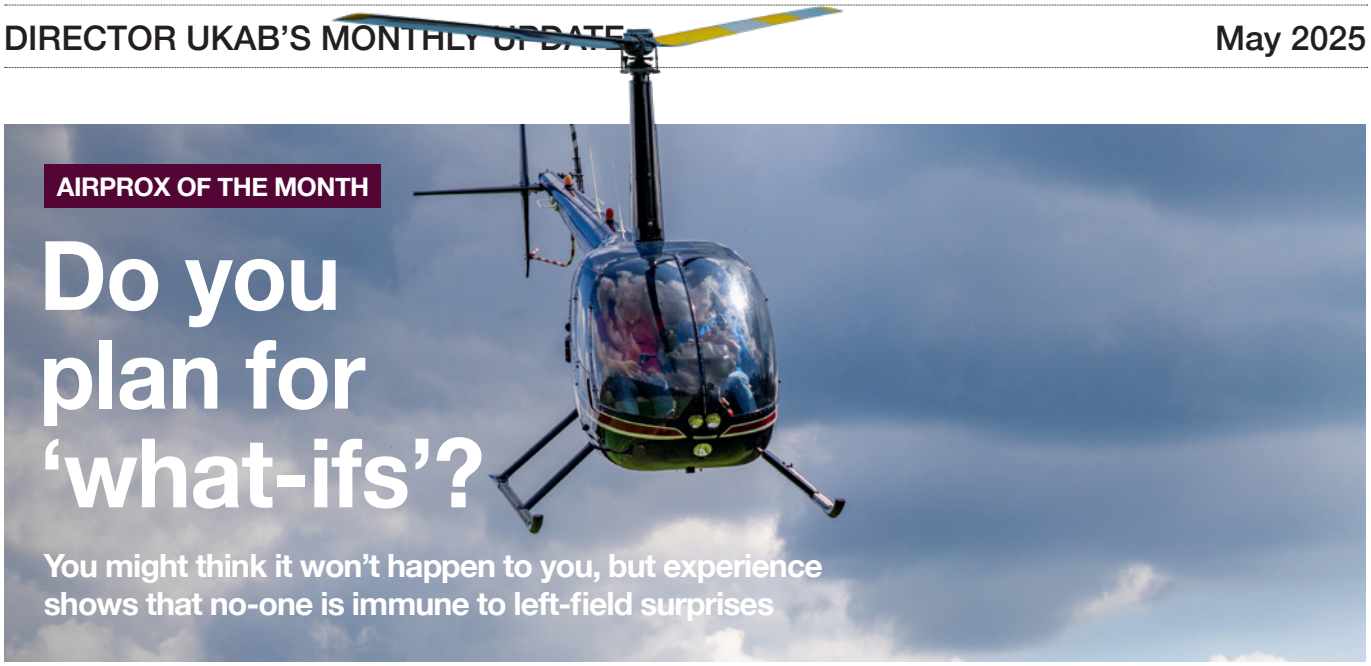
AIRPROX Insight

DIRECTOR UKAB'S MONTHLY UPDATE

May 2025



AIRPROX OF THE MONTH

Do you plan for 'what-ifs'?

You might think it won't happen to you, but experience shows that no-one is immune to left-field surprises

Photo for illustrative purposes: Shutterstock: Adam Bartosik

After highlighting in last month's Insight considerations to reduce the likelihood of an Airprox in the circuit, I thought it would be useful to expand on that this month by looking at some of the situations the Airprox Board sees just outside — or sometimes inadvertently inside! — the circuit.

For example, at least three events that occurred either near to the ATZ boundary or, where there was no ATZ, within two miles of the aerodrome, were discussed at the Board's recent May meeting.

I've chosen **Airprox 2024281** to draw a few lessons from, but I could equally have chosen **Airprox 2024284** or **Airprox 2024295**. This particular example (**2024281**) involved an R44 helicopter and a Beech 33 just to the south of Biggin Hill's ATZ.

The R44 pilot was conducting a pipeline inspection flight in and around the Biggin Hill ATZ, so was in contact with the Biggin Hill controller and in receipt of a Basic Service (the highest level of service that Biggin Hill can provide). The Beech 33 pilot, meanwhile, was transiting south of the ATZ, VFR, but in fairly challenging weather; they were in receipt of a Basic Service from Farnborough LARS East.

The pilots of both aircraft received Traffic Information about the other from their respective controllers (more on that later…) and the Beech 33 pilot stated that they were visual with the R44, however the R44 pilot was looking for the Beech 33 but hadn't sighted it.

The R44 pilot was also manoeuvring in accordance with the requirements of their task, which had presented a bit of a 'moving target' for the Beech 33 pilot. As the Beech 33 passed the R44, the helicopter turned towards the Beech and, at their closest point, a separation of 0ft vertically and less than 0.1NM horizontally was recorded.

There are a number of lessons to draw out of this Airprox. Firstly, route planning: the Beech pilot had chosen to route to the south of the Biggin Hill ATZ and was actually flying quite close to the ATZ boundary – so much so that they were concerned about it when overtaking the R44.

There is a narrow corridor of Class G airspace between the Biggin Hill ATZ and the Gatwick CTR (where the base of Class D controlled airspace is 1500ft). When routeing close to an ATZ, it's advisable to contact that unit as it is quite likely that they will have a better understanding of the local traffic picture than a LARS provider (more on that later, too…).

However, we aren't obliged to do so and, if we don't contact the controller/AFISO/AGO who has responsibility for the ATZ, then we will have to avoid it. Therefore, think about whether or not your lateral distance from the ATZ boundary gives you enough room to react to the unforeseen – if we route too close to airspace that we can't (shouldn't?) go into then that limits our options.

That leads nicely into the second lesson – frequency selection. Nobody wants to spend the entire flight changing frequency on the radio and talking to a new controller/AFISO etc every few miles. Then again, talking to the right person at the right time can really help.

In this case, had the Beech 33 pilot been on the Biggin Hill frequency then they could have immediately requested permission to enter the ATZ for traffic avoidance. The UK Airprox Board does recommend receiving a surveillance-based air traffic service (ATS) (a Basic Service is NOT a surveillance-based ATS) wherever possible, but acknowledges that this is not always the best solution for every situation.

In this case, although neither controller was required to pass Traffic Information to either pilot, they both did. But don't let this fool you into thinking that you'll get Traffic Information under a Basic Service – on the day in question both controllers had the time and capacity to pass the information; on another day they might well have been busy with other aircraft.

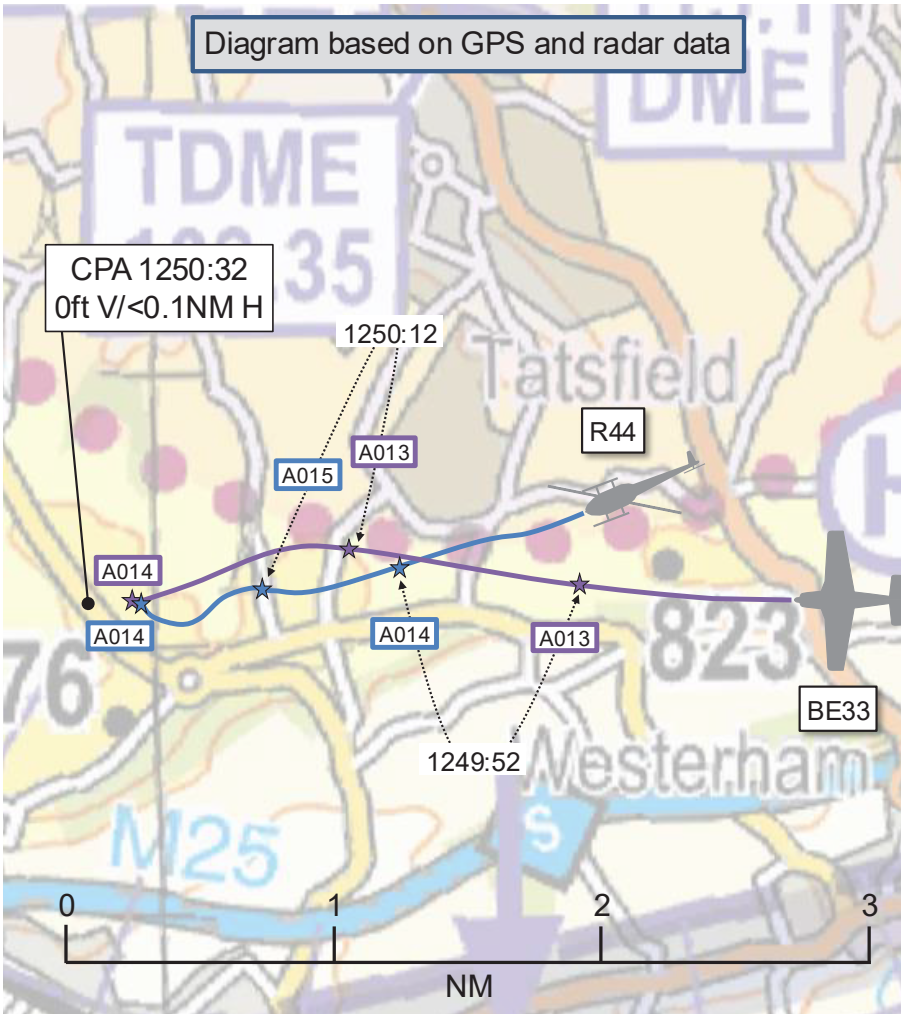
It's useful to have the frequencies of airfields along your route 'up your sleeve' even if you don't plan to use them. Things can happen quickly in the air so it's quite likely that we won't have time to find the

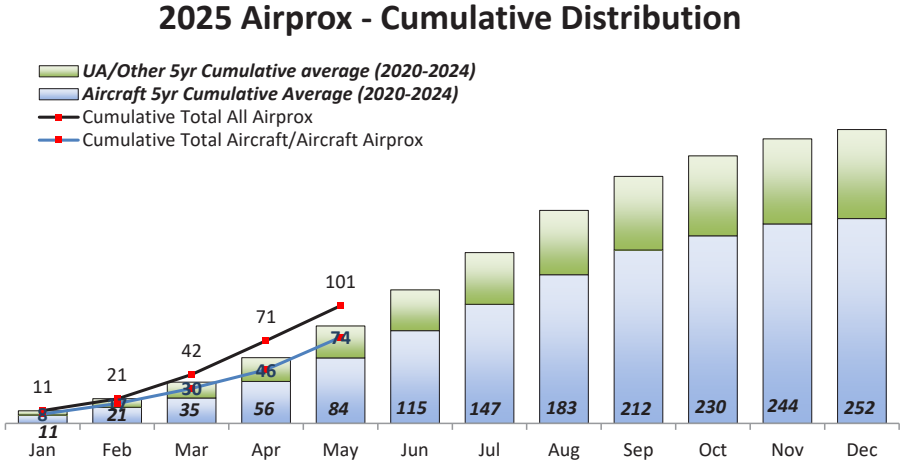
frequency we need if it's not already on the PLOG (or similar).

Although there's plenty to talk about with this Airprox, the last thing I want to specifically draw out is the weather on the day. Although the Biggin Hill METAR issued at around the time of the Airprox (EGKB 181250Z VRB02KT 9999 FEW030 07/05 Q1012=) suggests that the cloudbase wasn't too low, both pilots reported a lowering cloudbase and reduced visibility at times.

A look at the Biggin Hill TAF valid over the period tells a different story - EGKB 181104Z 1812/1821 07004KT 9999 SCT018 PROB30 TEMPO 1812/1815 BKN009 BECMG 1815/1818 BKN008… A 30% probability of poor weather usually means it will almost certainly impact our flight at the most inopportune moment ('Murphy's Law')! That's why it's always worth looking at the TAFs and the METARs and thinking about possible courses of action should the weather be less favourable than we were hoping for (it usually is). Think about track deviations, entry into controlled airspace, traffic avoidance etc and have a back-up plan – with information that is needed to execute it – during the pre-flight planning stage.

A final thought on the Rules of the Air Regulations and who gives way to whom. In this example, the Beech 33 was undoubtedly overtaking the R44 helicopter. Although the R44 pilot turned towards the Beech 33, it is worth remembering that the pilot of the overtaking aircraft is required to keep out of the way of the other aircraft throughout the manoeuvre '… and no subsequent change in the relative positions of the two aircraft shall absolve the overtaking aircraft from this obligation until they are entirely past and clear' ((UK) SERA.3210 Right-of-way (c)(3) Overtaking).





BOARD SUMMARY

This month the Board evaluated 28 Airprox, including 11 UA/Other events, seven of which were reported by the piloted aircraft and four by the drone operator.

Of the 22 full evaluations, six were classified as risk-bearing – one as category A and five as category B. The Board assessed the last of the 2024 Airprox reports this month (hurrah!) and made two Safety Recommendations, both regarding operations at Sandtoft – one to ensure that known unusual air activity within the ATZ/FRZ is promulgated, and one to align published hours of AGCS provision to what is actually being provided.

The graphic above right indicates that the number of reports we are receiving is on the up. While it's well ahead of the five-year average, those five years do include the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions on recreational flying, so I'm not overly concerned at this stage.

As expected, the warm and dry Spring has meant that more flying has taken place and, therefore, more Airprox are being reported in the early part of the year than has historically been the case. That said, numbers this year are only very slightly ahead of last year's, so we'll keep an eye on reporting rates and see whether there are any particular trends.

It looks like the 'flying season' is now in full swing, so I wish you all a safe and enjoyable summer. If the unpredictable British summer weather does scupper your plans to go flying, please do use that time to take a look back at some of these articles and ponder the lessons I have tried to draw out.