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contributed by Jill McCaw

A new home for Canterbury Gliding Club

ON April 14th the Canterbury Gliding Club celebrated the opening of their own airfield. The new development at Springfield in Canterbury, approximately one hour's drive from Christchurch, is a dedicated gliding field complete with cross vectors and a large hangar. And thanks to the generosity and fore thought of some current and past members, the club owns the airfield.

Saturday 14 April was a dismal day for flying activities. Cloud base was on the ground and it was bitterly cold. That didn't stop around three hundred people from sheltering in the new purpose built 100m x 15m hangar to listen to speeches, presentations and some wonderful live music. (The hangar has 9 bays and can accommodate around 14 gliders.) None of the flying activities planned for the day occurred which was a shame. Late afternoon the cloud lifted enough to allow a couple of winch launches to take place with one of the club's two seaters taking some ex-members for a quick ride.

Canterbury Gliding Club has come a long way since the mid 1990s when the plan to find the club a permanent home first germinated in the mind of the then club president Jerry O'Neil. In those years the club was operating off a recreational reserve in Hororata owned by the Department of Conservation. This land was administered by the local council who gave all the day to day responsibilities to a reserve committee.

Jerry O'Neil explains. "During this period the main strategic issue on my mind was long term tenure of Hororata. Our lease for the site was due for renewal in 2011 which at that time seemed a long way off. I knew however that if the club could not renew the lease, or had a lease with unfavorable terms, then gliding would be virtually finished in Canterbury." At his own expense Jerry engaged a resource lawyer who confirmed that the best option for the club was to own an airfield. "I resolved to find and personally purchase a suitable site as soon as possible because farm prices were very low at that time. This was before the dairy boom. The first thing I did was to determine the criteria for a suitable site, a whole subject of its own. It took about two and a half years of covert looking to find the farm for sale at Clover Hill near Springfield."



Ploughed and ready to sow (showing temporary strip used while main vectors were being developed).



Club members have turned out for some quite intensive working bees



Farmer club members have provided specialist know-how, equipment and time.



A busy and active gliding site.



Springfield provides easy access to the playground of the Canterbury Plains and Southern Alps.

With the financial help of his friends, pioneer glider pilots and long term CGC members Dick Georgeson and Jon Hamilton the farm was purchased. Most members of the club still knew nothing of the plan. After the purchase a trust was formed to hold the land asset and to ensure the property is available for the Canterbury Gliding Club well into the future.

One of the first to be let into the secret was Warwick Bethwaite who became the project manager for the field development. It is about ten years since Warwick took what was then a working farm and began the processes involved in turning it into an airfield. He says, "Club members Pete Chadwick and Rob Hay were involved from day one. We drew up a number of development scenarios and long lists of things to do. Council compliancy issues and effects on our new neighbours soon became the obvious big ones that needed immediate action." Resource consents took up a great deal of time.

A certificate of compliance was eventually issued and finally the club members were let into the secret. Members then got down to the real work. Hedges were removed, fences came out, cattle yards were dismantled, trees cut down, bonfires lit, conditioning crops planted, ground levelled, drains re-routed, concrete laid, vectors planted, new fences built, access tracks and a carpark formed. A large hangar was built and work still remains on the camping ground and kid's playground. The place will be very family friendly.

Warwick says, "We had to hire in some heavy machinery for some of these jobs, but a lot of the work has been done by a small number of dedicated club volunteers. It's taken a while but it's looking stunning and the soaring we're having from the site shows Jerry O'Neil's choice was a good one."

For visitors wanting to come and see, the Canterbury Gliding Club's new home is just off Highway 73. Turn onto Dalethorpe Road at Annat. The field is on the left when you run out of seal. The club's phone number is (03) 318 4758. Please no fly ins though. It's a glider field.

I'm Jill McCaw and I'm editor and publisher of SoaringNZ, the official journal of Gliding NZ. For subscriptions and details on other gliding clubs see the GNZ website: www.gliding.co.nz