

AN AWFULLY BIG ADVENTURE

Every pilot's dream aeroplane, the Spitfire has always been as exclusive as it is beautiful. But now an English flight school is turning dreams into reality

Words Alan Harper Photos Andy Annable & Alan Harper





An instructor shows student pilots over the £1.7m Boulton Paul Spitfire. Below: owner Steve Brooks.

Goodwood is the story J.M. Barrie might have written if he'd been a bit more of a gearhead. An English country estate run by a titled family, it is the ultimate Never Never Land for boys who never grew up. The annual Festival of Speed and the Goodwood Revival have passed into motor sport legend as the pre-eminent events of their kind, bringing together fast cars of all eras to race around a track which is essentially the perimeter road of a wartime airfield.

Unlike Silverstone, however, the airfield is still there, still paved with nothing but well-drained grass, and still populated by fighter aircraft from the 1940s.

"I thought I had died and gone to heaven," said one visitor, in wonder. "A pretty girl asked if I wanted a coffee, told me to go through into the hangar, and there I was,

among all these beautiful aeroplanes, with the grass airstrip beyond. I just stood there."

Among the beautiful aeroplanes which can now be seen at Goodwood are the Boulton Paul Spitfire, bought by Steve Brooks in 2009 at a Bonhams auction. An immaculate and rare two-seater conversion of the iconic wartime fighter, it forms the backbone, and principal draw, of his Boulton Paul Flight Academy. Newly restored and ready to fly, the aircraft cost him £1.7 million.

"The bidding went a little higher than I was expecting," admitted Brooks, 52, who has held a private pilot's licence for 20 years. "But the hammer came down, and it was mine. Then the auctioneer asked if it was going to stay in the country, and if it was going to fly." As an accomplished and adventurous part-time aviator – he has flown a helicopter to the North Pole, and his honeymoon was a three-month helicopter trip from Alaska to Chile – Brooks' answer to both questions was yes, whereupon the auction room erupted with cheering and applause. "It was very emotional – only then did the magnitude of what I had done start to dawn on me," the Englishman remembered. "I thought I had just bought an old aeroplane, but it's a piece of British history. I realised I had to think of a way to keep this spirit alive."

To own a Spitfire is to join a pretty exclusive club – fewer than 50 exist worldwide in flying condition – but the truly privileged few are the men and women who fly them. "The Spitfire world is very exclusive," said Brooks, who with his brother runs a commercial property company based in London and Hereford. "There are top pilots who'd love to fly one, but can't. We are trying to change all that."

The difficulty has always been one of regulation. As an ex-military aircraft, to the world's civilian aviation authorities even a pristine Spitfire belongs in the same legal category as a home-built microlight – aircraft which



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aren't even allowed to fly over built-up areas, let alone take paying passengers. The only way into a Spitfire's cockpit was by personal invitation from its owner. The solution, Brooks realised, was to do something no Spitfire owner had yet dared to consider: set up a flying school, with his rare and valuable fighter as the principal training aid. “The legalities took a few years,” he said, “but we're now a fully approved training establishment, where you can learn to fly a Spitfire.”

Thankfully, taking to the skies in this iconic and all but irreplaceable aeroplane is not simply a matter of rolling up in your Rolls-Royce, chequebook at the ready. This academy is very much a post-graduate establishment. It has its own aeroplanes, and charters additional machines when necessary. Its faculty includes pilots, test pilots and instructors from civil airlines, the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force, who come down to Goodwood to teach in their spare time. “These guys have incredible knowledge,” said Brooks. “They've inspired us like the Spitfire has inspired us – and they're great to be around. There's not an ounce of ego between them.”

So in order to become a pilot at the Boulton Flight Academy, you already have to be one. The courses are costly and time-intensive, and the pre-entry qualifications are rigorous. The most popular is the short, two-day Introduction Course, which costs just £5,000. You need



Refuelling by Range Rover – only at Goodwood.



One day – surgeon and student pilot Michael Thick tries the front cockpit for size. Below: ready for action. Bottom: happy customer Allen Knight.



at least a Private Pilot's Licence to apply for a place – but such is the lure of half-an-hour's instruction in a two-seat Spitfire that there is no shortage of applicants.

Designed in the mid-1930s and in the front line with Britain's Royal Air Force just in time for WW2, the Supermarine Spitfire was as loved by the men who flew it into action as it was feared by its opponents. Willy Hackett, a test pilot and serving RAF officer who displays and instructs on historic aircraft in his spare time, takes a professional's view of the elegant thoroughbred parked demurely on the apron outside the Boulton hangar: “It is a lovely aeroplane, and every pilot's dream to fly, but after flying operationally you can relate to the Spitfire's wartime role: its sole design purpose was to get eight guns 200 yards behind the enemy,” he said. As a veteran of several conflicts Hackett never forgets that all the Spitfire's fabled flying qualities, power and manoeuvrability were simply intended to ensure its effectiveness as a weapon.

And yet in the popular imagination, the Spitfire legend has long outstripped its wartime career. Today it is only British people of a certain age who still regard it as a



Willy Hackett explains the finer points of the Spitfire cockpit.

symbol of victory. For every other enthusiast entranced by its looks, by its elegance in the air and by the sublimely authoritative roar of its Merlin engine, it has come to symbolise much more – something that to a sufficiently romantic imagination can transcend grim reality and translate this venomous fighter aircraft into something blameless and beautiful – an indeterminate pinnacle of engineering excellence, a masterpiece of industrial design, an example without peer of pure aeronautical sex appeal.

As for those lucky enough to fly the Spitfire, mere words seldom seem up to the task of describing the experience. “It is very responsive – very little control movement is needed. It's almost as if you have to fly it elegantly to get the best out of it,” said Cliff Spink, a display pilot and retired RAF air marshal who instructs at Boulton. “The Spitfire hasn't changed since the war – it was a delight then, and it's as good as it ever was. Flying it is a technique – once you've mastered that, it will look after you.”

It is hard to think of any other machine that generates such feeling. The emotion Steve Brooks sensed in the



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auction room produced a powerful echo during the Academy’s first course, when one 45-year-old student was moved to tears by the experience of his first flight in the Spitfire. “We just left him in the cockpit for a while. He was quite overcome – he said it was something he had dreamed of doing since he was a small boy, but never, ever thought he would,” Brooks remembered.

“It is not just British pilots who want to fly a Spitfire,” explained Alex Gomer on a recent course at Goodwood. “It is all pilots.” Along with his three fellow aspirants, the 41-year-old Parisian financier was half-way through the



A euphoric Alex Gomer after his first Spitfire flight. Above: the Spitfire displays its power and elegance.

school’s two-day Introduction Course, which takes students by stages through the traditional RAF training regime of the 1930s and 40s. After an initial classroom session comes a hands-on lesson in the ubiquitous Tiger Moth biplane, with its open cockpits, plywood construction and doped wings – or, if preferred, in the more advanced, but equally diminutive, metal Chipmunk monoplane. Day two sees further classroom preparation followed by instruction in the pugnacious, American-built Harvard, with its bellowing radial engine, once described as the most efficient way yet devised of turning gasoline into noise.

The Spitfire comes after lunch. Long awaited, nervously anticipated, it never disappoints. “The thrill of a lifetime,” pronounced management consultant Allen Knight, 52, who was given the course as a Christmas present from his wife. For fellow student Michael Thick, 62, a London surgeon, it was everything he had hoped for. “Tremendous,” he said. “It handles beautifully – like a glider, almost. You think it, and it happens. And the *noise...*”

David Alston, a furniture manufacturer – another beneficiary of an understanding wife, who gave him the course for his 50th birthday – was succinct: “Amazing. Quite amazing. What else do you expect me to say?” Meanwhile, standing on the grass after fulfilling his own dream of flying a Spitfire, Alex Gomer looked slightly stunned. “There are no words,” he said simply.

“We must be careful what we wish for, because we might just get it,” said Michael Thick, once the initial euphoria of his own flight had begun to subside. “Now I need a new ambition.” There was only one thing that could be, and he already seemed decided – to qualify to fly the Spitfire solo.

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