

ALL IN A DAY'S INSPECTING...

Working in inspection and maintenance of balloons is interesting, but can be hard work. Becoming an inspector (a licensed aircraft maintenance engineer for balloons) can be a natural 'career' development for pilots and others with some practical skills and a suitable aptitude for documentation within a regulated environment. Allie Dunnington describes the training and workload involved.



Left: The inside story.

to grab test. Mixed equipment (bottom end from one manufacturer and envelope from another) brings extra complications. Some more time may be used with minor adjustments, changing cylinder O-rings and other tasks (some of which a pilot-owner might well do themselves during the year).

It might be a nice social occasion, but too much chat will extend the inspection duration. It's not the inspector's role to act as crew for unloading and packing the balloon. Check the balloon documentation files and manuals are up to date, then take away the logbook and a few other papers for work at the desk. Travel time each way.

PROCESS

We are documenting the annual inspection and reviewing the maintenance records so that an Airworthiness Review Certificate can be issued. This needs on-line checking of the latest information from manufacturers, the CAA and EASA. Often, the logbook needs to be tidied up, new or replacement equipment properly recorded and a log of the equipment state against Service Bulletins updated. The submission to the BBAC office is prepared, the ARC and other papers for the owner are printed. This is rarely less than two hours at the desk and often rather more.

SUBMIT AND FOLLOW UP

Hopefully the owner has paid the BBAC for the ARC by now; if not chase them on

Many balloon owners don't realise the training required to become, and the workload involved in being, an inspector. They may undervalue the services they access from an inspector and be surprised when the inspector asks for payment for their professional services, even at a modest level.

Becoming an inspector needs a significant investment of personal time and money. It's rather like doing a short apprenticeship course spread over a year or more, with 'on the job' training, courses at a manufacturer and with the BBAC, some testing and, since this year, also some exams. We need to think of the future and encourage new, younger entrants into the inspecting world. I doubt that we can do that unless it's clear that they should be able to get some modest income from their inspecting activities. So

what about the inspection process, both visible and out of sight? It might go like this:

PREPARE

Review last year's inspection paperwork (you might need to contact the BBAC office if done by another inspector), check on new Service Bulletins, Flight/Maintenance Manual updates and other changes so that the right tasks are done at the inspection. Liaise with the owner on setting up the inspection, location and weather.

INSPECT

Arrive to find (hopefully) a well organised kit, with cylinders out of the basket and jackets off, for their external inspection. It can easily take two hours to do the thorough inspection needed of a balloon with extra cylinders and many fabric colours



© Phil Hooper

Above: Grab test. Will it rip?

behalf of BBAC. Send the submission to the BBAC office and deal with any queries. Update your own inspector (engineer) logbook and file records. Phew, time for a glass of wine!

After 4–6 hours' work (in the field, at the desk and travel), what should I be charging the owner? When I wondered about this, I looked at the rates for other 'professionals'. We all have a rough idea what a plumber or similar tradesperson working in your home charges (£30–50 per hour). At the non-professional end of the scale, a cleaner or carer can easily charge £15/hr. Looking at other sports/pastimes, apparently it costs around £90 to shoe a horse, several times a year; to do the annual inspection and maintenance for a glider is £290+VAT in a well-known club, plus the ARC fee. Perhaps the BBAC should publish some guidance.

Paul Spellward comments, in his role as Chairman of the BBAC Technical Committee:

UK ballooning relies on its pool of around forty inspectors (licensed engineers from Summer 2020) to keep us flying. As we read in Allie's piece, undertaking an annual inspection for a small balloon and doing the associated airworthiness review and other paperwork takes typically 4–6 hours depending on the amount of equipment, its age and condition and also the state



Above: Back at the desk, the paper chase.



Above: Lined up ready for inspection.

of the logbooks, flight manuals and other paperwork, plus any travel time. Whilst many inspectors work partly to support our sport, the amount of time expended, especially at the desk after the inspection, means that they need to earn something for their efforts.

For reference, the BBAC suggests an inspector charge of £100–£150 for a private balloon, probably plus mileage, (and proportionally more for commercial balloons); the actual amount is a matter for individual inspectors to decide for each balloon they are asked to inspect. At the rates suggested, inspectors

come very cheaply compared to many tradespeople, let alone other licensed professionals.

It is also important to remind balloon owners that the inspector works under the authority of a Maintenance and Airworthiness Organisation, which must also make a charge to cover its costs. The BBAC charges £95 when an Airworthiness Review Certificate is issued for a privately owned and operated balloon; this charge is paid to BBAC by the owner and is separate from the charge made by the inspector.

© Paul Spellward

© Paul Spellward