

XT in the frame, shown off at Spamfield
Below, a look into that tidy cockpit



do need to remember the maximum 45° pitch limitation, mind you. We backed off to 5000rpm and continue climbing at 55mph, with a healthy 800ft/min showing on the VSI.

We left the circuit and climbed to 2000ft to play with the controls.

Cruising at 60mph we were using around 3400rpm. The book says that at 75mph the typical fuel burn will be 12 l/h, which gives a range of 436 miles in still air. I'm always sceptical of manufacturers' test figures, but even if you are burning a bit more you clearly still have a hell of a range.

Winding off the trim we edged 72mph, a decent cruising speed, with the bar in a comfortable position and acceptable levels of wind buffet.

Winding the trim back on again makes you realise how wide the A-frame is, and that the trimmer knob

is just a bit more of a stretch to reach than it is on the Pegasus/Mainair machines. I'd also prefer a crank-handle.

At slow speed we were showing around 56mph (fly at that speed and you'll be up all day!). The trimmed speed range of around 15mph is very useful as it encompasses most of what the average pilot will want to do.

The stall

I'd like to make the stall sound interesting – 'We spun hopelessly out of control as the wind clawed the fabric from the wings and pinned us to our seats on the very edge of consciousness, with nothing left on the clock but the maker's name' – but I'm afraid I can't.

That suits me just fine. There is an inevitability about descriptions of the flying qualities of this new breed of wing. I always end up using the word 'mush' to describe the stall, because at level speed entry that's about all that happens. We mushed at about 40mph – your arms are so far out at that stage and exerting so

much pressure that you know you are doing something wrong. Height loss was negligible with a gentle recovery, say 50ft. It would be perhaps double that with a higher speed entry. To conclude, stalling in the XT is not going to frighten you unless you do something really stupid. (I'll leave the test pilots to explore flight outside the envelope.)

At full chat the aircraft was still trying to climb. With Paul pulling back on the training bars we attained the official maximum level speed of 92mph, but it's not comfortable flying at this speed for any length of time and your arms won't thank you for it. If you need to get somewhere quickly, 80mph is a much more sensible speed and requires far less heaving in of the bar. Putting the aircraft into a dive you have to be careful not to exceed the V_{ne} of 98mph. The XT will certainly go there.

Much as you'd expect, under banking the aircraft feels crisp and responsive, with opposite rolls no problem at all. Take your hands off in the turn and the wing just keeps going round at the same angle. At the maximum 60° of bank, pushing the bar out a little, she was steady as a rock. Paul tried the same from the back and had no trouble duplicating my manoeuvres, although obviously not with quite the same panache. We each took a few minutes to generally make patterns in the sky and we agreed that the XT really is most pleasant to fly.

Fully bombed-up, the minimum descent rate, untrimmed, is quoted at 770ft/min. We simulated an engine failure, trimmed for 58mph to achieve the best glide rate, and descended comfortably at around 600ft/min.

Deciding against landing in the rape field to test out the Tundra tyres (all that yellow would have been a dead giveaway), I booted the power and once again the exhilarating climb rate put a smile on my face.

With time getting on, it was time take our new toy back to Popham. I had visions of Graham peering anxiously into the darkening skies, like a squadron commander standing alone atop the



control tower and straining for a glimpse of the first returning Lancaster. More importantly, we also wanted to make the clubhouse barbecue before they ran out of beer.

The book recommends that you land without trim, approaching at 60–65mph, so I did just that. There's no special technique for landing. Being used to the Quik, I could have flared a bit more, but I needed to check out the suspension... The XT felt similar to the Blade 912, which any idiot could land (I speak as one of those idiots). It had no tendency to float, nor to imitate one of its bouncing marsupial cousins.

Back down to earth

So, overall impressions.

This is one big, solid, well-built, uncompromising machine. But then what did you expect? It hails from the land of Crocodile Dundee, Mad Max and Dennis Lillee, a land where every animal you meet will try to poison or eat you, or both. They've got the Great Barrier Reef, Great White Sharks, deserts the size of Europe, beaches the length of England, lorries the length of trains and a big red rock.

I've been to Australia a few times, and the Aussies are a fiercely proud nation. They have developed many indigenous industries and when it comes to transportation, things need to be built tough. In Australia, if your car breaks down you could die.

The XT is built to be capable of operating in the outback, not just from some Pommie grass strip fit to host Wimbledon. If you expected the rugged XT to be a little rough around the edges, though, it isn't.

Airborne is to be congratulated for its standards of engineering. Sure, its engineers could make a few improvements, but that's no different from any Mk1 version – witness the several modifications made to the Quik since it first appeared. Graham told me that the manufacturer had to spend \$500,000 getting the XT through Aussie certification alone, and the firm's development funds obviously aren't unlimited.

Where I think this machine will really come into its own is in the training role. The new French trikes aren't legal in the UK because they are kits (completely ridiculous, in my opinion, but that's

how it is), the Quik restricts the instructor's view from the back, and the Blade is getting a bit long in the tooth.

The XT, however, is a machine that is comfortable for two lardies (as demonstrated), won't need refuelling every time it lands, gets you into the circuit quickly, has a good speed range, and can take the punishment that a student pilot will dish out.

Students will enjoy flying the aircraft, and new pilots often buy what they learn on. Those that do will find they have at their disposal an aircraft with undoubted talents as a long-distance tourer. With that big tank, big cockpit, stable wing and decent turn of speed, it should eat up the miles.

The deal

But what about the price? At £26k this is the most expensive (or 'most highly priced', as Graham prefers to say) of the current four-stroke trikes. But when did that deter anyone? Hell, those fixed-wing boys are spending twice that on kits!

Witness, too, the number of Quiks at Popham this year. Remember how two years ago we were sucking air through our teeth and saying 'Yes, very nice, but who's going to part with over £23,000 for a trike?' How wrong we were. Shared between two buyers or bought on HP, a £26k aircraft can be a realistic proposition.

I also like the fact that the XT is delivered to you ready to fly, with a nice fresh permit and a full tank of petrol. Customer care and after-sales service are high on Airborne's list – other manufacturers take note. I asked Graham about repairs and spares, and as an XT owner you would need to go back to him; but if what I've experienced so far is anything to go by, I can only imagine that his service is helpful and efficient. All airframe spares must come direct from the factory, but with the efficiency of airfreight carriers these days that also shouldn't be a problem.

So there we are. Another supertrike has been born. Competition can only be good for the industry, and, more importantly, good for the pilot and prospective customer. If you're in the market for a trike, at the very least you owe it to yourself to get down to Shifnal and try out the excellent XT – or 'You Beauty!' as they like to say Down Under.



This page, top to bottom: support of Liverpool FC not compulsory; comfy seats and plenty of cockpit width; Skydat gives comprehensive info without excess weight or wiring

