Tim Badham



Member Stu Blanchard flies his RF-4D from Breighton

Fournier fantastique

Mention the name René Fournier to anyone versed in European light aviation and it immediately conjures up a vision of beautifully sleek, light-powered machines using high aspect ratio wings, created by this renowned designer. The multitude of types which bear Fournier's initials RF in their designations all stem from his initial idea for an effective single-seat tourer Avion Planeur (glider 'plane). He designated it the RF-1 and began to draw this concept in 1947 but didn't start actual construction until the late 1950s. Reputedly the later stages of this build was done inside a disused laundry associated with the Waldorf Hotel in Cannes! Of wooden structure, with a retractable central wheel undercarriage and powered by a VW engine this aircraft, c/n 01 carrying registration F-WJGX, first flew in 1960.

It spawned a whole series of improved developments. The first production variant was the RF-3 and after that a strengthened version became the aerobatic RF-4. Next came a tandem two-seat machine the RF-5, and later still the side-by-side two seat RF-6 with tri-cycle gear. Some subsequent designs and derivatives (outside the scope of this summary) involved metal or composite materials. The story behind which organisations manufactured each RF model is somewhat convoluted, but suffice to say, that it reportedly included 89 RF-3 produced by Alpavia, 155 RF-4D, 127 RF-5 and 79 RF-5B all by Sportavia-Pützer and 43 RF-6B by Fournier.

Tim Badham



Ian Atherton's Fournier cabriolet style

Tim Badham



Smartly appointed RF-5

Fournier aircraft remain very popular sporting machines, some being owned by VAC members. The recent 'Sleapkosh' fly-in at Sleap including a gathering of Fourniers and amongst those was the example used by Bob Grimstead for graceful aerobatic displays.

Tim Badham



Bob Grimstead aerobating his RF-4D

Tim Badham



The RF-6B has side by side seating

Monsieur Fournier recently celebrated his 103 birthday, and two British RF-4D operators flew their machines across the channel to meet the great man and join in the celebrations. Trevor Bailey takes up the tale. ■

A gaggle of Fourniers at 'Sleapkosh'

Tim Badham



Amboise 102 or bust!

By Trevor Bailey

In late 2020, and a gap in Covid 19 quarantine requirements, the well-known aerobatics instructor and flying legend JT (John Taylor leader of the Skyhawks Fournier Formation Aerobatic team) suggested via Club Fournier Intl UK that the UK Fourniers should fly to Amboise in France to help celebrate René Fournier's 100th birthday. Plans were developed and a gaggle of Fourniers gathered one frosty December morning at Mike Dentith's (ex-Skyhawks team member) local grass strip. Along with Matt Hill, also ex-Skyhawks, a first practice of the '100' formation was flown. This was going to be a great weekend in France with parties, wine, food and flying, what's not to like. Sadly, Covid 19 soon put paid to that plan.

Undaunted JT suggested that we could do the same thing, with a few tweaks, for René's 101st birthday 2022. Practice continued at various airfields across the country from Sussex to Oxfordshire. The weather put paid to this attempt.

Forward to 2023 and Rene's 102 birthday (even more remarkable considering) and JT, ever the optimist, suggested we do a 102 formation! More excellent fun at practice days and I couldn't quite believe that some 30+ years after watching the Skyhawks team display to Pink Floyd I was now flying with them.

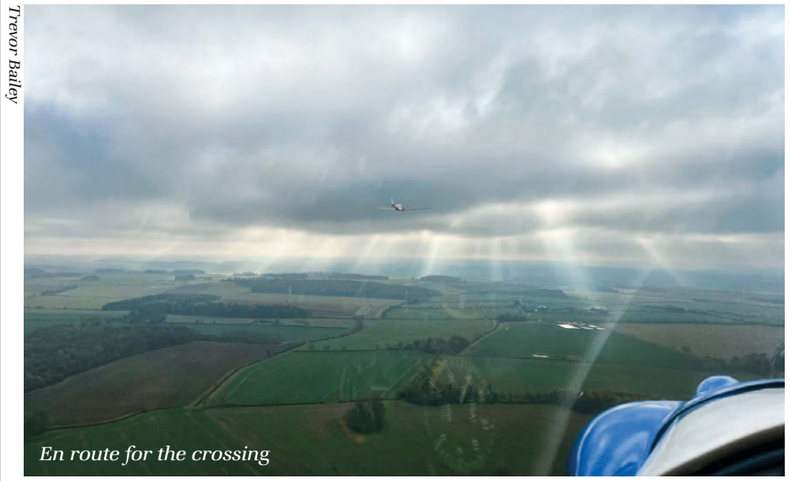
The big day came around and just as in 2022 the weather looked awful. No way could we take a formation of aircraft across the channel let alone down through France and yet…! JT and wife Fran were already booked to drive down. Mike Dentith was desperate to get there and meet up with Rene and show him his refurbished RF4 rescued from the USA and used by Mira Slovak to fly across the Atlantic …. but that's another story.

Tim Badham



A practice session at Bidford in 2021

Trevor Bailey



En route for the crossing

Mike is confident the weather will improve on Saturday and if we time our departure right, we should get across the channel. So, he asked if I could fly RF4 GAWLZ down with him as a duo. We watched the weather keenly during Friday and decided it would be worth launching by 09:00 Saturday morning.

With blue sky to the west signalling the approaching clear weather I depart Gloucester only to find the Cotswold escarpment is under cloud. I can see its broken and dissipating further east so elect to go over the top and descend in a gap to locate Mike.

As I come overhead Mike takes off and climbs to meet me and we decide to probe east at low level with the kind help of Brize who allow us to route through their zone.

Onwards to Lydd we skirt low level around Reading and contact Farnborough to route via the Bagshot mast. No one else was crazy enough to be flying for fun at this time of day in this weather. Clearing the North Downs as we flew over Wisley didn't fill us with optimism as cloud covered most of them. We pressed on towards Dorking and there as if by magic was the Gap. Through we went skirting around Redhill and the eastern edge of the Gatwick zone dodging showers via Tunbridge and into Lydd, 140 NM and 1 hour

Tim Badham



Trevor checking that his RF was ready prior to the journey

30 after departing Glos. Average speed 90knts and consuming 12 litres of avgas an hour. Not many aircraft can beat that.

The weather over the channel made a crossing impossible, given the danger areas to 1500ft and a cloud base at Le Touquet of 1000ft. Better weather was edging in and when Le Touquet was giving 1600ft our flight plan was accepted.

Arriving in Le Touquet we decided it was worth refuelling and given the tail wind it looked like we could definitely make Amboise in one leg with the 12 litres per hour we were getting.

With an improving weather outlook our flight west around Paris and down to the Loire was looking good and certainly the viz was much better but we still had to dodge the occasional shower and cloud base never got above 1500 feet until well south and it started to break up into scattered cumulus. We arrived overhead Amboise 2 hours later to a brisk cross wind and a voice on the radio saying, "speak in French, s'il vous plaît"!

The CFI AGM was still underway and given the time we would be taken straight there, as dinner would follow its completion so no time to change. What a surprise awaited us. A local venue had been hired with tables laid for 200 + guests. This was going to be some celebration. The CFI members gathered round to greet us and particularly JT and Mike who were the heroes of the hour given their Skyhawks history.

Trevor Bailey



Fueling at Le Touquet

Trevor Bailey



Rouen

Following a prestigious French feast with wine flowing everyone gathered round for the presentation of René's 102 birthday cake. René gave a speech causing hysterics. Something to do with his medics insisting he take it easy, eat better and drink less wine. "But I'm 102 years old he reminds them … I'm not changing anything now!"

On Sunday day we meet René (who amazingly drove himself there) and the press including TV, at the airfield for a look at our Fourniers and especially Mike's given the history. Also, it was a chance for the 'Alternative Duo' to catch up with Mike and JT to share experiences and get some useful hints. These "young" lads, Ben and Anthony, are taking on the Skyhawks baton with their two RF4s and displaying them around France. René then invited us all to join him for lunch in the clubhouse. It was amazing to see other aircraft arriving from around France just for Sunday lunch. Afterwards René invited us to Chateau Nitray and said he would drive. This was just magical, and it wasn't long before he brought out bottles of Chateau Nitray Demi-Sec providing each of us with a bottle to take home plus other souvenirs and for me a signed copy of his autobiography. What a day!

Trevor Bailey



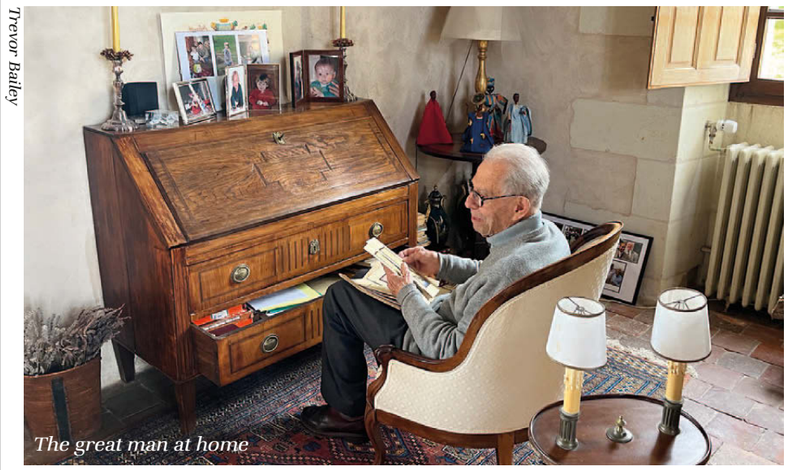
They finally get to meet René

Trevor Bailey



Models in René's include Mira Slovak's RF-4 as N1700

Trevor Bailey



The great man at home

Mike and I arrived at a deserted Amboise early on Monday to depart. First challenge, how to pack everything in our tiny cockpits given the souvenirs, wine etc! Next, given the headwind a fuel stop would be required. We decided on Rouen, from there, if the weather allowed, we could clear customs and flight plan direct to Lydd, all be it via Cap Griz Nez. Neither of us fancied the longer water crossing direct from Rouen. We routed overhead le Touquet into worsening murk and a lowering cloud base. With some relief and before we got to Cap Gris Nez, I heard Mike call le Touquet and request a weather diversion back to them. We had to endure a lovely French beer and meal downtown that evening! Tuesday morning proved better although the cloud base was only just above 1500 feet, but our flight plan was accepted, and we departed for Lydd. Once again, I found myself seemingly skimming over the whitecaps as we turned west from Cap Gris Nez towards Lydd and got the benefit of a tail wind to push us quickly across the unforgiving grey English Channel.

A quick refuel at Lydd and then 1.5 hours back to Gloucestershire and we parted company overhead Mike's strip and 15 mins later I landed safely back at Gloucester and remained sat in the aircraft savouring the memories of a fabulous if challenging weekend with the great man Rene Fournier and of course Mike and JT. Over 3 days, 8.5 hours of flying and many wonderful memories GAWLZ didn't miss a beat. 103 next year? ■

Miles Gemini G-AKDK available

VAC member Peter Turner is well known for his huge collection of Miles Gemini and Miles Messenger airframes, together with an inventory of tail units, fins, rudders, engines, and Gemini under carriages - to mention but a few of these.

Sadly, a decision has been made to start disposing of this collection due to Peter being the wrong side of forty (you can double that) and the cost of renting his superb unit. Some parts have already been promised to two museums which will be delivered later this year.

However, Miles Gemini G-AKDK is currently in his storage unit near Bearley, where it has been carefully kept since her return from Airbase at Coventry airport after her rebuild to fly was cancelled, due to lack of funds.

Peter would now like to offer this rebuild project for sale to a VAC member in the first instance.

G-AKDK has an interesting history as it spent some time in Denmark: Constructed as a MK1A with c/n 6469 Mk1A, it first flew on 21 August 1947 and was then delivered to EP Jenks Ltd at Wolverhampton. In June 1950 it was sold to Mitchell Engineering of Peterborough. In March 1954 it moved on again to WPB Pinner at Elstree. In February 1955 to E Crabtree at Yeadon, then in October 1955 went to fresh owner W Wilson & Sons at the same location. In February 1957 to RS Turner and based at Croydon. In August 1960 to GW Harben and kept at White Waltham, but its C of A lapsed 27.03.1970. It was sold in 1971 to Jens Toft of Veteranmuseum, Stauning, Denmark and was reportedly flown to Egeskov, but was subsequently moved and ended up stored dismantled at Billund for the Teknisk Museum. It was shipped back to the UK on 12 April 2011 for Peter Turner.

Ron Bass



G-AKDK shown when it was still in flying condition

In 2013 it went by road to Air Atlantique at Coventry, but a rebuild was abandoned, and it returned to Peter Turner in 2015. (Data thanks to Peter Amos).

The airframe has been stored in dry airy conditions since her last flight in Denmark circa 1963. The wing is in one piece! The project includes three Cirrus Minor engines which were part restored by Hornet Aviation.

Peter believes that currently there are three Geminis flying in England G-AKHP, G-AKKB, G-AKKH *('KH's permit expired in April 2020 Ed)* and one airworthy example in Scandinavia. Amongst other survivors of the type there are two others destined to fly again, namely one Gemini on rebuild in New Zealand and another (owned by a VAC member) in Iceland. It would really be fantastic if we could get G-AKDK also rebuilt and flying again. ■

Should any member be interested in viewing G-AKDK project, please contact the Editor who will pass on any expressions of interest to Peter.

David Ogilvy OBE FRAeS

We are sad to tell you that our President, David Ogilvy OBE FRAeS, passed away on 14 July at the age of 94. David had been a founder member of the Vintage Aeroplane Club in 1951 which existed until 1957. Sometime later,David was invited to become President of our Vintage Aircraft Club, a position he held for many years. His career in aviation spanned his lifetime and he had just finished writing his seventeenth book 'Flying and Preserving Historic Aircraft', which will be on sale later in the year.

We would like to thank Trevor Wilcock for the support and help he has given David over the last four years, in particular with the completion of his book for publishing. Our thoughts go to David's daughter Jill and all the family. ■

Anne Hughes

Trevor Wilcock



David with his National Transport Trust award