

# Sarah conquers the Cerne Abbas giant



*By Phil Hawkins, glider pilot with 30 years experience, from the Oxford Gliding Club at RAF Weston-on-the-Green. Recently he and Martin "Haste" Hastings, each flying their own machines, attempted 300 kilometre flights to the chalk hill figure known as the Cerne Abbas giant, just north of Weymouth.*

**This was supposed to be an exciting trip to far-off Dorset, but at first the reality felt very different.** Struggling in rough sinking air over the centre of Wantage, beneath a cloudless blue sky, I had the distinct feeling that this flight was going to be cut short, fairly shortly. The clouds had been so promising when we started, but over Oxford and Abingdon they had thinned out to nothing.

It was all Haste's fault. The night before, in the bar, he had got me interested in doing a flight to see 'the man with the big dick.' The Cerne Abbas giant is a chalk hill figure, 180 feet tall, whose origins and antiquity are the subject of much speculation. Nobody knows how long he has been there. Apart from his startling male appearance, he also wields an enormous knobbly club that seems slightly out of proportion, about 120 feet long.

Haste has talked before about using it as a turning point (TP) but maybe it was just the beer talking,

because on Sunday morning he tried to wriggle out of it! And as I sank gently towards Wantage, I was thinking how silly I'd look in the bar that evening after descending into a field only 25km away. I surveyed the generous selection of harvested crop fields to the south of the town, and wondered if there was a fish and chip shop open there on a Sunday.

Luckily Haste brought me out of these daydreams by announcing a sustainable thermal between Didcot and Wantage, so I backtracked a couple of miles to join him. We spent a few minutes circling carefully over East Hendred, then the thermal, unmarked by any cloud above, developed quite nicely. We were soon cruising ahead at 3,500ft over the high ground south of Wantage, where the air felt more buoyant. I made good progress over Lambourn and Marlborough, while Haste got low again at Membury. In the far distance to the southwest, another line of clouds could be seen, a tantalising promise of better things to come.

Approaching Devizes I noticed small gatherings of *parapente* enthusiasts soaring their banana-shaped parachutes along the hill slopes far below, facing the wind. From previous visits I remembered the semi-circular street pattern in the town, with the castle at the centre, shrouded by trees. On the western side is an impressive flight of canal locks, with a large square reservoir linked to each section of canal between the gates.

## *A very smelly thermal*

A few miles short of Keevil airfield I arrived beneath the first isolated cloud. Expectations were high, but in reality the thermal was no better than the blue ones I'd used previously. To the south it was all blue again, but still there were magnificent clouds in the distance, beckoning hypnotically. Over the tall chimney at Westbury I found a very smelly thermal, which helped me around the western tip of the Salisbury Plain danger zone.



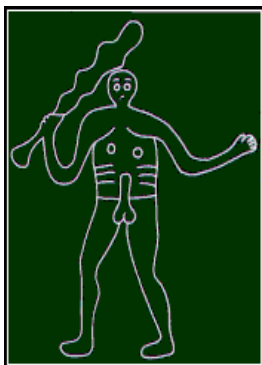
*Sarah*

The airspace above Salisbury Plain is occasionally occupied with shells and other ordnance fired off by the Army, not a healthy place to be flying.

Passing Warminster with Longleat safari park nearby, and the huge domed Centre Parks building, I recognised The Park dead ahead. This is a well-known gliding site on the top of a hill. A small wispy cloud overhead marked a strong thermal nearby.

Haste decided to turn back at around this time, following yet another low scrape at Keevil, but my fortunes couldn't have been more different to his. Soon I was racing ahead under a glorious cloudscape, my Colibri logger now indicating only 34km to go. The logger is a clever little black box device that talks continuously to GPS satellites and calculates its position and speed every 4 seconds. Near Henstridge airfield a superb thermal lifted me from 2000ft to nearly 4500ft seemingly in just a few turns. This gave me a good fast run down towards the coast. In the distance I could see Weymouth bay and the hazy outline of Portland beyond it, surrounded by a sparkling sea.

Map reading in this area was not easy. Lots of unknown villages nestling in the folds of the hills, each valley looking identical to the last. I was grateful for the reassuring read-out on the logger, methodically counting down the remaining distance. Ahead, the clouds ended abruptly marking cool sea air, but fortunately this seemed to be further away than the TP.



Following a curving line of clouds, I approached Cerne Abbas from the east. The giant was seen at last in full sunshine, but he looks rather small from 3000ft. He stands in a rectangular field all by himself, his warlike stance somewhat spoiled by the silly expression on his face.

### *The long trek home*

The flight moved into a purposeful new phase as I began the long trek home. Haste was reporting that conditions back at Marlborough were still very blue, whereas I was romping along under superb clouds. I wondered if it would be better to return around the other side of the danger zones, via Salisbury. The clouds in that direction looked very good, and the overall distance flown would be about the same. I therefore changed course slightly and headed for Compton Abbas, a picturesque little airstrip situated

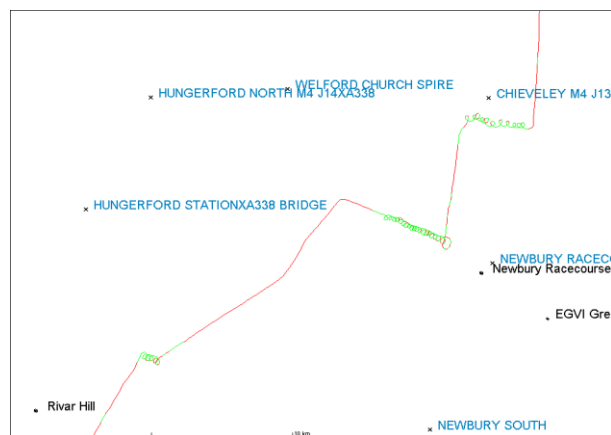
on a hilltop facing north. This was probably the best part of the entire flight. I was able to stay high, enjoying long lines of weak lift and reduced sink.

Salisbury cathedral was bathed in the afternoon sunshine - the clouds here were becoming sparse again. Looking north towards home, it was obvious that soon I would be heading back into the blue. I managed to re-set the logger to point to Weston-on-the-Green, but it promptly told me that home was still 105km away. I aimed for a small group of clouds near Thrupton airfield, only to find they had all dissolved into nothing by the time I got there.

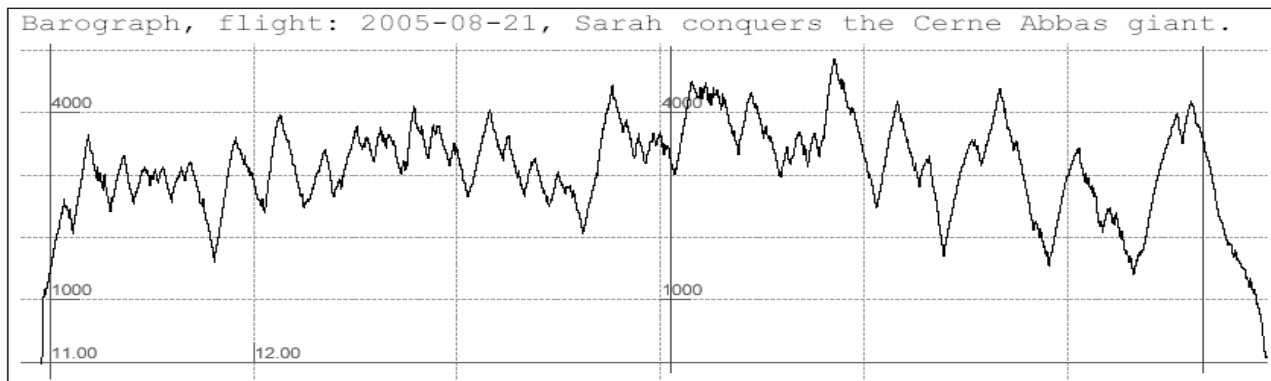
Clear of the eastern end of the danger zone, I continued the glide northwards. Very small and very isolated cloud caps could be seen miles and miles in the distance, none remotely within gliding range. I blundered into a strong blue thermal just short of Rivar Hill, but after that I found myself flying in strong sink for minutes on end.

The sinking torrent of bad air wouldn't stop. Convinced that I was merely reducing the retrieve distance for the ground crew, I pushed hard to get through it. However, I was saved by the sudden appearance of a little cloud, hovering within range over the western edge of Newbury. I had to change course by 90 degrees to reach it, but it was worthwhile. Those clouds over Newbury were the last I saw that day.

When I reached the power station at Didcot after another long glide, there was nothing but a few weak movements in the air. Nothing worth stopping for, anyway. I could envisage myself circling here for the next half hour, never making any headway, while the day slowly died and all chance of reaching home was lost. That wasn't for me. If you aren't climbing you might as well be



*Changing course by 90 degrees towards the last cloud of the day at Newbury. Red means descending, usually in straight lines, green means ascending, usually in circles. Notice how the glider was carried along with the NW wind whilst circling.*



The flight shown graphically as height (thousands of feet) against time (GMT).

gliding, that's what Haste says and he's right. So, sinking rapidly once more, I aimed for Abingdon airfield, which was within range and would provide a guaranteed landable surface.

Even lower than before, at around 1500ft over Abingdon town, I struck another strong thermal that tossed me about something awful before I got it partially centred. Although it was rough and squirry I could barely get 3000ft from it, and I wasn't sure I could get home from this position with a westerly crosswind. Crossing fingers, I continued northwards on a very marginal glide slope, hoping for something to turn up.

#### *A relaxing finale*

True to form, something did turn up, and I was able to do a few circles at Headington to improve the situation. When I returned to Weston-on-the-Green Haste was still soaring there over the motorway junction, apparently waiting for clearance to land by the hangar. It was now after 5pm and the thermal was sedate by earlier standards. We plodded around in wide circles, climbing slowly.

Haste was attempting to contact another glider for a photo session, but I cruised around Bicester airfield to put the second corner of my triangle officially in the bag. Why? I had noticed, while fiddling with the logger in the morning, that the Cerne Abbas TP was only 148km. A straight out-and-return would not give me a 300km flight without adding a second TP a few km to the north-east of Weston.

Minutes later, Claudia announced on the radio that the parachutists had closed down for the day, and that we could land up by the hangar if we liked. I was longing to stretch my legs. I cruised off the remaining height by completing a large circuit of the airfield around Heyford and Kirtlington. After a long approach I was finally bumping and rolling up towards the trailer.

I was suitably grateful to both of the women in my life that day. To Sarah, my beautiful Mini Nimbus, for getting me home against the odds, and to Fiona for just being there with a cup of tea when I returned. A large group from the Club went out to the 'sausage pub' at Caulcott in the evening, which incidentally I can heartily recommend, and it was a great way to round off a memorable day.

#### *The embarrassing PS*

On the way to the pub, I called in at home and quickly printed off the downloaded flight details from the logger. This caused some hilarity around the dinner tables. It was suggested that the southern tip of the flight track, around Cerne Abbas, is reminiscent of the giant's most famous attribute, and I'm not talking about the 120ft club. *I couldn't possibly comment on that, but see the enlarged inset and make up your own mind!*

