

Grand Designs

TOM BAILEY TRACKS DOWN REVERED MODEL DESIGNER / BUILDER TONY NIJHUIS

Despite one heavily delayed main-line train into London Bridge and two short-but-unbearably-clammy tube rides, I still arrived at Chancery Lane half an hour before the time I had pre-arranged with Tony. I did what any self-respecting journalist would do: I headed to the pub. To think over my selection of possible questions, naturally.

When the time came, I took the short walk to the offices of building service engineers Andrew Reid & Partners, where Tony works full-time as a Mechanical Consulting Engineer. I had been told before coming along to do the interview that Tony had taught himself to build at a very young age. As we sat down for a chat, I wondered if anyone had introduced him to the hobby, or if he had truly investigated all on his own: "It's true, looking back. Neither my mother or father were interested in aviation. Well, my mother worked for Miles Aircraft (and others) during the war in the drawing and design office, but there wasn't an interest outside of that, so there was no direct influence. It was always an uphill battle to go and do anything related with aeroplanes." So how did his interest start? "If you're interested in aviation, there's something deep down inside of you

which always sparks that off," says Tony. "There's a deep fascination that you can't put your finger on, but it's just there. I think all aviation buffs and all modellers have always had that."

I was interested in finding out how a young boy with an interest in aviation went about tackling the indifference surrounding him and educating himself in the way of modelling. "The simple way of doing it was going to model shops and, where I could, buying magazines. But we never made special trips to the local model shop. It was always a case of dragging my parents kicking and screaming in there if we were ever passing - and we were always in and out as quick as possible. My family could never understand the fascination.

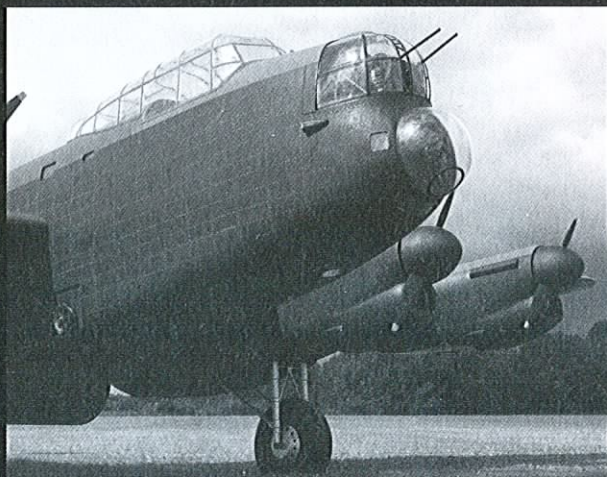
"I was always technically minded, so I could always draw things. I was literally doing three-view drawings at the age of four or five, as it was the easiest way of finding out how everything went together. Then, I would experiment: models were expensive, but bundles of balsa and other bits and pieces were relatively cheap. So I drew plans up, often on wallpaper lining or newspaper. That's where it all started, the design process. It was just the need to do something unique and for myself, without the help of anyone else. It was self-teaching, the only way you could do it."

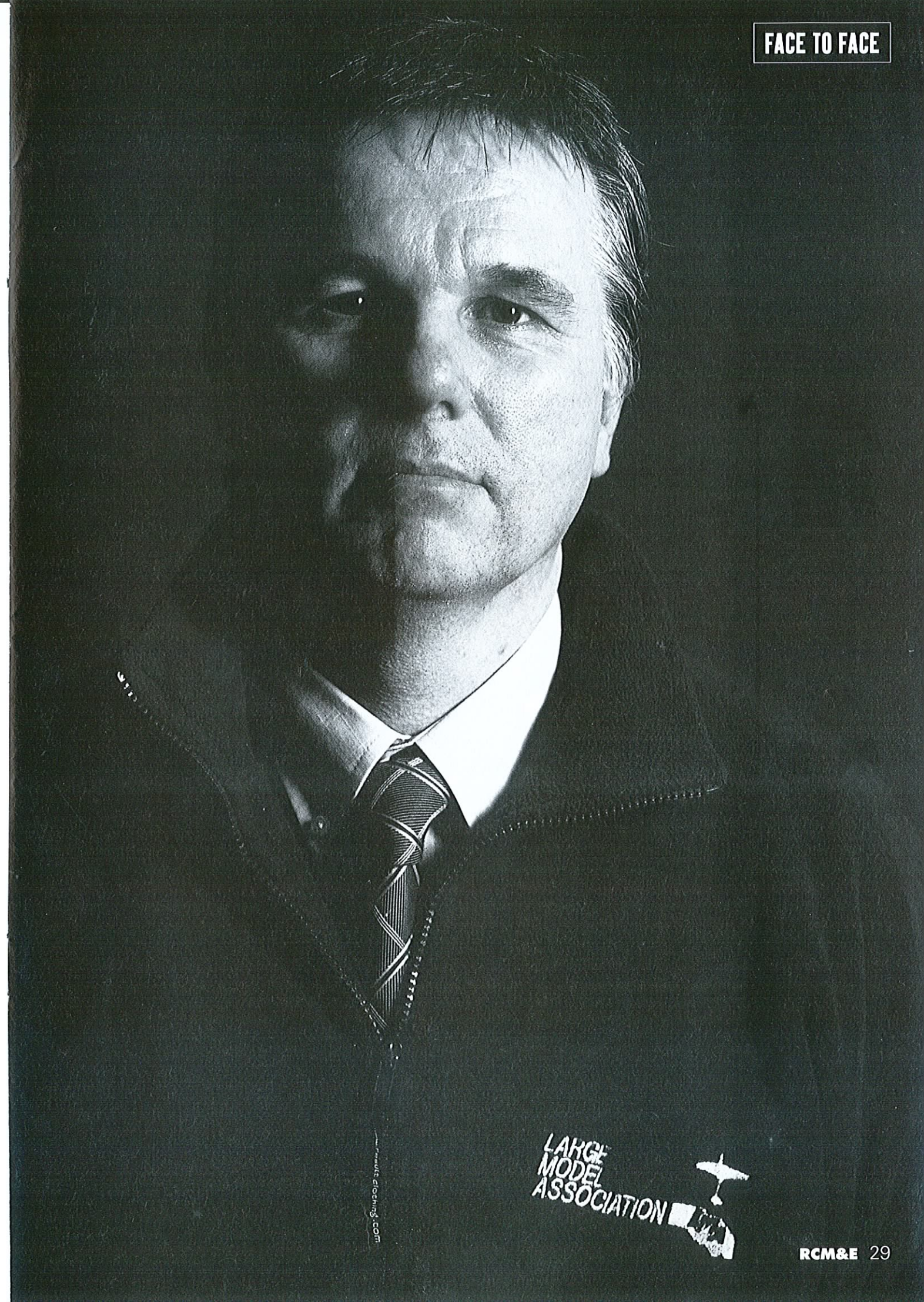
Talking to Tony, you get a feeling that the sense he describes, of doing something unique, is still what drives him today. It was certainly a contributing factor to the setting up of Westfield Models, the model business Tony started after being made redundant in 1991. He was already in contact with various people in the industry, so he put forward a proposal for four fun fighters: a MiG 15, Saber, Vampire and P80 Shooting Star. "I built them, flew them, did all the publicity for them," he says. "Then I went to see the main distributors. They were

interested, and they knew from my background that I could deliver the goods." For the next couple of years, that's exactly what he did. He added more to the range over time, and began to get them CNC-cut, making things considerably easier at his end. "Even so, once it becomes a full time hobby and you're manufacturing non-stop, it gets gut-wrenching," he says. "Enough was enough, so I scaled it down and went back to making a proper living. Instead of permanent distribution - piling it high and selling it cheap - I went direct to a few selected model shops. Now I pile it low and sell it slightly more expensively. There are now 12 in the range, but the volume is far, far less. I still do it because it's nice to get feedback from people who have built the kits. The philosophy was to build something that was of very good quality, and that's still how I see it." How about people who would say: "Well, I can buy an ARTF kit a lot cheaper?" "I'd say go ahead and buy one," says Tony. "You're buying my kits for a price because of the design and the effort that goes into them, and I know for a fact, the people that buy them appreciate exactly that."

So with a model business (albeit scaled down), a demanding full-time job and a wife and four children to go home to - not forgetting his LMA duties as a regional inspector, how on earth does Tony find the time to indulge in his favourite hobby? The answer is astonishingly frank: "I don't sleep much. If I'm on a roll then four hours sleep is the most I would have. Building time is usually from around 10pm in the evening until maybe 3am. Unfortunately I often have to get up at 6am and jump on a train up to London for work. However, what the train does is give you two hours each way for either sleep, writing or even drawing - I do all my stuff on AutoCAD, so I can use a laptop on the train. Effectively I get four hours a day to do work associated with my hobby.

With a massive 17ft wingspan this is Tony's largest Lancaster so far. And, of course, it's electric!





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Now, if you set aside four hours a day for anything, you can actually get quite a lot done. Your phone isn't going off, people aren't asking you questions. I'll also sometimes build on the weekend - but then the kids are around and it's a family thing, which is nice."

Tony's also notorious for building models incredibly quickly. He's got a simple reason for it: "I get bored. Invariably I'll be building two or three things at any given time. Doing one and having to wait for glue to dry is just horrendous. It's like watching paint dry. I think I'm the

keep the continuity going. We all say it's a dying hobby, because you look at the average age of the modeller down the club field, and they tend to be retired. That can't be good - what happens in 20 or 30 years time? Will every model club in the country close down? I mean yes, they probably will get a lot smaller. That's why the priority has to be to give clubs and modelling in general as high a profile as possible, and to get younger people in through promotion.

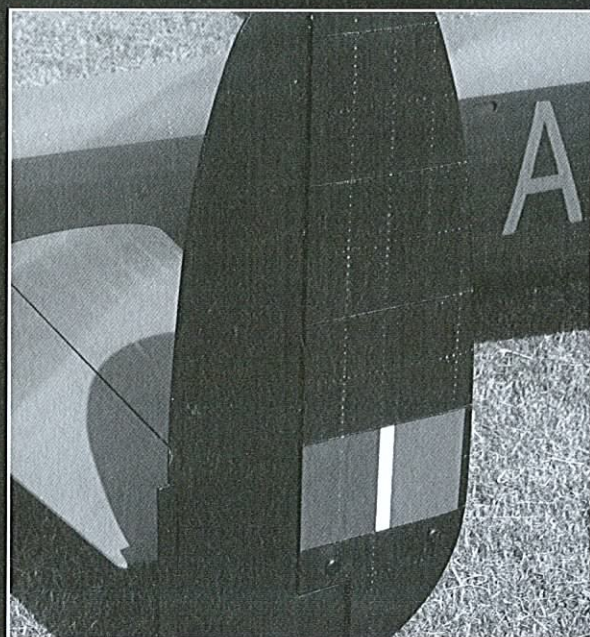
"Having said that, you'll find that modelling will always be safe

"The benefits of electric now outweigh the benefits of i.c. in all aspects. It does point to electric being the ultimate way forward, but you won't convince some people. Go to your average club field and you'll find that i.c. outnumbers electric hugely. The older ones are more comfortable with i.c. because they don't quite understand how electric stuff works. There's so much information out there and the technology moves forward so quickly - it can become confusing. The biggest problem is getting that info across, letting people know

Tony with his SE5A 'Dogfight Double' design. There's also been a Fokker DVII, a Spitfire, a Messerschmitt 109 and now we're promised a Pacific duo for a brushless / Li-Po combination.



Impressive level of rivet detail on the tail of the 17ft Lancaster.



only one who uses fast cyano' with flash activator, because I want to get it done quickly!" It's also, of course, down to experience. "The design process allows me to build quicker," he says. "There's no thinking time; you already know how it's going to go together. You've designed it, you've drawn it, so you've seen in your own mind how it's going to look. The result is that you instinctively know which bit goes where. Before I know it, one of my fun fighters will be built and ready for covering in an evening. If I spent anything more than two weeks building one of my designs then I'd feel like I'm really struggling."

The conversation wanders onto the future of the hobby in general. I ask Tony if he thinks it's time to raise public awareness and attract new people. "It has to be important," he says. "You need to

because people retiring will always come fresh into it. You'll always have this 65 - 90 age bracket, and a percentage of those will be new to the hobby, despite being older. That's why it's reasonably safe, but it's still key to get younger people involved."

While we're on the subject of the future, I take the opportunity to probe Tony for his opinions on the i.c. versus electric debate. "Electric can now do everything i.c. can do," he says. "Everything but cut your finger off and get fuel on it! Seriously, the only thing it can't do is replicate the noise. Having said that, we're now starting to see sound generators. I've got an mp3 player with a Rolls Royce Merlin sound being digitally remastered. In fact, I was going to put that in the big Lanc, but the weight of putting in a 30 watt amplifier and speakers in the wings to drum out a full-size sound was just a bit OTT.

what kind of set-up they need. It's like the conversion from imperial to metric - you're always going to have people who are reluctant. They don't want to understand it. Electric does tend to encourage a younger crowd who enjoy the challenge of things moving on quickly."

We move onto the subject of model shows. Tony got involved with running the Hastings event in 1999, and continued to do so until 2004. The aim of the show, which first appeared in 1996, was to bring in enough cash to pay off the mortgage on the club field. By 2004, the show was a roaring success, and the club had accumulated enough money to pay for their site. "Model airshows in general do an excellent job of promoting aeromodelling," says Tony. "The Hastings show was great for that, bringing in people who maybe don't



fly themselves, but are interested in the subject matter - and maybe when they have time, they'll eventually go into it. The shows aim to bring a few thousand people in to see something that they maybe had no idea existed. It's a constant drive to educate people."

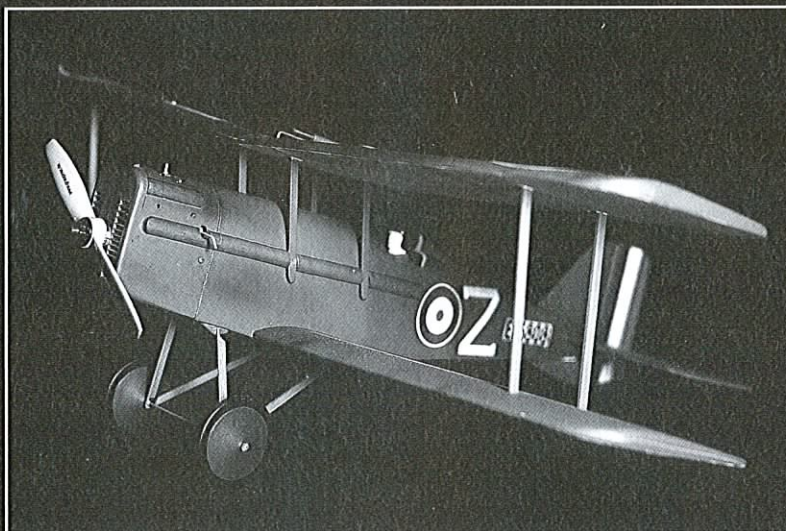
Somewhat inevitably, the conversation eventually turns to Lancasters - Tony has now designed and built eight of them in various guises. I put it to him that there's clearly an affection there. "It's obviously a favourite," he says. "I think it is for everyone. Along with the Spitfire, it's one of the more popular aircraft in the world. Certainly in terms of what modellers aspire to build. It's the epitome of the spirit of wartime Great Britain. I enjoy the challenge of making them bigger, or simply making them better, more scale-like. By doing that, I'm hopefully giving the avid scale builder out there a real chance to build what he considers to be his ultimate aeroplane. It's probably going to be the biggest and best model he's ever going to build, he's going to spend a lot of time on it, and it's going to be something he can be proud of." I ask if Tony enjoys that side of things - bringing pleasure to modellers, and at the same time maintaining an excellent reputation: "Absolutely. That's what drives you. You want to push the boundaries and make it perfect, so you don't get criticisms. Ultimately, if people don't like your plans, you'll be short lived." Are there poor plans out there, then? "Definitely. I've built

from a lot of plans in my life and working from a bad one can give you great incentive to do the job

There's absolutely no shortage of ideas. Even doing four or five plans a year, there aren't enough years left in my life to do all the models I want to do. So look out, Boddol!"

The name check confirms that Tony has huge respect for the likes of David Boddington - but also that he'd like to be considered alongside the greats when all is said and done. It's evident that the reputation he has worked so hard to achieve is terribly important to him. Tony is a man that takes immense pride in his work, and time after time the quality of the finished product is a testament to just that. In turn, we're proud to be able to bring you yet another new Nijhuis project in the near future - keep your eye out for a Pacific Dogfight Double before the end of the summer. Why so long? Well, we can't publish it before we've done the long-awaited B-17, now can we?

Not only does he build quickly, he builds accurately, too.



Well designed, painstakingly built, and thoroughly tested, every design is a winner in its own right. Unsurprisingly, the SE5A and Spitfire were particularly popular.

better. That's certainly what drove me from a very early age. It's crucial to me that I test my own designs, make sure they're right, and make sure they aren't altered in any way when being printed. I always take ultimate responsibility for my plans, as I do with my kits."

As I check my watch and see that our time together is drawing to a close, I ask how long he can go on for. Are there really that many more designs to tackle? "There's a list as long as my arm," says Tony. "I get so much feedback with ideas for new plans, and if something really interests you, then it suddenly jumps the queue. The Airbus A400 was a classic example of that."

