

By Robin Evans, BALPA member



FAMILY 'AIR'LOOM: A LABOUR OF LOVE

Three generations of a family decided to restore a 1945 Lancaster bomber to fly again... but where did they start?

There were two additions to the Panton family of Lincolnshire in the mid-1980s: Andrew, born 1986 and grandson of Fred Panton, whose elder brother Christopher was killed on a bombing raid over Nuremberg in March 1944; and NX611 'Just Jane', a 1945 Mk VII Lancaster bomber, acquired in memory of the family's loss. This is the story of how their fates intertwined over the next three decades.

Family mission

Fred's life quest was to find the surviving crew and learn more about the last journey made by his elder brother. "He had always wanted to visit Christopher's grave – or buy a bomber to commemorate him – but was forbidden by his father; initially, the family didn't want a reminder," explains Andrew. Eventually, Fred's curiosity got the better of him, and he visited Christopher's grave in Durnbach, near Munich. This had a galvanising effect on him and he began a painstaking search for an appropriate tribute.

After many years, Fred and his brother Harold sourced not only a Lancaster, but also part of the old bomber airfield of East Kirkby, in Lincolnshire. Their plan? To restore the aircraft and site as a fitting

memorial to Plt Off Christopher Panton and all the bomber crews of World War II. The timescale? As long as it takes.

Growing up within earshot of the rumble of nearby RAF Coningsby, it was perhaps inevitable that Andrew would develop an interest in aviation. "The aircraft came here when I was one, and I've grown up with it. I wanted to fly, but was unable to join the RAF." His sister Louise, meanwhile, is a flight engineer, making this very much a family operation.

Just Jane has become the jewel in the Lincolnshire Aviation Heritage Centre, accommodating around 1,000 passengers on scheduled taxi runs every year. More than that, she and the family are now part of the local fabric: 'East Kirkby – Home of the Lancaster' states the village sign.

Andrew explains that work on the airfield has been progressing in tandem with the slow, incremental progress made on Just Jane. "When we bought the last part of the site, our rival was going to





return the final pieces to farmland. We're slowly reinstating the taxiways and have already restored the original control tower."

Designed by Roy Chadwick CBE, the Avro Lancaster is 75 years old this year. "The Dambusters kicked it all off for the public," says Andrew of the aircraft's iconic status. "It's a classic case of 'if it looks right, then it is right!'"

Of the 7,300 Lancasters produced, only two are currently airworthy, and neither of these saw wartime service. While that is a good start when it comes to restoration, it doesn't guarantee what you'll find beneath the skin – as Andrew knows only too well from the Pantons' plane. "She has 2,424 flying hours, all accrued outside the wartime European theatre, but that includes a lot of coastal flying – some of which hasn't done any good."

Pandora's box

Andrew has commanded the most significant year yet for Just Jane. Last winter, she underwent a first full strip-down and survey – a vital step towards airworthiness. Present in the cockpit throughout the job was a pilot doll in period RAF blues. The plane was sat on jacks, and its wingtips, landing gear, turrets and bomb doors were set aside, as Andrew and his team stripped and sanded her back to glinting metal, assessing the work that was needed as they went. They had no idea what they would uncover... or the consequences. "The paint had not been stripped for 40 years – the winter was a bit of a Pandora's box, but now it's all a known quantity," says Andrew.

Just Jane was built in seven sections and, inevitably, corrosion had built up between the faces of each joint and the multiple layers of paint, applied over the years before the Pantons acquired her. Some areas had fared better than expected – others not. "Corrosion was worst under the wings," says Andrew. "Having been kept on grass, moisture bounces between the grass and the wing underside, and never truly dissipates. We also uncovered the results of a reaction between exhaust gases and paint – there was a straight edge to the corrosion along the stripes painted under the wings."



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Major work has to be scheduled carefully, when Just Jane is unavailable for taxi runs – but this downtime means a loss of vital funds. "We've been taxiing every year since 1995," says Andrew. "We used to taxi from March to November, but now only do May to October, which allows us a little more time to complete the necessary work."

However, the priority has always been longevity over immediacy – for instance, weaker magnesium alloy rivets are being replaced now rather than later. Andrew remains stoic about the quest to create the world's third airworthy Lancaster: "We're rebuilding as we get the funds – year by year, bite by bite." He estimates £3.5m and five years should see most of the work done, but stresses it will



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take as long as it takes. His integrity is tangible as he asserts the importance of the project: "The main reason for doing it properly is so that it's around for my grandchildren. Anything worthwhile is always hard – you have to work to deserve it"

Andrew is keen to assert the 'everyman' credentials of the project: "We want the aircraft to be accessible to all. Bomber crews came from all walks of life – if one person goes away with a better knowledge of Bomber Command, their losses and sacrifices, we are one step closer to repaying our debt." But, he says, there is a fine balance to be struck between keeping Just Jane in preserved condition and letting the public sample her atmosphere – offering a unique experience in return for funding the ongoing work.

Amassing momentum

Andrew details the battles fought on the long road to airworthiness: fighting the years of decay; acquiring skills and parts; undertaking feasibility studies; running a limited company; and publicising the fight to get airborne again. "Just Jane is the only publicly-sold Lancaster in existence; it took 16 years from first sight just to acquire her." The project is proudly run without external funding and had no income before the start of the taxi runs. These are very popular and often booked up a year in advance.

The Lancaster is graded as an intermediate aircraft on the Permit to Fly, based on system complexity and the required OEM support. WWII aircraft are fundamentally suitable for restoration because of the simple construction of their flight controls – cables and pulleys, rather than the post-war electronica of the recently retired Vulcan XH558. Before the aircraft is ready, however, there will be a final, logistical hurdle – the extension of the 3,100ft East Kirkby runway, based on reported data of a 5,500ft ASDA without use of brakes.

Among others, Andrew coordinates a team of three former RAF engineers, maintaining traditional skills as well as the tangibles. "There aren't many people doing this as mainstream work – these are skills being slowly lost," he says. "We have access to 20,000 working drawings – most of the aircraft. Some repairs can be made and some parts have to be manufactured."

Roy Lemmon is one of the engineers tasked with poring over every rivet: "There's corrosion more or less on every one," he says.



"I've worked on many other types, but it's great to have a Lancaster on the CV. The target is airworthiness, so everything is done at the highest level."

In spring 2017, with fuselage assessed and reassembled, it was time to restore Just Jane to a wartime livery for the summer. This was carried out in a sealed tent by MAAS Aviation. The engine overhauling is carried out in partnership with Eye Tech Engineering, of Suffolk, specialists in Rolls Royce Merlins. "Three of the four currently fitted are beyond overhaul hours," says Andrew, "so are used just for taxiing; every ground hour equates to a fraction of an air hour. But we have another three engines already airworthy and one more ready on the aircraft."

Andrew is one of several pilots who operate Just Jane: "Most of our pilots are ex-BBMF. One is ex-B-17, another flew the Dakota – so it's all multi-engine, taildragger experience." He describes taxiing the Lancaster as 'a great amount of responsibility; people expect you to say it's a humbling experience, but you're too occupied at the time to dwell on it. You only consider that afterwards'

Having been denied the chance to fly in the RAF, Andrew may be in the unusual position in the future of gaining his wings on his own Lancaster: "It would be an amazing feeling to do it, but in the back of my mind would be the responsibility for such a priceless item." ■



Visit and support the Just Jane Rivet Club
Lincolnshire Aviation Heritage Centre, open
all year round in East Kirkby, Lincs
www.lincsaviation.co.uk