

White Horse Model Club

History and rationale of the A certificate rule

Since the mid 1980's the WHMC has imposed a restriction on members which precludes inexperienced flyers, defined as those not holding a BMFA 'A' certificate, from flying unsupervised at the club site. This is a brief history and rationale behind this rule.

Almost from the inception of the club some ten years earlier, it was recognised that model flying operations could potentially presented a significant hazard to users of the nearby public roads, both of which border our flying site. Our long and trouble free use of the site, is due in no small measure to the fact that the club has always adopted a safety conscious approach to model flying operations and our safety record is testament to this.

In the early years the relatively small number of inexperienced flyers were catered for by being paired with one of the more experienced members, until such time as they could fly safely on their own. This scheme not only provided good continuity in terms of the flying tuition, but also provided the vital nurturing in all aspects of safety and flying field etiquette. The idea was to find someone you got on well with and who also went flying at the same sort of times as you. Both parties would co-ordinate the flying sessions by mutual agreement and everyone was happy. This 'godfather' system has proved, over the years, to be a most effective method of training and certainly works well in our club environment.

As a natural progression, it wasn't long before the club introduced a voluntary proficiency scheme, which featured 'basic' and 'intermediate' level flying skill tests. Members were encouraged to take part in this scheme, although it was entirely voluntary. Interestingly, these proficiencies pre-dated those subsequently introduced by the BMFA, but were remarkably similar to the BMFA 'A' and 'B' tests. When the BMFA scheme was introduced some years later, it was adopted and implemented by the club in place of our own.

The above system worked well for many years, but gradually the numbers of trainee pilots grew to such a level, that there were insufficient experienced flyers with which to pair them. As a result the method of training, almost by default, changed to one where members just turn up at the field in the hope of finding someone willing to look after them. Often this resulted in those instructors present being overloaded, or just as often, members would arrive to find there were no instructors. Inevitably some of the beginners with a little experience under their belts would be tempted to have a go on their own, generally with the predictable result. The number of crashes rose significantly and alarmingly there were one or two close calls involving both nearby roads. Every effort was made to improve the training situation, but there was only so much that could be done with the finite resources.

At about the same time an update of the BMFA handbook referred to the 'A' certificate as representing a safe solo standard. As a result the committee of the time took the then bold step of proposing the 'A' certificate rule. As you can imagine it was the subject of a fairly heated and lengthy debate at the AGM, the outcome of which was the introduction of the rule, following a six-month amnesty period. This provision was made to allow time for those experienced members who hadn't yet taken the test to do so. Remember the scheme had been voluntary and so not everyone who was capable had necessarily taken the test. Thankfully the concerns expressed by many of the members during the debate proved to be unfounded and the introduction of the rule resulted in a marked reduction in the number of crashes. Ironically, it also served to stimulate improvements in our training arrangements.

This type of proficiency rule is now a very common feature in many clubs throughout the UK, but it is worth remembering that when it was introduced, the WHMC were among the first in the country to implement such a regulation. Although it may not seem it, it is to our credit that the WHMC actually has a relatively high percentage of members certificated to this level. As an interesting epilogue to the article, the increasing prevalence of ARTF aircraft has resulted in a significant increase, nationally, in the number of embryo pilots requiring tuition. Much like ourselves many years previously, a large number of clubs are finding this situation difficult to cope with. The dramatic consequence has been that some have even taken the extreme measure of refusing entry to flyers who don't have any form of certification.