

# The Great British Air Race



For the first time in ten years, the BBAC was given the opportunity to stage The Queen's Cup in which balloonists were to compete for the prestigious sporting trophy entrusted to the Royal Aero Club, as the event's presenter Robin Batchelor describes.

It's 06:00, 7th October 2023, and still dark as we drive into a large field near Taunton and we see the headlights of other vehicles slowly finding their appointed spot. The navigator is looking at

an app on their phone called what3words, muttering things like 'marmalade.debut.rumble' or 'positions.excavated.ghosts'. Each team had been given their unique three-word location to place their basket ready for the start of the 2023 Queen's Cup balloon race soon after sunrise.

## ROYAL TROPHY

The Queen's Cup, usually stored at the Royal Air Force Museum in Hendon, is the oldest and most prestigious sporting trophy in the UK, dating back to 1719. In

Left: The Audi balloon, G-YSHK, a 2023 Ultramagic M-105, and one of the five Q8 eTron all-electric cars loaned to teams by the sponsor during the event.

Above: With all participating balloons inflated, Team Turner is first to take off, with others following at one minute intervals.

2010 it was entrusted to the Royal Aero Club by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, who originally received the trophy as a wedding gift in 1947. The trophy is made of Irish silver and has the Royal Arms on one side and the inscription 'The Queen's Air Race Challenge Cup' on the other, and the Royal Aero Club chooses which member association competes for it each year.

## GAS AND ELECTRIC

After learning that the BBAC was chosen for 2023, a committee started work on the organisation and received twenty entries

before the closing date. Life and health got in the way of ten disappointed teams, who presented their apologies, so as dawn broke over the field near Taunton in Somerset there were just ten teams laying out their balloons, plus a most welcome eleventh balloon called 'Avanti', which is the gas company who most generously supplied the 'bioLPG' based on advanced bioethanol produced from waste - a sustainable alternative to fossil LPG.

In keeping with sustainability the committee were thrilled when Audi not only agreed to support the event financially, but also lend five teams an all-electric Audi Q8 eTron SUV, one of which of course was Richard Penney flying the Audi eco balloon. Hats off to the sterling work done by Mark Warne, the sponsor liaison, and Rupert Stanley for keeping finances under control.

## AND THEY'RE OFF!

Some last minute changes out of their control meant some frantic re-thinking for launch site, accommodation and live-streaming, but the shared experience of the committee nailed it and race director David Bareford triumphed when he drove off and found the bacon butty van waiting at the wrong gate (they weren't familiar with what3words).

So ten balloon teams enjoyed hot coffee whilst listening to the briefing in what the landowner used to call Strawberry Picking Field, but now known as Queen's Cup field. Deputy Director and Safety Officer Stephen Jones hoisted the green flag and the early morning silence was shattered by the sound of inflation fans.

Viewers of the Queen's Cup Youtube channel enjoyed livestreaming and first off was Alan Turner followed by the other teams who all set off downwind towards the east, with their YB trackers switched on so their progress can be monitored online. In fact only nine balloons launched because fog rolled in just as Colin Butter was getting ready, and he elected not to fly. Disappointing, but we respected his decision. The rules state that the winner shall be the team that flies furthest from the start point during Saturday and Sunday in any number of flights, providing each subsequent flight starts from a point less than is less than the distance between the start point and the previous landing.

Bradley Lewis and Emilie Butter took an early lead heading due east at 53kph, but



Above: First to set off, Alan Turner and Alex Pollack head east in G-OJMS, a 2006 Cameron Z-90, into somewhat misty conditions, eventually landing near Lasham Airfield.



Above: Bradley Lewis and Emily Butter in G-JHAA, a 2012 Cameron Z-90, grab an early lead, but are overtaken by Thomas Hook and William Wood.

were soon overtaken by Thomas Hook and William Wood at 60kph, who lead the pack until they landed about 14:30 unable to avoid the Gatwick zone. Richard Parry, 2013 winner, launched "...with the accuracy of a Japanese bullet train" at 07:24 and climbed to find the best wind towards Margate. He successfully avoided Salisbury Plain No-Go zone, but in order to avoid the Heathrow and Gatwick zones he landed near Alton to refuel and relocate. He then continues, "...Clearing the corridor near Biggin Hill I enjoyed the Kent countryside and watched Spitfires doing victory rolls around me whilst looking for best speed/direction for the coast. Margate became impossible due to a fuel/wind shift calculation, so I headed further south towards Folkstone. My fuel ran out around

16:00, so I descended and encountered the sea breeze pushing me towards the NE and gaining a few kilometres. I landed on some MoD land and Ukrainian soldiers on a training exercise offered to help with the balloon packing."

## EARLY LEAD

Meanwhile Dom Bareford crept into the lead and takes over the story, "...We successfully were able to stay south of Biggin Hill, and once we were clear of Gatwick it felt like we could breathe a sigh of relief, we were on the home stretch and no more airspace to worry about for the rest of the flight. Jess Daly had been monitoring our fuel consumption closely and it looked like we would have enough to take us all the way to the coast. As we





**Above:** On their Sunday flight, Thomas Lee and Holly Skiplorne, flying G-RECL, a 2018 Cameron Z-105, witnessed the scar of HS2 disfiguring the landscape.



**Above:** Dominic Bareford and Jess Daly take in the sights of the Garden of England, including a track over the top of Canterbury Cathedral.

*passed over the lovely Kent sights of Leeds Castle and Canterbury Cathedral and were treated to a Spitfire fly-by, I thought, how close to the sea do I want to go? Andy Kaye had suggested a disused airfield at Manston as a possibility, after a bit of research he even got access arranged for the crew! Initially I thought it a bit close to the sea for comfort, but as we got nearer the conditions felt stable enough to go for it, besides, a nice big airfield with very little activity was a great target with the windy landing I expected! We lined ourselves up and frustratingly somehow managed to avoid all the grass! Anyway I was relieved to enjoy a safe landing after eight and a half hours in the air. I was exhausted."*

Richard Penney also landed in Kent in the Audi balloon after a flight of nine hours and ten minutes, successfully avoiding Salisbury Plain but enjoying a spectacular view of the cathedral. Richard writes, "...Descending into a lower wind took us past Winchester beneath Southampton's CTA and onwards towards Farnborough CTR, we climbed again and yes! The heading was easterly towards Dunsfold, well south of Farnborough but with Gatwick ahead.

Around Haslemere we took the decision to descend yet again to see if we could get a more northerly track. It was there, but painfully slow, between 500 and 1,000ft and only going at 10-12kt, however this

took us north of the Gatwick CTR towards Dorking. We climbed to around 3,000ft and tracked down the centre of Kent. Talking with Headcorn Aerodrome they were giving surface winds of 10/12kt gusting 15kt. We could see both the north and south coasts of Kent and the far end of the coast at Deal. It seemed surreal that eight hours earlier on the same flight we were looking at the Bristol Channel!" The sea breeze gave them a 65-metre drag south of Canterbury.

**BACK ON THE HORSE**

Holly Skiplorne and Thomas Lee had hinted on the launch site they may land early to relocate to avoid Salisbury and this they did, but had a tricky landing that knocked the wind out of their sails somewhat. Overcoming their initial desire to stay firmly on the ground, they found that with the help of their many ballooning friends they got back on the horse so-to-speak and had a better flight in the afternoon. They write, "...The afternoon was a lovely example of some of the ballooning community's shining spirits. So many people came together to help us relocate, not once, but twice, and ultimately launch again in very tricky conditions, so a massive thank you must go to every single person who helped us. A breezy launch from Timsbury and once again we were up and settling into the cruise. This flight was much more uneventful and we both managed to regain a little of our confidence."

Despite being first balloon in the air, Alan Turner and Alex Pollack went straight up to 7,500ft and watched other balloons scoot off ahead of them, so descended to 1,000ft and finally landed one field short of Lasham Airfield, who had invited them in. Their eTron re-charged after take-off and still got to the balloon before the other retrieve.

Darwin Peltan and Mark Mason found a wind that took them over the Winchester services on the M3 and landed past Micheldever wood to refuel with a second flight to Newbury Rugby Club. Chris Freeman and Oliver Penney flew from Taunton to Salisbury and then Yate to Oxford. 168km in 5.5 hours.

**LIVE FROM HQ**

Back at race HQ in Taunton, Committee Chair Stephanie Hemmings and Fiona Waite were feverishly co-ordinating



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all the images and videos being sent by balloons and crews to populate the hourly livestream on Youtube (Steph feeding her infant at the same time), whilst Joel Hemmings smoothly co-ordinated all the electricravery involved. Membership Secretary Angela Bird was busily juggling her small baby and the media very calmly.

All the teams then stuck the point of a compass in a map on the launch site and the pencil on their final landing spot, then drew an arc anticlockwise. Their Sunday morning launch site must be within that arc, the location being dictated by what they thought the wind would do and where they wanted to fly to best avoid obstacles to add as much distance as possible to their Saturday score. A huge cheer went up in race HQ when the BBC aired a news item of the race showing drone footage of the launch.

Teams spent Saturday night refuelling the balloon tanks and retrieve vehicle, recharging the Audi eTron, drive to Sunday's

launch area and find a launch field. Some even found time to eat and sleep.

**GREAT BRITISH BALLOON LAUNCH**

Sunday was a big day for ballooning because, coinciding with the Queen's Cup balloon race, there was the One Man Meet in Shropshire (twenty-nine balloons) and The Great British Balloon Launch, which saw balloons taking to the skies in Devon, Somerset, Wiltshire, Shropshire, Northamptonshire and Kent (plus those I've forgotten) to celebrate and promote our sport (see map overleaf).

Sunday morning in race HQ I was looking for a light switch to go downstairs and I could smell the coffee being brewed by the ever-smiling Louise Jones. The team were already avidly watching the YB tracker. I heard Fiona say "Look! Dom has turned on his tracker and is right up in Preston." Then Steph replied a few moments later, "...and Richard Parry is in Blackburn!" So out came the maps to have a stab at the tactics of the teams. David

**Above:** The One Man Meet, coincidentally held on the day of The Great British Balloon Launch enjoys a great turnout.



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**Above:** More than thirty balloon teams took the opportunity to fly as part of The Great British Balloon Launch.





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**Above:** Dominic Bareford and Jessica Daly, flying G-CDJF, a 2005 Ultramagic S-105, toward their first landing at Manston Airfield.



**Above:** Winning ways. Team Bareford, (L-R), Steve Daly, Jess Daly and pilot Dominic Bareford.



**Above:** The map shows the number of balloon teams that participated in The Great British Balloon Launch on Sunday 8th October 2023.

Bareford said, "They'll have to avoid RAF Spadeadam Electronic Warfare station." He seemed to know every inch of the UK.

**RACE TO THE NORTH**

One by one all the trackers appeared on the YB app and at sunrise they started moving downwind. Teams Bareford and Parry headed north across the Yorkshire Dales and Pennines doing battle for first and second place. Richard Penney in Team Audi launched from Doncaster and flew north towards York, which was deep in fog. They landed, relocated and continued north to 'wharfs.foreheads.silly', giving them third place with 394km, landing at 15:57, three minutes before the



**Above:** Behind the scenes. The team at HQ ensured that everything went swimmingly from launch through to coordinating media, livestreaming, and monitoring the teams' tracks..

16:00 deadline. Audi ran a competition to win an Audi jacket worn by the balloon crew if you could guess the what3words landing place of the Audi balloon.

Fourth and fifth place was being hotly contested with team Hook starting west of Shrewsbury and ending east of Sheffield, giving them a total of 314km, whilst team Turner started the day near Stowe on the Wold and ended near Cromer, one field away from the sea, clocking up a total of 380km.

Bradley Lewis and Emilie Butter launched from the same place as Turner and flew high all the way to Norfolk, landing south of Kings Lynn with a total of 309km and sixth place. Team Peltan

spent Sunday claiming seventh place with a flight from Banbury to Huntingdon and final score of 253km.

Thomas and Holly had better luck on Sunday, "This was, by far and away, the nicest flight of the weekend, even if it was the shortest and slowest. Taking off in stunning surroundings of the Malvern Hills, in flat calm ground conditions, at a leisurely pace, was just what we both needed. We landed at 0.4kt, having been chatting to the landowner of the field for five minutes before we touched down. We met another friendly landowner and another bouncy puppy and, running physically and mentally exhausted, began packing up again and started the

**THE QUEEN'S CUP 2023 LEADER BOARD**

Pos	Name	Start time Last pos received	Distance Scored	Duration
1	BAREFORD Balloon	07 Oct 07:20 08 Oct 14:29	442.01 KM Finished	1d 6h 29m 0s
2	PARRY Balloon	07 Oct 07:20 08 Oct 11:39	393.97 KM Finished	1d 4h 20m 0s
3	PENNEY R Balloon	07 Oct 07:20 08 Oct 16:25	384.47 KM Finished	1d 8h 34m 0s
4	TURNER Balloon	07 Oct 07:20 08 Oct 16:24	380.00 KM Finished	1d 8h 2m 0s
5	HOOK Balloon	07 Oct 07:20 08 Oct 14:48	313.52 KM Finished	1d 7h 5m 0s
6	LEWIS Balloon	07 Oct 07:20 08 Oct 14:00	309.25 KM Finished	1d 6h 20m 0s
7	PELTAN Balloon	07 Oct 07:20 08 Oct 16:07	253.29 KM Finished	1d 7h 50m 0s
8	LEE Balloon	07 Oct 07:20 08 Oct 17:06	236.80 KM Finished	1d 8h 27m 0s
9	PENNEY O Balloon	07 Oct 07:20 07 Oct 19:11	164.86 KM Finished	0d 11h 10m 0s
10	BUTTER Balloon	07 Oct 07:20 07 Oct 07:52	0.32 KM Retired	-

process of finding somewhere to refuel and launch again that afternoon.

We saw some stunning sights on this flight; the destruction caused by HS2 leaving a knife-like scar across the country, being buzzed by just about every light aircraft in the area, the two Cardington hangars, and flying over Cranfield airstrip where Thomas' Dad worked for thirty years, with the helpful guidance of the most accommodating and kind air traffic controller we've ever encountered. Holly's eldest son also spotted us in the distance from his Dad's house during the flight, leading to some excited messages being exchanged through WhatsApp, much to Holly's delight! We flew until the competition timings allowed, landing fifteen minutes before time, with our fourth happy, friendly and helpful landowner of the weekend." 237km gave them eighth place.

Ninth place went to Oliver Penney with 165km and with all the balloons safely back on the ground the 2023 Queen's Cup balloon race came to a close.

**IT'S A WRAP**

Huge thanks go to the organisers, who put in much work over sixteen months. The enthusiastic sponsorship from Audi and Avanti made the whole event a joy, and the gracious invitation from The Royal Aero Club to once again compete for the 'oldest

and most prestigious sporting trophy in the UK' gave the event a rather fine status.

But it is the pilots and crews and their friends who have made it such a success with their pictures and videos living up live streaming, and their enthusiastic smiling faces showing us how much fun it is to go ballooning.

The Grand Prize Giving was held at 'dazzling.pulp.presuming'.

**Right, from top:** Winning pilot Dom Bareford is presented with The Queen's Cup by his father, Race Director David; in second place comes the colourful Richard Parry; third place goes to Team Penney in the Ultramagic Audi-branded Eco balloon, (L-R) Yves de Contades, pilot Richard Penney and co-pilot Mark Whitewood; and in fourth place Team Turner receives the Sustainability Award from Audi, with pilot Alan (C) all aglow..

For abundant pictures and videos of the event online, check out:  
**YouTube** [www.youtube.com/@QueensCup2023](http://www.youtube.com/@QueensCup2023)  
**Facebook** [Queen's Cup2023](https://www.facebook.com/QueensCup2023)

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