

Dave Skerchly got a rare chance to visit Farnborough Radar;

"Farnborough Radar this is Golf Bravo Alpha Sierra Hotel..."

Most people will be aware that the MOD is vacating Farnborough airfield by the year 2000 after nearly 100 years in residence. It is proposed to turn Farnborough into London's specialist Airport for bizjets, and Farnborough Business Aviation has been formed to run the airfield. FBA is a joint venture by British Aerospace and TAG (a Swiss company whose initials stand for Techniques D'avant Guard). I was delighted to be asked by Peter Frewer,

McLaren's Chief Pilot, to attend a briefing on the plans for Farnborough Business Aviation, and yes I could fly in my AA5 G-BASH, and no I would not be charged a landing fee! The landing fee at Farnborough for a fully loaded bizjet flying in the airways, with all the trimmings, is about £1500, which is enough to make most Private Pilot's eyes water, and so this concession was very much appreciated.



G-BASH on approach to runway 25



Peter Frewer (left) explains the complexities of airways maps.

The day dawned wet and murky, with an occluded front forecast to be over Popham by 11.00am. I departed early, and took mischievous delight in contacting Farnborough Radar and asking for "joining instructions". After a few minutes confusion (who is this nut who wants to fly an AA5 into Farnborough) I was instructed to join IFR (I Follow Railways) from Basingstoke. No sooner had Bash been chocked than the skies opened and it started to rain.

I sat in the luxurious Pilots lounge, drinking their coffee and eating their biscuits until the other guests arrived, then Len Rayment gave a presentation, which outlined the future for Farnborough. Many of the new proposals were misunderstood by the locals, modern executive jets are considerably quieter than the Military jets which the RAF had operated from the field before, and the low volume of passengers would not create a huge passenger handling problem. It was interesting to note how the slick ground handling is done. FBA work closely with customs and immigration to get clearances for the passengers and their luggage before they arrive at Farnborough, so that if necessary the passenger's Mercedes can drive onto the apron and pick them up from the bottom of the aircraft steps.



The peculiar thing is that Farnborough's approaches do not yet comply with the CAA safety minima for an Instrument Landing System. The Control Tower will need to be knocked down, and the runways will be shortened to allow for a 3 degree protected glide-slope at each end. This will make the threshold position different for landing and take off depending on the direction, and if that doesn't confuse you, well it did me!



Tony Cowell, the Man behind the Mike!

We were then bundled into a mini bus and driven round the peri track to the tower by Tony Cowell the Senior Air Traffic Controller. The Tower is home to the traditional Tower controller, and below in the dungeon is the infamous "Farnborough Radar 125.25" a number burned into the psyche of every Pophamite. Tony explained the workings of ATC and the constraints of working so close to the London TMA. IFR flights require considerable co-ordination, and he explained how departing jets from zero seven are vectored immediately right until they are identified on Radar by London.

The Tower Controller

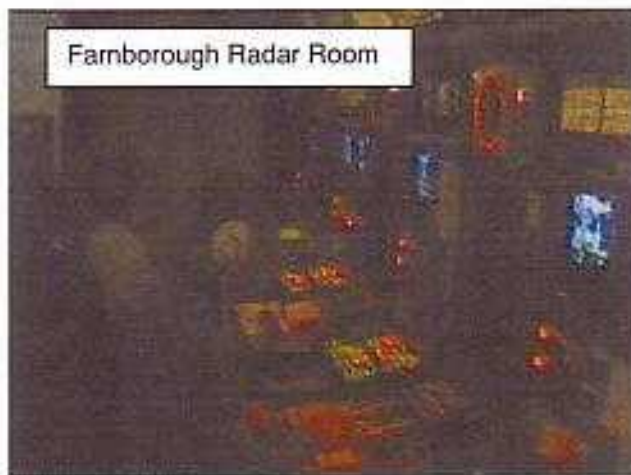


The Tower controller gets an easy life, that is until the SBAC show, when there will be up to 3 tower controllers, including one who just co-ordinates the executive helicopters. Apparently the displays are not the busiest period for ATC; it is actually the week previous to the show when the displays are practised, approved and co-ordinated that is the busiest.

We looked at the radar repeater and were surprised to find that the secondary radar (the transponder code) is "bought in" from another radar station in Kent, and merged with their own primary radar signal, how odd. The cloudbase indicator was a surprisingly high tech piece of kit, but the visibility indicator was a photo of the local landmarks annotated with their distance from the tower, crude but effective no doubt.

We descended downstairs to the approach and radar room where there were 3 stations, each with a traditional circular radar screen, covered in a profusion of amber dots, some of which were aircraft and some of which were not. Although the screen could be zoomed, the area around Popham was concentrated in a very small area of the screen at the bottom left. This explains why when returning to Popham you will be asked to squawk standby rather than 7000, otherwise all the codes merge and confuse the picture. One of the 3 air traffic controllers is a military controller who is dedicated to the Odiham MATZ. One station which, was not manned, is the precision radar approach or "Talk-Down" Radar used by the RAF. Apparently this service is available to civilian aircraft but there are few pilots who can fly it, most tending to over-control. Peter was a Javelin night fighter pilot so no doubt he is a master of this technique and entitled to be critical.

Farnborough Radar Room



After lunch we visited the executive jets which included Challengers and the ubiquitous HS125. Even with the glass cockpit the layout was sufficiently familiar that I might just have been able to fly one away. (*I think not... Eds.*)

For all this time the rain had poured and I was duly offered a lift to the station. I hung on, getting actuals from Southampton and from the Tower. Eventually there was a 1200ft cloud-base and I could see the horizon. With safety backups being an ILS approach into Southampton or Bournemouth, and enough fuel to wait until the weather cleared if necessary, I booked out. I walked out onto the apron looking every bit an executive jet Pilot, and when no one was looking, leapt into the cockpit of G-BASH and shut the lid, phew.

G-BASH in the rain, on the FBA ramp next to an RAF HS125.



I called up the tower and told them I was on the western apron, to be met with a frosty "Golf Sierra Hotel observed emerging from the southern apron" whoops, I copied my clearance, lined up and took off. As soon as I was airborne, I requested a climb in IMC to 2000ft. I trudged on for some minutes on instruments, getting the occasional glimpse of the ground. Over Basingstoke I flew into a nice big hole and descended until I had a horizon and minimum safety altitude. Farnborough Radar informed me that Popham was 11oclock 3 miles just as I too spotted it, "Contact Popham 129 decimal 8" (no hope, thought I, Pat went home at 5.00 o'clock) "and squawk standby goodbye" and it was a good day. So thanks Peter, Len and Tony for a great day out.