

Long Jump Report 2003

I have finally decided Air traffic controllers are nice people after all. For years I have always avoided their airspace in order not to have to talk to them. On my last long jump Leeds/Bradford made me avoid their CTR so I had to crawl around the airport at 100ft AGL losing a lot of distance. However as I have now moved to the South coast and most of my flying is often around Exeter airport, I have got over that fear. I took a few of them up for a flight just so they know what it is like for us.

This year as October came around again I got myself more organised. I spoke to London FIR to ask them how I got permission to fly into controlled air space. They took details of my proposed route, spoke to Manchester for me and then told me to give them a call. They were really helpful. I had to send a fax of my details and intentions, then as long as I had a working transponder and radio they would arrange clearance for me on the day. It all sounded too good to be true.

So on the first hint of a good weather slot, I find myself for the third time, making a long trip to Scotland. Only this time, due to our move to Devon, it was a further hundred miles. Driving through wind, rain and black clouds, my crew, Derek and Paul did wonder whether it was the right decision. I still had faith in my met man. Arriving in daylight we found a nice sheltered take off position in Sanquhar. Ever heard of it? Me neither. It's a very remote, bleak place somewhere north west of Dumfries but the local farmers were friendly. Things began to look better when we saw stars in the night sky. The morning was lovely, not too cold and no surface wind to speak of. I woke my met man with my phone call, all was looking good except the upper winds were not going to be as strong as expected. After talking to Manchester airport to tell them my flight was on, off I went, leaving the crew to grab a bacon butty from the B&B on their way past.

I climbed to the base of the air-lane at 5,500 and called up Scottish FIR to let them know my intentions. They asked my height a few times and when I crossed the border I said thank you and goodbye. He didn't want me to go, 'I can see you over into the Lake District first' he said in a slightly pleading voice. OK then. Affirmative I will stay with you. - Perhaps he was having a quiet morning.

Over the lakes I was passed on to Manchester, and started squawking. Here I climbed up to FL120, still in uncontrolled airspace. The speed increased to 31 knots, it was a good track with a lovely view of Ullswater lake just below. Apart from very cold feet, I was having a wonderful time.

Advice on how to save fuel meant I was draining the vapour off my almost empty tank to keep the pilot light going. Another recommendation was to only have one pilot light lit at a time. This was all great in theory but in practise it suddenly went very quiet. Sod's law dictated I was already in a slight descent at the time. I knew my piezo's were unreliable, but for some reason the gun striker wouldn't light the pilots either, even though I could hear gas coming out.

My heart was racing as I thought what a way to go (no parachute), I tried to calm myself down to think of the next move. After throwing everything out of my flight bag to get to the welding striker and changing the pipes to other tanks, I finally managed to stop the decent of 1100ft per min after almost a 4,000ft drop. Sheepishly, I climbed

back up to 12,000ft. I was expecting a call on the radio from Manchester any time to query my altitude, but they didn't seem to notice. I hoped they didn't lose 747's so easily. Not wishing the same thing to happen in busy airspace, I kept the pilot feed on a full tank. Trying to save fuel had proved rather counter productive.

Flying in controlled airspace at 12,000ft under supervision was a lot less stressful than last time when I was trying to avoid it all. As I looked down on the sprawling mass of Leeds/Bradford I had a good cheer. Yes, this time I am in your controlled airspace above you, it felt so good.

Despite me giving them the wrong information, my crew were doing a great job. When I told them I was over the Peak district, they speed off down the M6 to get round Manchester. When my next call said I was approaching Halifax, they realised my mistake, I had been over the Yorkshire dales. On the air map it is one big brown mass, I wrongly assumed that the bit south east of the lakes was the Peaks.

I was really enjoying my flight, especially when I did get to the Peak District. Air traffic reported that two jumbos would soon be passing underneath me on their approach to Manchester airport. I looked down and saw one on my right, 'I have it visual' I reported back, then not long after there was one on my left. Being 5000ft below me, they looked too small to take a photo, but it still felt amazing to be looking down on them from an open basket.

I can't believe how anybody can say that flying solo is boring: there is so much to do. Plotting your route, working out the gas consumption, trying to fly flat and level, talking to air-traffic and occasionally remembering the crew, looking at the views and recognizing land marks, (Like the Peak district). I enjoyed looking down on Chadsworth house and went right over the top of East Midlands airport.

Then Manchester asked me my intentions. I was leaving their control. I had felt nice and safe being looking after by them and it was quite sad to say thank you and good bye. However I now realised that my gas was not going to last as long as expected, something to do with the little blip over the Lake district and the fact that my balloon is 3 years older than last time. I descended to FL100 and stayed below the air lanes. I spoke to the retrieve and asked them to find out what the ground winds were like in the Peterborough / Cambridge area.

The first half of my flight had definitely been faster than the second. The speed dropped over the Peaks and now seemed to be nearer 25-28kts. As I descended further, I slowed down more. By the time I was at cloud level, around 4,000ft, I was only doing 20 knots and thought it was looking good, expecting it to be around 10 or less on the ground.

The reply was somewhat of a surprise. 'Its breezy but landable' they said, then gave me the xcweather surface winds for the last three readings - Bedford 16/15/17 Cranfield 12/16/16 Luton 16/17/17. The winds didn't seem to be dropping as the afternoon went on in fact they sounded like they were getting worse. For safety reasons in these winds I made the decision to land with plenty of fuel.

It was quite a bumpy descent, the side of the balloon had air knocked out of it at different levels. Smoke on the ground was fluctuating about 40 degrees. At 500ft I was doing 20knots. This was going to be an interesting landing.

I came low over Kettering looking for trees to drop in behind. I could see pylons in the distance and wanted to get down before them. At one stage I was doing 8 knots – great I thought it is much slower nearer the ground, but then another gust hit me, and I was back at 20 knots and had to put both burners on to avoid houses.

Climbing again, I could see a nice long field ahead on my flight path with no wires and decided to go for it and pulled the rip line. With a cold balloon, coming down fast, another gust veered me off to the right and now I was heading for the corner of the field. I had no choice. Even though my altimeter alarm was going off saying I was in a descent of over 400ft, at about 20ft, I pulled open the tri-vent to reveal a big hole and crashed it in, ouch! It didn't bounce, but it didn't want to stop either. I was going across that field at a great rate of knots. I could see hedge, road, telegraph pole and house all ahead and it didn't seem to be slowing down much. Fortunately it was a set aside ploughed field and as I was dragging along, the basket was building up a nice mound of mud in front of me. When it got big enough I finally stopped. I lay there awhile quite relieved to be down in one piece but also trapped by this mound of dry mud.

There were plenty of witnesses, most of whom I have managed to put off ever wanting a balloon flight. The top of the envelope was only 20ft from the road. One got out his car to ask me if I was OK, and helped me dig my way out. I gave him a camera and to his surprise, asked him to take a photo.

He was just signing my landing form as a witness when the crew arrived. This was all of 3 minutes after I landed, they had only been about $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile away when I touched down – I was very impressed. It does make me wonder why they never arrive until the balloon is packed away when I do a passenger flight for Exeter Balloons. Perhaps it is because I had insisted on taking the bag with me, even though it was extra weight, as I didn't expect them to be there. The challenge was on and they won.

Paul got out the GPS and checked the distance 247 miles, if only I had known, I would have flown on a further 3 miles. He also went and measured the drag. 105 yards – Yes that was quite a landing!!

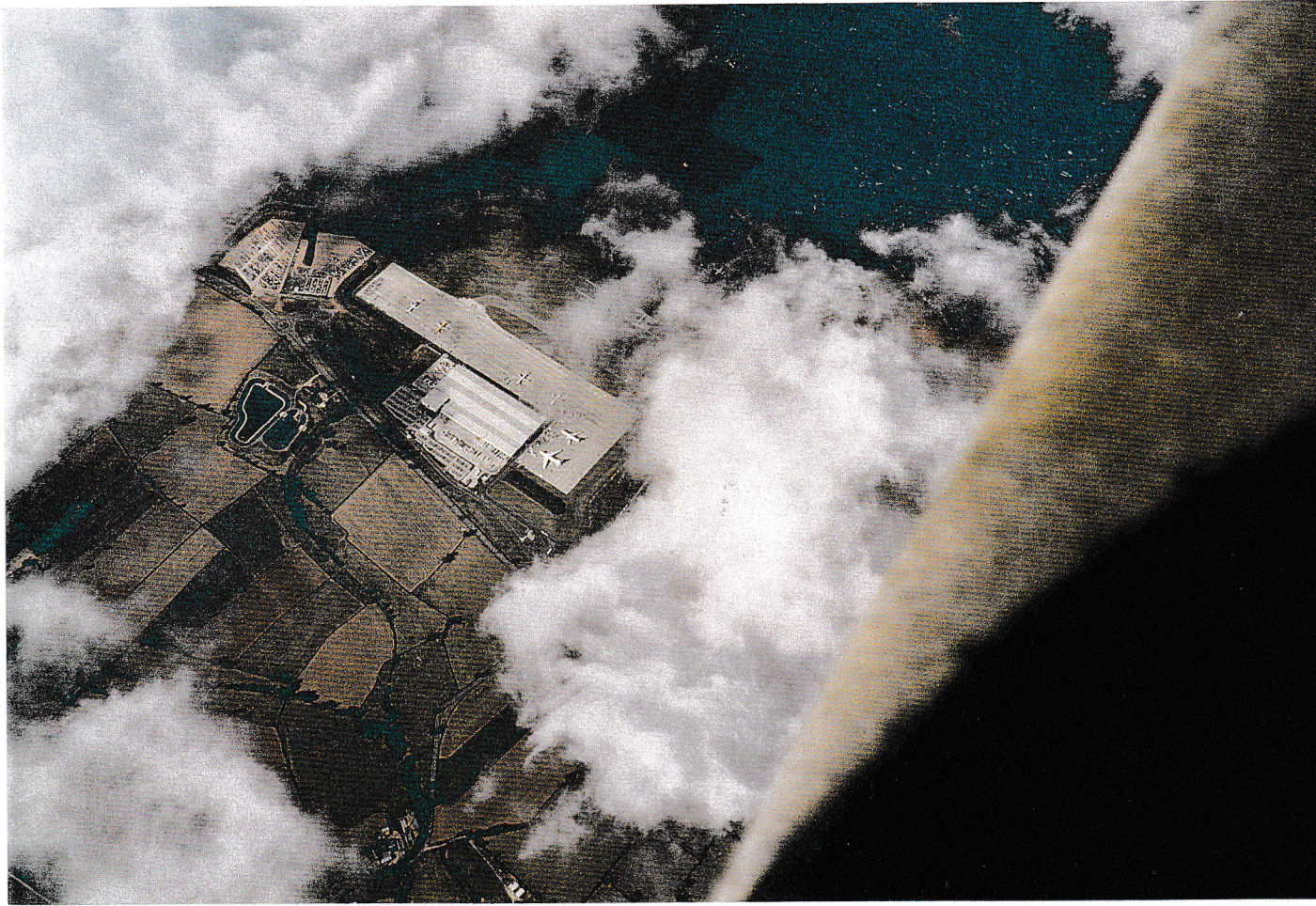
Mandy



Take-off at Sanquhar



DUMFRIES



East Midlands Airport (from 12,000 ft.)



having a kettering 8 hrs 10 mins. later