

Returning to Flying Safely

On the 2nd March the Department for Transport released further guidance for general aviation flying in England following the Government's phased approach to coming out of lockdown. The devolved administrations of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have had differing approaches to lockdown but generally they have all prevented recreational flying for some months by virtue of their lockdown rules.

The guidance for England will allow private pilots to fly solo or with a member of family or someone within their bubble from 29th March. And then if all goes well instructional flying can start from 12th April. These dates do depend upon the Covid-19 infection rate continuing to fall; otherwise the dates will be put back. There is no detailed guidance yet for the devolved administrations.

You will remember that we were in a similar situation last May. Flying had stopped from mid-March, following a wet and windy Spring, and it wasn't until 15th May that private flying was allowed and tuition couldn't start until 4th July.

One thing that we learned from last year was that pilots suffer skill fade, and skill fade leads to accidents. It is vital for your own safety and of course your wallet that you carefully consider what might be different before you decide to go flying. The following guidance is written to help you to get SAFELY back into the air.

Geoff Weighell

BMAA ADVICE - GETTING BACK TO MICROLIGHT FLYING AFTER A LAYOFF

INTRODUCTION

For many pilots it will have been some weeks, possibly months since they last flew, due either to the Covid-19 lockdown and/or Winter weather. We understand that pilots will be keen to get back to flying as soon as possible but urge a degree of caution before that first flight. Please consider taking a familiarisation flight with an instructor as a safety precaution, even if this means waiting a few weeks until the Government guidelines allow instruction. The following guide gives some food for thought to help to ensure everything goes safely.

MIND-SET

Recognise that however keen you are to fly and however experienced you might be any lay-off will have caused a deterioration of your pilot skills. (Skill Fade) These will be both handling skills and thought processes. What might have been a simple task when fully current can become an overwhelming problem when out of practice.

Remember that flying is NOT like riding a bike. Mental capacity **will** be reduced. Situational awareness **will** be compromised. Task saturation **will** cause mistakes such as infringements or accidents.

Recognising your own potential shortfalls is the first step to avoiding becoming out of your depth in flight.

PLANNING

The more difficult the flight that you plan the more likely you are to reaching a state of overload before you rebuild your skill levels to what they were.

Start with a simple flight with limited opportunity for error. For example, plan to fly a session of circuits in good weather and on your own, unless you feel that it is wiser to take an instructor if this can be done safely with respect to virus contamination. On this flight you will minimise workload. You won't have to change the altimeter setting. You won't have to change the radio frequency. You won't have to navigate with GPS or a Chart. You won't have the distraction of a passenger.

You don't have to land off the first approach, you can go around at an early stage. Take the next few approaches a bit further and a bit further and don't land until you are confident everything is just right.

When you get back into practice you can start making the flight more complex. Leaving the airfield to the local area. Some basic handling practice. Returning and joining the circuit to land. Leave the long flights with multiple altimeter and radio frequency changes and an interested passenger until you are totally confident again.

PAPERWORK

Before going flying make sure that your personal paperwork is up to date. Check your licence, medical and insurance. Remember that when you do start to take passengers again you must have flown three take-offs and landings within the preceding 90 days. Many pilots won't have done this, so check.

Just as important as your personal paperwork is that for the aircraft. Check that the Permit to Fly has a current Certificate of Validity and that any maintenance required is up to date. **If you are a share owner don't rely on others to have done this, check yourself.**

HEALTH

As always it is vital to ensure that you are healthy enough to operate the aircraft. The mnemonic I'MSAFE(E) is a useful check list that you can use before each flight. This is copied below.

Illness - Is the pilot suffering from any illness or symptom of an illness which might affect them in flight?

Medication - Is the pilot currently taking any drugs (prescription or over-the-counter)?

Stress - Is the pilot overly worried about other factors in their life? The psychological pressures of everyday living can be a powerful distraction and consequently affect a pilot's performance.

Alcohol - The pilot should consider their alcohol consumption within the last 8 to 24 hours.

Fatigue - Has the pilot had sufficient sleep and adequate nutrition?

Emotion - Has the pilot fully recovered from any extremely upsetting events such as the loss of a family member?

Eating- Has the pilot maintained physical functionality by proper eating.

Health also includes your mental attitude. ***Be keen to fly, but not at any costs.*** Be honest with yourself. There will always be another day.

THE AIRCRAFT

As well as your layoff from flying the aircraft itself may have been sitting unused for some time. It is even more important than ever that thorough pre-flight preparation is carried out before attempting to fly.

Usual pre-flight checks of course, but remember that if the aircraft has been sitting for a while there may be other considerations.

Fuel quality doesn't last forever. You may be wise to drain out any fuel that has laid in the tanks for a month or more.

Rubber parts like tyres and fuel and water tubes tend to dry out and may perish if not used. Make sure that none of the rubber parts show any signs of cracking. You will need to rotate the tyres to look for damage when they might have sat in the same place for a while, and to make sure that the brakes are operating.

Animal and insect damage can occur to an aircraft when parked for any length of time. Check thoroughly that there are no nests or chewed wiring. Make sure that vents are clear and, where fitted to an instrument, the instrument is working too.

RADIO AND NAVIGATION AIDS

When planning, make sure that any radio frequencies that you might use are correct and that you understand how to enter them in the radio.

More pilots are now using a GPS enabled device to assist with navigation. This is being encouraged to help reduce the number of airspace infringements. Make sure that your device has current software and chart and that if used for flight planning it has the up to date NOTAM information. Some devices allow the pilot to turn off some features. It is recommended that any activity features such as gliding and parachute sites are turned on to give you the best picture of potential airspace hazards.

Finally make sure that the devices have sufficient power for the flight and are placed in a position where they can be of most use. There is very little point in leaving your navigation tablet in your flight bag,

PASSENGERS

By the time you fly, some pilots may have been vaccinated, so may some passengers, but remember the danger of spreading the virus remains.

In a microlight it is impossible to stay 2 metres, and in most cases difficult to stay 1 metre away from a passenger and so we advise extreme caution if taking anyone with you. Common sense must apply

and if there is any chance that there might be a contamination between pilot and passenger then the flight should not take place. The rules allow close contact between members of the same family living in the same household, so under that circumstance passenger carrying in a microlight will be as safe as any other contact between those two people.

If an aircraft is shared then due consideration must be given to disinfecting the aircraft between different pilots.

All surfaces must be cleaned with substances that will kill any virus that might be left on surfaces.

The rules for flying in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are often different. Be sure to make yourself certain of the current local rules before you fly.

AIRFIELDS AND AIRSPACE

During the Covid-19 lockdown many airfields have closed as staff have been furloughed. This means that airfield maintenance may not have continued as normal. Make sure that the airfield is open before you go to fly, and be understanding if it's not just yet. Even if you fly from your own grass strip, make sure that the condition of the strip is good before you attempt to fly. ***Is there a rabbit hole that wasn't there before? Walk the strip to find out.***

Many Air Traffic Service units have also furloughed staff and are operating on a very limited capacity. Your flight planning must be flexible so that you don't rely upon assistance or clearances that may not be available due to low staffing levels. The CAA ask that you file a flight plan to enter controlled airspace so that the ATS unit can manage flow with limited capacity. ***Don't expect too much too soon.***

CLUBS AND SCHOOLS

Most pilots will operate from an airfield with other people. It is important that social distancing and hygiene protocols are developed and followed. Best guidance comes from Government as published on the .gov website and television that we are all well aware of.

OTHER GUIDANCE

Other guidance will be published by the CAA and the Department for Transport in due course and we will forward the links. GASCo has also published an online briefing which is also a very helpful prompt ahead of a return to flying. This is the link <https://www.gasco.org.uk/returntoflighting.html>

SUMMARY

It is widely recognised that a long lay-off from flying will have a detrimental effect on pilot skills. Plan a safe return to flying by being cautious and aware of the dangers of reduced skills and mental capacity.

Please, follow the guidelines above to ease back into flying so that you stay safe.

John Teesdale