

Paul Walton on how a very shiny machine blinded him to his previous love of flexwings



“Good grief, that's bright!” I said, squinting at Roger Cornwell as I caught a reflection off the wingtip of his EuroFox demonstrator.

It was, undeniably, shiny enough to sustain retinal damage if viewed in strong sunlight without welding goggles, such was the quality of the paint finish.

I was on a visit to Oaksey Park, the home of EuroFox Aviation, as part of a shopping trip to see which microlight I might buy after deciding to convert from flexwing to three-axis – in spite of my flexible friends deriding it as a move to the dark side.

Indeed, I have loved my trike. It's the only XT-912 registered in the UK with Tundra, or comedy tyres, as my flying chums mischievously call them.

Pretty much everything I know about flying, I learned on that trike, but the truth was, I wasn't getting any younger, and I was starting to find flying a trike a bit more hard work and a bit less fun.

Some flexwing purists might regard the move as wimping out, but I prefer to think of it as natural evolution, so I found myself looking at the very attractive EuroFox and pondering whether I dare take the plunge.

The finish was quite superb and belied the fact that it was actually a kit. Roger, the head of EuroFox

Aviation, proudly demonstrated all of the salient features of the aircraft, and it wasn't very long before I was smitten.

The deal was sealed with a lovely test flight culminating in an impressive sideslip approach in a strong crosswind which would have had me leaving my trike in the hangar.

Back home, I converted my garage into a suitable workshop, and when the kit turned up, I was pacing up and down like an expectant father. The ceremonial offloading was followed by obligatory tea and chocolate biscuits.

The project continued throughout the winter, evolving into a real voyage of discovery, since the only aircraft I had built before was an Airfix Westland Lysander which I ruined when I spilled a miniature tin of Humbrol

silver paint over the canopy moulding.

I found wiring my panel to be quite a challenge, especially since I'd included a couple of MGL Xtreme EFIS and EMS devices.

I wanted a look of traditional steam gauges but with some digital technology (or toys) too; probably as a throwback to my youth, when only cars with lots of dials in the dashboard had street cred.

No car without a rev counter and oil pressure gauge, for example, was even worth considering, and the Triumph Dolomite Sprint was my car of choice in those days by virtue of its rather splendid wooden dash, adorned with a chick-pulling array of knobs and dials. Sadly, I never did own one.

I also rather fancied a Johnny Seven Gun too, but never owned one of those, either, so perhaps the EuroFox was a latter-day substitute for those boys' toys that I never had in my youth.

It's a credit to Roger Cornwell and Adrian Lloyd – my inspector – that they were both perpetually available for technical help when I needed them. Nothing ever seemed to be too much bother and, reassuringly, no question too silly. Just as well.

An amazing feature of the EuroFox is the ingenious wing-fold mechanism. This is very handy for minimising hangar space and in my case allowed me to shoe-horn the entire plane with wings folded into my garage while being built.

Nevertheless, as my build neared completion I needed more space to spread the wings, so Roger kindly transported the plane to the airfield in his purpose-built trailer.

Over the next few weeks I completed the remaining tasks and prepared for the first engine start. Having read in the Rotax installation manual about the importance of priming the lubrication system, I primed the oil and continued priming until I could prime no more. In fact, never has such a prime effort gone into priming an engine into such a prime state of primeness by a primer who primarily wanted his engine in prime condition.

To quote a favourite Black Adderism, I gave it a thorough pumping in the debriefing room.

But my worries went beyond lubrication. I'd never even turned the engine over before. What if I'd wired everything up wrong? What if...? Pangs of self-doubt pervaded my thoughts once more.

Eventually, after giving myself a good talking to, I just went for it. With the brakes on, mags off and wheels firmly chocked, I turned the key. The engine turned over sweetly and I could see oil and fuel pressures rising nicely, so, with the mags on, I took a deep breath and turned the key once more.

She coughed and spluttered a bit, then burst into life with an enthusiasm that took me by surprise. I

spent the first few seconds listening intently, then eased the choke in. She settled down to a satisfying throb and the engine, along with my pulse rate, calmed to a healthy fast tickover.

After inspecting her for leaks and other tell-tale signs of ineptitude on my part, I fired her up again and taxied her across the airfield. Even such a rudimentary operation felt like pioneering stuff.

The nosewheel steering was, of course, contra-directional to that of my trike, so I zig-zagged slowly but happily across the tarmac as far as the runway threshold, the familiar long carpet of black asphalt reaching out invitingly in front of me and tempting me to line up into wind and go for it.

Luckily, my sense of self-preservation outweighed any inclination I might have felt for flaunting the rules, so after a happy taxi up and down the runway, I meandered gently back to the hangars feeling like an intrepid explorer. So little had been achieved, and yet it felt like so much.

The next milestone was my final inspection. On the morning of reckoning, Adrian spent somewhere between a reassuring and a worrying amount of time scrutinizing things in minute detail. It was a tense period, like being introduced to your



girlfriend's parents for the first time or the days when, as a youth, my old cars went in for an MOT, since funds available for car repairs in those days were strictly limited to the acquisition of a Haynes manual and whatever parts could be scrounged for pennies from the local scrapyard.

In the event, I needn't have worried. As Adrian pointed out, he was there to help and advise, not criticize, and my plane passed the inspection with flying colours.

The crunch in terms of anxiety came when Adrian

had me hauling the plane out of the hangar to prepare it for engine and fuel-flow testing. I retired to what I considered a safe distance, but as Adrian eased the throttle towards 5,000rpm, I began to feel that a safe distance would actually have been in the next county.

The plane was firmly anchored down, but with the Rotax now revving at full chat, it looked like a thoroughbred straining at the leash, desperate to be let loose.

At last Adrian gently brought the engine back to idle, switched off, emerged from the cockpit and uttered the glorious words: "Yes, very sweet. Nicely on song, that."

Next, the maiden flight. Roger, who was my test pilot, flew in and parked his own EuroFox alongside mine, with them looking rather splendid together in the morning sunshine.

As he started up and taxied towards the runway, I couldn't help wondering if the wings or propeller might fall off as she left the ground for the first time, and as he lined up on the numbers, my heart was thumping.

Was that a Mayday in Morse code I could feel beating in my chest? I regretted not having brought with me a defibrillator and a change of underwear.

I saw her start to roll before I heard the engine revs increase, then Roger gently rotated the aircraft into a steady and uneventful climb and seconds later passed me overhead at 200ft.

She was flying! And she sounded fantastic. Despite having the same Rotax 912 as my trike she sounded altogether more...grown-up.

As she climbed out into the circuit above me, the Doppler Effect dropped the almost musical sound of my new steed by a semitone as she whizzed past overhead. It was a truly memorable moment – right up there with my first solo for sheer lump-in-throat exhilaration.

I watched on in admiration as Roger did some basic and unadventurous manoeuvres in the vicinity before coming back in for a greaser of a landing.

Then it was my turn. I jumped into the P2 seat as Roger's official observer, strapped myself in and away we went. What a great day that was!

We spent several hours exploring the aircraft performance and I learned a lot about the testing process and the plane. I was smitten all over again. Afterwards I re-entered the crew room with a broad grin which I'm still wearing today.

And then, my first lesson. As I took off for the first time, I was struck by how gentle the rotation was. I was used to the feeling of being scooped up by the

hand of God in my trike, but in the EuroFox, the actual moment of leaving the ground was so gentle as to be virtually imperceptible.

We did three hours on that first day, and she flew beautifully – despite having me at the helm – and proved to be great fun.

I reflected afterwards how pleasurable it had been and how relaxing compared to doing three hours in my trike.

At the time of writing, I'm circuit-bashing, trying to master approaches and landings. The EuroFox is a very slippery machine and I've discovered just how important it is to nail the approach speed with a degree of precision. Otherwise, I am reliably informed, you just float on and on and eventually fall off the end of the planet.

I can thoroughly recommend the EuroFox to anyone who fancies building their own plane, appreciates great design and places high value on quality and top-notch support.

My EuroFox journey has been a very happy and fulfilling one, but I'm beginning to realize that I'm perhaps only now starting the real journey – spreading my wings to pastures new at airfields up and down the country and beyond, at the helm of a very foxy lady!