

Model aircraft in the New Forest

*(Briefing paper for 2015 FE review for the 2015 HRA with NE)
(updated 2021)*

An annual licence is issued by the Forestry Commission to the Beaulieu Model Flying Committee(BMFC) to allow it to manage the flying of model aircraft on Beaulieu Heath from the remains of the old concrete WWII runway. By agreement with the Forestry Commission, this is the only place in the New Forest that is licensed for model flying.

All model aircraft are under 7.5kg Maximum Take off Mass (MTOM). Most models are powered and radio-controlled. A few are specially designed models without power. All models are flown within line of sight and under CAA regulations and Local Air Traffic Control height limits.

The club has a well established set of rules and code of conduct, with a good safety record, despite this being a popular point of public access in the Forest. This activity takes place with ground-based pilots on foot controlling models flying in a designated area away from the normal public access areas. Model aircraft take off and land from the runway and do not overfly the public. No motor vehicles are used off the metalled roads or hard gravel tracks. Cars, model planes and associated paraphernalia are parked in the designated carpark. No cars are parked on verges.

The club has a membership of over 200 model flyers who fly small models occasionally at the airfield, there is a diversity of membership including disabled adults, juniors, retirees and minorities as well as regular members. Most flying takes place in the mornings (when the light and wind conditions are best), and only on fine days (when the wind is low, and visibility is good). The numbers involved rarely exceed a dozen people on any one day. All model flying is for recreational purposes only. The BMFC is affiliated with the national governing body, the British Model Flying Association, which provides extensive support in terms of policy, public indemnity insurance, recommended operating guidelines, achievement qualifications and so on.

The nature of model flying is gradually changing, due to technological innovation, with a trend towards smaller, lighter models powered by electric motors rather than the traditional combustion engines. As a result BMFC is becoming steadily cleaner, less polluting, quieter and safer over time. The models with combustion engines use methanol (alcohol) fuel, or less frequently, petrol. Relatively small amounts of fuel are used and the area for refuelling is demarkated on the concrete so any spillages can be effectively dealt with by using sand, etc. There have been very few spillages over the past over 40 years. There are no visible effects of pollution in the immediate area (inspection was carried out by Kathy Stearne FC & Bridget Leyden, NaturalEngland(NE) in October 2014) indicating that safeguards are adequate if fuel spillages happen.

Possible effects of model aircraft affecting the wildlife of the New Forest has been extensively discussed over many years, and a number of studies have been done. In summary, the impact of model air craft on the ponies and other animals (cattle, donkeys etc) is negligible. The possible impact on ground nesting birds during the nesting season (March to April) has been regularly raised but no evidence of detrimental impact has ever been presented, possibly because the Beaulieu Heath Airfield is not a major bird nesting area. So the effect of the model aircraft flying and associated activities is unlikely to have any significant effect over and above other normal day to day quiet recreational usage of the area.

A small number of "club" events can occur during the year for BMFC permit holders only, No "public/ spectator " events are organised. However, because this is a public site, some members of the public may be present. In particular, during the summer there is a consistent stream of holiday makers who make this a point of interest, not to mention local historians who like to visit WWII place of interest (such as Beaulieu airfield). The BMFC do not organise public events, and are not keen to advertise any model flying, as it is that it would involve them in the management of public control, the provision of facilities etc. It would also place extra stress on the environment.

BMFC are allowed up to 8 one-day "free-flight" events under their licence. Free Flight involves ultra light models without power that glide freely for a few seconds, These events take place on the far side of the airfield and involve about a dozen people (max 20). These are part of the UK National Free Flight championships, and have been taking place, every year for over 20 years; they have not caused any measurable disturbance to the environment or the nesting birds being one day only events. These events take place in Feb, March, June, July, Sept, Oct.

Other committee organised events are permitted provided 14 days notice is given to the Forestry Commission. In recent years the BMFC have not exercised this facility at all, owing to a number of factors.

Contact - Dr Richard Sharman,
Chairman Beaulieu Model Flying Committee
023 055 8389
bmfcchairman@aol.com