

Earlier this year Trevor Bailey accompanied Jon Corley on a Meteor T7 mission to Pardubice in the Czech Republic. Like a big-budget version of Bailey's *Trevor Gets Down* outing in the last issue, it turned into another tale of derring-don't.

Here's part one of the story, as told to *Meteor*.

CZECH FLIGHT



Main photo: Trevor Bailey (inset: Steve Bridgewater)

The strangeness of what I do for a living comes home to me sometimes.

Heading out over the North Sea in a sixty year old jet whose early safety record was distinctly peccable is one of those times. "Meatbox", they called it, not entirely affectionately. I listen for any strange noises from the left-hand engine; no point listening to the one on the right – it's been shut down to save fuel. Not that the Meteor T7 is a dangerous aircraft nowadays; the aerodynamic fault that caught out so many pilots is fully understood today, and that area of the flight envelope is simply and easily avoided. I stroke my lifejacket and remind myself of all this as I survey the vast expanse of water ahead.

How I got here is the result of a series of happy accidents. Flying our two Meteors has long been the exclusive task of jet-driver extraordinaire, Dan Griffith. In 2012 I had the incredible privilege of flying the T7 under Dan's expert guidance and I was charmed by its tractability and – to one accustomed to propellers – its warp-factor power. Then another opportunity came along when I accompanied Dan as observer in our other Meteor, the Cyrano-nosed NF11, climbing to 30,000 feet in about the same time it takes the Prentice to clear a small dog.

Meanwhile our Chief Pilot, Jon Corley, was undergoing more formal training with Dan to become a qualified Meteorist. All of this was taking place at a fairly relaxed pace, there being no pressing reason to hurry. That was about to change.

In 2012 we were approached to display the Meteor T7 at Pardubice Air Show

The Meteor's fuel burn is anything but inconsiderable; that and the complications of getting the old girl to Eastern Europe meant that the pricing quotation consisted of some substantial numbers

in the Czech Republic. We quoted a price and, frankly, expected to hear little more. The Meteor's fuel burn is anything but inconsiderable; that and the complications of getting the old girl into Eastern Europe meant that the pricing quotation consisted of some substantial numbers. So the confirmation, a very few weeks before the event, came as something of a surprise.

OK, a few problems here. Dan's diary was already full, and Jon was yet to solo the Meteor. Even if the solo sign-off could

be achieved before the date, there was no chance whatever of Jon's receiving an authorisation to display it. Mr Griffith made phone calls, called in favours and made promises, and succeeded in freeing up the actual event day. If we could get the aircraft to Pardubice, he could display it. One down, lots more to go...

Now to deal with the less than trivial matter of signing Jon off to solo the Meteor. Fortunately Jon's used to flying an unusually disparate list of types, some of them powered by jets almost as old as the venerable Derwents that push the Meatbox around with such enthusiasm. After cramming in some intensive dual, Dan felt able to secure his straps, climb out of the rear cockpit and utter those memorable words, "OK, I think you should do this one on your own."

But there's a considerable gulf between soloing an early jet around Newquay and embarking on a 2,000 mile round

"OK, she's all yours." Dan tells Jon he's about to become the world's first civilian-trained Meteor pilot.



trip, some of it over water. Dan strongly recommended that Jon be accompanied by another competent pilot, preferably with experience on the type. I still haven't decided whether I walked by at exactly the wrong moment or exactly the right one. "Trevor, you've flown the Meteor with me, have you got a minute?"

So that's how I found myself on the apron, doing a pre-flight walk-round on "Queenie" on the apron at Newquay. Jon was aloft in one of the Rapides, giving eight passengers the vintage aviation experience they'd been looking forward to. The inspection having revealed nothing unexpected – our engineers have acquired a certain competence over the years – I called for the fuel bowser and began the somewhat damp process of refuelling. This is a task that was wisely avoided by RAF pilots of yesteryear. Filling the pressurised ventral tank is an experience best observed at a distance, as demonstrated by the airport refuellers who stood well clear, spill blankets at the ready. Meanwhile I tried to coordinate the filler and vent, with my third hand

Filling the pressurised ventral tank is an experience best observed at a distance

operating the refuelling nozzle. Ten minutes later, and smelling strongly of Avtur, I greeted Jon, who apologised for being too late to help. He's refuelled the Meteor before too.

Which brings us to today. Here we are, strapped into a silver bullet from the dawn of the Cold War. The air's as clear as Gordon's Gin and the Met gives perfect conditions all the way. Happily, the Jet-A1 fumes have largely dissipated by the time we taxi out to the hold of runway 30, complete our final checks and line up. Jon confirms that I've heard the departure clearance and opens the throttles. I help by calling out the speeds; the Meteor approaches take-off and climb-out

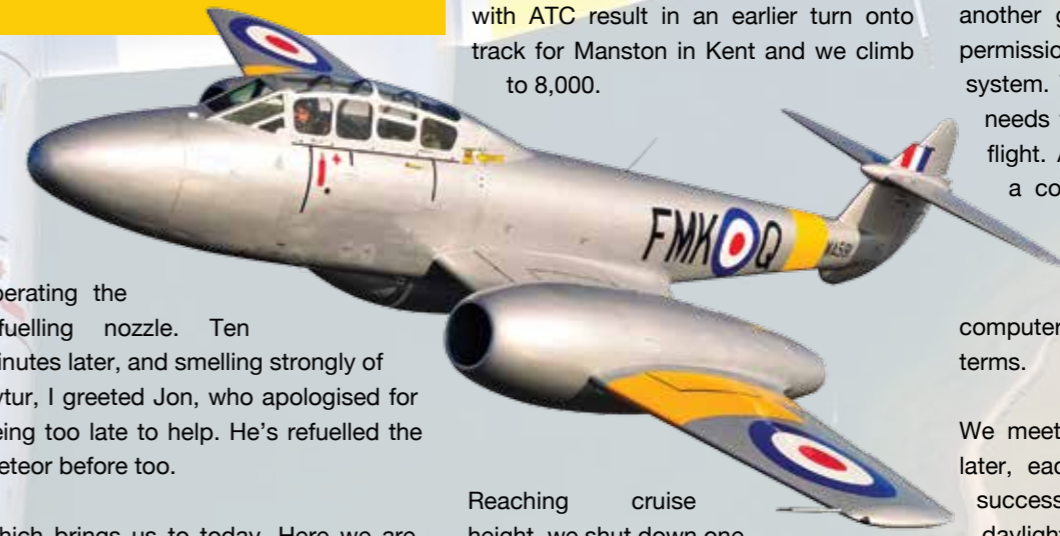
with commendable zeal and it's easy to exceed the 150 knot limitation speed before the gear is safely tucked away. As a result the climb angle is amazingly steep, keeping the old girl's speed under control by giving her a steep hill to climb.



Source: Google Maps

Close, but no cigar. The weather gods have never been noticeably influenced by flight plans. On this occasion they taunted us by almost allowing us to see the end of sector three.

We've been given a straight-ahead climb to 5,000 feet, which would be fine if that wasn't taking us in almost exactly the wrong direction. When you're burning around fourteen gallons of paraffin a minute you don't want to be wasting too much of your 90 minutes' aviation on a brief tour of South Wales. Negotiations with ATC result in an earlier turn onto track for Manston in Kent and we climb to 8,000.



Reaching cruise height, we shut down one engine to conserve fuel. The Meteor's remarkably benign and cruises happily in this configuration at around 250 knots, with the asymmetric thrust easily trimmed out.

We route via Okehampton, turning to the north of Exeter to avoid the Dartmoor danger areas. Overhead Southampton we turn briefly south and descend to 4,500 to avoid Gatwick. As we turn inland we meet

cloud and descend again to 1500 just north of Hastings to maintain VFR. We're still at this height as we pass Folkestone; 20 miles left to run. The tyres chirrup on the runway at Manston just over an hour after departure; 275 nautical miles with a

maximum speed of 376 knots. First leg complete.

Time to refuel, except that the adapter on Manston's fuel bowser doesn't fit the T7's filler. Perfect. As Jon heads off to locate an alternative bowser connector from his old friends at the aeroclub I encounter another glitch. Somehow our overflight permissions haven't made it into the system. The rules say that a hard copy needs to be held in the aircraft during flight. A pattern of ones and zeros in a computer won't do. I muse that aviation hasn't moved all that far since the Meteor was built and go in search of a computer and printer that are on speaking terms.

We meet up three quarters of an hour later, each to report an equal lack of success. Time is ticking away and daylight becoming precious. We'll have to improvise. We fashion a workable fuel connection out of gaffer tape and succeed in getting the majority of the fuel we pay for into the aircraft. Then our printed permissions turn up from whatever digital dimension they've been inhabiting. The North Sea is calling.

There's always a moment of doubt as you cross the coastline and head out over the sea. "Automatic Rough" ●●●

is a well-known condition to which all aircraft engines are subject at this point. You look out at that unbroken greyness and wonder whether you'd die of cold before drowning if it all went wrong. There's 100 miles of rolling dampness between us and the Netherlands, so let's get on with it.

Queenie whines contentedly on and it's less than twenty minutes later that we pass the Dutch coast at 8,000 feet, with an 250 knots showing on the ASIs and 50 nautical

EasyJet passengers who press against the windows, smartphones held high, to get pictures of her gleaming in the afternoon sun outside one of the original 1950s hardened aircraft shelters.

Refuelling is slightly less moist this time and we're soon aloft again, heading for our next stop at Erfurt. At just 190 nautical miles this is the shortest leg of our journey and an ever-helpful ATC allows us to track directly through controlled airspace. The weather's still beautiful and all seems right

We consider our options: the wind's not that big a problem – Queenie's a weighty old bird, with plenty of inertia to cope with gusts. As for the thunderstorms, well, you can see a cu-nim from a long way off, so we decide against flying into one. We inform ATC that we'll continue as planned.

With only ten minutes to run we hand over to Erfurt approach and receive unwelcome news. They have a major thunderstorm right overhead, with associated strong winds and seriously impaired visibility.



Weeze Airport, Neiderrhein. This was RAF Laarbruch until 1999, and many of the Cold War buildings are still visible



The best possible view of Jon Corley. The runway at Weeze is just visible to his left

miles to run to our next fuel stop at Weeze Flughafen, Niederrhein in Germany. Until 1999 this was RAF Laarbruch, one of Britain's advance Cold War bases, so the Meteor is a fitting visitor. We receive a warm welcome and the airport very kindly offers to waive handling charges. The T7 is due to display at Volkel, just over the Dutch border, in ten days' time, so we make plans to re-position her here on our return from Pardubice. Meanwhile she makes a fine show for the RyanAir and

with the world when our plans receive their first sharp nudge from reality. The gods have decided not to comply with the forecast given by Weeze, and the view ahead is darkening. A quick weather check tells us that conditions have suddenly started to deteriorate. We're just deciding that we can get down before it all goes nasty when Erfurt ATC informs us of thunderstorms ahead and strengthening wind, gusting to 35 knots. Not pretty.

One unbreakable rule of the old, bold pilot axiom is that you don't mess with thunderstorms. The inside of a cumulonimbus contains a beast with forces at its disposal to make a nuclear bomb look like a squib. An IFR approach is out of the question; we have to divert. Fuel has now become a pressing issue.

Our planned alternative is Leipzig, 40-50 miles to the north-east, but ATC informs us that the storm line extends all the way there. We dismiss Dresden as being too far east, and offering no available alternative should the weather turn against us there too. We consider turning back to Paderborn. My fingers are hammering the GPS into submission as I calculate fuel burn. It's possible. Just.

The weather ahead is beginning to look really nasty now. The visibility at Erfurt is down to 2,000 metres and this is all starting to look serious. As we start a right-hand turn to avoid the weather we have to ensure we don't infringe a parachute dropping zone - though any canopies in the air today are unlikely to reach the ground in this life. Corley spots the airfield in the middle of this zone and points forward.



Operating a Meteor would be considerably cheaper if more of the fuel could be persuaded to flow uphill into the belly tank.

"Massive runway there!"

"You think we can get in?"

"It's either that or all the way back to Paderborn on reserve fuel. I'd rather be on the ground before this weather gets any worse."

A call to ATC tells us that we're approaching Eisenach-Kindel, a GA airfield. We inform them of our intentions and they give us the relevant radio frequency.



The bleak outlook at Eisenach-Kindel was hugely outweighed by the warmth of the welcome they gave us



Helpful aero club member offers not, as it turns out, an alien artefact from Roswell, but a home-made NATO adapter.

I click the press-to-talk switch. "Eisenach this a Meteor fast jet G-BWMF in your overhead. Request landing instructions."

Everything should be OK now and I wait for the reassuring tones of Eisenach tower. At this point there are certain words you don't want to hear. We hear one of them straight away. Twice.

At this point there are certain words you don't want to hear...

"Nein! Nein! Ze airfield is closed! We have big thunderstorm!"

By now the fuel gauges are insistently pointing out that our choices are limited to a landing on this long, welcoming runway or a far trickier one in some large pine trees.

"Eisenach, Meteor G-BWMF we are landing. Confirm you have Jet A1 available."

"We have fuel, but also have big thunderstorm. No land! Is not possible!"

"Negative, Eisenach we are low on fuel and must land." I click back to intercom. "They have fuel Jon, we going in?"

There's no reply. Corley is busy turning downwind, staring out to the side to keep the airfield in view and plan his circuit. I take over calling the speeds to ease his workload and let him concentrate on looking out. We turn finals and in the distance we can see fields disappearing completely as we fly towards a near-solid wall of water.

Corley pulls off one of his signature feather-touch landings; the man has no nerves detectable to human science. The weather system reaches us as we taxi off the runway and the world disappears. We come to a halt in the sort of visibility that finished off the Titanic.

We sit in the aircraft for thirty minutes; stepping outside in this would necessitate inflating the lifejackets. The atmosphere in the cockpit is unusually subdued.

A momentary slackening in the downpour allows the airport manager to venture out to greet us. He offers us a very warm welcome, plenty of hot coffee and the news that we've just landed at what used to be a forward Russian base in the Cold War. We're the first Allied military aircraft to land here!

It's clear that we're not going any further tonight so our kind host delivers us to a snug local hotel with soft baths and hot beds. Or something like that – we're very tired by now.

A call to Dan Griffith updates him on our situation. The forecast's looking grimmer and he starts to reflect on his plan to fly

out to Pardubice in a single-engined Mooney.

Saturday dawns with no easing in the weather. We head for the airfield with more hope than confidence and set about refuelling the Meatbox, enthusiastically assisted by the local microlight club. Once again there's a connector challenge, but this time its overcome by sheer positivity and friendliness. Given a quiet afternoon these guys could have fixed the Bismarck.

Hope flickers more strongly when a PA28 decides to brave the elements and takes off into the swirling cloud. Hope flickers out five minutes later when it returns, its pilot probably formulating an "I learned about flying from that" article in his head.

The met reports aren't encouraging and we begin to consider leaving Queenie here and flying back to the UK. We call Pardubice to deliver the news: we're just one sector away, but unlikely to make it to the airshow. Their disappointment is hard to bear and we decide to wait another 24 hours.

Sunday dawns with a slightly improved aspect. The cloud is hiding the mountain tops, but the valleys are clear. With Pardubice now an impossibility we have a fighting chance of getting back to Weeze, meaning that we'll be heading towards lower coastal ground, so we come to a decision. Let's go!

Unfortunately Queenie has other ideas. The starboard engine fires up easily, but no encouragement within our powers can persuade its twin to wake up. We disturb Pat White, ●●●



Safely back at Weeze, Queenie looks at home outside one of the Cold War era hardened aircraft shelters Trevor Bailey

our jet engineer, from his Sunday morning slumbers to ask his advice.

“Have you been starting it on internal batteries?”

We confess, with due diffidence that this is the case.

Leaving him to his well-earned rest we turn to the task of finding a ground power unit. The flying club are as helpful as they were yesterday, but their briefcase-sized accumulator is unlikely to provide the “oomph” to twirl a couple of vintage Derwents. Surely we aren’t about to be defeated at the final hurdle?

The tower are as helpful as ever and take us to a nearby building, sliding open the door to reveal a gigantic, military-issue Russian power unit. This thing could have powered Munich, let alone one elderly jet aircraft. They fire it up to check all’s well before hitching it to the tractor and towing it out to our Meteor.

The electric shock therapy wakes the left engine and we’re soon running, with all temperatures and pressures in the green. Time to go.

The flight back to Weeze is pleasantly uneventful, and we discuss the possibility of dropping Queenie into Volkel, ready for next weekend’s air show. Of course we’ve forgotten that modern military organisations don’t work at weekends, war being a five days a week occupation, so the airfield is closed. Weeze airport proves as cheerful and helpful as ever and readily offers a spot on the apron. We can return and collect the T7 next week. There’s even a conveniently timed RyanAir flight back to the UK available.

As we near our destination we receive a request from Approach Control at Weeze. Would we slow up please, as we’re catching up with the RyanAir 737 ahead of us. As Jon throttles back we catch a glimpse of it, ahead and above us. He points up through the canopy,

“I don’t want to worry you Trev, but I think that’s our flight.”

It is, indeed, our flight, so we land and taxi with some expediency and jump out, leaving some of our bags in the plane, and run for the handling agent’s van with Queenie’s engines still gently ticking behind us.

We rush into the ticket hall in sweaty flight suits to negotiate the purchase of our tickets. By the time we reach the departure gate we’re both gasping like beached fish. Nope, sorry, flight closed. Don’t worry though, it’s only eight hours until the next one.

As we sit, seething, in the lounge, we keep glancing out to where our gracious Queenie sits relaxing in the sun that’s now emerged to taunt us. There is another way to get home. So tempting...

The saga continues in the next issue of Meteor, when Trevor returns to Volkel and goes adventuring in a Rapide.

We’re working harder than ever to put members into the dream seats. So it was a real pleasure for us to be able to call Gold Member Richard Gotch and ask if he was free to join us as volunteer aircrew to fly the Meteor T7 to Fairford. He told *The Meteor* about a lifetime experience.

First Impressions

The Meteor’s a remarkably clean design so, despite her advanced years, WA591 looks very modern as you approach her. The silver finish gives a definite air of the space age. So the cockpit comes as something of a surprise; it’s from the era before jets, which is probably more a comment on just how advanced this propulsion system was for the time. It’s too easy to forget that this is a 1940s design.

Strapping in I was struck by how comfortable the “office” is. Time to look around and breathe in some history. It did tingle all the senses, but the smell wasn’t what I was expecting. Instead of the warm, heritage smell of oil and leather, it had the fresh, contemporary aroma of a piece of well-maintained engineering.

Start Engines!

Jon Corley saw me safely strapped in place and then climbed into the front cockpit. An intercom and radio check and it’s time to start the engines.

I had been expecting to be shaken and blasted with noise, but it was surprisingly quiet and completely smooth

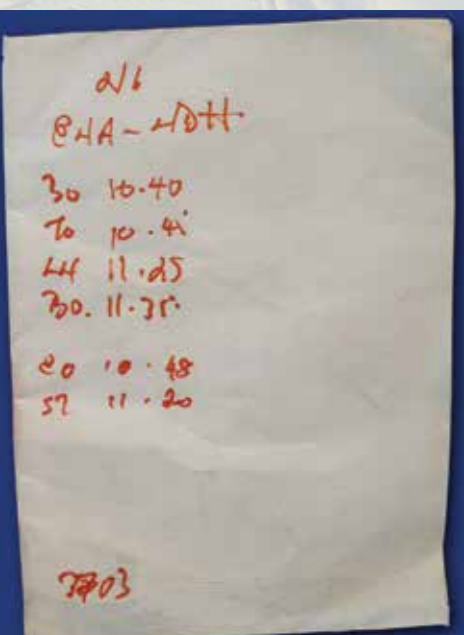
I had been expecting to be shaken and blasted with noise, but it was surprisingly quiet and completely smooth, with none of the vibration you experience from a piston aircraft of this vintage. Acceleration felt modest, but that may be because it was so undramatic. It felt as safe – probably safer – than a modern light aircraft and the pilot was excellent, very reassuring and didn’t do anything too spectacular.

The Meteor has such an important place in the history of aviation that it was a real privilege to fly in one of the few remaining airworthy examples. The technology remains extremely impressive, a considerable testament to the British engineering innovators who developed the engines and the aircraft. It was quite a surprise to look into the air intake and instead of compressor blades, see an assembly of static subsystems.

I’m delighted to have been able to help fund the preservation of this iconic aircraft and to have been offered this wonderful opportunity to experience this remarkable example of British engineering.



GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY



This scrap of paper, recording key events in the sector from Eisenach to Weeze, is now one of my treasured souvenirs

“Well that’s your problem. You’ve got no juice. Find a GPU and it’ll start OK. You do know that Europe’s an hour ahead of the UK don’t you?”