



contributed by John Nicolson with assistance from Dave Paul

Ag. Planes Past and Present

Part 1 - The Miles Whitney Straight and Auster B.8 Agricola

John Nicolson says he was first attracted to aerial topdressing aircraft as a wide-eyed youngling during the mid to late 1950s. He confesses that ag. planes became an obsession, a consequence of which has been an ample photo collection, much of which has been gifted to him over the years. Readers will be both enlightened and entertained as John looks closely through the dust and bird

droppings at a variety of history making New Zealand aircraft over the next several issues. It won't all be about history though, as many of these types are still in service today, albeit perhaps in different roles to that of their original purpose. We start the series right at the beginning, with Government backed trials of lupin seed sowing along Ninety Mile Beach.

NEW Zealand's eco-credentials in terms of aerial agricultural are well documented as a world-wide leader in the industry. The idea of aerial agriculture in New Zealand (and the world) surfaced in 1906 when Kiwi John Chaytor, a farmer in Marlborough, used a hot air balloon to spread grass seeds over a large boggy and non-productive area of his farm. In 1926 another Kiwi farmer, John Lambert, thought it would be a good idea to apply fertiliser from a plane over the many hilly parts of his farm. But the idea, seemingly, went down like a lead balloon. In fact those in the 'circle' thought the man was bonkers. Even the government of the day turned their nose up at the idea of aerial topdressing.

ZK-AFH Miles Whitney Straight

As it happened, somebody must have dropped a flea in the ear of a high level official because it was the government that actually sparked what was to become aerial topdressing and/or aerial cropspraying, as we know it, in the late 1930s. From the late 1930s and on into the early 1940s, Alan Prichard, a pilot for the Public Works Department, flew government-backed trials of lupin seed sowing along Ninety Mile Beach - Prichard was later trialling the technique of spreading super and he had much earlier been sowing seeds for a farmer from a DH.60 Gipsy Moth. For the trials, Prichard flew the department's two-seat 130hp Miles Whitney Straight (ZK-AFH), which had been fitted with a specially-built hopper that could provide for a 330lb/150kg payload.

Alan Prichard initially sowed a ton of seed in seven hours of flying, over two days. And in mid 1946, ZK-AFH, when flown by another Government pilot, spread 5,900lb of bluestone crystals over 1,400 acres of land in the Thames area.



This UK immigrant in Miles Aircraft's 1936 Miles M-11A Whitney Straight was owned by the NZ Public Works Department in the late 1930s and was flown mainly by their Chief Pilot Alan Prichard up until the 1950s. Eight Whitney Straights arrived here in the late 1930s, three of which served with the RNZAF. ZK-AFH was withdrawn from use in 1962 and was scrapped c. 1966. (John Nicolson Collection)



Looking every bit bullish, gawky even, is this 260hp Auster B.8 Agricola, which was ultimately dogged here by the Fletcher. Agricola insiders were fond of the B.8's light stick forces, its great visibility from the cockpit (pilot being seated ahead of the hopper) and they say it was nice to fly - especially at slow speeds. November 1956 - BMJ went to Airlift (NZ) Ltd, ex-Bristol Aeroplane Co NZ Ltd (the Kiwi agency.) August 1960 - BAC repossessed BMJ and it was thus transferred to Associated Farmers Aerial Work Ltd of Martinborough at the same time. 1960 - leased to Air Contracts Ltd at Masterton and was there equipped with a 260hp Continental six engine. BMJ suffered a few 'typical industry' prangs thereafter.

August 1977 - registration cancelled. (John Nicolson Collection)

remnants of BMK, BML and CCV. The Kiwi Agricola's flew with Air Contracts (BMJ/BXO/CCU/CCV), Airlift (BMJ/BMM/BMK), Rangitikei Air Services (BML), and Associated Farmers Aerial Work (BMJ, BMM, BMN, BXO and DEU.)

Our last surviving B.8 Agricola (BXO) went to the UK in 2005 and is today the only one of its type still flying in the world. John Stephenson, who restored BXO, had connections with the Agricola in NZ spanning many years.

Talking about on the job statistics, and comparatively speaking, an Oamaru ag. pilot flew his 750shp Cresco through a working day of 10 hours during which time he spread 340 tonnes of solids (a metric tonne = 2,204lb) - the Cresco's usual payload is around 4,400lb.

ZK-BMJ Auster B.8 Agricola

BMJ, C/n B.102, was one of six, of only nine ever UK-built Agricolas to come here, starting in 1956 (with one as a spare) - thus BMJ, BMK, BMM, BMN, BML and CCV. The Kiwis had originally ordered 15 Agricolas.

Known light-heartedly as the 'Flying Hen Coop,' the Agricola, which was manufactured by Auster, could haul upwards of 1,700lb of super and was powered first by a 240hp Continental engine before five Kiwi B.8's were fitted with a 260hp Continental engine - as in ZK-BMN, BMJ, BXO, DEU and CCU. The Agricola, having first flown in 1955, was built of fabric-over-steel framing and had a ROC of 770ft/min. The type was effectively up against the established FU24 and didn't really make much of a footprint on the local topdressing scene - and its life here is a bit higgledy-piggledy, to say the least. Agricolas BXO, CCU and DEU were build-ups in NZ - CCU, for example, was made up from the hand-picked