

I'm selling up - to save my Spitfire: Britain's only practising female Second World War-plane pilot puts £1.25million home on the market to secure her fighter jet

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As the only practising female Spitfire pilot in the world, Carolyn Grace is much in demand. During the summer months, she spends every weekend taking part in aerobatic displays across the country.

But looking after her classic fighter plane is an expensive business, so Carolyn has put her six-bedroom home, The Cangle in Halstead, Essex, on the market for £1.25 million to ensure its future is safe.

'The Spitfire costs about £5,000 an hour to fly and we fly it 70 hours a year,' she explains. 'The engine overhaul alone costs £120,000 and has to be carried out every four or so years. You have to keep on top of the maintenance. We need to free up funds. It's about preserving it for the next generation.'



Saving the plane: Carolyn Grace has put her six-bedroom home, The Cangle in Halstead, Essex, on the market for £1.25 million to ensure the future for her Spitfire fighter aircraft is safe

Although more than 20,000 Spitfires were produced shortly before, during and after the Second World War, the 'Grace Spitfire' is one of only a handful to survive today. And it is all the more special as it was the first Allied plane to shoot down an enemy aircraft above the Normandy beaches on D-Day.

Carolyn's passion for the plane stems from her late husband Nick, who bought the aircraft, which required a full rebuild, from a Scottish museum in 1979. A design engineer and pilot, Nick set about painstakingly restoring it at St Merryn airfield in Cornwall, a process that took more than five years.

Once the rebuild was finished, the couple moved to West Sussex because the Spitfire needed to be in a more central location to keep down flight times to and from various shows.



Highflyer: Carolyn Grace, the world's only female spitfire pilot, standing next to her engine in her workshop

They found a 100-acre field near Horsham that was perfect, built a workshop/hangar on the site, and also applied for planning permission to build a house.

But tragedy struck before their dreams could be realised when Nick was killed in a car accident in 1988, just three years after getting the Spitfire airborne again.

Carolyn moved with the couple's young children – Olivia, then five, and Richard, then four – to the family's current home, and also transported the Spitfire to Duxford airfield near Cambridge.

Although she was already a qualified pilot, she took the intrepid decision to train as a Spitfire pilot, to the shock of many. She is the first woman to have done so since the women of the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) service in the Second World War.

Although The Cangle has nine acres, that is not a large enough area to keep the Spitfire. However, the property does have an enormous double-height workshop in the grounds, where the aircraft's engine is currently awaiting an overhaul.

Although she is from Australia, Carolyn knew this patch of Essex well before she moved there as her aunt and uncle lived locally, while she and Nick were married in 1975 in the nearby village of Great Bardfield.



Expensive hobby: It cost Mrs Grace about £5,000 an hour to fly her Spitfire, and as she flies it it 70 hours a year, she needs to 'free up funds' (stock image)

'It's an idyllic spot – we're less than two miles from Halstead but very secluded because our grounds form a horseshoe around the house, and there's woodland beyond that.

'I knew as I drove up the lane that I wanted to buy this house. I grew up on a farm so I was brought up on the land – I like the idea of not having neighbours,' she says.

The Cangle's sense of history also appealed. Built in the 1550s, it is packed with original features. An earlier structure on the site was mentioned in the Domesday Book.

The house itself was in a poor condition when Carolyn and the children moved in, so she set about installing a new kitchen and knocking down old farm buildings.

Carolyn, 62, spends every weekend from May to September flying at events, including displays at outdoor concerts. 'You have to fly the Spitfire wholeheartedly,' she says. 'The minute you feel you're not on top of it, you should stop.'

Selling the house will be a wrench, she admits. 'We have a lot of memories here. I'll miss the seclusion and the wildlife – stoats in the garden and ducks that come back to our pond every year. But we have always moved with the Spitfire. It has been the priority from the time Nick first brought it home. It is good to know we are continuing to base our lives around ensuring its future.'