

WARREN FARM RADIO FLYERS

A Potted History

As Warren Farm Radio Flyers celebrates its 25th anniversary of flying in the London Borough of Ealing, now is good time to acquaint newer members and other interested parties with the history of the club, the trials and tribulations which the club went through, and how the present agreement with Ealing Council was arrived at.

EARLY DAYS

The whole process started as long ago as 1982, when **Bob Howard** recognised a need for a legal and organised model flying facility in the borough. This came about partly from problems beyond the control of an existing club (their flying site was sold off, and is now buried under Stockley Park in West Drayton), and partly from the recognition that, whilst Ealing boasted the largest area of Green Space in London, all of its model flying residents (with the exception of a small number of them operating illegally near Horsenden Hill) were travelling to other boroughs with far less green space available, but with a more enlightened attitude to model flying.

Bob's approaches to Ealing Council were picked up on by **Councillor Fred Dunckley**, a respected local politician with a love of model flying. Cllr. Dunckley's involvement was to prove crucial in the development of model flying, although (inadvertently) almost sabotaged by a small number of model flyers.

EALING AND DISTRICT MODEL FLYING CLUB

The initial attempt to introduce model flying revolved around changes to an ancient bye-law relating to part of the Horsenden Hill complex. As this was Public Open Space, the council's bye-laws prohibited all but control-line flying, and then only in a small area of the park. After much negotiating, cajoling and endless letters and phone calls, the council agreed to suspend the bye-law for a trial period, whilst an updated bye-law was drafted which recognised the changes in R/C technology since the original bye-law was passed.

As part of this process, Ealing & District MFC was formed by a number of interested local model flyers, including **John Stephens, Trevor Slater** and **Jim Rowe**. The biggest sticking point, however, was the blank refusal by council officers to authorise the club to control flying activities. They considered it not legally possible for a private organisation to be permitted to police an activity governed by bye-laws. This decision was to prove disastrous, and set back the whole project by several years.

Flying commenced in 1984, however within weeks the club acquired a small number of members whose presence was to derail the new bye-law. Their particular interest was in F3A Class Competition Aerobatics (or "Pattern Flying" as it is often known).

These few individuals insisted on practising F3A aerobatics, using large models with 10cc 2 stroke engines and tuned pipe exhausts. The size and power of these models, together with the type of flight envelope commonly used in competitions, resulted in them using so much airspace that complaints were made on a regular basis from many locations around the site. Places of specific sensitivity included residential areas, a bird sanctuary, a nature reserve and the Ballot Box pub.

Because of the council's refusal to allow the club to police flying activities, this small minority of flyers continued to cause complaints for many months. As a direct result, all flying facilities were withdrawn, and the amended bye-law was scrapped. Flying at Horsenden Hill ended permanently at the end of 1988. After operating at Wormwood Scrubs for several years, the club was eventually wound up.

The issue of F3A aerobatics practice was later to have a major impact on negotiations relating to the use of Warren Farm Sports Centre.

KEN LIVINGSTONE and MARGARET THATCHER

At around the same time that this was happening, there was an upheaval going on in the local politics of Greater London. **Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher** and Greater London Council (GLC) Leader **Ken Livingstone** were in continuous conflict, and eventually **Mrs. Thatcher** abolished the GLC in 1986. This also had the effect of dissolving the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA).

All of the land owned by GLC and ILEA was sold off to local authorities, including Ealing. Warren Farm Playing Fields (as it was then known) had been owned by ILEA, and had been used to provide sports facilities for inner London schools.

WARREN FARM SPORTS CENTRE

Warren Farm Playing Fields had previously been considered as a possible flying site by **Bob Howard**, but was dismissed due to the problems in dealing with ILEA officials. With the recent changes, it was now possible to approach Ealing Council to discuss the use of the site (now renamed Warren Farm Sports Centre), and in 1994 a detailed proposal for model flying on the site was presented to the council. The support of **Cllr. Dunckley** was again vital in guiding the proposal through numerous council offices and committees, and eventually some progress was made. At around this time, an ad-hoc group, later to become **Warren Farm Radio Flyers**, was formed, with support from a number of local model flyers including **Trevor Slater, Ken Stanbury, Mike Sullivan** and **Chris Hockley**.

The proposals concentrated on 2 major changes which made flying at Warren Farm feasible when the project at Horsenden Hill had failed so dismally.

1. In the intervening years since the loss of Horsenden Hill, significant improvements had been made in model technology. This included the increased use of quieter 4 stroke engines, improvements in 2 stroke silencing and the development of much quieter propellers (Irvine "Mouse" silencers and APC Propellers had recently been introduced).
2. Warren Farm Sports Centre, although council owned, was not classified as Public Open Space, and was therefore (at that time) not covered by the existing bye-laws. However, access to the facilities was restricted to those organisations able to pay the booking cost. There would, therefore, be no legal reason to prohibit a club from policing flying activities on site.

One of the more bizarre results of these negotiations was that the same council officials who had previously vetoed the idea of flying activities being policed by a club now insisted upon it as a condition. It was never clear whether they had learned from the error of their previous decision, or were simply trying to appear to have come up with the idea themselves.

FLYING DEMONSTRATION No. 1

Eventually, in 1995 (some 13 years from the initial approach) council officers agreed to arrange a short flying demonstration at Warren Farm. They invited a small number of council officials to witness the event, however it was clear that at least some of them were there with the idea of letting the applicants have their say, so that they could dismiss the idea and be rid of them once and for all. They were pleasantly surprised to learn that all of the claims of improved silencing were fully substantiated.

The first model to take off was closely observed by both the Sports Manager and the Head Countryside Ranger, and passed over a flock of Canada Geese grazing in the middle of the field. The Ranger was heard to comment that the geese had, to his surprise, remained undisturbed, to which the Sports Manager replied "Bugger!". We later learned that he had been hoping we would scare the geese away, and solve the problem of the disgusting mess they were leaving behind. To this day, the place is usually covered in goose droppings.

The ghost of the Horsenden Hill débâcle had not, however, been laid to rest. Several officials asked why we had not flown “those fast noisy models that use up so much sky”. It was explained that they were referring to specialised models intended for competition use only. After some negotiation, it was agreed that F3A practice would not be permitted under club rules, together with other noisy activities such as Pylon Racing and I/C powered ducted fans.

FURTHER NEGOTIATIONS

As further negotiations continued, the group suffered a setback. **Trevor Slater**, one of the original negotiators, retired from his job as a police officer, and moved to the West Country. **Michael Sullivan** and **Ken Stanbury** continued to assist **Bob Howard** with the negotiations.

It was also at this time that Warren Farm Radio Flyers formally came into existence, with an inaugural meeting at a local church hall on 3rd April 1996. The elected officers were **Bob Howard** (Chairman/Secretary), **Mike Sullivan** (Vice Chairman), and **Ken Stanbury** (Treasurer).

The club immediately applied for, and was granted, BMFA affiliation as Club No. 0697.

FLYING DEMONSTRATION No. 2

In 1996, a further demonstration was organised. This time, a significant number of potential objectors were invited. An environmental inspector was on hand not only to noise test the models (which all passed), but also to assess any environmental impact.

Residents from all around the field were also invited to the demonstration, which was scheduled to run from 10am to 11am on a Saturday morning in May.

By the time all of the council officers, councillors and residents had tried their hand with a training model equipped with a “Buddy Box” dual control system (courtesy of **Peter Vidgeon**), and all of the models had been flown, the demonstration had carried on until 1pm – mostly because of the spectators asking “Can we see just one more flight?”.

The question of F3A practice was again raised by a further group of council officials, and again it was necessary to reassure them that club rules would prohibit this and other potentially disruptive activities.

The spectators were, who were originally drafted in to find out whether they would raise objections, were suitably impressed, with the exception of a lady from nearby Wolsley Close. Her complaint was “Why has the council not done this before”. **Gill Barrat** (now **Gill Hughes**) joined the club on the spot, and has remained a member of WFRF ever since.

LICENCE CONDITIONS

Following the successful demonstrations, Ealing Council began to draft a licence to for flying at Warren farm.

The agreed terms of the licence was that the three Licensees (**Bob Howard**, **Mike Sullivan** and **Ken Stanbury**) were legally responsible for the activities of all club members. Apart from name changes whenever a Licensee is replaced, this condition remains a cornerstone of the agreement, and explains why the Licensees need to ensure that sensible rules governing club activities are observed.

PLANNING CONSENT

All involved were confident that success was drawing closer, however just as the final agreement appeared to be at hand another hurdle was presented – the club needed planning permission.

It was explained to the council that Model Flying is recognised by the Sports Council, and by the Central Council for Physical recreation. Therefore, there was no difference between WFRF activities and those of the footballers and cricketers who regularly played there. Eventually, it was learned that the site had no planning permission for those events either – the planning consent, dating back to the days if ILEA, was for use as a school sports facility only.

Mike Sullivan accepted the onerous and time consuming task of applying for planning permission. This also required him to contact the CAA, National Air Traffic service (**NATS**) and Heathrow Airport, as the field is in Class A controlled airspace.

Temporary planning permission was eventually granted, this consent being specific to WFRF members only, and the licence to fly was finally issued in February 1997 – 15 years after the first approaches to Ealing Council. Sadly, one of the founder members of WFRF, **Chris Hockley**, passed away just 2 weeks before the licence was issued.

The intention of the Planning Officers was that the planning permission would be issued for periods of one year only until such time as Ealing Council were satisfied about the club's conduct. However, they were so impressed by the manner in which the club conducted its affairs that, one year later, full permanent planning permission was granted.

It is important to note that both the this planning consent and the letter of authorisation from **NATS** are specific to members of Warren Farm Radio Flyers. All others flying at the site are in therefore in contravention of both the planning consent, the current bye-laws and CAA regulations.

SUBSEQUENT EVENTS

The club continued to fly for some years, until eventually in 2006 **Tom Thomas** agreed to replace **Ken Stanbury** on the licence. The licensees were shocked to learn that changing the name on the licence involved legal fees, and a "Surveyors Charge", totalling around £800 in addition to the annual licence fee. No amount of pleading, cajoling or pressure from various councillors had any effect, and the club was lumbered with a huge bill which emptied the it's bank account.

This raised the thorny issue of what would happen if another licence holder wished to withdraw. At the suggestion of **Tom Thomas**, **Mike Sullivan** renegotiated the new licence to include a clause limiting the cost of any further name changes to £50 per change – not unreasonable for the level of admin required. It was also set up as a perpetual rolling licence, to provide a secure future for the club.

These new conditions were prove essential when, for health reasons, **Mike Sullivan** withdrew from the licence during 2009, as the management company contracted to Ealing Council again tried to charge us hundreds of pounds for the change. Copies of the original 2006 agreement were sent to them, and as a result a further fixed cost term was sealed.

THE FUTURE OF WARREN FARM RADIO FLYERS

The club was secure for many years, however in 2012 there came a threat. Ealing Council invited bids for a 200 year lease of the site, and the bid from Queens Park Rangers FC was successful. It was feared that QPR would seek a way either to curtail the club's flying activities, or to price us out of the facility. In addition, the "Community Area" which would possibly have been available to us was too small for training beginners, an activity which has been at the heart of club activities from the outset.

It was particularly disheartening that such a successful and well respected club, with a history of 22 years without a single complaint from local residents, council officers or any of the "Professional Complainers" which an afflict other clubs should be placed in jeopardy by commercial pressures.

The alternative site offered by Ealing Council offered in 2014, at Rectory Park, in Northolt, was most unsatisfactory, and after a very short tenure on site was rendered virtually unusable by the building of yet another soccer academy, with construction beginning in 2017. As the works at Warren Farm had been delayed by legal challenges, WFRF returned to there, apparently as a temporary measure. A new 1 acre grass runway was prepared for the club, where the club has since been flying regularly.

In April 2020, we were both astonished and delighted to learn that the proposed QPR redevelopment plans, which posed such a threat to our future, had been withdrawn. The future of the site is as yet undecided.

There have been plans for Ealing Council to return the site to a “Community Sports Hub”, much as it was when we began us flying there in 1997. If this happens, we believe that some flying will be able to continue, although how we will be affected by increased sports bookings is worrying.

An alternative proposal by a local group is for the site to become formally recognised as a “Local Nature Reserve”. Since sports bookings ceased, the whole area has become naturally rewilded, with an abundance of wildlife including skylarks, bats, butterflies and owls flourishing. The group has assured us that they are happy for us to remain on site.

INSURANCE

Owners and/or managing agents of any possible future flying site should rest assured that club affiliation to the BMFA (currently £38 per senior member per year confers upon the club a range of insurance benefits. These include :-

- Public Liability insurance for claims up to £25,000,000.
- Employers Liability Insurance for claims up to £10,000,000.
- Directors and Officers Cover for claims up to £10,000,000.
- Club Equipment Cover for claims up to £10,000.
- Personal Accident Cover up to £35,000, which includes accidents not directly related to flying. This would typically cover accidents to members carrying out maintenance works to the flying site (e.g. mowing) or whilst working on models in a home workshop (machine tools, craft knives, soldering etc.).

The insurance also covers non-BMFA members (e.g. persons interested in taking up model flying) provided that they are flying under the guidance of one of the club’s registered instructors. This usually takes place using a specially prepared training model equipped with a “Buddy-Box” dual control system, which enable the instructor to instantly take control of the model.

AND FINALLY

It is important to understand that the rules by which WFRF operates have been developed over a number of years to reflect changes in the technology, flying practices and performance of models. However, those rules have remained firmly rooted in the agreement negotiated with Ealing Council in 1997 to enable the original licence to be issued. These rules are not there simply to restrict or control members activities, but to ensure that those who may seek to curtail club activities (and they can exist in the vicinity of any model flying site) are denied any ammunition which which to attack the club.

The licence holders are held legally responsible for all activities of the club, and as such it is their responsibility to ensure that all club activities are carried out within the framework of the original agreement.

It is a testament to the licence holders and members of WFRF that this policy has been so successful that many local residents are actively supporting WFRF in it’s bid to secure future flying rights. The BMFA have advised that this is the first time they can recall a model flying club at risk of losing it’s flying site enjoying this level of support from local residents. The future relies upon the club retaining this good relationship with council staff, local residents and environmental groups.