boxted, the Group was able to fly from Wormingford. Later, Wormingford was to play a vital role in the history of the Club

After reading the newspaper article, John Thurlow who had been through an advanced gliding course with ATC Gliding School Martlesham Heath, immediately joined the Group. Eric Richards joined soon after, guiding the club into the next millennium, eventually as President.

Originally the launching method used a nylon rope behind members' cars and vans, which got the glider up to 500 feet in a good wind. In September 1960 they progressed to launching with piano wire, buying an old Jaguar to use as a tow car, increasing launch heights in the Cadet to 800 feet.

They were enthusiastic flyers. After flying late into the evening, they would tow the glider to the hangar and if the driver went fast enough and slowed down gently, would fly the glider back on a rope no longer than 20 feet!

A contribution to the Sailplane & Gliding magazine in 1961 mentions eight 'bods' from the Group on their first expedition to RAF Swanton Morley.

The early little magazines, of half the size of the present Sailplane &



The first S & G

FAREWELL
POCKET SIZE
S & G

ALAN YATES



Gliding are a good source of club history. Reports of a 'C' badge or a 'Silver C' occur in the magazines of the time. An "A" badge was for a solo flight of at least 200 feet and successful landing straight ahead, successful being defined as no damage incurred. A "B" pilot had to demonstrate a turn to the left and a turn to the right. A "C" badge was awarded for a sustained flight of five minutes, which excluded launch and glide down. A dramatic jump without any subsequent instruction was the 'Silver C' badge qualification. This was almost identical with today's requirements of a 5-hour duration flight, a 1000 metre climb and a 50km distance and would have been much less easily attainable in the comparatively poor performance gliders then available.



With the insurance money from the crashed Cadet and increased contributions from the members a Tutor was purchased. This glider had better ailerons and thus was significantly easier to fly. The Tutor VM653 is shown with Eric Richards and his son Russell, years later also to become an instructor, in the cockpit. The Auster G-AHAP in the background belonged to Colchester and North Essex Flying Club and being underpowered was never a tow aircraft. However, Percy Hatfield allowed C&NEEFC qualified



members to aerotow in his own Tiger Moth G-AIRK. To economise on fuel and on engine time, the pilots would cut the engine on rollout after landing and sometimes even before landing. Rather than taxi the machine, members would walk the Tiger back with its tail up. Of course most trainee glider pilots were restricted to auto-tow in the single-seater Tutor. Tony Sutton was the only member to convert to aero-tow in the Tutor without any two-seater instruction.

It was clear that a two-seater glider was required. So the Group sold the Tutor to buy a Ka7 from John Adams and Arthur Clarke who had been flying it from Martlesham Heath. Both John and Arthur joined 'The Colchester Gliding Group' as it called itself. It was also necessary to become officially recognised as a Club under the British Gliding Association (the BGA) for training. Trevor Ware, Geoffrey Woods' company pilot, ex RAF and RAF Gliding Sailplane Association, became Chief Flying Instructor and cleared Eric Richards and John Thurlow to instruct.

Peter Wilby had independently formed a flying group called "The Suffolk Gliding Group" based at another wartime Suffolk airfield just North of Ipswich, at Debach, pronounced 'dee-bitch'. Before finishing National Service, Peter had heard of a sale of RAF gliders – a hangar full of Tutors, Cadets, T31s, T21s and others. He and a friend put in a tender for a Tutor with all the money they had. Having made it look as unattractive as possible to others by kicking a hole in the rudder and removing the variometer, the bid of £50 was accepted. So, when they returned to Civvy Street, they had their own glider. They launched it at Debach with an Austin A40 pickup truck and a solid cable. The political feeling at that time was that flying should be encouraged in case there should ever be another 'Battle of Britain'. So a tax rebate was available on petrol for flying. A launch was costed at one shilling and sixpence (7.5p) and still made a profit.



Rarely did more than four of the six members of the Suffolk Group turn up. However, even cross-countries with retrieves were achieved with only two people on the site, the pilot and ground crewman. The system was as follows. A temporary castor wheel was fixed into the wing tip resting on the ground, but would fall out when the wing went up. The wire between the car and glider would have the slack taken up before the pilot got in. When the pilot was ready he would wave to the driver and off they went. The castor supported the wing by rolling along the runway until the wing came up off the ground and the castor wheel fell out. If the launch was successful, the driver had to retrieve the tow wire and castor and watch for a sign that the pilot was setting off cross-country. The signal was two stalls in succession, whereupon he would hitch up the trailer and, without radio, follow the glider by eye wherever it went. In 4 successive days in August 58 they retrieved from near-by Ashlacton, Crettingham near Beccles, Caistor-by-the-Sea and Shipmeadow.

Like the Colchester Group, the Suffolk Group needed a two-seater for training, as inexperienced pilots damaged the Tutor too often. So in 1963, Peter Wilby flew from Boxted with Eric Richards in the Ka7, with the possibility of an amalgamation in mind. However, the sight of the Tiger cutting its engine and being hauled back to the launch to save fuel and



Bob Adams, born in 1934, joined and learned to fly with the club in 1977 and remains an enthusiastic member. The history is told in a light-hearted non-technical style. Anecdotes and over 200 illustrations, mostly in colour, make a fascinating story. A limited edition produced at cost.

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