

Hall of Fame

John O'Donnell

From Mike Fantham and Michael Warren

John is Britain's greatest-ever natural model flyer, and one of the best there has ever been. Throughout his career, he has honed his natural skills both by careful thought and rigorous attention to detail. In the 1957/58 *Zaic Yearbook* John said, 'I feel that warps should be regarded as a trimming device, and not as an unpredictable and unfortunate result of doping'. That's typical O'Donnell – succinct, clear-minded, ahead of his time, and right.

Born in 1932, John first cut balsa in 1941, when 'solids' were in vogue. He soon moved on to flying models and his name first appeared in *Aeromodeller* in 1947, when he was 14. He was the British national overall free-flight champion 19 times between 1952 and 1999, including ten years in a row from 1954 to 1963. His longevity is barely believable. John flew at his 50th Nationals in 2000, at the age of 68. This was no token effort by an old man for old times' sake - he won, and took the Model Aircraft Trophy for open rubber yet again. And last year, at his 60th Nationals, he flew four events and maxed out in all of them. Not surprisingly, to list all his contest successes would fill a book.

As John says, 'In the early days I was fortunate to be part of an active and keen club at Whitefield and had a talented younger brother, Hugh, with whom I went to every contest for some years. Later, my wife June was more than supportive – she went to contests, took good photographs, held rubber models, launched gliders,

timed flights and had far more sense than to retrieve my models!'

John has dozens of admirers and many friends, and his contribution to free flight has been enormous. He has, we suspect, flown in more free flight contests than anyone else in the world, ever. And he's still at it although, as he admits, the passing years are making things more difficult. His single-minded approach,



however, hasn't always **made life easy**, either for him or for those around him.

He was lost to Britain's international teams after a very public disagreement with the authorities in 1973, so we'll never know how he would've coped in the era of the six- or seven-minute Wakefield and high-tech bunting gliders. Since his aim has always been to win free flight contests, no doubt he would have come to terms with it – indeed, perhaps helped in the developments – and would've succeeded. His models have rarely been at the forefront of technology, and he is amiably rude about fashions in model design, but has always taken the best of the essentials, and used them to great effect. He was, for example, one of the first to recognise the importance of reducing weight in the interest of a better glide, was successful with delayed release props well before most of the opposition, and changed the face of British free flight by popularising the use of Mylar covering.

In earlier days, John represented Britain eleven times at World Championships, placing third in Wakefield (F1B) in 1956 and second in A/2 (F1A) in 1965.

John wrote and produced photographs for regular magazine columns in Model Aircraft between 1963 and 1965 and for Aeromodeller from 1966 to 1977. And all this whilst raising a family – he married June in 1965 and they have two children – holding down a day job, and maintaining consistently high performance in contests. Aeromodelling led to an interest in photography – shared with June – and he also has an interest in the serious end of science fiction. Though he's not usually associated with committee work (the flying field is his natural home) John was Treasurer of the North-

West Area for eight years, at the time of the mammoth Woodford Rallies, and for a while was even on the CIAM F/F Technical Committee. He has a degree in Maths and Physics, and spent half his working life in industry (aircraft and then manufacturing) and the rest teaching maths in further education.

Though there was a trip to the US Nationals back in 1967 John has never been one for much foreign travel, and he seems uncomfortable in really hot weather. On the other hand, there has been a thriving and varied free flight scene since the 1940s in the UK, where conditions are often difficult, and that's the way he likes it. A few years ago his disparaging remarks about 'gadabouts' – the Brits who go to the European contests each summer – caused genuine ill-feeling. But, as ever, John explained his position forcefully and with typical honesty. His key point was that the aim of going to a contest should be to win it. Everything else (the scenery, the food, the wine, the weather, even the camaraderie) is secondary and should not be allowed to interfere with the purpose of the trip. John view is clear – go to win, or don't go – and he has lived by it for years. It's a big part of what's made him the best.

He has won almost everything on the UK scene (sadly a World Championship eluded him), has thought and written about every aspect of our competitions, and his ability to find thermals in the most unlikely conditions is legendary. He was on the scene before most current flyers had even heard of free flight, and has outlasted hundreds. For many of us, that first sight of JO'D – until then only a black and white image in the pages of Aeromodeller – was a genuine thrill. Quite a guy.