

M. BRIGGS

#### Matamata-Piako Model Aero Club History.

In May 1948, Devon Sutcliffe and Lew Hale, both 4th. formers, met for the first time in the school grounds of Matamata College and discovered their mutual interest in aeromodelling. Devon had two neighbours, Kelvin and Bruce Hancock, whose father had built a Ben Shereshaw "Cloud Cruiser" with a Brown Junior motor and flown it pre-war. Shortly thereafter, Ken Came joined the group, and this became the nucleus of what was to become the Matamata Model Aero Club. In 1948, an NZMAA affiliated club had to have at least 5 members, of whom at least two had to be seniors (18 years old), so for several years the nucleus had to become Lone Members of the NZMAA. Before long other younger ones became interested, and numbers went up to about a dozen. Among these younger ones were Jim Winter, Noel Ellis, Jim Mateer, Les Worsley, Allister and David Bibby, and Bill McGarvey. Of these original members, Devon, Lew, Les and Bill are still modelling (as at June, 2012) and Bill has a record as an international free flight contest modeller, flying in contests all around the world. Perhaps his first big success was to win a national rubber model contest in the U.K. in the early sixties when he was studying there.

The group, prior to getting driving licences, used to bike to flying fields with models strapped on behind with distances, on infrequent occasions admittedly, of up to 20 miles. One memorable day, the club flew in the fields on the east side of Rawhiti Avenue, Matamata, now a large housing subdivision including Pohlen Hospital, then cow pasture. Incidentally, as late as 1958, the gliding club was able to land it's then new Rhonlerche glider in this paddock and trundle it into the main street for a P.R. exercise.

Eventually, as time went on, about 1952, Dev and Lew became old enough to become senior members of the NZMAA and the Matamata Model Aero Club became affiliated to the national body. Members travelled to other clubs for contests, one of which was the unofficial "Bone" contest between the Hamilton, Cambridge, and Matamata clubs, meeting about every 3 - 4 months on their different sites. Hamilton flew at Rukuhia Aerodrome (pre Hamilton Airport days) when it was a big grass field surrounded with ex RNZAF aircraft in adjacent paddocks, and Cambridge on the Fisher property at Monavale. Matamata flew at Waharoa airfield which at that time had only the local Piako Aero Club for traffic. (two Tiger Moths and an Auster.)

The Matamata MAC was basically a free flight club, rubber, power, and glider, although Lew also flew controlline as did Gerry Bolton of Morrinsville, a regular visitor at Waharoa and a current club member. Other modellers at this time were Mike O'Grady, still modelling after an aerial topdressing career, Alf Creer, Tony Fowke, Brian Kosoof, and Harold Oates, now the doyen of aerotow pilots with over 20,000 tows of full size gliders. Tony Fowke was National Gliding Champion on a number of occasions and winner of a number of provincial contests. It is interesting to see how an interest in aeromodelling led many modellers into full size aviation, and even ownership of their own aircraft.

In the mid fifties, Lew became involved in full sized gliding, Devon moved away to a job and study in another town, and the younger members found competing interests in study, working careers, and marriage, as they do, and the club gradually slipped into recession.

In the early seventies, Ken Price, an auto electrician in Matamata was building controlline models and was discovered by Ray Baxendine (a current member) and with others over a period - the Towler boys, and Derek Todd - started a club which specialised in control line combat and flew in various parks in Matamata and eventually gravitated to Waharoa airfield. Derek became involved in building a radio controlled model in conjunction with the parents of a handicapped boy but it soon became obvious that the flying of it was going to be a bridge too far for the handicapped, so Derek and Ray became the radio control pioneers in Matamata with various models including a "Black Magic". Experiences with this model led to the sobriquet "Black Tragic"! About this time, Phil Demler arrived on the scene with a single channel model and the club was in transition from control line to radio control. The club had its evening meetings in the homes of club members in Matamata, until then President Ray Baxendine negotiated the use of Peter Ryan's parachute clubhouse at Waharoa airfield, in which the club still meets. Warwick Gatland built an r/c glider, and with others initiated a monthly glider contest at Waharoa which ran for twenty years or so until the powers that be brought in the 400 foot height restriction which made model gliding untenable on a licensed airfield. Over that period, Warwick became a nationally prominent model glider pilot ranking high in competitions, especially F3B.

About 1990, the Te Aroha MAC which had been going for about 10 years folded, and members Gerry Bolton and Lew Hale joined Matamata, which at about this time became the Matamata-Piako MAC in recognition of the fact that members came from a wide area, from about Hamilton to Tauranga and down to Putaruru. After some ten years in office, President Ray stepped down, with Gerry becoming President, and Lew becoming Secretary. Members, the Golden Oldies, flew on Wednesdays, and the others who had to work for a living flew on Sundays. This set up still pertains. Because Waharoa is recognised as a very good flying site for models, over the years it attracted a membership from a very large area until the local fliers felt threatened by being in a minority.

This coincided with a trend to quite large petrol powered models which needed more airspace and for a while there were stresses and strains within the club. This situation was resolved by a new president, secretary, and committee being elected and the club has moved on. Waharoa (officially Matamata Airfield) is host to a number of provincial (and wider ) model events, such as the large models (MANZ) fly-ins, scale model comps, IMAC comps, and aero-tow events.

The airfield is quite different from what it used to be. In 1948 it boasted two runways on the present alignment, but the long one was more than 5000 feet long. It has since been reduced to 3500 feet, and a large triangle piece at the intersection of the runways was also disposed of. There was an aero club built wooden hangar and a similar clubhouse, both with a sort of "rustic" charm. Sheep grazed on the runways and in a warm Spring their droppings raised quite a pong, and stuck to car undersides needing washing off later in the day. The Aero Club had a very quiet period in the mid-fifties, following accidents, and one solitary Auster flew about once a month. Modellers then had virtually free run of the airfield. In 1958 the Piako Gliding Club was formed, and gradually in the following years sport aviation began to locate at Waharoa – flying schools, parachutists, homebuilts, etc. In the mid sixties, the Piako County Council, at the behest of the Gliding Club, bought the area (where the small hangars are now) between the old hangar and the Maori settlement, and erected the ablution block. The gliding club erected the clubhouse and a large hangar. The model aero club has fitted into the aviation activities with its own area at the end of the short (less used) runway off Jagger Road. Aeromodelling has changed out of all recognition since the days of the stick and tissue or silk model of the forties. Is it any more FUN? Well, that's a matter of opinion!

Lew Hale

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