

Sydney Flyer



In today's *Sydney Flyer* article, SFC private member, and PPL holder Colin Dibdin shares his recent experience converting from steam gauges to the digital flight deck onboard our new Archer TX fleet. ...

Converting to the Piper Archer TX

Part of the joy of flying is the satisfaction of achieving goals. Today I am feeling satisfied after my first private hire of the new Archer TX. It was not an easy goal to reach, but well worth the effort.

I have a PPL with 450hrs mainly in single engine Pipers and Cessnas – all with the circular analogue dials. My first solo was at Griffith Aero Club in 1973 while still too young to drive. Over the decades I would fly intensively for a few months and then not use my licence for a couple of years, and then refresh my knowledge enough to pass a flight review and repeat the process. It was the best way to keep my passion for flying affordable and safe. That – and flying only in good weather, over familiar terrain, with full tanks.

In 2007 I gave up flying for good, or so I thought. My “last flight” was with SFC in VH-SFR. Although the passion was always there (I would ride my bicycle to the end of RWY16 at Sydney on weekend mornings to be under the international arrivals on short final) the money wasn't. But 14 years later I figured that, if I dipped into my retirement savings, I could still be a pilot.

My first step was to do a few hours with a school other than SFC. I learned that I had a lot of re-learning to do. Bankstown was busy and confusing. I took a month off work to familiarise myself with the VFRG, re-read the theory books, practice checklists, and find out about changes to airspace and radio procedures. I passed a flight review while on holiday in South Australia. That gave me enough confidence to come back to Bankstown and find SFC in its new Birch St location.

Although SFC has always been friendly and professional with a good fleet of aircraft for hire, I could not help but notice how it had grown since 2007, and had developed systems to manage a complex operation. The member induction kit, quick reference handbooks and the detailed lists of checks and procedures were most impressive, and almost seemed a bit too much for a private pilot like me whose checklists had been more pocket-sized. I had no plans to be an airline pilot. Still I immediately appreciated that I was part of a club where everything was geared to increasing my competence and therefore my confidence too.

The news that SFC had acquired a fleet of brand new Archer TXs gave me an exciting goal to work for, so that I could fly new aircraft all with autopilots. A bonus was that I would be compelled, albeit reluctantly, to learn the Garmin 1000 electronic flight instrument system.



Colin enjoying VH-XHE on a private hire to Parkes

I say 'reluctantly' because I can glance at a circular altimeter or ASI and instantly "see" my altitude and airspeed, but when looking at a "tape" I see only a number which needs some mental interpretation. That was my thinking then, and to some extent still is. However that was not my main problem. My biggest challenge was the number of buttons and knobs. If I want to set a target altitude I must use a knob. I look down at the panel and see knobs everywhere. 9 on the PFD, 9 on the MFD and 1 on the audio panel. My 7yo granddaughter could master this in 5 minutes, but I need to practice a lot and only gradually does it start to stick in my mind. And don't get me started on the knobs within the knobs, and the buttons and soft keys. I just want to look at the scenery!

There are some excellent YouTube videos for learning the G1000. I watched a few, several times each, and it really did help. Also helpful was an hour in the simulator, and time just alone sitting in the TX practicing checklists with the engine off.

Another trick, which I do NOT recommend, was to flatten the battery of an Archer III as I practiced entering a flight plan into the Garmin 430 (which is not unlike a G1000) with the master switch on and the engine off. Sorry club members.

A useful aspect of my conversion to the Archer TX was the endorsement questionnaire. This really got me looking into the Pilot Operating Handbook and other documents. In 50 years of

flying the Pipers and Cessnas I have never really studied a POH, and therefore never properly known the aircraft I was flying. That changed as I worked my way through the TX questionnaire. It took me a couple of weeks to complete. I'm obviously still a beginner but I feel that I know much more now.

Back to the G1000. Three days ago my VERY patient instructor, Tarquin, and I flew to Maitland for a few circuits and back again. On the return leg I was so slow with the knobs, and mystified by the sequence of buttons to achieve an outcome, that I convinced myself that the G1000 was not for me. I was resigned to sticking with the relatively simple but aging Warriors and Archers. To my surprise, however, Tarquin did not see me as a hopeless case, and signed me off on the conversion to the Archer TX.

Today, in the run-up bay, on my own, I did all the checks and entered a flight plan with 15 waypoints. After departing, when north of Parramatta, I felt comfortable to use the autopilot. Enroute I had time to explore the features of the G1000 while still enjoying the scenery and making sure that the autopilot was doing as expected. The Traffic Advisory System was very useful for sighting, communicating with and avoiding, two potential conflicting aircraft (approaching Maitland and approaching 2RN). The landing wasn't bad. The Archer TX quick reference handbook ensured nothing was missed. I felt a sense of satisfaction knowing that, with effort and patient instruction, a small mountain was climbed, and the learning continues, as does the joy of flying.

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