On the dirt

If you want to fly to Jandakot and you haven't been there for a while, you'll do your homework so you have a chance of dealing with all the downsides of the place, such as clearances, inbound points, traffic, radio chatter and landing charges. But what homework should you do if you fly to somewhere that has none of Jandakot's downsides but none of its good points either, such as bitumen strips with centrelines, windsocks, TAFs, ATIS and fuel?

Preparation

If you're flying to a certified aerodrome – shown with a white background in ERSA or by a blue circle superimposed on a cross on the charts – you can trust the published information, whether it's in ERSA or NOTAMs. Information about an uncertified aerodrome, on the other hand, is subject to change without notice, so you need to contact the aerodrome operator to be sure about serviceability and facilities. Uncertified aerodromes such as Northam are marked with a blue circle on the charts and by a grey background in ERSA. Many of those have limited detail in ERSA, and the Country Airstrip Guide is a better source of information. Bear in mind though, the CAG is only updated every couple of years, which means the "change without notice" may take a couple of years to appear in writing.

"Certified" versus "uncertified", however, still doesn't cover the ones that really require you to do your homework – the bits of dirt that aren't marked on any chart. They're the ones that you really need to talk to the owner about. Here are some questions you should think about. (What questions can you add to this list? Discuss over beer at the bar.)

- How long is the strip?
- What's the elevation?
- What's the direction?
- What's the surface?
- Is there a slope?
- What markings does it have? Tyres, gables, nothing at all.
- If it's dirt or gravel, how long since it's been graded?
- Where is the windsock? What colour is it? It'll be that little bit easier to find if you know exactly what you're looking for.
- Is there any weather that the Area Forecast won't tell me about?
- Tell me about the surrounds. Terrain, fences, trees.
- What else uses the strip? Cattle, sheep, roos, emus?

There are plenty of dirt strips around that may be marginal in terms of length if you have a full load on a hot day. Do your takeoff weight calculations.

When Simon Cooper and I flew CMP to its new owner back in 2007, I rang and asked about the strip. The owner told me it was east-west and the elevation was 600 or 700 ft if I remember rightly. On arrival we found a strip orientated roughly 05-23, and at 1700 feet we were most definitely not 1000 ft AGL! Be cautious about word-of-mouth, unpublished information.

And remember the owner of a bush strip may have been flying out of it since Pontius was a student pilot, and he knows all of its intricacies – the surface, surrounds, how the wind over the trees creates downdraughts on late final on approach from the west in the morning – but you don't, so don't be scared to ask all the questions you think you need to.

If he's a farmer, "Yeah, the surface is looking fantastic" may mean, "Yeah, we've had 4 inches in the last two weeks and it's lovely and lush and green." That may be good news for the adjacent crops, but nice long grass and wet earth is not so good when you're trying to get airborne with a bum on every seat.

Northam is a good example for weather that the Area Forecast doesn't warn you about. "Fog clearing by 0100Z" on the forecast doesn't cover Northam being in a hole where the fog can sit until 11 a.m. And the forecast certainly won't tell you that the strip usually has a nice gusty crosswind in the morning around this time of year.

Moora, which has featured in a number of our PPL Nav 3 lessons, is a good example of a strip you need to ring the owner about. There's a fence halfway (give or take) along the strip, so you'd like to know the gate will be open and that the stock aren't on the strip.

Strip inspection

You're not going to land on an unfamiliar piece of dirt without doing a strip inspection. Firstly, if there's no windsock and not much on the way inbound to help you with wind direction, and if it's safe to do so, overfly the strip at right angles no higher than 500 ft AGL and see which way you're drifting.

On a strip inspection you want to suss out the approach – trees, fences, powerlines – as well as the overshoot in case you have to go round, and the condition of the surface. Set the aeroplane up for safe slow flight – 70 knots and Flap 10 works well in the 172 – and get down to 100 feet if possible. At this height of course, you're going to be very conscious of having one eye on your attitude and speed, and one eye on the strip.

Another factor down low is convective turbulence. Low flying in the middle of a hot summer day may be such a bad idea that you plan your arrival for early or late in the cooler part of the day.

As you know from driving on country roads, roos rarely travel alone, so if you see them, look for their mates as well. And if it's sheep, bear in mind they're the stupidest creatures on earth that don't barrack for Collingwood, so on approach they're as likely to run towards you as to run away. And of course, if one decides on a suicide run across the strip, the other 100 will follow.

A useful bit of calculation: if you're not sure of the length, 1 knot is roughly 0.5 metres per second, so time your low pass: strip length (roughly) = ½ IAS × the time in seconds. 70 knots, 20 seconds from end to end, 35 × 20 = about 700 metres.

Approach and landing

Having gained an idea of wind and turbulence on approach, you can factor that into your approach. And depending on the strip length and surface, you may want to do a short or soft field approach and landing.

Taxiing

Assuming you've landed and taxied safely to a parking spot, you may need to plan your taxi for departure. If you have any doubt about the surface, walk it first.

The prop is a major consideration on a bush strip. Taxi with the stick held back to keep the weight off the nosewheel. That may give you a bit more prop clearance, and it will also minimise the chances of getting the nosewheel bogged.

Never have more than 1000 RPM when stationary on gravel. If there's nowhere free of gravel to do your run-ups, do them while taxiing, breaking the normal rule about not using power against brakes. Northam old-timers will remember that once upon a time the only bitumen on the airfield was at the holding points.

Take-off

What speed do you plan to rotate at? What will your initial climb speed be? Plan them, bearing in mind your best angle and rate of climb speed, and your stall speeds, clean and with take-off flap.

On a gravel strip, you don't want to do the short field take-off that you learnt in training because that means full power on the brakes, and stone chips for your prop. You'll apply power smoothly and just accept that it costs you a few extra metres. If the surface is anything other than firm, use a soft field take-off, which means you keep rolling and don't stop to line up, and get the nosewheel off the ground right at the start of the take-off roll.

Finally, of all the lessons in the RPL syllabus, the ones that usually elicit "I enjoyed that" from students are advanced turns, instrument flying, and short and soft field take-offs and landings. So if you're rusty on the last of those items and you'd like to brush up, give me a call and we'll go and have a bit of useful fun.