

GA Safety



Landing Issues

Getting back in the air after the poor winter weather followed by the lockdown has resulted in a bit of a bumpy start for some people returning to flying - around 70% of the GA unit's Occurrence Reports covering May and June have involved some sort of landing difficulty.

While a few incidents have been airworthiness-related — problems lowering the landing gear or it collapsing — most have been down to pilot error, although right now 'rustiness' is probably a fairer way to put it. The most common problem, some 50% of the reports, has been loss of control during or just after touchdown, and there have also been several landings in the undershoot...

The approach and landing can be one of the most tricky flight phases, yet perhaps surprisingly some pilots actually do relatively few of them even if they fly regularly because they prefer to focus on cross-country flights, so for some that's perhaps only one or two take-offs and landings per trip.

Nobody wants to be patronising and tell pilots how to approach and land, most are way beyond that kind of advice, but with the higher than usual number of

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incidents this year it's worth remembering that the skills involved are, to use a turn of phrase, highly perishable both physically, such as muscle memory and reacting on the controls quickly and appropriately, and cognitive, making judgements and anticipating what might/will happen next.

What all this boils down to is that after a long lay-off (for any reason) it takes time to get the eye, hands and brain 'back in' — and if you don't believe it, there's also been a recent spate of runway incursions – with several down to rusty pilots rushing to get airborne...

The ideal, fairly obviously, if you're feeling a bit rusty after a long-ish lay-off is to do a quick circuit session with an instructor. Bad habits tend to creep in if techniques and skills are mis-remembered or mis-applied and 30 minutes circuit-bashing with someone watching and advising really is money well spent.

If you don't want to do that, have think about planning a handling and circuit session in the familiar surroundings of home base before heading off into the blue to another airfield with the increased workload and pressures that can bring — potentially different weather conditions, circuits, runway directions, traffic and procedures.

So perhaps choose a straightforward day rather than one when the met or wind conditions are a bit iffy — particularly if it's a crosswind — to give yourself the best opportunity to ease back in and fly with less pressure.

While it's tempting to 'just get on with it', have a think before starting up about the 'what-ifs' and how to handle them. How, for instance, would you tackle being 'cut up' on the approach, or a bounce on landing (if in doubt go-around and save the nose leg...), suppose a crosswind starts a ground loop (especially in taildraggers), what about windshear, all the usual things that can occur and, of course, not forgetting to rehearse the pre-landing checks and radio calls, it all makes life easier.

Essentially, the aim is to remind yourself of the necessary actions and responses both physical and mental should something unexpected happen, plus self-briefing potential eventualities every trip keeps it fresh in the mind.

In the air it's worth starting by practising general handling at height (give yourself 3,000ft to play with) and incorporating some other upper air work that's relevant to landing such as slow flight, stalls and recoveries in different configurations to remind yourself of the indications that you are approaching the edge of the envelope — and what to do if you do get there.

On that first circuit you don't have to land or roll off for another — practice establishing a good stable approach and getting the approach/landing 'picture' right again, then perhaps do a go-around so that you can really focus on the set-up. Once you've nailed that, do a roller, but do remember to pre-brief the take-off actions and contingencies for it.

This year there have also been some forced landing incidents and while no-one wants to have to make one, brushing-up on eventualities such as engine failures and PFLs isn't a bad idea; when was the last time you did one?

As we said earlier, this short piece isn't intended as an exhaustive 'How to Approach/Land' article, it's simply some reminders and suggestions aimed at helping to making landings go as smoothly as you'd like them to.

And finally, remember that it's not just down to you — the circuit is the airspace with the greatest mid-air collision risk and others might make mistakes (we're all human, after all), so lookout, think and fly defensively, and try to be ready for the unexpected.