

## I knew 'Her' in 1944 ©

**A**s a very young boy, with an immense interest in anything with an engine, wings, & which flew, gave me the ambition to work on aircraft.

The opportunity came upon leaving school at the age 14 yrs. when I applied for, & was given a job working on airframes at '**Herts.& Essex Aviation**' at **Broxbourne aerodrome**, (which in actual fact was sited at **Nazeing Essex**).

My starting wage being a few '**Old Pennies**' per hour, = equal to about **4 New Pence per hour** in to-days currency.

The airfield was formed in 1931 by the Frogley brothers, Roger & Buster, on part of the family farm, & prospered during the following years to become a very active flying club.

Soon after war was declared on **Sept 3<sup>rd</sup> 1939** the government decided to impress most civilian airfields, & aircraft into wartime service with the RAF, thus a few months later **Broxbourne** was taken over by '**The Ministry Of Aircraft Production**' as a '**Repair & Maintenance**' unit.

Local carpenters, engineers, mechanics, etc were employed, & trained for the work on aircraft, others to become inspectors, etc. extra buildings were erected, & by early 1940 the unit was up & running.

A variety of aircraft types arrived such as **Percival Proctors Mk 1-11-111 - Vega Gulls, twin engine Percival Q6 Petrel. – Miles 'Magisters'**. Two rare **twin engine French 'Caudrons'** flown across the channel by two French men who were fleeing the 1940 German invasion in 1940, were sent in by road, were repaired & flew with the 'Free French Air Force'. (**The slightly larger Mk 1V Proctors began to arrive at Broxbourne in about 1944.**)

My working life began in **January 1943** when I was placed under the guidance of a very stern, elderly carpenter, by the name of Bert Johnson, who had no sense of humour. --- wore a grubby old grey Trilby-hat, an old suit, with a white bib & brace apron for protection. Although he suffered from bad health he kept on working, whilst at the same time teaching me to become dedicated at my work. He would not tolerate the practical jokes which were played on 'new boys' (such as myself), who were sent to the stores to collect such objects as :- Left handed hammers, left handed screwdrivers. Etc.

Every piece of Canadian Spruce, walnut, Birch plywood we used had to be inspected by **A.I.D** inspectors before anything could be made to the official drawing for each individual part, - **all finished item** had to be **checked** by an **appointed inspector**, & if passed, he/she confirmed it by **applying his/her own identity** together & **A.I.D** code, with a rubber stamp, - **any holes drilled** were tested with the correct diameter tool for

tolerances. --- ‘Casco’ water based glue had to be mixed by an **assigned person**, & inspected prior to use, the inspection process was in force for **all items & trades**.

**Double -summer time** imposed for a part of the **six years of war**, meant that I had to cycle the **14 mile trip** to & fro work, at times in complete darkness due to a strict, & **complete blackout imposed on all lighting which was visible from the air**, -- ‘**Double summer time**’ gave longer evenings, but we often started work at 8 am. whilst it was still pitch dark, **no outside lighting of any kind were allowed** during the black-out period from **dusk**, until **sunrise**, --- even our **bicycle lights** had to be masked, as did all **types of transport lighting**, lighting a cigarette, striking a match etc. were **infringements & considered an offence**, - **fines were imposed on offenders**.

I had to cycle the **14 miles** to & fro work in pitch darkness with limited lighting, whatever the weather, --- dealing with punctures,-- broken chains, etc. --- at times facing hazardous due to possible air-raids, -- just to save a few pennies on the bus fares.

The very **first aircraft** that I worked on was **Proctor Mk1- P 6309**. Which survived the war, **G-AIEC** & was **exported** to **New Zealand** in **1946**, as **ZK-ALS**

The sound of an approaching aircraft gave me the excuse to dodge away from my workbench, & nip outside to watch as many planes as I could, taking off, or landing.

During one such event at **4pm.**, on a dull afternoon on **November 21<sup>st</sup> 1944** I arrived in time to see a Proctor making a **very bad landing approach** on the shortest of our grass landing strip, it seemed certain that a crash was imminent if the landing was carried out, **no attempt** was made by the pilot to **abort**, resulting in the aircraft being unable to stop, thus **hitting a pile of sandbags**, which tipped it vertically onto it’s nose, - at that point it could have turned over, but luckily for the pilot, it fell backwards onto it’s tail-wheel, -- seconds later the door opened, the pilot emerged unharmed to be greeted by our ground staff who had rushed to help.

The aircraft was moved over to the hangars where it spent the next **3 months**.

Having undergone major repairs in our workshop the Proctor left Broxbourne on **March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1945** for the **Central Flying School** at **Tangmere** ---never to be seen again by me, (or so I thought !! ). --- I could never remember the details about this aircraft, other than seeing the crash. I never knew whether it survived the war, or heard anymore about it, however I now know that in the meantime, it had survived. - Only just!!

On the **27<sup>th</sup> July 1947** she was sold for civilian use to **Southern Aircraft Ltd at Gatwick**, changing hands on **9<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1949**, -- & **again** on the **20<sup>th</sup> Dec 1950** ---to be exported one week later to **Sweden** on the **27<sup>th</sup> Dec 1950** -- as **SE-BTR**, but had crashed on arrival.

**64 years would pass** before a very good friend **Mike Biddulph** told me that he had bought the remains of a Proctor which had been stored for over **53 years** in **Sweden**, & that he was bringing it back to the UK to be restored.

Even though it had suffered badly over the years through lack of attention, it was mostly intact, I was thrilled to hear that another Proctor had been found, & therefore I was eager to obtain as many details as possible to research it's history, hoping that it would be one that I had worked on.

My research into the aircrafts wartime service proved it to be the **actual one** that I had seen crash **64 years earlier**, & that the pilot was a woman, -- **Monique Agazarian**, belonging to the **ATA (Air Transport Auxiliary)**, -- a wartime scheme for civilian pilots to deliver all types of aircraft to RAF units, thus relieving service pilots for other essential duties. I tried to trace Monique in hopes that I could show her the aircraft which she crashed all those years ago, but sadly she had passed away a few years earlier

I was reunited with '**a memory from the past**' when I was taken to Suffolk on a bitterly cold day in February 2008 to see **G-AKEX**, which, when I last saw it carried serial number **LZ791**, & in RAF wartime camouflage, -- this was still clearly visible under several coats of civilian paint, & was almost certainly the paint scheme applied at Broxbourne **64 years earlier**.

Some months later, on the beautiful afternoon of **19<sup>th</sup> October 2008** my very good friend, & owner of LZ791 > G-AKEX, **Mike Biddulph**, drove me out to see LZ791 in the new workshop. -- A great sight to behold!

Whilst inspecting the airframe I found some markings applied at **Broxbourne 64yrs** earlier, I also found the Broxbourne A.I.D reference marks with the prefix **HX** indicating that the work was completed at **Herts.& Essex Aviation**.

The 'set-up' at Great Oakley made me wish that I was 30yrs. younger & able to don my working clothes, --- get out my tools, & commence work on this airframe in wonderful working conditions & surroundings.

After a couple of very interesting hours looking over the airframe I had the privilege to be the very first person to sign the '**Visitors Book**'.

My memories from **64 long years ago** flooded back during this visit, a lifetime had passed, & the years have taken their toll, not only on LZ701, but on myself, --- the difference being that LZ791, alias KEX, will have her body completely rebuilt 'as new', but alas it is not possible to do a 'rebuild' on my body. However I am assured that a plaque will be made outlining my connections with her & will be placed in the completed cockpit to ensure my link with her will not be forgotten in the future.

In the years to come, when I have long departed to this earth to '**The Big Hangar in the Sky**' & G-AKEX gets her 'new-lease of life' & again takes her rightful place skies that I adored, -- on-board will be my name, & hopefully my spirit.

As I write this I have just reached 'the ripe old' **age of 80**, I hope therefore that I will be spared the next few years to see her fully restored, & flying again, ---**maybe by 2012**.

### Aircraft Records & History.

**LZ 791** was made by **F Hills & son** of **Old Trafford Manchester** under contract **No.498/C4**. To be delivered on the **6<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1943** to the **ATA at Thame Oxen**.

Just **under a year** later, on the **21/11/1944**, she crashed at **Broxbourne**, & was placed on to repair list of **Herts. & Essex Aviation at Broxbourne Herts**. On the **22/11/1944**, when repairs completed she was 'Awaiting Collection' on the **9/3/1945**. On the **22/3/1945** she was delivered to **CFE ('The Central Flying Establishment')** at **Tangmere**.

On the **21/3/1946** she arrived at **West Raynham Norfolk** & was placed on 'Home Census' list for possible disposal, but for some reason was repositioned with the **CFE Fighter Leader School** – of the **Fighter Leader School – Central Fighter Establishment -West Raynham**, ----- on the **30/5/1947** she went to **39 Maintenance Unit at Colerne Wilts** for disposal. On the **26/8/1947** she was purchased by **Southern Aircraft Ltd. Gatwick**, then sold on to a private owner in London on the **9/11/1949**, -- on the **20/12/1950** going to **Willis Hale Aviation at Croydon airport**, then exported to **Sweden** on the **27/12/1950** as **SE- BTR**, sadly she crashed on the delivery flight, where she remained in storage until **Mike Biddulph** flew to **Sweden in 2007** to fulfil his lifelong ambition to own a Proctor. The sad, dusty remains, a legacy of **54 years in storage**, were loaded onto a low loader trailer in **November 2007** & towed to the sea ferry en-route to **Hull**, from where she was towed the next day to temporary storage **Nr. Lavenham Suffolk**, she remained there for about 7 months, until a suitable workshop could be found to start her restoration. A derelict cow shed was found at **Great Oakley** & in **July 2008** work was started to restore the building as a workshop, -- **LZ 791** started her **32 mile journey** on **Sunday 23/ 9/ 2008** to her 'new home' -- On the **21<sup>st</sup> October 2008** she was joined by a 'Sister-Ship'--**Mk 5 G-AHTE** which is to be restored to flying condition alongside **LZ 791** by restorer **John Tregilgas**, who also put such a great effort into the workshop restoration



**G-AHTE** is seen above to the **left** of picture, with **G-AKEX** to the **right**



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Seen here in 1946, at the age of just over 17 yrs. of age, with a model of a Percival Proctor Mk 1 which was being made to Percival scale drawings, specifications, & materials. Sadly it was never completed due to flooding of our home in Stanstead Abbots in the Lea Valley Hertfordshire during the awful winter of 1947.

November 2008 ©

## *Addenda*

Until my research into the Nov. 1944 crash at Broxbourne, I thought the pilot to be a man, but the results proved it to be a 24 yr old lady, no other than Monique Agazarian who was serving with the ATA, & who, post war, formed Island Air Services at Heathrow, flying DeHavilland Rapides on pleasure flight over the London area -- seen below in one of them.

Later she moved to Booker as an instructor, she was a forerunner of flight simulators & went on to write books on that subject.

She passed away in 1992 aged 72

