



Welcome to the Pilots' Republic of Seething

Out there on the flatlands there's a flying group which embodies the free spirit of general aviation, as Pat Malone reports

Karl Marx would have approved of Seething Airfield. Not that there's a nest of Commies down there in rural Norfolk, but a philosophy that says "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" is the guiding principle by which they live.

Well, up to a point. Perhaps a more apt comparison would be with a backwoods airfield in America, where you get free coffee, there's no controlled airspace, everyone pitches in and there are no landing fees. This is what flying must have been like in Britain 30 or 40 years ago – in fact, life is so good there that Seething is seriously worth considering moving to Norfolk for.

Waveney Flying Group, which owns Seething Airfield through a limited company called Wingtask 1995, is more like a family than a flying club. Not that they're always bickering – although they do their share of that. They are a group of friends with a common obsession, small enough in number to maintain an easy intimacy and to feel able to work for the common good. They have enough benign parent figures to hold everything together, and nobody gets paid –

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not the directors, the committee, not the instructors, not the people who give up their time to dig holes, build hangars or paint the runway.

Seething is a refreshing antidote to commercial pressure, but things can only operate the Seething way in small groups of committed people, with a low turnover of members. The club is small – only 90 members – partly because it's a long way from anywhere urban, and turnover is low because nobody wants to leave. Indeed one of the original founders, Jimmy Hoseason of holidays fame, still flies at Seething after 46 years.

The club owns two aircraft, a Cessna 172 for training and a PA-48 for touring, and rates are kept as low as possible – £85 solo, £90 dual. They are blessed with five instructors, including a 777 captain and an Airbus first officer, who all fly for free. Unusually, they train only on Saturdays – although whether they'll be able to stay in the training business now the CAA is hiking their licence fee by some 420 percent (see separate panel) is debatable.

The club owns the runways outright, and about 16 acres of land. Despite the fact that they



serve a rural area and train only one day a week, the club has supplied a steady stream of aspiring youngsters to the airlines. Alan Youngs, the retired village bobby who serves as membership secretary, airfield manager and general factotum at Seething, says: "We've got captains and first officers flying with easyJet, Ryanair, Air UK, DHL and others. Our instructors are of the highest calibre, and a PPL gets a very good grounding at Seething."



puts a shoulder to the wheel when necessary. We had a work day to paint the runway recently – there are 12 paint slabs, each of which would take one man an hour. So if 24 people turn out you can get the job finished in half an hour, then go and have a drink.”

Several work days were needed to complete the clubhouse, formerly a prefab from which the roof was torn by the notorious October 1987 gale. Today it is a comfortable and capacious building with a sort of bar and a sort of kitchen to which members bring food from home.

Funding for such improvements is also a communal affair. When the runway needed to be resurfaced the call went out for members to pay their annual subs up front – subs are £150 a year – and some paid for as much as five years. Problem solved overnight. The club's Cessna 172 was also bought with advances from members who were paid back over three or five years, while the three hangars were built using advance rent from those who wanted space in them – there are 15 private aircraft at Seething.

Member Ian Davies says: “Costs are kept low because we have among our membership people of many talents, welders and builders, electricians and plumbers, people with design

wonder. Each contains a turntable, so that one man or woman can take out any aircraft without having to manhandle any other – which cuts down on hangar rash as well as time and effort. While they'd probably be able to squeeze in more aircraft if they did the usual jigsaw job on them, the ease of handling makes the turntable system invaluable. The first turntable looks rather agricultural, resting on two rails and powered by an electric motor pulling a cable. The second is more sophisticated, its designers and builders having clearly shot up the learning curve,



“But we're not really a flying school. The person who comes to learn to fly here will be expected to muck in from the start, man the fire truck, paint the runway, do whatever work needs to be done. If you just want to come along, do your flying, pay your money and leave, then Seething wouldn't suit you. We look for members who'll make a commitment to the club, and who feel they have something to contribute.”

“People join first as social members, then they can be accepted as flying members after an interview with the Board. Six months later, your application for full membership may be considered by the Board.”

Alan, who lives only ten minutes from the clubhouse, exemplifies the spirit of Seething. He is famous for having dug in more than 1,000 yards of cable for the airfield's (unlicensed) runway lighting with his garden spade. During his working life Seething was part of his beat, so he formed an early attachment to the airfield, learned to fly there and is now a club check pilot. He is one of the movers and shakers who organise the 'work days' when members turn out to tackle the big jobs that crop up from time to time. “There's a hard core of maybe a dozen people who can always be relied on,” he says, “but everybody

Opposite top: The group has a Warrior for touring and a C172 for training

Left: former village bobby Alan Youngs is a kingpin of the club

Above, top and right: Seething runs a regular programme of fly-ins and events which attract locals as well as aviation enthusiasts



and business skills.” Ian himself is a businessman – he's director of development for Archant, the magazine and newspaper group that owns *Pilot* magazine, and he's also an accomplished photographer. The clubhouse walls are adorned with high-quality air-to-air photographs of Seething-based planes.

Seething's hangars are things of beauty and

while the third is cutting edge. Not only does it run smoothly and almost silently, but one merely has to push a button with a registration on it to bring that particular aircraft to the front. Says Ian: “We have a member who excels in the computer software world – he has designed the software that runs Capital Radio and many more radio stations, so it was

a small matter for him to chip our turntable to stop on command." Part of one hangar is given over to the resident engineer, who looks after virtually all the aircraft on the field and many customers who fly in.

Seething is a popular destination for visiting



controlled airspace. A major worry is the expansion of Norwich Airport, which looks likely to blanket Seething with Class D airspace.

There's a history to Seething, too. The old control tower has been restored by local volunteers with financial help from veterans of the 448th Bomb Group USAAF, who flew Liberators from 'Station 146' during the war. The tower is full of memorabilia from a time when up to 3,000 Americans occupied the field. Alan says: "We get elderly Americans hobbling around the airfield with sticks, although the old men come less often now – sometimes we have coach parties, but it's usually the next generation, the kids who want to see the places dad talked about when he was alive."

*Left: the old tower is now a museum to the Americans who lived and died here
Below: a sophisticated turntable system delivers aircraft at the touch of a button*

'The new CAA charges probably mean we can't carry on as we have been doing'

Waveney Flying Club was formed in 1960 after the airfield had lain unused for many years, with the runways being leased from the local farmer. It took four months to clear the rubbish off the runways, and the club then leased in a Miles Messenger which was available for £4 an hour. Later they added a Tiger Moth and a Rallye.

Although neighbours are few and far between Seething goes out of its way to accommodate them. There are noise-sensitive areas for which the circuit is stretched, and each year the airfield invited everybody in the district to come for a sausage-on-a-stick dinner and to check the place out. "Lots of people do come," says Ian. "We take some of them for flights so they can see their gardens from the air, and as a result we have relatively few noise complaints.

"We also invite the Scouts to camp here, and we had the local Guy Fawkes bonfire on the field because they'd outgrown their previous site. We are very much part of the

aircraft on summer weekends. "We can have ten or 15 planes on the apron on a nice day," says Alan Youngs. "Some people just come to get the name in the logbook – we're a good distance from the Home Counties airfields, but we're a destination airfield primarily by virtue of the fact that we're not on the way to anywhere. We have avgas, but you wouldn't drop in to Seething to refuel on your way from A to B. People come because we have a reputation for being friendly and we don't charge for tea."

There's no landing fee, either, although there are envelopes for donations. Most visitors seem to value the experience at a fiver, although the odd plonker puts a handful of brown coins in the envelope – probably not realising that the envelope also has his registration written on it. Seething Radio, 122.6, will probably be answered by a passer-by who has a coffee in his other hand, to the consternation of those urban fliers who seem increasingly unable to operate without direct instructions over the radio. Local pilots, of course, are used to the opposite – qualifying cross-countries are usually to places like Peterborough Conington and Bourne – and some feel wary about venturing into busy



CAA fees hike spells catastrophe

Waveney Flying Group is to be hammered by the CAA's decision to force massive increases in licensing fees on general aviation. Seething Airfield's annual licence is going up from £600 to around £3,800 over three years – and for a club that trains only one day a week, that's a catastrophe.

The club has been training pilots virtually since its foundation in 1960, although it had to stop in 1967 when the requirement to have a licence was introduced. The licence was obtained in 1968 and training has continued ever since.

Ian Davies says: "On a good Saturday we can do perhaps five hours of training, so when you take into account the number of days lost to weather you're looking at a total of perhaps £20 an hour in training costs just to pay for the CAA's new charges – and that's not taking into account the extra costs that will be levied by the CAA directly on the students.

"There's been a lot of discussion about what we can do, but we haven't come to a firm conclusion. One option is to train for the self-launching motor glider NPPL, but that is quite a change. We've discussed stopping training altogether and not renewing the licence, but training is an important contributor to our objective of promoting aviation. We have discussed increasing the subscriptions but there aren't many of us and the burden is great.

"We have also discussed increasing the number of days on which we train, but that would probably bring us into the realms of paid instruction, and we would have crossed a threshold which would greatly increase our costs across the board.

"What is certain is that we cannot continue to operate the way we are doing. This is a crippling blow for us, and we have our opinions of those who are responsible for it – although they could not be printed."

community – and of course we have our own social nights five or six times a year, to raise funds and to have a good time."

Can the good times last? "There's no reason why we shouldn't stick to the same philosophy," says Ian. "The atmosphere won't change. But the new CAA charges probably mean we can't carry on as we have been doing. We're a legally incorporated entity and we have a Board, but up to now we've managed to avoid most of the expensive hassles that go with being a company. From a commercial point of view our aircraft are under-utilised, but once we move away from the purist philosophy that says everybody does the work and nobody gets paid, we move into a whole new world. It is probable that in the future the organisation will have to change, and the challenge is to ensure that we preserve the ethos of the club." ■

**Seething Airfield has an excellent website, www.seething-airfield.co.uk, and is strictly PPR on 01508 550453. Runway 24/06 is 850 yards.*