AIRPROX Insight

DIRECTOR UKAB'S MONTHLY UPDATE

May 2026

AIRPROX OF THE MONTH

Who gives way to whom?

Sometimes it's not as straightforward as you might think

Photo for illustrative purposes : Shutterstock: Ivan Cholakov

Some time ago (back in April 2025, in fact) I wrote about issues with integration into the circuit, but it seems a high proportion of Airprox incidents are still taking place in, or around, the visual circuit — and this was also the case at the UK Airprox Board's meeting in May.

A contributing factor to these events is often that one or both of the pilots involved didn't follow published procedures. This month, though, there were four examples of problems integrating into the circuit where all the pilots had pretty much been doing what they should have been doing. So why did all of these end up as reportable events?

I've chosen **Airprox 2026028** as an example to look more deeply into, but I could equally have chosen **Airprox 2026004, 2026005** or **2026009** and they're well worth looking at to.

This month's case for examination occurred on the downwind leg for RW02 at North Weald airfield and involved a Cessna 152 (C152) and a Cessna 150 (C150).

The C152 pilot was conducting circuit training with a student and was in contact with North Weald Radio. They were equipped with a transponder, but no other additional electronic conspicuity (EC) equipment. The C150 pilot, meanwhile, was joining from the east and was also in contact with North Weald Radio; they too were equipped with a transponder but no additional EC equipment.

The pilot believed that they had identified all circuit traffic, and so crossed the upwind threshold (at around 1100ft) towards the downwind leg. When they sighted the C152 out to their right-hand-side, they believed that it had been joining from the north-west and so, quite understandably, thought that they would fit into the circuit ahead of the C152.

However, the C152 was actually established in the circuit pattern and was already on the downwind leg. Nonetheless, the C150 pilot decided to climb to around 1400ft to introduce some vertical separation. For their part, the C152 pilot sighted the C150 joining on crosswind and, also quite understandably, assessed that, since they had been established in the circuit, the C150 pilot would integrate with them.

The two aircraft closed in on each other and the C150 pilot then turned in front of, and above, the C152. As the C150 pilot then descended, the C152 pilot took control from the student, reduced speed and generated some lateral separation as well. The closest they came to each other was when the C150 passed more-or-less overhead the C152 with 300ft of vertical separation.

So, let's start working out the ins-and-outs of this one by first looking at the Rules of the Air and, in particular, (UK)SERA.3225 Operation on and in the Vicinity of an Aerodrome. This rule states that *'An aircraft operated on or in the vicinity of an aerodrome shall: (a) observe other aerodrome traffic for the purpose of avoiding collision; (b) conform with or avoid the pattern of traffic formed by other aircraft in operation…'.*

I think it's safe to say that both pilots in this encounter satisfied paragraph (a) of this rule, however, where there is a *'pattern of traffic'*, paragraph (b) comes into play.

Now, from the C152 pilot's point of view, they had formed the pattern of traffic so it was for the pilot of the joining C150 to *'conform with or avoid'* their pattern. In other words, it was for the C150 pilot to integrate with the C152.

This seems obvious, *unless* the perception of the C150 pilot was that the C152 was not in the pattern and was actually also joining traffic. In that case, it would have been for both pilots to integrate with each other.

This is where things becomes tricky – who gives way to whom? Who has 'priority'? The natural progression and geometry of this

encounter seems to have justifiably led to the C150 pilot believing that they could position themselves in front of the C152. However, the reality was that the C152 ***was*** established in the circuit and this fact then influenced the actions of the C152 pilot.

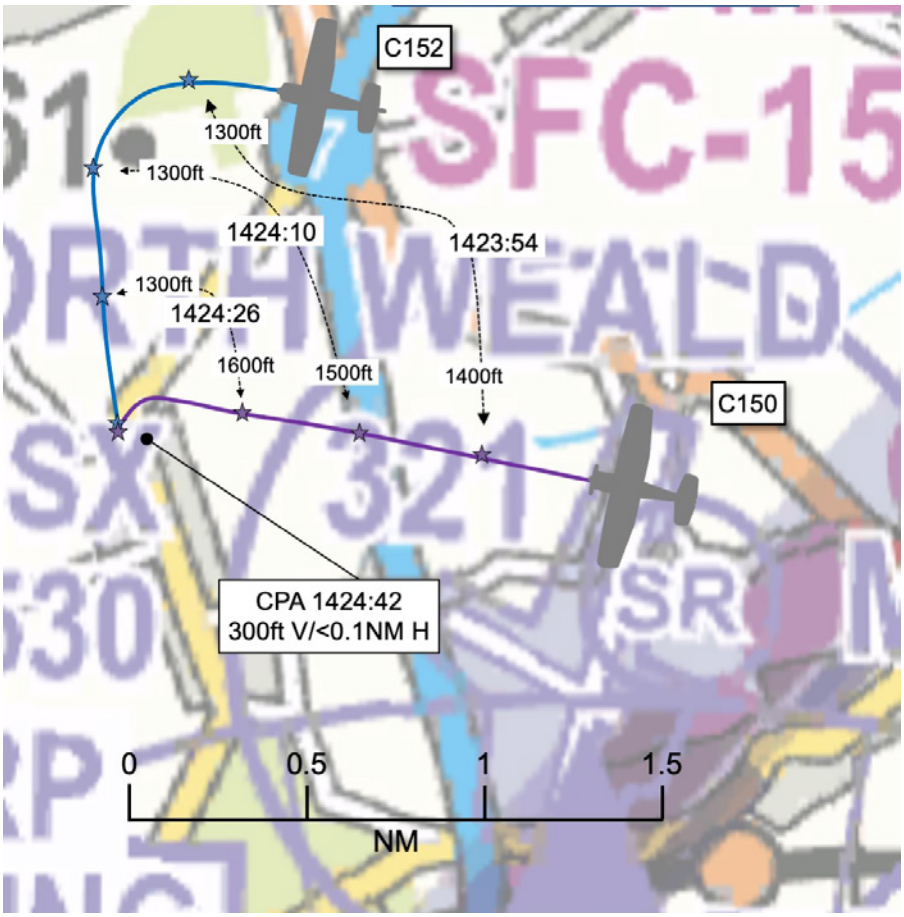
Predictability is the key here – the C152 pilot would not have wanted to do anything that made them unpredictable and, therefore, make the C150 pilot's job of integrating even more difficult, so it's logical that they chose to maintain their current track and altitude on the downwind leg.

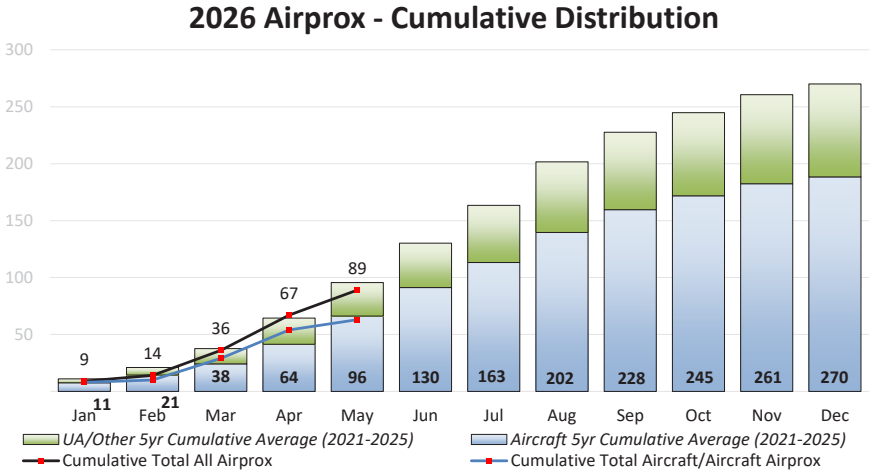
A complicating factor here is that the visual circuit at North Weald isn't a 'standard' oval pattern – it is wider to the north than to the south due to local noise abatement procedures and other restrictions. This could make it more difficult to identify whether an aircraft is actually established in the circuit or simply joining from a different direction, because the downwind leg is not parallel to the runway.

So, how to resolve this conundrum? Both pilots were doing what would be expected for them to do, yet we ended up with two aircraft in close proximity ***and*** both pilots were visual with the other aircraft!

As is so often the case, communication is key – if unsure of the intentions of the other pilot, try to clarify that with a radio call. I realise it's not always possible to get in on the radio, especially when the circuit is busy, but it's unwise to assume that you know what the other pilot is doing or that they have seen your aircraft .

We at the UKAB see plenty of Airprox events where the pilot submitting the Airprox report is under the impression that the pilot of the other aircraft must have seen them. Obviously, that wasn't the case in this encounter, but early action – be that through a radio call or manoeuvring the aircraft – can save a lot of heartbeats… In a nutshell, always fly defensively and never assume, always check (if you can).





Board Summary

This month, the Board evaluated 19 Airprox, including three UA/Other events, two of which were reported by the piloted aircraft and one by the RPAS operator.

Of the 17 full evaluations, five were classified as risk-bearing – all as category B. The Board also made one Safety Recommendation at the May meeting following an Airprox between a Coastguard DA42 and an EC155 helicopter in the Dover Straits.

During the analysis, it transpired that the Coastguard operation, in conjunction with an RPAS operating BVLOS (Beyond Visual Line Of Sight), was using the Lydd QNH as the datum for the vertical extent of the Temporary Danger Areas (TDAs) established for RPAS operations. This is not stated in the AIC, so other pilots will not know that is the altimeter setting to use to ensure that they remain clear (above) the TDAs. The Board's Recommendation to the wording of the AIC aims to address that.

As can be seen in the graphic above, the slower-than-average start to the year is well and truly over. With the atrocious weather of the first couple of months of 2026 now firmly behind us, Airprox reporting has picked up to reach expected levels for this point in the year.

I'm grateful to all those pilots who report Airprox events such that they, and others, may learn from the event, and encourage all readers to consider how they might apply the lessons from others' experiences. All Airprox reports are published **HERE**, and many of the 'ingredients' are common. So take a look at some of these articles and reports and have a think about whether you could reduce the likelihood of your having an Airprox.