



Brawn and brains: the XT

With the UK type-approval of Airborne's top-of-the-range XT 912, British pilots can finally sample the wares of one of the world's best-known trike makers. Geoff Hall assesses this Australian newcomer



TEST REPORT

I don't have particularly high expectations when making the annual pilgrimage to Popham, especially when it comes to seeing something new in the flexwing division. Sure, there will be the latest clutch of slick, expensive-looking additions to the ever-burgeoning fixed-wing fleet, and all the usual suspects of the microlight fraternity, but nothing I don't expect to see.

Still, Popham traditionally represents the 'official' start to the flying season. Although it's a five-mile round-trip hike to the pub, and although I may one day be found frozen to death in my tent, I keep coming back. Hell, it can only get better!

But last year there was something I didn't expect to see. Not only a new flexwing, but a new company (new in the UK, at least) to boot. Clever old Airborne, they'd managed to keep their entry into the British microlight market a complete surprise. You could see the bleary-eyed campers gathering round and squinting at this apparent apparition in the early

morning gloom and all uttering something along the lines of: 'Cor blimey, what's that then?' and 'who the hell is Airborne anyway?' There it was: a brand new trike sitting proudly on the company stand.

Surprise

I like this kind of surprise, and, judging by the queues forming alongside the demonstrator, so did all the other trikers.

The XT 912 was the talk of the show, and stole the thunder from the other flexwing boys.

I was a bit short of time on the Saturday as my flying partner had selfishly stolen the Quik and flown back to Kent on the Friday night (thereby escaping the most miserable evening of the year, sitting in a frozen marquee with one 60W bulb for light, warmth, and entertainment), so I didn't have time to partake in a freebie. I always feel a bit embarrassed queuing up anyway, as I tend to mentally rehearse what I'm going to say when the demo pilot asks one of those inevitable sales-orientated questions: 'Of course I'm looking for a new plane. I just need to fly

all of them for free first, sell mine for the same price I paid for it 10 years ago, win the lottery and get permission from mein Gruppenfuhrer. The order is as good as yours.' I'm never very convincing and they can tell straight away I'm lying through my teeth.

I did have a good look around the XT however, and was left with an impression of quality engineering, ruggedness, and size. This is one big aircraft – the tyres look like they've come off a Quad bike.

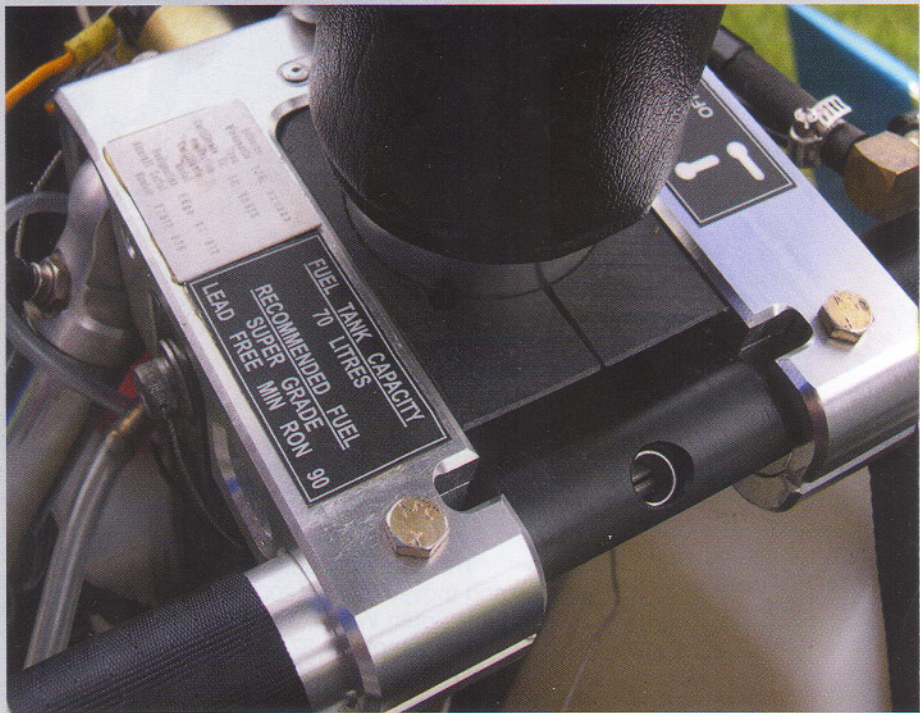
The next opportunity to conduct a flight test of the aircraft for the purposes of this article came up when Popham hove onto the horizon yet again. Simple: I'd wing up to the hallowed turf on Friday evening and have all day Saturday to fly and photograph the XT.

Paul, my long-suffering co-pilot, suggested however that we overnight at Bembridge, where they have a pub on the airfield. Can't argue with that. But come Saturday morning you couldn't see further than your front strut. We eventually escaped through a hole in the fog in mid-afternoon, and we were running out of time.

Graham Webster was busy showing off his new baby in AirBorne's impressive marquee. They had obviously gone to a lot of trouble as they had three trikes on show and one demonstrator. Proprietor Rob Hibberd was around too. I patiently waited while Graham fielded technical questions from an admiring punter. It's always interesting to watch and listen to these guys at work – it gives you a vibe as to whether or not they actually believe in the product, and as to the level of service you might expect to receive. So far so good.

Welcoming

Graham was immediately welcoming and it was nice to at last put a face to an email. I could tell straight off that he was genuinely enthusiastic about the XT.



I was surprised to learn that he only started flying eight years ago, when he was 50 years young (I'll leave the less numerically challenged to work out his current age for yourself). He then took over from Tim Guest as CFI at Shifnall Airfield, where he had been Tim's first student! Now he is running his own microlight company and is the sole agent for AirBorne UK – not a bad achievement in such a short time.

AirBorne Australia started with hang-gliders back in 1983, and flew its first trike in 1985. This was designed primarily for aero towing, but when a second seat was fitted demand for the machine soared. ▶

Above: The mast block assembly illustrates the quality of engineering evident through the aircraft

Main photos: Nothing unconventional about the design, but the XT is rugged and very well put together

