



AIRPROX *Insight*

DIRECTOR UKAB'S MONTHLY UPDATE

December 2024

Photo for illustrative purposes: Shutterstock/Evenen Kalinbacak

AIRPROX OF THE MONTH

Assumption – the mother of all mistakes?

Just because you expect something to happen in a certain way doesn't mean that it will...

Back in June 2023, I looked at an incident between an aircraft joining the circuit at Fair Oaks and one carrying out a touch-and-go ([Airprox Insight June 2023](#)). The theme of the article was all about double-checking that what we expect to have happened in a certain situation has actually happened, rather than simply assuming that it has.

The UK Airprox Board sees quite a number of events around airfields (aircraft joining, departing or circuit traffic), so I make no apologies for revisiting the question of assumption and the potential risks it poses, particularly when operating in or around the visual circuit.

[Airprox 2024145](#) occurred in the visual circuit at Compton Abbas between a PA-22 and a Tiger Moth. The Tiger Moth pilot had joined the circuit from the south via the overhead and had identified two aircraft ahead. The PA-22 pilot had joined the circuit from the north, again via the overhead, and had identified three aircraft ahead, including the Tiger Moth.

However, once established on the downwind leg the Tiger Moth pilot then identified a fourth aircraft ahead.

Unfortunately, there was no radar coverage of the circuit at Compton Abbas, and other data sources (such as ADS-B) were inconclusive, so it was not possible to establish exactly how many aircraft were in the circuit and their relative positions.

Nevertheless, it was apparent from the pilots' reports that the Tiger Moth pilot had extended the downwind leg – possibly to maintain spacing from the aircraft in front – and this had apparently taken them outside the ATZ. The PA-22 pilot lost sight of the Tiger Moth on base leg and only regained sight of it as they were about to turn onto final, with the Tiger Moth already established on final and crossing in front; it seems that the Tiger Moth pilot never saw the PA-22 as they crossed its path. It could not be positively established how close the two were to each other, but the PA-22 pilot reported the separation as 50ft vertically and 50m horizontally.

The first thing to note here is that it shouldn't be expected that circuit traffic will remain within the ATZ, and departing the ATZ is not an indication that an aircraft has left the circuit. Although most (if not all) airfields publish circuit patterns, either on

their websites or within the UK AIP, these patterns are not strict ground tracks and the visual circuit is designed to work well when pilots follow the aircraft in front.

Of course, we should all strive to stick to any noise abatement procedures and other local restrictions, but the safety of our and others' aircraft is paramount. No pilot should expect sanction for deviating from local procedures if it is done on safety grounds.

That said, it's important to remain predictable wherever possible so that other pilots know what to expect but, if we do need to deviate from what is considered 'normal procedures', communicating that deviation is vital to help maintain other pilots' situational awareness.

Don't expect others to always have you in sight – as we've seen on numerous occasions (including this example) it's all too easy to lose sight of another aircraft and, when that happens, our mental picture will usually revert to what is 'expected', not necessarily what is actually happening.

If you extend downwind then announce it on the radio; I know this isn't always easy, particularly when the circuit's busy, but if

you can't get in on the radio then consider leaving the circuit and re-joining for another go, rather than risking derailing the train.

In addition, don't be afraid to ask for the positions of other aircraft if you are unsure. A controller (callsign 'Tower') or FISO (callsign 'Information') should then pass you Traffic Information on other aircraft in the circuit, but it is less clear cut at an airfield served by an Air Ground Communication Service (callsign 'Radio') or one without any formal FIS provision at all (callsign 'Traffic'). In these latter cases other pilots should respond to let you know where they are so that you can find them visually and/or adjust your circuit pattern accordingly.

Remember, you don't have to wait until you see the other aircraft to take positive action – if it's all getting too confusing or too difficult to sequence yourself, then consider leaving the circuit by the safest means and then think about rejoining via the overhead and orbiting until you have all the traffic in sight and you can re-integrate safely.

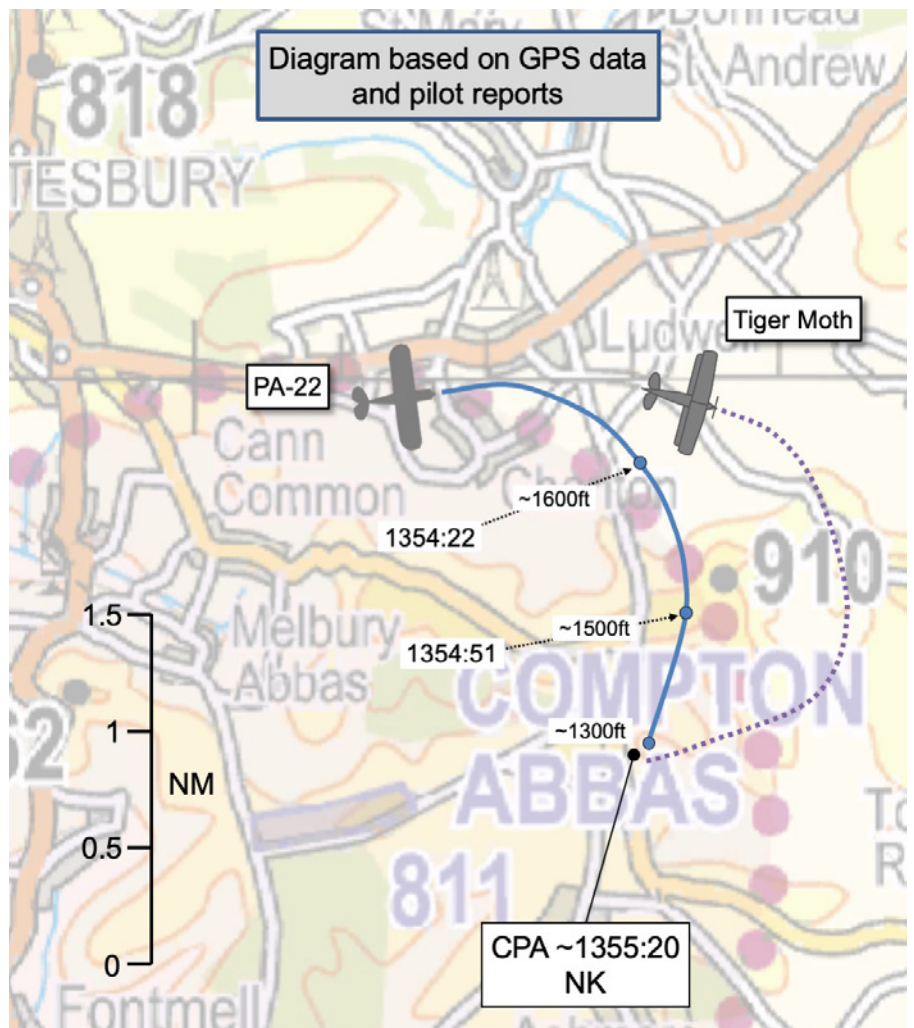
Speaking of the overhead, this is the place to gather situational awareness on all other circuit traffic – we should not begin a descent on the deadside until we are happy that we have identified all the traffic in the circuit and can integrate safely. There's a diagram and explanation of the overhead join on page 104 of [The Skyway Code](#), but this doesn't include an orbit on arrival.

Of course, an orbit won't always be necessary if the circuit isn't busy, and we should be able to get an idea of how busy it is from listening to the radio while approaching the overhead, but if there's any doubt about any of the circuit traffic then an orbit in the overhead is likely to pay dividends. Better to spend an extra minute or so in the overhead to understand where all the traffic is than to end up having an Airprox (or worse) because we are unaware of, or haven't seen, all the other aircraft in the circuit.

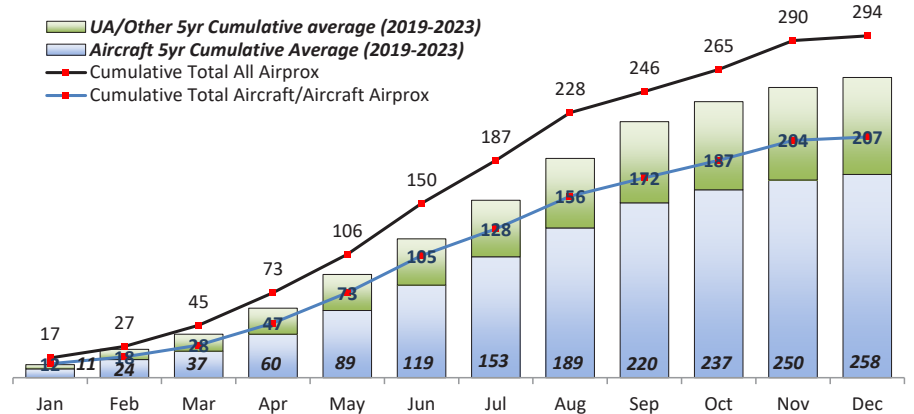
Returning to the question of assumption, it's a technique that serves us all extremely well in many situations, but aviation is not really one of those. If there's any doubt as to what is going on then get on the radio and ask – don't assume that because you would behave a certain way in a certain situation that others will do the same.

UKAB MONTHLY ROUND-UP

This month the Board evaluated 18 Airprox, including five UA/Other events, three of which were reported by the piloted aircraft and two by the RPAS operator. Of the 15 full evaluations, three were classified as



2024 Airprox - Cumulative Distribution



risk-bearing – all as category B. The Board did not make any Safety Recommendations this month.

Finally, I have included the usual graphic that shows reporting levels over the year. At the time of writing, there were still a couple of weeks to go before the end of 2024 but, given the weather we all experienced in December, I don't anticipate a deluge of reports.

That said, this year has already seen the highest level of reporting on record – it's unclear whether that's down to more open

and honest reporting or a genuine increase in the number of events (we know that not all Airprox get reported). While I ponder that question, I'd like to wish you all better weather and happy landings in 2025.

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