

The Best Little Airport in the U.K.



A Golfing Surprise: The Best Little Airport in the U.K.

By Mike Jones

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It may have been mentioned once or twice that I have the great blessing of being married to a Scottish lass. Aye, laddy, she's a bit stubborn and a wee bit argumentative. She also has an inordinate fondness for high-heel shoes and forlorn puppies. But she's wicked smart, a determined golfer, and undeniably cute, so it's a tradeoff I've been willing to make. We've been going for 43 years now, with no gunplay. We must be doing something right.

But every bride comes with The Family (onerous drum-roll, please). Families must be visited from time to time, no matter the inconvenience, distance, expense, or the intrusion into the Stanley Cup finals. It was time for a visit; we hadn't been "across the pond" since before COVID.

But Annie's family tree has sprouted with the years. What had started as just a sturdy seedling with four sisters has exploded into an orchard of in-laws, nieces, nephews, cousins, and significant others. Before you could say "Bob's your uncle" we were reintroducing ourselves to teenagers who were surprised to find two geezers exuberantly loitering in mum's kitchen.

Can you see the storm clouds?

About five days into this expedition, I needed some air; too much family. Amazingly, Annie did, too. A quick bit of Googling showed a golf course just two miles from our hotel — a little muni course in the town of Glenrothes, in the Kingdom of Fife.¹ Perfect. We wandered over and introduced ourselves. The pro shop was tickled to meet some Americans quickly assembled a motley bag of clubs. With fog on the heather but bright skies in our hearts, we struck out. To my amazement, we struck gold.

Picture the scene. It's the tenth hole, maybe the eleventh. We've been walking for hours. The ill-fitting clubs are making the game doubly-hard. The course is brilliantly lush but soaked from the Spring rains. The grass is impossibly deep because the course is too wet to be mowed. Lacking proper water-proof golf shoes, our sneakers and socks are soaked. I've got a blister on my heel. Annie is thinking a glass of white wine would be better than the back nine. We crest a knoll and — *sacre bleu!* — a Piper trundles by, a few hundred feet over our heads. Peering through the mist, Brigadoon like, we dimly spy a runway in the valley below. For one of us, at least, the day brightens.

Later that day, blister bandaged and Google Maps working overtime, I dragged Annie back to that airport. I was surprised and delighted to discover the Fife Airport is a charming facility, well-equipped and under new management. But before we explore the airport, it is useful to explore the status of general aviation in the U.K.

¹ Fife is a very special place. It is the section of Scotland north of Edinburgh but south of Inverness, on the eastern edge of the British isle. In Fife you will find St. Andrews, the center of the golfing universe, as well as St. Andrews University, the third oldest in the English-speaking world. Fife is ancient beyond all knowledge. It was an important stronghold of Pictish kings in Roman times. Just a dozen miles from Glenrothes is the hill-fort of Clatchard Craig, which has been documented as an important Pictish stronghold as far back as the sixth century. For centuries it has been called "The Kingdom of Fife" (or "Fib" or "Fif" depending upon your typography) and locals claim it was the last bastion of independence before being merged into the Scottish realm. You should check it out.



The Fife Airport is visible from the 11th tee of the Glenrothes municipal golf course in the Kingdom of Fife. As Jonesy and Annie played their round they repeatedly stopped to watch the air traffic.

Similar But Different

My friend Ian Seager has been running the popular British aviation magazine, *Flyer*, for more than 30 years. Many people consider *Flyer* the leading aviation magazine in Europe. *Flyer* serves a big market, too: there are 9,000 planes in the U.K., flown by 28,000 private pilots, 10,000 glider pilots and 19,000 commercial (termed “professional”) pilots, for a total of something around 60,000 pilots in a country not much bigger than New England.

Seager’s an experienced flyer himself, having (among other accomplishments) flown his Cessna 182 to Oshkosh in 2012. “I thought the worst part would be flying over the ocean,” he reminisced with me, “but there

are long stretches of Canada which are nothing but forests. If you lost an engine, nobody would ever find you.”

Flying in Europe, Seager related, is both better and worse than flying in the U.S., although he feels most Americans would feel the more comfortable flying in the U.K. The big difference, and the most exciting one, Seager noted, is not the differences in the flying but in the destinations.

“In the U.S., the aviation infrastructure is perfect. But when you land, you’re still in America,” he said. “In the U.K., we fly for an hour and we’re in France. Just for lunch. Another hour you’re in Germany. You’re in very different cultures, different languages, and different historical richness. There’s an intense variety in a relatively small geography.”



Captain Jim Watt ran a busy Scottish flight school for more than two decades, and now his “retirement job” is running the Fife Airport and flying his cherish Cessna Birddog spotter plane.

I can personally vouch for the differences —the accents and slightly different terminology used by the local pilots and controllers might cause problems for an unwary American pilot. It definitely becomes more challenging as one goes farther east into the rest of Europe.

There also are procedural differences in the U.K., so some orientation training would be required because sometimes the rules are weirdly complex, almost unnecessarily so. “It’s as if we found that somebody already had invented the wheel, but then we decided to make a new, better, rounder one,” Seager laughed.



One of the featured airplanes at Fife is this spectacular Cessna 182 on floats. Watts uses it for site-seeing rides, sunset romances, and dropping off the participants for lake-side picnics. Scotland is littered with lakes and reservoirs, and they all are accessible from this unique airplane.

“One example of an unnecessary difference is that the U.K. has different kinds of flight following, compared to the U.S.,” Seager explained. “There’s basic flight following, where they acknowledge you’re in the air; then there’s radar traffic flight following, where they point out traffic threats if they have the time, and then there’s procedural flight following where they take responsibility for separation.”

The airspace designations will give U.S. pilots more gray hair. “Class A airspace in the U.K. begins at different altitudes and includes a variety of transition routes not found in the U.S.,” Seager explained. “In fact, Class A airspace in the U.K. can begin as low as 2,500 feet. On the other hand, you can fly in IMC without talking to air traffic control, as long as you remain out of controlled airspace.”

What? Flying in IMC without radar separation? Are these people nuts?

The aviation infrastructure is very different, as well. Almost every airport in the U.K. is a private, for-profit business. Since there is no government support, the airport has to find a way to be profitable, just to keep the lights on. This introduces a wacky variety of fees and a lack of operational consistency.

“For example, many airports have a ‘prior permission required’ (PPR) rule before operating from that airstrip,” Seager reported. “It’s a mad, stupid requirement, but there it is. Some airports require you to call them in advance, or text them, or email them, or go on their web site. There is no standard process to get a PPR.”

“Then there are navigational fees, landing fees, ramp fees, parking fees, security fees, and on and on,” he explained. Landing fees are typically \$12-24 *per landing*, even for training flights. Biggin Hill, just outside London, is one of the worst with a landing fee of \$90 for a typical G.A. airplane. Bristol is the airport closest to Seager’s home which offers night operations. “To land at Bristol one evening will cost \$400,” he said with a sigh.

Seager also notes that most airports have an opening hour and a closing time, and the airport simply isn’t available outside of those hours.

“We have this concept of a ‘licensed airfield,’ he told me. “You can only do flight training at licensed fields. If a field requests, it can be inspected and if it

has the right safety features it can be licensed, which means it is available for flight training. But once it's past the closing time, the airport is no longer licensed, so you can't use it for training. As a consequence, there is very little night flying."

One big issue is the cost of fuel: avgas is \$12-\$20 a gallon, which forces many weekend flyers into smaller planes. The EU also is considering a phase-out of leaded avgas in 2025 which will ground thousands of fully-capable aircraft. "I know what will happen to my Cessna 182," Seager said. "It'll be put in a crate and sold to somebody in America."

As for the Fife Airport, Seager knows it well. "Our magazine voted the Fife Airport the best general aviation airport in the UK in 1998. No hassles, a friendly voice on the radio, and affordable services." The magazine no longer operates that contest, but they are considering re-introducing it. If they do, the newly reconstituted Fife Airport will be a strong contender again.

Fife Airport

Today, Fife Airport is run by Jim and Kate Watt. Jim's been flying since the 1970s and has accumulated about 5,000 hours in the left seat.

"My first taste of taste of flying was in the Royal Navy, flying helicopters," Watt recalls. "I got my private license in 1988 and then quickly collected my commercial license, a float plane rating, instrument, taildragger, and became a flight instructor."

About twenty years ago the Watts founded a flight school at Dundee, a bigger airport twenty miles away. It turned into a powerhouse of flight training. At its peak, they had 20 aircraft and 25 instructors, and contracts to train pilots for regional airlines. They also had a contract with the Royal Air Force to train all the RAF pilot cadets, averaging about 180 pilots a year. The Watts sold the

business two years ago and moved over to their “retirement business” running the Fife Airport.



“I instruct in the morning,” he told me with a big grin, “and fly for fun in the afternoon.” These days he’s mostly flying a 1958 Cessna Birddog and a 1982 Cessna 182 floatplane. The flight school has two TECNAMS and that Piper Warrior which floated over our heads when we were on the golf course.

The Fife Airport has a concrete runway about a half-mile long, gently sloping downhill from the west to the east. The

(Above) Chef Wrocek Kwasniewska and his wife Anita run the airport’s café. They have just moved to Fife from their native Poland and are thrilled to be introducing their customers to fresh-baked food that’s never seen a non-microwave.

(Right) I chatted with a group of diners who, somewhat amazingly, were from Montana. They were thrilled with their lunches and praised the food highly.



airport is surrounded by farms, a derelict palace, warehouses filled with quietly aging whiskey, and the aforementioned golf course. At the west end of the field are two corporate hangars occupied by Skyhook Helicopters and a Skydive St Andrews. At the east end of the field is the small terminal building, two more hangars housing 25 private aircraft plus the flight school aircraft, a red-and-white high visibility control tower, and a marvelous restaurant. One hangar is occupied by Aircraft Engineering, a busy aircraft maintenance operation which saw how well the Watts were doing and relocated seventy miles from the high-rent district of Prestwick Airport to more affordable and affable digs at Fife.

But things have not always been so harmonious at the airport. Despite being named “the best G.A. airport in the U.K.” in 1998, Fife slogged through a variety of owners and managers in the past few decades, most of who



Scotland on a sunny day is a magical place, and when you add fresh-baked breads and airplanes it's practically perfect. Here, my Scottish wife and our niece share tea and sweets.

struggled to make ends meet. The restaurant went downhill and finally closed about three years ago. Non-aeronautical businesses materialized on the field, degrading the airport's focus but helping to keep the lights on. All of that is now being reversed, slowly but steadily.

“This airport is a great asset to the community,” Watts said. “For example, now the refurbishment [of the restaurant] is complete. We aim to use the café

as a welcoming home for all aviators, including the Flying Club, the skydrivers, and all the aircraft owners hangered at Fife.”

The Watts and their airport will have to compete against all the other airports in Scotland to attract flyers. Kate Watt is confident they will win this battle and has put together a program to make it happen.

“We are the most GA friendly airport in the U.K.,” she told me proudly. “It’s run by pilots for pilots. The café is second to none. The views on the airport are stunning. Our prices are among the cheapest in Scotland and the service is first class.”

Living the Dream

The Watts knew running a restaurant was not for them; they’re airplane people, and the café needed an experienced restaurant operator. To find an operator for (a) an out-of-the-way restaurant (b) with a bad reputation (c) in a semi-rural community was going to be tough. But for Chef Wvocek Kwasniewska and his wife Anita, it was the perfect fit. “This is my passion, for baking, and my husband’s passion is for cooking,” Anita told me.

“I be learning [to cook] in Poland from 5-star hotel-restaurant there,” Chef Wvocek related his background, with his heavy Polish accent. “I was sous chef, head chef, cook, everything from scratch. I moved here three months ago, because I have family here.”

“We knew [the café] had been closed, and saw the sign on the window that said, ‘Restaurant for rent,’ so we just poked in here,” Chef Wvocek recalled. “We spoke to the owner [the Watts] and I said, ok, that’s it, this is the place. My Anita loves this place. It was Anita’s dream to own a pastry restaurant. So we make a deal.”

The café is bright and welcoming. Huge windows overlook the runway. The furniture is new and comfortable, and a large cabinet showcases Anita’s cakes

and cookies. Sun-drenched picnic tables make plane-spotting easy. I spoke with one waiter (I apologize for not catching his name) who had worked at the same restaurant under the previous regime. He reported that despite the wet spring the new café is busier after just three months than the old restaurant had ever been. Chef Wvocek modestly demurred, but is pleased with their progress.

The menu is abbreviated but all the ingredients are fresh. I ordered a simple sandwich and Annie tried the fish-and-chips; both were simple and delicious. As hundred-dollar hamburgers go, I predict the Skyview Café is going to be a huge success.

“To be honest with you, during the week we are very busy, but not as much as we’re busy on the weekend. People come here for the fresh food, which is made from scratch, that’s the thing that attracts the people; it’s not a



Michael Bisset, Christopher Bisset, Kate Watt, Jim Watt, and the author after the boys got their rides in the Birddog.

McDonald's, it's not all frozen. I know in this country, Scotland people cook from the microwave, even in restaurants. But we're not doing that. It's a dream come true."

Family Ties

I imposed upon Watt's good nature to give two of my teenage nephews a ride in his Cessna Birddog. These kids are experienced flyers (everybody in Scotland travels, because winter lingers for eleven grey and soggy months) but never in a general aviation airplane, especially one with a pedigree like this Birddog.

Watt's Birddog is a Cessna L-2 made in 1958. He's owned it for twelve years. The plane has a bit of history: designed for the Korean War, this particular machine flew in Vietnam. It then served the French army for 20 years, until it was shot down in Algeria. "It was retrieved and restored by a friend in Northern Ireland," Watts explained, "and today it is equipped almost exactly as it was in Vietnam."

The plane has a 213 hp normally-aspirated Continental engine and a fixed prop. It has "lots of power for the weight of the plane" and none of the complex systems (like a constant-speed prop or fuel injection) which could be maintenance hassles out in the field.

Days later, my niece tells me her sons were "gobsmacked" by their flights, showing photos to their friends and explaining their adventure. But at the time, it seemed less exhilarating. Since the Birddog is a two-seat aircraft, each lad received a private flight. As I watched from the café, the plane lifted off in two or three hundred feet from a parallel grass runway. Once they were above the trees, Watts showed the boys what a "real" airplane could do: standing on one wing, checking out the sheep in the field, scooting over a dilapidated palace. Thirty minutes later, Watt is back on the ground and the other nephew climbs into the backseat for a similar rollercoaster ride.

I breathlessly wait for their return, snapping photos as they climbed out of the cockpit. “How was it?” I ask. “What did you see? What do you think?”

The two teenagers look at me, cellphones in their hands. “It was okay.”

See what I mean about family?



Fish and chips, Scottish style, at the Skyview Café.

About the Author

Dr. Mike Jones is a 4,000-hour general aviation pilot, an entrepreneur, and an expert in airport governance. He has served on his local airport authority for the better part of a decade, and has now embarked on his fourth career helping to save endangered airports. He's working with small G.A. airports across the country, helping them to get grants, protect them from avaricious developers and reverse the damage caused by ineffectual politicians.



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