

Cabletalk

Surrey Hills Gliding Club Newsletter

July 2023

Editor's notes

Thanks to Adrian who has written a great report of the club trip to the Long Mynd in Shropshire. Now the 615 Cadets are back flying at Kenley there will be SHGC closure weeks in the future so we will try to organise the club excursions. Hopefully reading this will encourage people who have not been before to go on a future trip. It was a great week and it's not just

the flying, which was very challenging because of the wind direction.

SHGC's week at Long Mynd

Adrian Roberts

During the half-term week when the Air Cadets required the use of Kenley Aerodrome to entice their teenagers away from



The SHGC expedition group.

their smartphones, some of us went up to the Midlands Gliding Club at Long Mynd in search of adventure, fresh air and a challenge to our gliding abilities. Geoff Purcell came along as our instructor; the rest comprised Chris Leggett and Caroline, Phil Skinner and Jean, Paul Armstrong, David Hamilton, Sam Matthey, Gary Campbell and myself. Geoff towed our SZD-51 Junior single-seater and Phil towed our Two-seat Grob G-CKFG. That is worth mentioning as Long Mynd is in a National Trust area of spectacular hills and valleys at an altitude of 1,400 feet AMSL, only accessible via narrow steep tracks infested with sheep and tourists. Just driving there, let alone towing a 30-foot trailer, requires courage and a decent car. Having neither of those things I went with Gary, which

made for some male bonding as well as saving the planet and my clutch.

The club is about four miles from the Welsh border, near the village of Church Stretton near Shrewsbury. Mynd means hill in the local lingo, and it forms a ridge three or four miles long, orientated North-South, with a steep drop into the valley on the West. When there is a West wind, it blows up this hill creating lift all along and enabling ridge soaring. As early as the 1930s glider pilots were reaching heights of 7,000 feet or more above the ridge. The club was founded in 1934 and is among the oldest in the country; Amy Johnson was a member for a while. Unfortunately, there was an East wind of around 20 knots the whole time we were there, so it was pretty much ordinary



Looking over the ridge and out to the valley, and Wales beyond. Try not to land in the heather!

gliding. However, it was still an interesting challenge in breathtaking scenery. The only negative was that the wind was cold. We had been warned about that; I hadn't brought my winter coat but I had several pullovers, a scarf, hat and over-trousers and to be warm enough I had to wear every stitch!

Most of us stayed in the club accommodation, which was perfectly acceptable. The dining area has picture-windows facing West across the Welsh hills, a view which most hotels would envy especially during a sunset. Many of the club regulars seem to live on site, in caravans, and were going round in t-shirts and shorts when we Londoners were wrapped up like FE2b observers in January 1917. The kitchens were run by Helen who served up the most gorgeous evening meals as well as breakfast and lunch; her husband Dave is the ex-CFI and now runs most of the practical aspects of the premises. The meals were taken at a long communal bench which made for a family atmosphere. The beer is locally brewed and comes from barrels kept in the hangar. There were two ladies, Dee and Barbara, who I'm sure must be at least in their 70s. Both are gliding instructors; Dee was part of the t-shirt and shorts brigade; Barbara had held an ATPL and still owned an



Helen and her husband fed us every night. We certainly did not go hungry!

ultralight and an autogyro; both were tremendous characters who seemed determined to out-do the men in the colourful language stakes.

They say that if you can glide at Long Mynd you can glide anywhere. The airfield is basically a strip of moorland about a mile long on the top of the ridge. The runways are strips of grass cut into the heather, along the marginally flatter parts of the field. You are almost always going to land slightly uphill or downhill, possibly very uphill or downhill if you get the approach wrong. For those of us used to concrete runways, a grass one can be very confusing as the delineation between grass and heather is not always clear if you are not used to it. Launch failure options are limited and usually require a full turn if you can't land ahead. We were warned about ponds and rock-strewn tumuli dotted around the area. Sheep wander around the whole area. They weren't a huge problem as they get out of your way quickly, provided you don't land low over them: I had always been curious about the assertion in "Bronze and Beyond" that "sheep jump", but it seems that they can launch vertically into the air if surprised, which doesn't seem very effective if they are being chased by wolves but has certainly taken out some glider tailplanes in the past. Loose horses are another



David and Adrian in their winter clothing!



Adrian doing his stint on the retrieve winch.

hazard: but the biggest risk comes from human ramblers who walk across the field. When launching towards the North with an easterly wind, a club member must be stationed to watch that no walkers deviate from the path along the valley-side, as this is not visible to the launch controller or winch driver. And a footpath emerges from the trees just by the top of the Northbound runway: we were warned to pass over it with a clearance of at least 30 feet, of which more anon. The Mynd launch using a winch, but the system differs from Kenley's in that instead of the cables being drawn back from the winch to the launch site after use by a vehicle, there is a "retrieve winch" at the launch site, which has a secondary cable attached to the main cable and is drawn out with it. When the

main cable detaches from the glider at the top of the launch, the winch operator radios to the retrieve driver to engage his drive and the main cable is then drawn back by the retrieve cable. Geoff had described this to us before we went, but I couldn't really visualise it until I saw it. The retrieve winch is simpler to operate than the main winch so all of us took turns operating it. When it works well, it makes for a faster rate of launches than Kenley's system, but there is also more to go wrong and slow things down: two cables that can break or get tangled up on the winch drums, and they have to use steel cables which makes sorting out tangles even more difficult, as Dyneema nylon rope would wear out on the stony ground.

We are all solo pilots of varying levels of experience, but it was clear from the radical differences of the Long Mynd aerodrome from Kenley that we would need a considerable number of check flights before going solo at this site. Given that our launches would have to take their turn with the Mynd gliders, we would probably only have time for a couple of flights a day each. If the wind direction had been suitable for ridge-soaring, which is very different from the thermalling that we are used to, I had pretty well resigned myself to not going solo in a week. With the East wind, our flying once airborne would be what we were used to, but with the very different approach regime and landing conditions, we would need several flights with Geoff to orientate ourselves, and probably the dreaded launch failure test before going solo at the Mynd. Never mind, I was going to enjoy it anyway and if nothing else it would be a great holiday in fantastic scenery.

We spent Monday and Tuesday on circuit practice, dual in the Grob with Geoff instructing from the back seat. That was when we were truly able to experience the rolling green hills and valleys; apparently Gary spent his first flight going "Wow, gosh, oh wow!". Working out the circuit and approach, however, was a challenge. The grass runways are very close to the edge of the pine forest on the east, and so on my base leg I couldn't see the runway and was trying to orientate myself from the clubhouse that was visible on the other side, as the runway only became visible as I popped out over the trees and I immediately had to turn onto finals. Inevitably I went wide the first few times and had to dog-leg back toward the threshold. Our flights were mostly short. The thermals weren't good enough for many people to make very long flights, apart from a couple with an Arcus T who disappeared grandly into the Blue Yonder

every morning and reappeared out of the sunset in the evening.

Wednesday was the only day that flying was cancelled, due to low cloud, drizzle and excessive wind. There are plenty of other local attractions. Some of us went to the Ironbridge Museum of the local Industrial Revolution, and by all accounts had an interesting time. But Gary, myself, David, Paul and Sam made for the RAF Museum at Cosford. For an aviation enthusiast this is equivalent to the Chocolate Factory. It is the only place where you can see all three types of V-bomber, a TSR2, a Boulton Paul Defiant, and a cornucopia of other types. We lost each other several times; someone remarked that keeping five aviation geeks together around Cosford was like herding cats. Of course, there was the usual scorn for unsympathetic management. I can live with the fact that exhibits are sometimes swapped with Hendon's, but I was perturbed to find that the Saunders-Roe SR53 and the Prone Meteor, which had been safely indoors on my last visit, were now outside at the mercy of the elements. And the Bristol 188 and the Junkers/CASA 52 had disappeared altogether and the staff had no idea where they were.

On Thursday we were flying again. I managed a brief soaring session with guidance from Geoff. By the end of the day, the Kenley mob were starting to get sent solo, I can't remember who was first, but I had high hopes of being among them. Due to the queue for the launches, I had resigned myself to waiting for Friday but just before we packed up for evening, Geoff pointed out that James, a Long Mynd instructor, had an empty seat in their K21 and why didn't I have a go in that? How considerate I thought, only slightly perturbed by not having flown a K21 for six years. I should have smelt a rat... I got into the climb without problems, and then the speed decayed



The sunset over the Welsh hills. It was like this most nights.

rapidly. Of course, this was the winch failure test! I got the nose down and dropped the cable, but after that it all went pear-shaped. James said later that he had asked the winch driver to cut the power at 500 feet, but in fact it was cut at not much more than 200 feet. I should have landed ahead, but the runway ahead of me was different to the one I had been landing on, and all I could see was a blur of green with the type of hilly and boggy bits that we had been told to avoid just off the end. So I decided to make a turn and come back to the runway. James admitted that he should have told me to land ahead, or even taken over control, but the result was a worrying low circle, at a lower speed than we had agreed, and I could see that we were in danger of being blown over the ridge, so to avoid that I ended up

diagonally across the runway too low for any more turns and we ploughed into the heather anyway. Fortunately there was no damage done but my underpants had a narrow escape. Clearly I was going to have to do another test tomorrow; in the meantime James bought me a drink in the evening!

Friday was to be our last full day there. I started off with another simulated launch failure, with Geoff in the Grob. This time I knew it was going to happen and we were at sufficient height for a safe abbreviated circuit, but it was still a relief to hear Geoff say "Well done" after we had rolled to a stop. Finally cleared, I managed my first solo from the Mynd that afternoon. The flight went well; I managed to maintain height for a while; I was timed at fourteen

minutes: it didn't seem that long to me but I do remember trying to use some of the thermalling advice that Geoff had given. Sadly my landing was not one to be proud of. I managed to start the approach correctly, but I became fixated on the warning that we had to allow plenty of height over the footpath near the threshold in case walkers suddenly emerged from the trees. So I closed the airbrakes before reaching it to reduce my rate of descent, then worried about opening them too close to the ground, and ended up with a very long landing run. Once I was down I hauled on the airbrake lever which also operates the wheel brake, but again ended up in the heather at the end of the runway. No harm done but I realised that every member of both clubs would have been watching and rightly criticising. However, I did notice that later the Mynd K21 twice ended up in the same patch of heather. Meanwhile, the Kenley team had assembled the Junior and some were flying it, but I didn't dare ask to have a go.

That evening we had our last meal in the clubhouse, of Helen's delicious cooking. The occasion will always live on in our memory because of Gary's misadventure! As the meal progressed, we became aware that his starter was sitting untouched in his place. He had told some of us that he was going for a run and would be back in time for the meal. We checked his room. We tried phoning him but there was no answer. We hoped that he had simply got lost and would return at any moment. Even at this point the situation provided some dark humour; someone asked if it was true that the conservationists had re-introduced wolves into the Welsh borders: but there was genuine concern that he might perhaps have fallen and broken a leg. Eventually, after two hours, Helen's husband Dave took a call on the club landline from a farmhouse across the hills. Gary had indeed got very lost; he had been in the pine forest plantation, so all the paths looked the same, and it was getting dark. He hadn't taken his mobile



Phil (Grob), Geoff (Junior) and Chris (repaired Vega trailer) on the descent to Church Stretton.

phone with him as he wanted to “experience life in the moment”, or something. He had finally found a lonely farmhouse and the surprised inhabitants had let him use their phone. Dave went to fetch him but that took another hour as the distance driving was considerably further than the distance running. As Gary expected, we didn’t half take the piss once he arrived back! There was plentiful advice about how to find his way to the bathroom, and we wondered how he had recently passed the navigation module of his Bronze gliding exam. He admitted that he had prayed to at least eight different deities, including the Jedi Force, and he claimed to have repented of most of his sins and was prepared to negotiate on the rest. I don’t know if this is still the case.

The next day, Saturday, was our last, and Gary and I wanted to leave by lunchtime. But it was a fine day and we couldn’t resist another flight. I had hoped to redeem myself by doing a better landing solo, but the wind had changed, still East but veering South, so the launch and landing area was at the opposite end of the field and the

circuit completely different, so we had to all go dual with Geoff again at least once. We had been told that the turning point for the final approach was a clump of trees on the hill beyond. On my downwind leg, I tried looking for these trees, but couldn’t make them out, and Geoff told me to “just fly the thing” – only blunter than that! What he meant was, quite rightly, that I should be orientating my circuit with respect to my selected touch-down spot, allowing for wind conditions and other traffic, not with respect to landmarks. With that advice I landed more or less in the right place, but as expected I had no time for another flight before departing for home with Gary.

We had had a fantastic holiday in amazing scenery with great company. But Geoff’s advice encapsulated the real value. It is very easy to get stuck in a comfort zone if you only fly from one aerodrome, and lose adaptability. Not all of us have the money and time for frequent visits to other sites, but to do so provides an essential work-out of our flying skills, and the greater insights and flexibility will enhance our safety and enjoyment.

Contact Details

The Directors of the Club are:

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Comments on this newsletter and any contributions or photographs are welcomed and should be sent to the ‘Cabletalk Editor’ at the above email address.