

## **My first Great British Long Jump!**

### **Intro**

Having only recently check out as a Pilot, the idea of a Long Jump probably shouldn't be at the top of my list. However, after reading some of the epic flight reports of years gone by I thought why not give it a go. I started looking at options in late September. I wouldn't for example be embarking on a flight from Wales over the Irish Sea to Scotland for example! Maybe in 10 years' time! After a week or so of research I had several sites in mind should the right weather arrive and everything come together.

### **Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> October**

Was I working this coming weekend... check of the calendar, no, not Saturday and that according to the early forecast was looking like a good day! Clear skies with a light Westerly wind. Hmm probably not the best conditions speed wise for a good long distance balloon flight however perfect for a first time go perhaps?

A quick message to Luke and I had a retrieve driver for Saturday as Dad was busy. Launch site would probably be around the Eastern edge of Bristol with the help of Mandy Thompson.

### **Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> October**

Uh oh the wind direction on the updated forecasts was now starting to give a Northerly element. From the Eastern edge of Bristol this wasn't very useful as you would be flying directly towards Salisbury Plain Danger area and therefore ending any hopes of a substantial flight. Back to the planning and I contacted Andy Collet to see whether he had any launch sites in the Gloucester area that he would be happy with me using. Thankfully Andy came up with three suggestions all of which would be available at fairly last minutes notice.

My search was also ongoing for a "co-pilot". Thankfully my good friend and Ultra Magic Rep Richard Penney was up for the flight and would confirm in the next 24 hours.

In the meantime, the kit was ready to go. I had also borrowed a Worthington tank from local balloonist and friend Ron Griffin who gave me some very useful and wise advice on long distance flying having flown to the North of England from Icicle in years gone by. Ron would be attending the One Man Meet at Cirencester that weekend however jokingly claimed that he would try and race me on Saturday morning should he fly too!

### **Friday 7<sup>th</sup> October**

The forecast was now looking like a North Westerly therefore ruling a Bristol launch. Back to the map and I decided that Fromebridge Mill near Whitminster would be the best option for launch. A quick call to Andy he confirmed that the site would be available and advised on access. Another call this time to Fromebridge Mill to let them know of my intentions and to make sure that everything was Ok their end for me to fly. Thankfully, the manager was delightful and more than happy for us to use the site! Woohoo!

More good news, Richard was available and able to join me for the flight. This was a relief as he has participated in long flights before so would have the relevant experience.

The rest of the evening was spent checking trajectory forecasts and met updates for the day whilst watching Reading FC loose to QPR on the box! The upper winds were forecast to drop out during the day however early on a forecast of 20knots at 2000ft was looking promising. In my mind, I would be delighted if I could get back to Newbury however with the updated met I set my sites on Basingstoke/Alton if we were lucky!

### **Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> October – Flight Day!**

The alarm went off at 5:00am however it was safe to say that I was wide awake way before then checking the forecast. The morning was looking good with the 20knots at 2000ft however by early afternoon the winds would be down to around 9 or 10knots. Not ideal but it looked a lovely day to go flying!

We met 6:00am at the farm and proceeded to Fromebridge Mill. A quick stop at the delightful M5 services (seriously it's worth a try albeit pricey!) to stock up on "essentials" for the flight and onto the launch field arriving at 7:25am.

Conditions were rather chilly as we set about loading the basket ready for flight. Very kindly Richard had brought along his supply of extra tank straps which were very necessary. After 10 minutes or so we finally had the basket loaded with tanks. Note: It's very difficult to push over a basket with 6 tanks in it! Inflation then proceeded as normal.



All the essentials were then added. Flight instruments, spare batteries etc and finally after the usual pre-flight check we were ready for take-off. Warming the balloon up, we unstrapped the Worthington and removed just before take-off which proceeded at 08:10am. Climbing out of Fromebridge Mill our objective was to get to 2000ft and the "faster" winds. It was a beautifully clear morning with views into Wales across the Severn estuary albeit rather chilly on the ground so was a relief to see the Sun!



Climbing to 2000ft and heading East/South East. Stonehouse & Stroud to the Left. Having reached 2000ft we were pleased to see that the speed was indeed around 20/22knots and heading in a good direction. This was my first experience of flying a heavy balloon so it took a bit of getting used to however I soon found a way that was comfortable. Looking ahead our track suggested that we would be West of Kemble and clear of any airspace as we headed South East.

Minchinhampton Common and earthworks.



Soon enough Kemble came into view on our left with the giant disused airliners parked up. At this stage staying at 2000ft was taking us more and more South. This was OK however once we crossed the M4 we would more than likely have to come down and find the Westerly surface winds to avoid running into the Salisbury Plain Danger Area.

We continued our flight, enjoying the views of the Wiltshire countryside with a good track and good speed (still around 22knots). As we approached the M4 we took the decision to descend to a lower altitude. We could afford to do this as heading East would take us into the Newbury area and familiar territory. After crossing the M4, we proceeded over Royal Wotton Bassett and across the huge solar power farms. We had dropped to around 1600ft at this stage, but our speed was still relatively healthy at around 20 knots, so we were satisfied to still be covering ground.



Having crossed the Solar Farms we proceeded down to Marlborough and the Savernake Forest. As we approached the Marlborough, the conversation turned to past Icicle Balloon Meets as our track would take us across the forest and the old launch site at Warren Farm. Soon enough we were directly above the launch site with stories and memories of past flights from the field. It almost felt right that we crossed the site where many good times had be shared for many years by many people in the ballooning community.

Warren Farm with the old Icicle Balloon Meet Launch site.



By now our speed was starting to suffer, even at lower altitudes we were barely managing 10 knots. However, we proceeded as it was just a nice day to be flying! The direction was still good, clear of Salisbury Plain Danger area and into Hampshire.

After slowly crossing Great Bedwyn we proceeded onto higher ground and the gliding club at Shalbourne who were waiting for the thermals to arrive for their gliding club members.

We continued into the Test Valley, sticking at around 1200ft to make the use of what speed we had. There was a very small layer at around 1200ft where we had 10 knots, and it was difficult at times to keep the balloon in this layer with the Thermals that were now forming. After proceeding to Whitchurch we adjusted the plan, Salisbury Plain was now long gone and as we had stayed low we had in fact drifted more East therefore taking us away from the Southampton Zone.

This was excellent news as we approached and cleared the A34. We could now climb to over 5000ft (with a significantly lighter balloon) and hopefully achieve more distance. The views were

now the best of the flight. We could clearly see the South Coast, the Isle of White and the ferry liners as they departed Southampton & Portsmouth.

5206ft and back up to around 20 knots!



The balloon was now flying beautifully, cruising along very high and a real sense that we could achieve a good distance despite the somewhat “slack conditions”. Ahead now we could see Basingstoke to our left in the distance with Alton to the South and Lasham in between.

Despite our now increased speed, gas was starting to get low. Richard advised that we should start to consider landing options. Looking at the map there were in fact a few large SA’s approaching with No landing options available. Richard also mentioned that conditions on the ground could thermic therefore making landing tricky and more unpredictable than normal.

As the time ticked on to 04hrs 30minutes flying time, we decided between us that it was best to descend to a lower level and find a suitable landing site. Crossing the Steam Railway line at

Ropley we noted several options in front of us including a large, sheltered grass paddock. True to Richard's word, conditions on the ground were thermic and quite tricky. Skilfully Richard brought the balloon down and despite some unpredictable changes in direction we made it into the field and a perfect stand-up landing!

It was soon noticeable that conditions were indeed very thermic on the ground so we deflated the balloon as quickly as possible to make everything safe.



At this point we were approached by the landowner who was amazed to see us. She was even more amazed when we told her where we had come from and insisted that we should have coffee and biscuits! After a short time, Sarah returned with a tray of two coffees and chocolate biscuits eager to learn more about our flight!





Coffee drank and biscuits eaten, and the story of our flight told we started the process of packing the balloon. After a short time, Luke arrived with his youngest son Rab and the trailer. All packed away we thanked Sarah for her hospitality and set off on the journey back to base at Enborne, West Berkshire.

All in all, a fantastic experience and something I will never forget...

**Thank you... (Such a flight is not possible without the support and dedication of good friends)**

Richard Penney – For sharing his experiences of long-distance ballooning and joining me on the flight.

Luke Butler & Rab – Crew for the flight. Top job as always

Ron Griffin – For the loan of an inflation tank and useful flight tips based on his experiences of long-distance ballooning.

### **What did I learn...**

My main aim of the flight was to learn having only recently (Mid-August) received my Balloon Licence.

So, what did I learn...

**Planning is everything** – As with all flying, plan well and often 2/3hours ahead, the forecast as we know often changes!

**Charge everything** – Charge everything that needs charging and take spare batteries!

**The first hour** – The first hour or so the balloon will fly heavy and therefore differently to what you are perhaps used to.

**Tank straps** – You need a lot of these! Thankfully Richard provided a bag full!

**Food & Drink** – You will get hungry and especially thirsty!

### **Final Result**

Starting place: Fromebridge Mill, Whitminster, Stroud,

Landing place: Gilbert Street, Ropley, Alresford, Hampshire

Distance Flown: 120km (74.56miles) Duration: 04hrs 40mins