



The Oldest

Can you fly Canadian?

Chipmunks are just one of “those” airplanes; no one can walk past one and not have some variation of “cute” or “just right” pass through his or her mind. There’s something about its lines that makes it universally loved. When you pass over the Canadian/U.S. border headed north, however, there’s an additional ingredient to the airplane’s attraction—national pride.

The Canadians are justifiably proud of having hacked a nation out of a wilderness and everything that entails, which in this case includes the

Chipmunk. It’s a homegrown product, and any serious sport aviation nut from up there has his eye peeled for one of two airplanes, or both: a Canadian-built de Havilland Tiger Moth or, its descendant, the Chipmunk. And it was through the simple process of keeping one’s eyes peeled that the latter-day saga of Chipmunk No.11, the world’s oldest flying Chipmunk, began.

“I was scanning an auction website looking for ex-RAF Bulldogs and happened to click on a link to past auctions,” says James Brooke of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. “As I scanned

through the listing of RAF Bulldogs [the military version of the Beagle Pup] sold in the past, I ran into a listing for a Chipmunk. It was buried clear in the back and caught my eye because it said the airplane had been the winner of the King’s Cup Race in 1953 and was the developmental airplane that had been sent to England from Canada for the RAF to test to see if they wanted to adopt it. What was even more interesting was that the airplane was listed as having been put in the auction for sale, but it didn’t show up on their listing as having been sold. So, I didn’t know what to



“The airplane was located on this tiny, squishy green airport—Bagby Air field in North Yorkshire. It looked as if there should be signs saying ‘Hobbit Crossing.’”

Chipmunk

BY BUDD DAVISSON

BONNIE KRATZ

think. Was it sold, or wasn't it? And, if so, where did it go?”

Had this been just another Chipmunk for sale, James would probably have ignored it. But what few historical facts were given on the airplane told him this wasn't just any Chipmunk. This was the airplane that had forged the link between de Havilland of England and its Canadian subsidiary and eventually led to the mass production of the airplane for the Royal Air Force (RAF).

James says, “As we understand it, when de Havilland of England decided to build an airplane to replace

their Tiger Moth as a basic trainer, they were busy doing what they probably saw as more important projects, fighters and airliners and all that. So, they assigned the design of the new trainer to de Havilland Canada.

“De Havilland Canada finished the design and test-flew serial number 1 for the first time in May of 1946 with de Havilland England's Pat Fillingham at the controls. Then in January of the next year, having been sent over to show the ‘mother company,’ serial number 1 was flown in England. At the same time in Canada, serial number 2 crashed because of a

delayed spin recovery, destroying the aircraft and almost killing [the] pilot. Subsequently, spinning a Chipmunk has been taken as a training maneuver requiring very special attention. But, more on that later.”

While serial number 1 was being tested in England, de Havilland Canada (DHC) continued refining the airplane and produced a small pre-production batch including serial number 11, which rolled off the line in April 1947 in Downsview, Ontario. Three weeks later, serial number 11, along with serial number 10, were shipped to England for evaluation flights.



No. 11 was given the U.K. registration of G-AKDN—the only registration it has carried for more than 59 years.

James says, “I got together with David Gillespie, and we both liked the Canadian connection the air-

plane had, so we continued researching it. We checked the U.K. registry and found the airplane was listed to a name in North Yorkshire, England: Philip Derry. I called to verify that it was there and, having recognized the last name, Derry, asked him if he was any relation to John Derry, the de Havilland test pilot who invented the Derry Turn aerobatic maneuver and who was the first U.K. pilot to break the sound barrier flying a DH.108 Swallow. It turned out he was indeed related, as a great-nephew several times removed. He was extremely nice and invited us over to have a look.”

When James and his elder son, also a pilot, followed the directions through the English countryside, they were intrigued at what they found.

“The airplane was located on this



STEVE SCHULTE

To cure a quirky spin characteristic, the Chipmunk has a pair of strakes running along the fuselage into the leading edge of the horizontal tail. The wood component highlights the craftsmanship that went into this uniquely Canadian airplane.



STEVE SCHULTE



STEVE SCHULTE

The tightly cowled Gipsy Major 10 Mk2 was a bit of a headache as far as Canadian registration was concerned, so the Chipmunk retains its British registration.



STEVE SCHULTE PHOTOS



The wing fuel tanks feature the filler neck and mechanical fuel gauge all in one unit.

tiny, squishy green airport—Bagby Field in North Yorkshire. It looked as if there should be signs saying ‘Hobbit Crossing.’ It was a perfect place for a Chipmunk.”

It was no coincidence that Philip Derry owned the airplane and his great-uncle was a famous-in-England de Havilland test pilot and the first supersonic pilot in the United Kingdom. Philip said he saw the airplane in the auction and recognized it as one his great-uncle had flown as one of the evaluation pilots before the RAF adopted the type. Philip contacted the then-current owner and arranged to have it taken out of the auction for a private sale. That explained the curious Internet listing of being for sale but not being listed as sold. The strength of Philip’s desire for the family connection is made

even more evident in the fact that he isn’t, and never has been, a pilot. That and the fact that he didn’t tell his girlfriend-soon-to-be-wife that he had bought the airplane. It was, as he phrased it, “An impulse buy.”

“While I was there,” James says, “Phil let me go through all the test pilot’s notes, which included those by his great-uncle, which were really fascinating to read. I was just a little uncomfortable asking to buy such a family heirloom. However, it turned out that the Derry family also had Canadian connections in Ontario, and in fact, John Derry had learned to fly in Canadian-built Tiger Moths in Canada with the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan in the early 1940s, so the idea of the airplane being returned ‘home’ to Canada seemed reasonable to Phil. The

difficulty they had in trying to get primary flight training locally in the Chipmunk for Phil and his sons only added another reason for him to let the plane go.

“I called David and told him the airplane could be what we were looking for. It only had 120 hours since the engine was overhauled and about 3,000 hours total. Plus, the airplane was in original 1948 condition, essentially how it had left the RAF evaluation trials in 1948 and was the way it was when it won the King’s Cup Race in 1953. Best of all, it had no military service, so maybe it wasn’t a wreck. It was pretty much as it was when shipped to England in 1947. David was excited, which, if you knew David Gillespie, you would know he was borderline crazy about the idea.”

It’s one thing to love an airplane,

but quite another when it's in England and you're in Canada, plus the airplane is registered in England. Both areas present their own problems.

James says, "Even before we went over to retrieve the airplane, it was obvious that re-registering the airplane in Canada was going to be a paperwork nightmare, which is exactly the way it turned out. The shipping of the airplane had its own headaches, but they were more manageable."

Moving a foreign-registered airplane across the Atlantic is not for the faint of heart. It would be a major challenge for anyone, much less two private pilots who had no idea

what they were getting into. James is a mathematics professor, and David is the creative director at an ad agency, neither of which prepared them for what they were about to attempt. However, enthusiasm almost always overcomes inexperience.

Their enthusiasm, however, was further augmented by good fortune: Tom Coates, an engineer who had built up his own private de Havilland air force over the years and had shipped numerous airplanes across the pond, was literally in their backyard. He possessed the experience they were lacking, plus lent them the special attachment hardware they'd

There Are Chipmunks, and Then There Is No. 11

In the course of putting their little beauty back in the air, the David-James team discovered on their airplane a number of items that differed from the usual Chipmunk. For one thing, it has the original Canadian-designed "bird cage" canopy that was adopted on the U.K.-produced airplanes (around 1,100 in total) but wasn't used on the rest of the Canadian-produced 'Munks (just more than 200 produced), which have the distinctive blown bubble. The rear side panels of their canopy were originally flat, but they were "bubbled out" during the RAF evaluation process to allow the pilot to move his head further sideways.

The landing gear also has a number of characteristics that set it apart. In the U.K. production models, the landing gear legs are canted forward a few inches to improve stability on the ground roll, but on Canadian production models the gear is in the original position, as on No. 11 and all early pre-production versions.

Also, the airplane has small, streamlined fairings around the gear legs, which are found on U.K. production models and the Canadian pre-production models but not on the Canadian production machines.

The stall strips on the leading edges of the wings are much longer than those on Canadian production airplanes, and it has the slab-like spin strakes on the fuselage ahead of the horizontal stab, which is a feature of all U.K. airplanes but not found on the Canadian birds. As mentioned earlier, spin recoveries were always a problem, which led to the strake modification and to the longer-chord rudder and elevator on both the Canadian and U.K. production models. In contrast, No. 11 carries a short-chord rudder and elevators, as on the original pre-production aircraft.



BONNIE KRATZ

need to secure the airframe in the 40-foot shipping container. He said they could do it. They felt they could do it. So they were on their way.

David says, "When my wife, Karen, James, and I checked in at the airport to leave, we were each carrying 60 pounds of slings and brackets for picking up and then securing the airplane in a shipping container."

"When we got to England," David says, "we flew the airplane a couple of times, which was really stressful! We had already committed to the purchase with a down payment, and we had to make a 'go/no-go' decision before we took the next step. Neither of us had more than an hour's time in a Chipmunk. I had loads of Pitts time, but James' tailwheel time was in Fleet Canucks and Decathlons over 20 years before. But we took a deep breath and took the plunge.

"When we set about taking it apart, we quickly found it really wasn't fun. We thought we had all the right equipment, but we weren't even close. For one thing, tools were hard to find because British standard wrenches didn't fit a bunch of the bolts. It was a random mix of metric, British standard, and some stuff I'm not sure we know yet what it is. It took us seven full days



The forward cockpit of the Chipmunk is short on frills but long on usefulness.

to get it apart and packed in a 40-foot container. This was also complicated because some of the Chipmunk shipping brackets wouldn't fit, probably because this airplane was something of a prototype and was different from later airplanes. Finally, we found a bracket for a TV satellite dish that would work and modified that. We



STEVE SCHULTE PHOTOS

David Gillespie and James Brooke.

also used a lot of big pipe insulation as bumpers. To make matters worse, the airplane was in the far back corner of a packed hangar, so wrestling it out of there was a chore. By the end, I think a lot of the locals thought we were nuts!

"Again, good fortune must have been looking over our shoulders because we came to know Graham Fox at Bagby, who maintained the aircraft for Phil Derry. He not only gave freely of his knowledge, but loaned us some of his people to help at the critical stages.

"It was through Graham that we came to know the proprietor of Bagby Airfield, John Dundon, who solved what appeared to be an immense problem for us: he moved the wingless airplane about a quarter mile across the soggy grass with his backhoe.

"It seemed as if everyone on the airport jumped in and helped, and there was a great spirit of 'getting the job done' and helping out other aircraft lovers."

Whatever James and David's problems, the airplane arrived safely

back at Saskatoon, where they looked at it closely.

James says, "The airplane was in good condition, no corrosion or anything like that, although the fabric on the wings could probably use some work. Actually, as we were to find out, it needed a lot of work. What was curious was that as the airplane sat in our hangar, the 40-below weather caused the paint to flake off, and it left a shadow of the airplane on the floor in paint chips.

When they got ready to approach the registration issue, they knew they had a lot of work to do. Among other things, the airplane, when built in Canada, had a Gipsy Major 1C engine, but when it was being prepped for the RAF trainer competition (the only other entrant was the Fairey Primer), the engine was changed to a Gipsy Major 10 Mk2. This didn't go down well with Transport Canada, and the possibilities of getting it re-registered were getting dimmer and dimmer.

"By that time, we were already looking at paint schemes, and every

time we thought about changing the G-AKDN, which is what it was known as since it arrived in England, to a Canadian CF number, it just didn't look right in our minds. The airplane had originally been natural aluminum with some stripes, and it had been painted perhaps sometime in the '60s, but we wanted it in its original 1947 scheme, which is what it was wearing when it pioneered the RAF adoption in 1949.

"Somewhere along the line, while we were stripping the paint and polishing the aluminum, which took 200 hours, by the way, we decided the best way to keep the airplane looking original was to leave it registered in England and fly it here in English registration. There was simply too much history to lose by changing the numbers.

"We could only keep it registered in the U.K. if we were working with an English-licensed engineer and a U.K.-approved maintenance organization in Canada. Once again, luck was with us, and we managed to have Tom Coates' aviation company in Saska-

toon approved, and we engaged Graham Fox to oversee the paperwork and ultimately come over from England to conduct inspections. Also, Philip Derry wanted to maintain his connection with the airplane, so he's one of our partners, and we have successfully preserved the English registration.

James says, "When the aircraft originally came out of its shipping container, in August 2002, and we flew it, over 55 years had elapsed since it initially left the country. Although it flew like a charm, we knew we had our maintenance work cut out for us. It was disassembled and worked on until May of 2004, when it underwent its 'Star Inspection,' which is required every three years for English-registered aircraft. It is sort of a super-duper annual. Graham came over and worked with Tom Coates to do the work.


"The test flight after this inspection was something really special because we had George Neal, then 86 years old and still flying his own Chipmunk, do the flight. George was the de Havilland Canada Chipmunk chief production test pilot who did the very first flight on No. 11 back in 1947. It was a thrilling day for us."

When the project was finished and the airplane was flying, James and David found they had created much more than simply a wonderful airplane.

"Graham comes to visit quite often, both for inspections and to go hunting. Ultimately we expect to host an extended visit by Phil Derry and his family, and flying will be on the agenda. The entire project has been fun with one of the major side benefits being the close friendships that have developed. Those we never expected and have made it all the more worthwhile."

As the airplane now sits, it's not only the oldest airworthy Chipmunk, but also probably one of the most original, because little has been changed or replaced since it left for England so many years ago.

David Gillespie sums it up when he says, "This airplane is very much a part of Canadian aviation history, and the less we do to change the airplane, the more of that history remains."

We like his way of thinking. 

To Restore or Not to Restore

The David Gillespie, James Brooke, and Philip Derry Chipmunk is an interesting conceptual study. In this day and age when it's so common to see an airplane that has had every little nick and age-blemish removed and acres of skin replaced, many find the "lived-in" feel of this largely unrestored airplane comforting. The feeling of the 1940s is carried forward because some of the marks of that era are still in evidence. Many feel that when an airplane is restored to perfection, every bit of patina that's removed is a bit of authenticity that's lost forever. Still, when an airplane like this Chipmunk that is so complete comes along, it is terribly tempting to rip everything out and give it at least a fresh coat of paint before putting it back together. The foregoing is a tough call, but one thing is certain: once the decision is made to remove, restore, and repaint, there is no going back.

Airplane restoration, like so many other things, goes through fads. At one point, it's the rage to customize an older airplane, then total originality, right down to unsafe mechanical systems, reigns, and then "leave it as is" comes on the scene and utility is the goal. Everything changes, but the one constant is that if an airplane, such as this Chipmunk, isn't over-restored and is left, as much as possible, in its as-found condition, no mistake is being made and a later age won't be decrying our actions.