

NEWS

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Space age: Dr Rob Buckingham, of OC Robotics, above left, demonstrates the Snake Arm robot to Keith McLaughlin, of Advanced NDT Instruments.

Boost for aircraft overhauls

Hi-tech robot has safety in its reach

A PIONEERING robot developed in Bristol could be used to help make air travel safer for millions of travellers around the world.

The Snake Arm robot, created by Henleaze-based firm OC Robotics, could revolutionise the way passenger jets are checked and overhauled.

The weird-looking robot has a flexible tube-like arm that allows it to squeeze through and work on awkward parts of an airplane or a jet engine which cannot be reached by a human mechanic.

At present, aircraft repairs can be a long and painstaking process.

Air mechanics often have to strip engines or other sections of the aeroplane down to its smallest components in order to carry out stringent safety checks or to repair a broken part.

But the Snake Arm would

by IAN TURNER

enable repairs to be carried out without having to take the plane apart.

Aviation industry experts are already calling the new robot a breakthrough in aircraft safety and maintenance.

The robot is the brainchild of Bristol scientist Dr Rob Buckingham and was given its first public showing at a technology exhibition at the BAWA Conference Centre in Filton.

It is equipped with a special camera which allows its operator to observe as it worms its way around tight spots and carries out any repairs.

Programme secretary Geoff Millar said: "As the name implies, the robot is in the form of a flexible tube which is able to manoeuvre through a whole range of positions to get access to parts of a modern airliner or engine that humans could not reach without a strip down. It has to be seen to be appreciated."

Snake Arm's makers say the robot could have a number of other applications, including the decommissioning of radioactive equipment in the nuclear power industry, in surgery, or by the emergency teams searching for survivors in earthquake zones.

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