

## Early History of the Wairoa Aero Club

An interest in aviation and an urge to learn to fly was started in Wairoa early in 1932. At this time the instructor for the Hawke's Bay and East Coast Aero Club based in Hastings arrived in Wairoa flying off the present grounds of the Wairoa Golf Club began giving joy ride flights to the Wairoa people for the first time. A small number of young men who had a flight on this occasion became very interested in learning to fly.

The two most prominent among these were Mr Jack Allen and Mr Arnold Beckett. Their keen interest was recognised by the instructor Mr Tiny White and the pleasures of being able to fly an aeroplane. The fundamental principles of flight and the methods of flying instruction were fully explained to these keen enthusiasts. These keen young men were soon joined by several other young men who had also a desire to learn the art of flying an aeroplane. Shortly after his visit to Wairoa Mr White resigned his position as instructor to the Club.

A new instructor Mr Gerry Gerrard was appointed in his place. Mr Gerrard was appointed while instructing with the Australian Air Force, he then resigned and came to Hastings to fill his new position. His keenness was soon evident in Hastings by his beginning of flying instruction in Gisborne. One of the aeroplanes from Hastings was sent up to and stationed in Gisborne. A resident of Gisborne Mr Harry Lett who held an instructor's licence was appointed a part time instructor there.

Towards the middle of 1932, seven of these young enthusiasts commenced flying instruction, several went to Hastings and the rest started flying in Gisborne. After the commencement of the flying, Mr Gerrard suggested that he was prepared to continue with the elementary part of flying off a suitable paddock in Wairoa. A suitable paddock was selected on Mr Norman Hill's property at Whakapau on 19 June 1932. Mr Gerrard flew up from Hastings and spent the day providing instruction for Wairoa's seven pupil pilots. The seven who were then receiving instruction were Mr Jack Allen, Mr Arnold Beckett, Mr Nigel Boyd, Mr Victor Lane, Mr Bert Prichard, Mr Len Coker, and Mr Tom Hall. A fortnight later on 8 July Mr Gerrard again flew to Wairoa and carried out the second day of instruction in Wairoa. At the end of this day some of the pupils had completed the part of instruction of straight and level flying, climbing and gliding, and medium turns.

They had now reached the stage of having to commence the instruction of take off and landing. This was not permitted other than off a licensed aerodrome of which Mr Hill's paddock did not permit. Some of the pupils decided to travel to Hastings and complete their training there under Mr Gerry Gerrard, and the remainder travelled to Gisborne to complete to a licence standard under Mr Harry Lett. A few of the pupils did not continue with the instruction to reach the A Licence standard but Mr Jack Allen, Mr Arnold Beckett and Mr Tom Hall continued flying for many years eventually building up many hundreds of hours of accident free flying.

Each of these three pilots at some period of their flying career owned their own aircraft. During this early period of flying in Wairoa, the then Wairoa Harbour Board saw the future need of an aerodrome for the town and the block of land on which the present airstrip is located was purchased. Some months after flying commenced the original Wairoa Aero Club was formed at a meeting held at the residence of the Late Mr D. H. Withers. A committee was elected and Mr D. H. Withers was appointed Secretary of the new Club.

One of the first actions of the newly formed Aero Club was to make an approach to the Wairoa Harbour Board to investigate the proposal of the development of the block of land purchased to at least of an airstrip if not to an aerodrome standard. After due consideration the Harbour Board saw the proposal worthy of investigation and negotiations were commenced with the Government of the day. In 1936 the then Minister of Public Works the Hon. R. Semple agreed to investigate the proposal. During the next three years the proposal appeared to be reaching a successful conclusion when the Second World War commenced and the proposal was dropped on this account.

The outbreak of War saw the termination of all private flying activities, with the cancellation of all flying licences and the purchase by the War Department of private aircraft, and established Aero Club facilities were taken over by the Airforce. Prior to the outbreak- of War Mr Jack Allen had purchased his own aircraft, a DeHaviland Gipsy Moth registered A.E.J. This he had to dispose of to the Government at the outbreak of War, he was given the option of repurchase after the War.

During the War years and after the completion of the Railway to Wairoa, the purpose of the Wairoa Harbour Board ceased to exist. The Board during this period was disbanded and became defunct. The control of the aerodrome block of land was transferred and vested under the control of the Wairoa County Council. After the cessation of the War and peace was restored, Aero Clubs then began to resume their activities and private flying and instruction began to revive. This allowed Mr Jack Allen to resume the option he held to repurchase the aeroplane he owned prior to the outbreak of the War.

During the latter part of 1946 or early 1947, the Wairoa Aero Club was reformed and a committee was elected with Mr Ted Thompson as president and Mr Cam Rose as secretary. The committee immediately began negotiations with the County Council who now controlled the aerodrome block of land, to consider resuming the proposition of development from where it left off at the outbreak of the War. The members of the County Council were then not very receptive to the proposal. The club committee then made a proposal to the County Council to allow them to construct a grass strip by voluntary effort of club members with the assistance of the County in the loaning of Motor Graders.

Permission was granted by the Council to the Club Committee to this proposal. The Club began to organise this work to be carried out during the summer of 1948 with the purpose of sowing the grass on the strip during the autumn of 1949. The response of the public of Wairoa was very good especially the owners of bulldozers, agricultural machinery and transport firms and especially voluntary labour to carry out this work on weekends. A list of donors in this work is printed in the brochure of the opening of the strip in November 1949 which I think should be printed.

The work was completed and the grass was sown as planned. The Club owes its grateful thanks to all members of the public and the then Club Committee for their great assistance to enable this proposal to be successfully completed.

The Committee then began supplying and making all the amenities that are required on and around an airstrip before a licence can be applied for. A Civil Aviation Licence was then applied for to be granted in the early part of November 1949, when the grass had gained a sufficient hold and the strip was dry enough to be heavily rolled.

The strip was inspected by Mr E. A. Gibson, the then Inspector of Civil Aviation Department and a Licence was granted for a limited schedule of light aircraft. On November 26th 1949 the strip was then officially opened by the Hon. P. J. O'Kane a member of the now defunct Legislative Council of New Zealand. The opening day was celebrated by the Committee by organising a Club Air Pageant and attended by aircraft

from other clubs. The Club was now in the position of having a licensed airstrip to commence full flying instruction in Wairoa. The Committee immediately completed negotiations with the Bawke's Bay and East Coast Aero Club to visit Wairoa on suitable weekends to give flying instruction and supervise flying generally. The Late Mr K. Parrish was the instructor from Bastings and was the first to carry out full flying training off our newly licensed strip. Mr Jack Allen immediately shifted his private aircraft to Wairoa from Gisborne to grace Wairoa with its first resident aeroplane.

Flying very soon became well established in Wairoa and in early 1950 Mr Bill Cookson, part time instructor with the Gisborne Aero Club was appointed instructor to the Wairoa Aero Club using an aircraft from the Gisborne Club. The Club was now progressing rapidly and the committee decided to purchase its own D.B.82 or better known as the Tiger Moth. The Club placed an order in England for two dismantled aircraft which arrived in New Zealand about the middle of 1952 and were assembled in Bastings and the Club aircraft was flown to Wairoa on 25 July 1952 by Mr W. Moloney the then Club President. After the appointment of Mr Bill Cookson as instructor, the number of pupils for flying instruction increased rapidly.

On 24 September 1950, Mr Cookson reached what could be a record sent four of the Club's pupils on their first solo flight. They were Mr Harry Howell later Club President, Mr Russell Howell his son who later obtained his commercial pilot's licence, and also his Instructor's Licence. Later Russell was appointed instructor to the local club in which he learned to fly.

The other two pilots on that occasion were Mr Arthur Alexander and Mr Nolan Pepper. Bill Cookson also commenced giving instruction to Wairoa Club's first lady pupil pilot being Mrs Jean Powdrell. Unfortunately the Club's first aircraft was short lived as it was completely written off in a crash at Westshore on the outskirts of Napier Airport in November 1952 after a life of only four months. The pilot and passenger were luckily not injured in the mishap. A replacement aircraft was purchased in April 1952 which served the club well until late 1957. During the early part of 1957 the club considered and decided to purchase a new Piper Cub cabin aircraft. This aircraft duly arrived and was assembled in Palmerston North and flown to Wairoa on its delivery flight by the Club Captain and accompanied by the Secretary. This was a very good step forward as it was a change from open cockpit aircraft to a comfortable cabin aircraft. Wairoa Aero Club is unique in that later two more of its locally trained pilots qualified for their instructors licences being Mr Lance Hagen who served the club for a number of years as Club Instructor and the third being Mr Keith Kyle who also served in that position for a period. Since its revival after the World War the Aero Club always had a very active Social Committee which was most ably led by Mrs Edna Wright over a long period of years. It was most pleasing that the club saw fit to honour her with Life Membership in recognition of her excellent contribution in this capacity.

During the period 1950 several privately owned aircraft came to Wairoa they being the one owned by Mr Jack Allen as previously mentioned. Early in the 1950's Mr A. Beckett purchased a Cabin Tiger Moth which he owned for a number of years and later sold to another club pilot Mr H. Mayhead. Also about this time a vintage D.H. Gypsy Moth was purchased by Mr Arthur Alexander and reconditioned in Gisborne and brought to Wairoa.

This type of aircraft was the same as the ones used by the original club members in 1932. It was later sold to Mr Tom Hall.

This makes it unique that all the three original Wairoa Pilots to qualify at some time owned their own private aircraft.

Another club pilot to own his own aircraft was Mr Brian Hedley who purchased a Fairchild Argus. When the club committee decided to purchase it's own aircraft in 1952 they had then to consider ways and means of providing a hangar to keep it in. This also become another voluntary effort. A number of trees were donated for Timber and transported to two private sawmills by transport companies. The construction of the hangar was due to Mr Bob Smyth assisted by several club members. the beginning of the Clubhouse construction was also due to that gentleman's efforts and labour.

#### HARRY HOWELL'S 1932

My first flight in a Tiger Moth was in 193~ with Mr Gerrard. I along with others journeyed from Wairoa to Hastings a few times and enjoyed our flying experience. But as I had just taken over the Carrying business off Mr Tom Carson, and had a young family, I could not afford the time or the money to continue flying lessons. The originals then started the negotiations with the Council to get things Boing. I came back into the picture again about 1949 when the Late Ted Thompson was President. I think I pulled my weight as did many others, to name a few.

We enlisted the aid of many tractors and machines from Fred Steed; Lee Joblin; Mike Connell; John Jardine; with my own machine was doing up to 3 days a week in levelling and forming the air strips. I would like to mention the Crarer family, mainly Peter and Max who dida splendid job in assisting us, they had the lease of the land and were particularly helpful in lending their machinery for mowing etc and moving stock when required, and thanks to Roly Taylor and the De Luxe Service.Station for their assistance. The County Council did a lot towards the early strips, along with Mr R. Smith and Tom Hall with their trucks, and a lot of other people that I have forgotten about as well. I hope the Late Sir Tui Carroll will get special mention, as he was Chairman of the County Council while I was President of the Aero Club. We had a meeting at the Clubhouse with the Works Committee that we would have the full assistance physically as well as meeting the Powers to be.

It certainly was a great day for the Aero Club when four of us went solo on the same day. I must say this was arranged a little to suit the Testing Officer, who sat on the ground and watched us do a couple of landings and circuits and then a few questions.

My particular one was where did I put the water to keep the motor cool. I think that through all the effort put in freely and willingly by all concerned did a lot for Wairoa in getting Top Dressing from the Air on the way. Tom Hall and I were responsible for getting Bill Cookson interested in coming to Wairoa permanently (with the Aero Club in mind) and promising to assist him to get started in that business. We arranged a meeting with Eric Powdrell, Late Eric Tong, Late Keith MacRae, Tommy Hall and myself. Also with the Late Mr Blundell from Bank of New Zealand and Dan Walker as Secretary. That was the real beginning of "Cookson's Airspread", which actually put Wairoa on the map for Top Dressing.

Then a smaller company set up business, with the Late Gordon Taylor; Brent Harrison; and Jim Lancaster, with Murray Sanderson as then Pilot. They too also put in a lot of work on the hangar, on the understanding that they then got a place for their machine. Chapman Bros were responsible for the sawing of the logs donated by the

Late Gordon Taylor and Jim Lancaster. The Aero Club supplied the Roofing and the Principles and Framing, and built by Bob Smyth with help from quite a few of the gang.

In one of the early Air Pageants we had a bumper day; and collected a lot of money from the generous public; this allowed us to put a drain down one side of our strip and right out to the Paeroa drain, and this took a small lake in front of the Clubhouse, and many other puddles away. On wet days we used to have to walk from the Engine Shed

up to the aerodrome, until the Council saw fit to metal the access road. One thing I would like to point out is the fact while the Wairoa Club has not made a spectacular advance, it has not as yet got into financial difficulties like a good number of sister clubs in New Zealand; and overseas with trying to fly before they could even walk.

I would like to pay tribute to the Late Bob Shortt, in his capacity as Mayor of Wairoa. He did a tremendous lot in arranging

visits from many new aircraft which greatly helped in keeping the interest of the club, and also the interest of the Wairoa

public who have been very generous in assisting financially. With the comparative isolation of Wairoa, the Airport has been a big asset to the town.

Sorry that I cannot remember any more; but you may be able to pick a little out of it.

Other than that I cannot praise the President and the Committee too much for the untiring efforts that they are putting into

getting at least some of the Club's history together. Freda and I enjoyed the dinner etc. very much, and it was well worth the trip down from Auckland, and to meet so many, and many a thought for those that are not with us any more. Regards to all {signed).....HARRY HOWELL