Like a duck to water

Photographs by TOM HAMILL

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WATER-BORNE AVIATION in Britain virtually vanished after World War Two, and with it much of the sense of liberty in aviation. For a nautical nation, bounded by innumerable good sheltered bays and with no shortage of inland water, this is perhaps a sad admission.

Ignorance of the sheer pleasure of operating off water contributes much to the absence of this activity. Meanwhile owners of water are unaware that any pollution is negligible compared with that of even a small outboard motor. Authorities seem as yet equally unaware that, in other parts of the world, seaplanes of all sizes operate safely from crowded harbours.

Recent attempts by the Tiger Club to find a fresh-water base for its Sea Tiger have highlighted this problem and have paved the way for moves to resurrect this activity. Now a small company in Chichester, heart of British boating, has joined the onslaught with the introduction of an inexpensive and versatile amphibian, the Thurston Teal.

Doyen of the company, Marinair (Transport) Ltd of 8 South Street, Chichester, sole European distributor for the Teal, is Chris Murphy. The aircraft itself was designed by David B. Thurston, the outcome of a lifetime of work with flying boats, which included the Mallard and Albatross during a career with Grumman. Production rights have just been taken over by Schweizer Aircraft Co of Elmira, NY.

I was not totally unfamiliar with the Teal, having had the opportunity to fly it briefly at Flight’s Cranfield show in September last year. The flight was, however, long enough to whet my interest and I was very happy to accept Chris’s invitation at the time for a full air test.

Meanwhile Chris took the Teal for an extended tour of Scotland on what he considered a highly successful operational feasibility study. As a result it was not until recently that I was able to fly it again, this time from its base at Goodwood, where it flies between the airfield and the Solent.

With its crisp blue and white colours added to its unusual shape, the aircraft appeared particularly conspicuous at the edge of the green, empty airfield. There is nothing sleek about the Teal on land; it squats low on its wheels, its dumpy nose tilted upwards as if to scorn comments about the engine protruding like an afterthought. There is, however, an air of distinction generated by an evidently rugged and practical appearance.

This latest model of the Teal has a back seat fitted across the fuselage. For the flight the seat was occupied by David Pelly of Yachting World, who had joined us to examine the Teal from the point of view of the sailor who might use such an aircraft to commute to his boat. This position was somewhat cramped and we both felt that an adult might suffer on a long journey. The extra seat, optionally a spacious baggage area, nevertheless offers that much flexibility over the earlier model. David Pelly’s observations were published in January’s Yachting World.

Access is via an extended window-cum-hatch on either side, an arrangement I found slightly cumbersome. The lower part, or window, is slid up behind the upper part or tinted roof-panel which then hinges up to near vertical to provide a large opening. A step is attached to both undercarriage legs and one must then stand on the seat before