



Scottish Airsports Club

Latest News

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Contents

Forthcoming Events
Page 1

Appeal for photographs
Page 3

An Epic Flight by Garry Hume
Page 1

Airfield News
Page 3

Forthcoming Events

Verbier Summits 8th - 15th July

Not long now till I'm off to Verbier! Expect a full report in next month's issue.

An Epic Flight by Garry Hume

Ignoring the Three 'P's – or at Least Most of Them!!!

Good XCs usually depend on Preparation, Preparation and yet more Preparation – with a dose of luck thrown in with the weather.

The overall weekend forecast (22/23 April) was not inspiring when I checked on Thursday evening. It was so poor in fact that I did not bother to check what Sunday would be like until late Saturday night (Saturday was again wet and windy). In fact I did not even look until very late, after a good curry and more than the Nanny State recommended dose of alcohol, I went onto the net and Weatherjack. Stupid internet – stupid fingers – stupid computer, then - oh bugger it looks on for XC but with a wind that would be fickle and oriented towards all the "closed for lambing & bird nesting sites", within a sensible drive of the Lakes.

Heading south was not an option to the Peaks, as it promised to be a case of catching up with the very active cold front that was passing through that evening. Not the best preparation so far – in other words the first of the 'P's' crossed off. Aerotowing in Scotland was the obvious choice but I could not phone at this late hour, to ask if they were likely to be going out to play on Sunday.

To make the best of a day trip to Scotland (as I live in Kendal); ideally I need to leave about 7.30 am to allow for a leisurely 2 hr 40 min drive (read as fast as possible - without being caught!!!). The next 'P' e.g. was also going to be out then due to lack of time e.g. no chance of arriving with plenty of time at the field, XC map Preparation, flight planning, a slow careful rig and perhaps one or two tows to before going XC.

I woke up Sunday morning to a sparkling clear sky; slightly spoiled by an "distinctly overcast and hazy head". The very strong overnight wind had also gone. The drift was from the North and it had all the hallmarks of a classic, strong, spring XC day. The phone calls started around 8.30 am to the usual suspects – other escapees from the usual B&Q misery. Matt Doncaster said he also fancied a spot of aerotowing and the rest went power or paragliding on various unflyable (for HGs) hills. I got through to the club and it was confirmed they would be towing.

Arriving late at Thornhill at about 1.30 pm, the sky looked epic – but with nobody flying and a distinctly gusty, 8-15 mph WNW wind. The consensus was that it was pretty damn rough. A slow rig competition it was then, between Matt and me. I won but Matt was not keen to fly, as he hadn't aerotowed for about two years, so in the end I was ready first. After quizzing a couple of microlight pilots when they landed and being assured it was now pretty pleasant, I decided to give it a go, taking off around 2.25 pm.

The air between on tow from 500' to 1,500' was pretty rough in places and reminded me more of Spain!! Waved off at 2,200' into good lift, the sky looked perfect upwind but very lifeless and washed out downwind.

I decided to work up to cloudbase and hang around waiting for the downwind sky to improve. I spent a pleasant 30 mins jumping from cloud to cloud, up down and crosswind, with unexpected thermals found in the blue between the clouds as well. The sink was pretty strong at times too. I could not work out why nobody else was flying – off the tow it was great fun and there was lift all over the place. Eventually I saw an Atos VR being towed and flew over to join it, as I was about two miles south of the field at this point and in strong sink.

On the way over I hit even stronger sink – looked downwind and saw a great cloud and so plan 'B' was instigated and I set off XC. Despite searching the best I could find was zeros and I was now down to just 2,500'. The best option was to head back upwind as it least I would have a reasonably short walk back to the field, and there was a great cloud on the way back over a dusty field being ploughed – a good option for "a last chance low save".

The air got rougher until I hit the core – a "stonking" half-up at about 1,000'. This was better than sink so I clung on, hoping it would eventually trigger and this is did after about 10 mins scratching around.

The drift was very slow so as soon as I had 3,500' I punted downwind towards Stirling where there were great clouds over the Ochils. These face south and the wind was WNW so I decided that if I hit sink, I would run out into the main Forth valley. I arrived lowish over Stirling castle and this was a great trigger (it is sited spectacularly on a west-facing crag) and rapidly climbed up to 4,000' where I had to stop, well short of base, due to restricted airspace above.

The views were spectacular. To the north were the Highlands, with a light sugar icing of snow on them. Below was the castle and in the distance the mighty Forth bridges spanning the Firth of Forth. A much younger river Forth I had been following for about the last hour. Pretty much the whole of Fife was visible in the crisp spring air.

The glide on my Cheetah is so much better than my old glider and with full VG I set off for a great cloud over the Ochils behind Stirling. Below was now the boonies but with an easy glide out to the main 10 mile wide valley if the lift did not materialise. I spent a few anxious moments searching for lift in strong sink, then back to just under 4,000'. I tried just circling to let the wind do the work but drift at height was barely 10 mph, whilst it was nearer 17 mph low down – weird!

The next cloud, deep in the Ochils looked very active with some sort of convergence effect. The lift again took some finding and when located it was very strong – as in "South of France strong". Off with the VG, keep plenty of speed – then head back to the valley for something a little less lively.

I hopped from cloud to cloud, flying alternately quite deep into the hills, then back to the main south face, passing Alva, Tillicoultry and Dollar. The flying was smooth, predictable and great fun. The last of the 'Ps' is preparation in terms of timing. I was so involved in the flight and the predictable climbs, I forgot that it was getting late - nearing 4.30 pm.

At the end of the range I could see a high performance sailplane climbing fast and set off, VG on full, head down and arms tucked in. By the time I got there I had only lost 1,000' and as I arrived, the sailplane flew out into the valley to an even better climb. I searched around and could only find weak zeros and two-ups. Instead of sensibly working this weak lift, I shot out of the hills into the valley to get "the better climb" – which did not work. Downwind however were three perfect clouds; one of which must work so off I went again. With hindsight, I should have realised the day was getting weaker and started to work every scrap of lift until high again. Late in the day, slow down and stay high.

Off I went to the three perfect clouds and none worked at all. Nothing – not a ripple. Worse, further downwind was in shade. I could now see from the lengthening shadows, my mistake. I had been far too slow earlier in the flight and too fast as the day was starting to end.

In the distance I could see Bishop hill, with about half a dozen sailplanes and a lone blue paraglider that looked like it was leaving the hill. I was far too low to make it but a patch of sunlight over Kinross was a last chance. I arrived with about a 1,000' and found absolutely nothing. To the north there were a couple of good clouds and shade below so with nothing to lose and plenty of empty fields below, off I went. Spotting a couple of swifts darting around revealed weak, broken zeros. Working my socks off, I slowly lost and gained height until at 2,000' I lost it again. With luck I may make it to Bishop, a great westerly site overlooking Loch Leven. Then, the plan was to ridge soar for a few minutes, pick up a good thermal and carry on to Crail at the tip of Fife.

The wind was now slightly south of WSW and so I had a fair crosswind to penetrate to get to the hill. Full VG and I eventually made it with a couple of hundred feet to spare. The wind was about 35 degrees off the hill to the south and pretty crowded, with a range of ancient wooden and "state of the art" glass fibre gliders. And there I stayed for the next 50+ minutes.

It was fairly breezy and none of the PGs were flying. At one point one tried to take off and was dragged violently for some distance. I willed him to be OK as I did not fancy top landing a site where I had no knowledge of the top landing to help out. After an anxious couple of minutes he got up and dusted himself down. It was very busy at times with glid-

ers sometimes scratching below the top. By now it was late, about 6.15 pm and I made up my mind to try once more and if it failed, fly out and bottom land.

I dribbled over the back with about 500' in a one-up, working back over some pretty wild county over, a small loch until I hit sink. Time to bail and fly back but on the way upwind I caught some more lift and drifted back again. This time I was committed when the lift died and with full VG turned downwind with at best 1,400' agl towards a largish reservoir and a very remote farm with some good fields. It looked pretty windy low down and I set up at the back end of the fields and started to loose height. The ground was in shade and the shadows were lengthening by the minute. Then the impossible – more lift which I drifted back with to 2,500'. The long flight was on again – Crail here I come. I lost the lift after a few minutes, again turned downwind and headed east to land a few miles northeast of Glenrothes in the largest open field I could find, as the wind was definitely picking up.

A smooth landing and I by chance I met a fellow hang glider pilot that was driving past. Matt kindly retrieved me, having decided not to fly, being both rusty at aerotowing and having had little airtime recently due to knee problems. This spoilt the day for me a little, as it was a shame to travel so far without flying on such a good day – still safety first is always best. It may not have been the longest XC flight I've made (just 63 km) and certainly not the fastest but it definitely one of the prettiest and most varied in terms of scenery. I really, really enjoyed it and it has got me fired up to do more XCs.

If you fancy something a little different and there is a light wind forecast, try the Scottish Aerotow Club. Great facilities, a friendly and keen bunch, a good campsite nearby – what more do you want. I am hoping to try an 8,000' tow with the new tug over the Highlands next (towed up from the same field) in search of the famous wave. Not too far north from the field there is no height restrictions for airspace.

Appeal for Photographs

Has anyone got any good aerial photographs taken along Garry's route that could be used to illustrate the above article so that it can be sent into Skywings? If so, please let me know. Alternatively, if any microlight pilot is willing to take me on a flight along the route (Stirling Castle, the Ochils, Bishop, Glenrothes) I would be extremely grateful!

Airfield News

Sue sends a reminder to all members of the aerotow club to ensure that the tow rope is never left on the runway unless towing is actively taking a break. So even if towing has just stopped for a quick break, please ensure that the rope is taken to the side of the runway, out of harm's way.

It has come to my attention that a couple of aerotow club members have been using their cheque books to gain an unfair performance advantage, with a shockingly low sink rate and devastatingly flat glide angle. One might even call them cheetahs. Or to be more accurate, one might even say they're flying the latest model Avian Cheetah Evo. Both Ken and Scott got their maiden flights on their new hotships on the lovely evening of Tuesday 27th June. Scott had a particularly big grin on his face after his tow to 3000 feet, but then flying the Cheetah after the Discovery is like driving a Ferrari after a pedal car. For more info on the Cheetah and other Avian hang gliders, visit www.hanggliding.co.uk.



The Avian Cheetah

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