80 Years of the de Havilland Chipmunk



Classic Flying Collection's Chippy Formation at Pretoria Airshow, Rhino Park (29 August 2026)

Eighty Years of the "Chippie": The de Havilland Chipmunk at Sandstone

On 22 May 1946, a small silver monoplane lifted off from Downsview airfield outside Toronto. It was the DHC-1 Chipmunk, the first aircraft ever designed by de Havilland Canada, and it was built to replace a legend: the Tiger Moth biplane on which a generation of wartime pilots had learned to fly. With its enclosed cockpit, tandem seats and the same trusty Gipsy Major engine as the Tiger Moth, the Chipmunk was modern, fully aerobatic and a delight to handle. Pilots soon nicknamed it the "poor man's Spitfire."

The Chipmunk went on to train pilots across the world. About 1,280 were built: just over 200 in Canada, around 1,000 in Britain and 66 under licence in Portugal. The Royal Air Force made it its standard elementary trainer from 1949, and RAF cadets were still flying Chipmunks in the 1990s. Prince Philip took his first flying lessons in one in 1952, and King Charles III also learned to fly in a Chipmunk. Remarkably, eighty years on, hundreds are still airworthy.

South Africa's Chipmunk story has an unusual twist in that the South African Air Force never operated them. Instead, the Chipmunk arrived through the RAF's flying training schools in Southern Rhodesia.

When those aircraft were sold off in 1953, several crossed the Limpopo onto the South African civil register, and more ex-RAF examples followed in later decades. Flying clubs and private owners kept them flying, and the de Havilland Moth Club community helped preserve them. One of these early Rhodesian arrivals, registered ZS-DIU, is now on display at the SAAF Museum at Swartkop.



ZS-LJU, the third oldest flying Chipmunk in the world, dancing along the Lesotho border (Tiger Moth flown by Steve Brown; Chippy flown by Chris Joubert)

Today some of the finest Chipmunks in the country belong to the Classic Flying Collection at Springs Airfield. Alongside its Tiger Moths, Auster, Stampe SV4, Boeing Stearman and Harvard, the collection has restored former military Chipmunks to immaculate, flying condition. Among these is ZS-LJU, a red and silver beauty that is the third oldest flying Chipmunk in the world. The collection was at the heart of the type's 75th anniversary celebrations at Springs in 2021, when nine Chipmunks flew past together, and it joined the 80th anniversary gathering at Jack Taylor Airfield in May 2026.





ZS-JJG at Sandstone in 2019, flown by Grant Timms.

Chipmunks have been flying at Sandstone since the early 2000s, and they have become a familiar sight over the eastern Free State, flown in both by the Classic Flying Collection and by private owners. Classic

Flying's Chipmunks last visited in November 2024, and in November 2025 Simon Berkeljon brought his own Chipmunk to the Maluti Military Fair at Sandstone in November 2025, and we look forward to having seeing this aircraft back on the Sandstone runway. As the Chippie celebrates 80 years, we couldn't let this milestone slip past without acknowledging this cornerstone in Sandstone's aviation lineup.



ZS-COX over the ploughed fields in 2017, piloted by Chris Joubert.



Tiger and two Chippies, chasing sunset (Steve Brown, Chris Joubert, Grant Timms, 2019)



Trains and planes, April 2019.