



Some 65 private and commercial aircraft are based at Stow's Minute Man Air Field – all propeller-driven and mostly single-engine planes used for business and recreational flying.

24. Airplane Things

Among Massachusetts towns, Stow has a singular relationship with flying. As home to three widely dissimilar airfields, Stow's skies on the right day might have twin-engine corporate Cessnas flying into and from Minute Man Air Field, ultralight "trikes" soaring above Crow Island on the Assabet River and vintage World War II aircraft – from both sides – circling the Collings Foundation near Lake Boon.

That's not counting the guys who show up some afternoons practicing barrel-rolls and other stunts over the Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge. They're from an acrobatic flying school based at Hanscom Field in Bedford.

Stow's oldest and busiest flying center is Minute Man Air Field (www.minutemanairfield.com), off Boxborough Road, the only Stow airfield open to public use. In 1963, an enthusiasm for aviation led farmer Henry Erikson to construct a grass runway in a hayfield. Erikson Field was licensed as a private, noncommercial landing strip.

It became Minute Man Air Field after Acton businessman Paul McPherson found himself dissatisfied with Hanscom, where

he based his Cessna Skylane. In 1966, he bought Henry Erikson's airstrip and surrounding acres, paved the runway and opened it three years later as a small working airfield for private aircraft with the services he felt Hanscom lacked.

Among those services: Peg's Place, a restaurant run by his wife (Peg, of course). Since Paul McPherson's death in 1972, the airfield has been operated by his son Don, whose wife, Nancy, today continues the restaurant as Nancy's Air Field Café (www.nancysairfieldcafe.com).

Along with the café, Minute Man hosts a flying school, an aircraft repair company, a helicopter group involved in aerial photography and scenic tours, and several other businesses.

On Wednesdays, members of the flying community often undertake group "fly outs," going to sites throughout New England for lunch or dinner. Members of EAA Chapter 196 operate a "Young Eagles" program that gives kids free airplane rides and encourages their interest in flying.

And Minute Man is home to a program called "Angel Flights," in which local pilots fly non-critical, ambulatory



Rob Albright compares a “trike” ultralight aircraft to a motorcycle with wings. Here: a trike and hanger at Stow’s Crow Island. Also, a plain old, totally wingless motorcycle.

patients from throughout New England to Boston and other sites for medical care.

In the days following the 9-11 attacks in 2001, when aircraft throughout the country were grounded, Minute Man was one of the few airfields that were operational, supporting flights to Washington for staff from the Federal Emergency Management Agency in Maynard.

Aviation at Crow Island grew from the fascination for ultralight aircraft that Stow resident Robert Albright discovered in the 1970s. Introduced to hang gliding by a friend, he initially travelled to Colorado to sail off high peaks there.

By the early 1980s, he had moved up to powered ultralights, bought Crow Island as a place to indulge his passion, built a hangar and a 2,300-foot grass airstrip, and created a center for alternative aircraft.

Today, a dozen or so ultralight enthusiasts from throughout New England keep their craft at Crow Island, flying trikes and other sport flying machines. A trike is a three-wheeled cart with cloth wings, a propeller and a motor about the size of a snowmobile engine.

You might be tempted to say that it has an open-air cockpit, except that you’d be

more likely to say it doesn’t have a cockpit at all. Technically, by FAA standards, if it weighs less than 250 pounds it’s an ultralight. If it weighs more than that it’s a “light sport” aircraft.

Albright flies three or four times a week during good-weather months, usually at 1,500 to 5,000 feet. He sometimes flies in winter – the trikes can be equipped with skis. Ultralight fliers dress warmly.

Crow Island is also the base for the Air America Flying School (www.flytrikes.net), run by Albright and some friends. To find out if you’d like it, you can take an introductory flight for \$40.

The Collings Foundation (www.collingsfoundation.org) was established in 1979 by Robert Collings, a former high-tech executive who retired to concentrate on philanthropy, creating a non-profit foundation committed to educating visitors through exposure to “living history” programs and artifacts. Originally, its focus was on transportation events like antique car rallies, sleigh-rides and winter ice-cutting festivals on Lake Boon.

From this start grew its collection of more than 60 classic automobiles, from a 1903 Franklin horseless carriage to a 1928

During Collings Foundation open houses, the aircraft and automobile collections are open for viewing and aircraft rides are available.



Pierce Arrow limousine to the Formula-One racer Mario Andretti drove in the 1980 Indianapolis 500 (he finished 20th).

During the mid-1980s, the Foundation broadened its focus to encompass aviation, including events like air shows, barnstorming and historical reunions.

Today, the collection holds 22 historic aircraft, from an original 1909 Bleriot XI (the model that was the first to fly across the English Channel) to a 1944 Grumman TBM Avenger (perhaps the U.S. Navy's best known carrier-based fighter/bomber).

The collection includes a German Feisler Storch spotter plane used in World War II and a replica of the 1917 German tri-winged Fokker flown by the "Red Baron" in World War I. Most of the planes in the collection are still capable of flight.

From the Collings Foundation's point of view, its most elaborate activities are the "Veterans' Wings of Freedom Tour,"

which don't take place in Stow at all. Based in Florida, "Wings of Freedom" takes restored World War II B-24 and B-17 ("Flying Fortress") bombers to air shows around the United States, honoring veterans and giving audiences a chance to tour these historic aircraft – and to fly in them.

Over 18 years, the "Wings of Freedom Tour" has made more than 2,100 appearances throughout the country. A newer program, "Vietnam Memorial Flights," has a similar role with a Phantom jet and other Vietnam-era aircraft.

From Stow's point of view, the Collings Foundation means the museum off Barton Road where the aircraft and automobile collections are preserved.

The museum hosts some 20 events annually, including the Stow 5th-grade auto and aircraft history day, fund-raising events for non-profit groups such as breast cancer and type-1 diabetes research and several open houses for the public.

Collings open houses usually have a theme. "The Race of the Century" focuses on advances in transportation technology. Here, a Stearman biplane and a sprint race car compete. On this day, the sprint racer won – just barely.

