

WHY FLY A CLASSIC?

Why fly a Gentleman's Conveyance like the Fairchild? Here are ten good reasons.

1. The ambience and style of a vintage cockpit
2. The class and detail of the fittings
3. It doesn't take off: it levitates
4. It doesn't land: it settles gently, like a bird
5. Simple practical touches like wind-down windows
6. The excellence of the control harmony
7. Short take off and landing ability
8. Savouring the sound of an older engine
9. Spares can be cheaper than modern ones
10. The pleasure of watching people stop to admire your aircraft

FAIRCHILD ARGUS

Dimensions

- **Length** 23ft 10¹/₄ in
- **Height** 7ft 7¹/₂ in
- **Wingspan** 36ft 4in
- **Empty weight** 1813lb
- **Useful load** 680lb (full fuel)
- **MAUW** 2882lb

Specification

- **Engine/hp** Ranger L-440-7 inverted in-line 6 200hp
- **Fuel capacity** 54 imp gal
- **Fuel consumption** 11 gph

Performance

- **Cruise speed @ 75%** 90kt
- **Service ceiling** 12,500ft
- **Range (no reserve)** 440nm
- **Landing speed** 49kt

Current value Approx £40,000

Delightful interior with wind-up real glass windows and chromed handles from now-classic cars



When flying club chat turns to old aeroplanes, people usually search for analogies to connect a world they know with one they don't, and since most drive a car, this is the obvious inventory. Is the Fairchild a bit like a nice Austin Cambridge, somebody asked, rather than say, a Ford Mondeo? You know, nice leather armchairs and that big steering wheel? 'Yes,' I thought and meandering down the road in a series of undulating motions like a small boat on a swell rather than sweeping through the bends as if on rails... I don't remember that as being nice. Yet I knew what he meant. Yes, it is like that and then no, it absolutely isn't – always the problem with car analogies.

Meandering might have been the best that Austin and 1957 could provide but it certainly isn't a great way to travel these days. Redolent of an age perhaps, but not great, and the significant difference between this and an aircraft from the same period is that the aeroplane can still feel wonderful today. Not because of the ambience swirling around a vintage cockpit, but a far more tactile dimension. The relationship between controls and pilot, and the simple, buoyant joy of wind beneath its wings. The way it leaves the ground, then returns. A detail which might sound pointlessly esoteric, but you need to understand that aeroplanes from a certain era don't take off, they levitate. They don't simply land; they settle, like a wind-surfing seagull.

FRIENDS REUNITED

I had owned a Fairchild before, and like many others in my flying career it had been sacrificed on the financial altar which divides reality from aspiration. But I had always promised myself that when things improved I would have another because there had been so many things I had enjoyed. Like the long pointed nose with its inverted six-cylinder 440 cubic inch Fairchild-Ranger engine and the big wooden Sensenich propeller. The former so neat with a camshaft in the head operating the valves via pivoted fingers, rather than pushrods. The latter so elegantly formed from many layers of wood, each edge clearly visible across the ample chord of the blades. And the lofty cockpit into which you clambered, left leg on the step with its neatly fashioned foothold; right hand firmly clasped around the tube which runs along the windscreen's edge.

'Aeroplanes from a certain era don't simply take off; they levitate. They don't just land; they settle like a wind-surfing seagull'

A six foot hike leading to a space dominated by the big chrome stick which moves like an ascendant wand and connects to the ailerons via rods and joints rather than cables. Flying controls which sport balance weights so that when you stir the pole, the motion carries on for a fraction, like sliding a puck on ice. There were wind-up windows too, made from real glass and operated by the chromed handle from some long-dead Studebaker or Packard... ventilation missing from most today, which makes holding short on baking hot days merely an inconvenience rather than a sweaty ordeal.

HANDLING EXPERIENCE

But most of all, I liked the way it handled and that was an experience which began on the ground. From the moment the starter whirled, slipped its clutch, then whirled again and swung the engine into life with that blend of hollow hum and watery crackle that only six cylinders in-line can make, it was an experience to be savoured. You wait while the all-important oil temperature gauge creeps towards 50°C and the 3.5 gallons of oil is pumped around the engine before being sucked up by the scavenge pump and dumped into the oil tank which lives just ahead of the firewall on the port side.

When the gauge says go, the view over and either side of that long aquiline beak as you taxi is clear, the more so to the sides through the angled glazing of the three-part windscreen, and the ride is comfortable thanks to that gawky undercarriage, with its multitude of braces and struts which soaks up ruts in the runway and indifferent landings with equal ease.

Power checks are then a battle between the expanding rubber bags of vintage Hayes brakes and the gallop of Ranger horses, and since flicking switches and pulling knobs dips the revs by an amount detectable only by ear, you do it only because you should. Fifteen degrees of flap via the lever under the panel, sweep onto the runway knowing that forward motion and the throttle is a more reliable steering method than the brakes, then push the brown Bakelite knob to the firewall.

The Ranger's hum rises in concert with the needle which pauses at 1900rpm, and shoving the stick forward takes a fair amount of muscle, but within a few yards the pressure against you disappears and as the tail rises there's that marvellous

Right: Cockpit oozes classic Forties ambience and is dominated by the big chrome sticks which connect to the ailerons via rods and joints, rather than cables; the controls have balance weights and when you stir the pole, the movement continues a fraction longer

Far right: Classic venturis gleam against the fuselage

Centre: Elegantly formed Sensenich propeller; each edge of its wooden layers are visible across the chord

Right: Gawky undercarriage with a multitude of braces and struts provides comfortable taxiing

Below right: Neatly fashioned footstep is essential for the high climb into Fairchild's lofty cockpit

sensation of a seat elevating under you while the complete view of the runway drops into the windscreen's frame.

Meanwhile, keeping it all straight is an essential, but in something so long and with legs so far apart it's enjoyable rather than a balletic frenzy of blurring feet. A bit like riding a bike with an overweight saddlebag, you make small but deliberate movements to which there's an immediate but measured response and it gives a sense of a greater, rather than lesser amount of control. It's why flying any taildragger is so much more interesting than the average nosewheel and why, given a bit of practice you can land one of these in a crosswind way outside a trike's limits. You wouldn't be able to taxi, but you could certainly get it down.

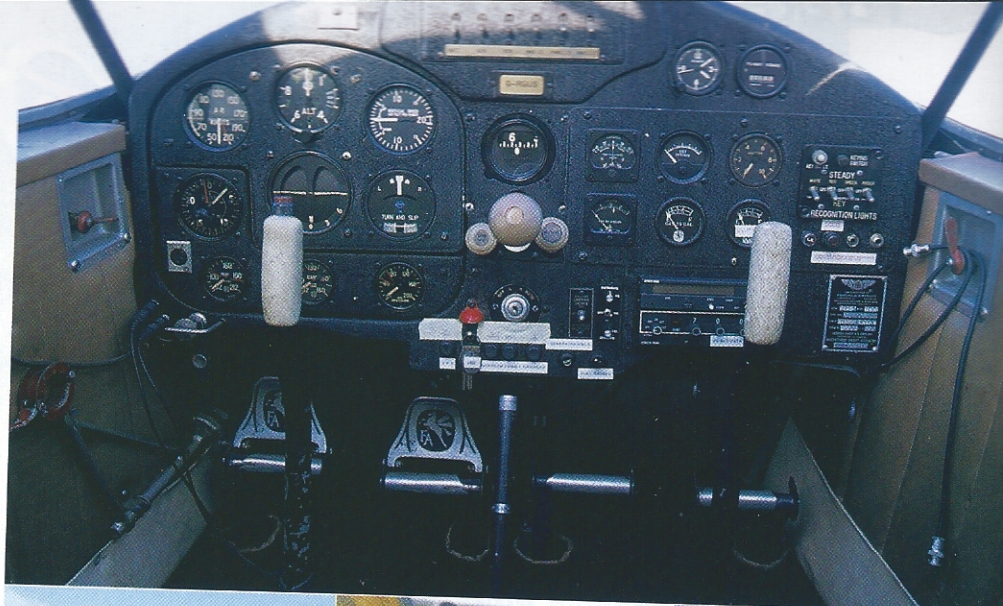
FLUID TAKEOFF

It feels like a scant few lengths before the Fairchild rises from the ground, after which you don't point the nose at the clouds and hang on the propeller, you just let it float skywards at about 500fpm. And since you can't hurry the thing, there's no point in trying. Much better to gently waft the controls about and enjoy the fluid relationship of smooth aileron and powerful rudder – not that you need very much of that in normal flight.

For a utility aeroplane of the era with a span of 36ft there is surprisingly little adverse yaw and a genuine pleasure in the feel of stick and rudder. Move one and the need to move another is a pleasure of co-ordination; a sort of floating sensation where gentle turns seem to lose little or no height and the response is always in proportion to the movement, without spoiling the stability in the other axes. It's the kind of harmony which makes you look like an expert.

Should you wish to probe the envelope in search of excitement, you can explore the stall but during the last C of A flight test, we couldn't get it to happen. Nose reared towards the blue, stick held back with both hands against the seat, ASI sagging below 50kt and the Argus responds by simply going down at 500fpm.

Flaps down makes about two knots difference and in either case, only the physical effort required to hold the stick and the peculiar hiss from a slipstream passing at an unusual angle said that there was anything unusual. You could probably



Below: The Argus was restored to its striking USAAF livery back in the 1980s

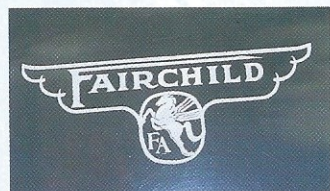




After takeoff just let the Fairchild float skywards – it's that simple

Below top: Timeless Fairchild logo

Centre: Ailerons are fitted with neat mass balance weights



Eight-inch travel on undercarriage softens the blows on the ground

Bottom: Inverted six-cylinder 440 cubic inch Fairchild Ranger engine

► accelerate a stall but rather like attempting to reach VNE, that seemed like an academic exercise.

REAL DRAG

I remember pushing the pole until the knob was somewhere under the instrument panel while both of us hung from the straps, both pairs of eyes glued to an ASI wondering whether the needle would point at the required 180kt before we ran out of altitude. The fact that the VNE is about twice the cruise is testament to what you'd call real drag, but despite this, the military required them to be aerobatic. How you would acquire the energy required for loops or rolls is a science known only to the likes of Bob Hoover.

On the other hand, it's the kind of stability which makes instrument flying almost a pleasure. I remember trying in vain to find a hole in the early morning stratus, so I could land at Cadwell Park racetrack. Having forlornly announced to Coningsby's controller that I would have to return home, he proposed a welcome alternative: 'You can come in here if you like,' he said, 'and wait for it to clear. We'll give you an SRA.' Technology designed to protect our fastest and best works equally well for slow and old. The descent through the floss was easy, while the sight of a Fairchild parked among the Tornados was something else to savour – as was the vision of several bewildered youths manhandling a fuel hose designed for the needs of a Dakota.

LANDING IN STYLE

Happily, each of the Fairchild's 27-gallon wing tanks boasts a huge and complicated cap which, apart from letting in several pints of water per thunderstorm, was also capable of accommodating the military's five-inch brass nozzle, whereas at Lyneham, the need for seven gallons in my Aeronca had involved a long and complicated search for a funnel. The tanks in the Argus have separate taps and either can feed the Ranger at the rate of about 11 gallons an hour, so with a sensible cruise of about 90kt at 2100rpm, four of you can stay up for four hours, plus a bit for safety. Enough for a leisurely trip to northern France.

Landings are in a style in keeping with everything else. Pull the knob from the panel and let the Ranger trickle down to about 1200rpm while you gently twirl the trim handle in the roof and then let it all just hang there, while the speed gently drops

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away. Without any weight in the back, you'll run out of trim but you still have that delightfully springy elevator which remains active until what feels like walking pace. Nevertheless it's best to resist the temptation to pull on the first stage of flap until turn final because despite its near 2000lb empty weight, the Argus wants to keep flying. And because the flaps are simple split ones which create more drag than lift, you'll end up dragging it in under power if you drop them too early.

So you pull the second stage on very short finals which tends to leave a bit of extra speed over the numbers but the touch of float that results is the best way to keep yourself looking like an expert. Even with a bit of sailing above the surface any landing will still be a good deal shorter than most, and if you just maintain a couple of extra knots and fly along the runway in a level attitude you'll hear the wheels connect with the runway before you feel them.

CLASSIC ACQUISITION

If you do need to land really short, and I mean really short, then you can drag it over the numbers with full flap and a fair amount of power and just plod on, then find yourself stopped without trying. Safe when there's a howling crosswind. Plenty of power to stabilise everything while you point the nose into the wind and use the natural stability; the weight and powerful controls to make sure you get the upwind wheel down on the ground. Do that and the Fairchild will do the rest for you.

The Argus has the classic look of a 1930s biplane but a humble role in the war that followed meant that nearly 60 years later, it can audition for several roles. A genuine four-seat tourer in the classic mould, or genuine warbird with a touch of glamour which the intervening years have added but which certainly didn't have at the time. And yet it does special. Maybe it's the host of little engineering aerodynamic details that were added to an otherwise unglamorous specification; rarely seen again on post-war austerity made itself felt.

The Fairchild is neither fast nor glamorous, but it is an awful lot cheaper to buy and operate than some of its contemporaries, and easier to enjoy than most. I have never understood why there aren't more in the UK, which might be why I will sell this one and bring in another. A radial engine one this time, I think. ■