

Bond's 'Little Nellie' autogyro flies into

Made famous in *You Only Live Twice*, it is now on show in Barton. ADRIAN PEEL talks to Elliot Wallis about his family's fascinating history.

She memorably “defended her honour with great success” in the James Bond film *You Only Live Twice*, after receiving a “hot reception”, and now visitors to the Wallis & Son Land Rover showroom in Barton can see ‘Little Nellie’ – the world’s most famous autogyro helicopter – for themselves.

For Wallis & Son’s managing director, Elliot Wallis, is the second cousin of the late Ken Wallis – or Wing Commander Kenneth Horatio Wallis DSO MBE CEng FRAeS RAF, to give him his full title – the famed inventor, aviator and engineer who designed, built and flew Little Nellie on location in Japan as a stand-in for Sean Connery in the unforgettable 1967 British spy classic.

Little Nellie wasn’t the only gyrocopter of her type and Elliot now has all of the Wallis autogyros, bar two, in his possession.

He reveals that there were originally 19 Wallis autogyros, but one was sold by Ken’s son Jake in 2014 to an American buyer who is not interested in selling it back to the family.

Another one – the second ‘Little Nellie’, which Sean Connery sat in for the close-up shots against a green screen – is currently on display around Europe as part of the Bond in Motion tour. Elliot has also recently become one of the directors of the Wallis Heritage Ltd (wallistrust.org), the trust set up to look after Ken Wallis’s autogyros.

Ely-born Ken, who earned 34 world records for his work with gyrocopters, passed away in 2013 at the age of 97.

Elliot’s grandfather, Geoffrey Wallis, was Ken’s cousin and he notes that the autogyros were originally built at his grandfather’s house in Coton.

He remembers Ken, an RAF pilot and something of an eccentric figure, taking him up in one of the autogyros at Ken’s home in Norfolk when he was between 10 and 12 years old and says that the last time he saw him

was when his grandfather died in 1998.

“After grandfather passed away, I suppose there was less of a connection to Ken,” says Elliot, 47, who is very proud of his family history and plans to learn to fly next year, though he won’t be taking any of Ken’s autogyros up anytime soon. “Grandad and Ken hadn’t stayed in great touch, but they were still in touch.

“But after grandfather passed away, Ken and my grandfather’s family didn’t communicate very much. So time passed, and rolling around to 2017, it was our 80-year anniversary for our business.”

An anniversary party was held that year at Quy Mill, with Little Nellie as the star.

Wallis Heritage Ltd is jointly run by Ken Wallis’s daughter, Vicky Wallis, and other directors. Elliot’s

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Elliot Wallis

side of the family had somewhat lost touch with Ken’s side over the years, but Elliot visited the Wallis Heritage website and emailed Vicky. Happily, he received a reply.

“She then arranged to meet me at Shuttleworth’s [The Shuttleworth Collection at Old Warden in Bedfordshire, where Little Nellie was previously housed], and I went over to have a look at all the aircraft with her,” recalls Elliot, “and then it went from there.

“We’re trying to raise money for the trust, to keep the aircraft and maintain them, so she was going to rent me one for a photoshoot.

“Then I could pay an annual fee and have it here permanently with



Elliot Wallis in Little Nellie, made famous in the James Bond film *You Only Live Twice*

me and look after it and do shows and events, which we agreed to do.

“I picked it up in July 2022, brought it back here, cleaned it up – it was one of Ken’s record-breaking ones that had broken distance and speed records.

“We did a photoshoot with it, started doing a bit of social media marketing with it, which was great. Vicky and me got on really well and she was really pleased to have me on board.

“She said, ‘I want you to become heavily involved if you want to’ and obviously I was more than pleased to. So she said, ‘I’d like to put you on as a director on the trust’, which I’ve carried on doing.

“In November 2022, she had an email. The leadership team of The Shuttleworth Collection changed and the director who was in charge of the museum left, so that was a bit of a game-changer for us – also Vicky.

“A new chap came in and said, ‘Right, we’ve had these aircraft in our hangar since 2013 when Ken died, we haven’t charged anything because we’ve had Little Nellie on display, but it’s been nearly 10 years and next year unfortunately we’re going to have to start charging you storage of £14,000 a year’.”

Elliot notes that the trust only had a small amount in the bank account at that time and understandably Vicky started to panic. “I said, ‘I haven’t got room for 17 autogyros but I will make room’,” says Elliot, “so I then went to task, trying to make space.

“I sold a few vehicles to make space and rejigged stuff. I had lots of cars in storage that belonged to friends and colleagues.

“We cleared out a hangar which I’ve got at home, which was the original hangar which was used to store some of the aircraft back in the ‘80s, because we still live on the same premises where my grandfather bought in the late ‘50s, early ‘60s.

“So we went and collected them over a two-day period; we moved them all back in trailers back to my place. They’re in different states of conditions – flat tyres, dusty, cobwebs, bits missing off them, so we’re slowly restoring them. I’ve got six of them back here now at the garage.

“I’ve got Little Nellie back now – that was the prime one. Little Nellie was a bone of contention with Shuttleworth’s; they obviously wanted to keep it, they didn’t really want to let it go, but we said to them,

‘Well if you don’t want to store them, then we’ll have Little Nellie back’.

“She took a little trip to London for a couple of months – she was in Harrod’s front window over Christmas for a Bond promotion of Macallan whisky, which is James Bond’s whisky, so they hired it.

“She does get hired for events like that, and she does corporate events. That’s an area that I want to develop more, to help keep the other aircraft maintained.

“So we got Little Nellie back here in March time to stay with us; she sits now in the front showroom being the star of the fleet.”

The filming of the Little Nellie scene in *You Only Live Twice* required 48 hours of flying time and 80 action shots for just six minutes of footage.

“One of the things he [Ken] always says in his YouTube videos is that it was bloody cold,” says Elliot, “because he said that they’d decided to sit Bond in a linen shirt in the film and he said at 6 o’clock in the morning at 6,000 feet it was so cold!”

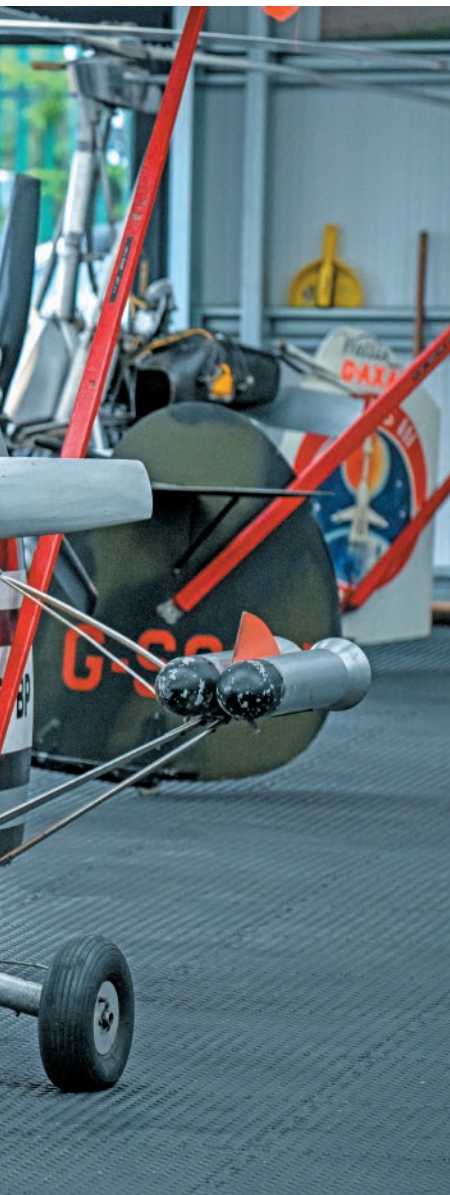
Elliot says many visitors to his showroom stop to look at Little Nellie and take pictures through the window.

“So many people ask me whether



Little Nellie in the air
Pictures: Wallis family

Wallis & Sons' showroom



Picture: Keith Heppell

it's the real thing – 'Is it the one from the film?' It looks to me like it is because it's old and battle-scarred!"

Wallis and Son was founded back in 1937 by Geoffrey Wallis and his dad, Elliot's great-grandad, Percy Wallis.

Demonstrating that a passion for aviation had started long before Ken Wallis had made the autogyro famous, Percy and his brother Horace – Ken's father – had successfully built a steel-framed monoplane in the shed at the back of their parents' home at 12 St Barnabas Road, Cambridge, which was unveiled in 1910.

Ken, who was made an MBE in 1996, completed 28 bomber missions over Germany during the Second World War, for which he received a campaign medal in 2013.

He later set up Wallis Autogyros Ltd with Geoffrey in 1964.

He flew until he was 94 years old and always wore a shirt and tie when doing so.

As well as Wallis & Son, Elliot also runs Wallis Defenders, which specialises in Land Rover Defenders. Inspired by his family history, the company has produced a limited edition vehicle, the Wallis Defender GYRO (wallisdefenders.co.uk/gyro/).

How does it work?

An autogyro looks rather like a mini helicopter and uses an unpowered rotor in free autorotation to create lift. Its unpowered rotor disc must have air flowing upward across it to make it rotate, while an engine-driven propeller provides forward thrust independently.

While a helicopter forces its rotor blades through the air to draw air from above, the autogyro's rotor blade is more like a glider's wing in that it changes the angle of the air as the air moves upward and backward around the rotor blade.

Autorotation moves the free-spinning blades, which are angled to generate lift. The rotation speed of the blades increases until the rotor turns at a stable speed, when the drag force and the thrust force are in balance. A pilot uses a control stick, rudder pedals and throttle to control it.

Spanish inventor and engineer Juan de la Cierva came up with the name 'autogyro'. He wanted to create an aircraft that could fly safely at low speeds and first flew one on January 9, 1923, at Cuatro Vientos Airport in Madrid.

Ken Wallis with Little Nellie



UK adventurer James Ketchell was the first to circumnavigate the world in an autogyro in 2019, travelling 44,450km. Ken Wallis holds the record for the fastest time

to climb 3,000m – 7 minutes 20 seconds – and for speed over a 3km course – 207.7 km/h. He was the oldest pilot to set a world flight record at the age of 89.



Elliot Wallis with another autogyro from his collection. Below, Sean Connery as James Bond, right, and Desmond Llewelyn as Q with Little Nellie in the MGM movie *You Only Live Twice*



Ken Wallis flying



In the cockpit



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