

Account of flight no. 850 (7 August 1988)

This was a particularly memorable Inter Club League flight from Enstone. Saturday 6 August was blue with thermals up to 3000ft although locally around Enstone conditions improved further in the late afternoon. Tasks were set around Aston Down and Didcot but nobody got much further than the first turning point. I retrieved John Giddins from Little Rissington where he had managed to upset the United States Air Force.

The forecast for Sunday was rather better. Tony Cox had obtained an ascent that suggested if the ground temperature reached 28 degrees the thermals would go up to 6000ft! The task for the pundits and intermediates was initially to Market Harborough and Leighton Buzzard railway stations. The novices had HB and return. I spent some time fettling a problem with the Cirrus canopy catch, but meanwhile the thermals were taking their time to get started. Also there was only one tug aircraft available, so launching the competitors promised to be a slow process. There was a pretty good turn-out of 13 pilots out of a possible 15 from the five competing Clubs.

Shortly before launching we were told that the task had been shortened – the second turning point was now Towcester race-course. I'd forgotten to take my camera to the briefing and thought that Tony Cox would bring the start board out to the runway afterwards. But he didn't, so I took a picture of him with his arms indicating 12:30pm in semaphore!

After the aerotow I climbed slowly to 3,500ft with a constant blast of air on my face from the side vent. The sky wasn't completely blue – there were odd swirls and clumps of cirrus, some of them thick enough to have a marked effect on ground illumination and thermal production, but I didn't realise this until later. The immediate problem was to hang about while the remainder of the competitors were launched, before the start line could be opened.

When the line did open after a lengthy delay I was low and in sink, but I started anyway in the wake of 820 (Tony Cox) and LB (an ASW-20). They led me to the first thermal, but I rejected the idea of doing another start because I thought the day was likely to be won on distance rather than on speed. So I just set off towards Banbury at 3500ft at a cautious 60 knots against the easterly wind. Before reaching Banbury I had to stop for another thermal, and I heard Chris Reynolds (the OGC novice) landing his Skylark 4 near Banbury.

There were some areas of strong sink near Banbury but more lift was located over the town, and now LB and 721 (Bob Sharman's LS6) were following me. They stayed behind me for the next few thermals, during which time we made slow but steady progress towards Daventry. The thermals were cropping up quite regularly and I was using an operating band of about 2000ft to 3500ft, but I was taking care to avoid the darkest of those strange dim smudges on the ground caused by the thicker bits of upper cloud. Perhaps Tony Cox didn't, because he landed out in this area.

Visibility was quite good and I was able to pick out HB from just beyond Daventry. Market Harborough was reached with no special problems, and I could see the railway station near the eastern edge of the town. Arriving over the town centre at the bottom of my height band I couldn't seem to find any decent lift, and with every scrappy circle the wind was drifting me away from the turning point. At length I decided to press on low and take the picture, then sort out a thermal afterwards. As I turned steeply to take the photographs, I saw LB doing a wide sweep at a lower altitude to my left.

I grovelled around but Market Harborough just wouldn't produce a thermal to get me going again. I noticed that LB and 721 had set off together, still lower than me, towards the south. I followed them gradually getting

lower, until they split up. One went left and one went right for no apparent reason. I was down to about a thousand feet and reduced to scratching in any bits of zero sink that nudged the wings. After a while I noticed that LB and 721 were now turning together about a mile *behind* me and had gained height.

Glenn Bailes asked me how I was doing. He was the intermediate pilot on the same task, and with an earlier start had reached Towcester already. But he was getting very low, and reported that the Northampton/Towcester area was quite gloomy. Not long afterwards I heard him land on the race-course.

Meanwhile, cursing my luck, I backtracked northwards and edged towards the spot where my two companions were circling. At about 600ft indicated over green fields the audio began to burp quietly. I could see a main road wandering over the top of a hill, not like a map but in three dimensions, I was so close to it. On the other side it descended into Market Harborough. Round and round we went. I was sweating buckets and drinking constantly, and the light wind gradually blew me over the top of the hill. Then I saw that I was fortuitously being drifted towards HB and would soon be in range for a landing there and a simple retrieve. This reassuring prospect had a relaxing effect, and I began to enjoy working this extremely scrappy thermal. Eventually I was rewarded by a very gradual climb to 900ft, then a pause, then another series of bumps took me to 1300ft from which height HB was easily accessible.

In the far distance to the west beyond HB were some very small cumulus tops in amongst the scallops and swirls of cirrus. I had no hope of being able to use them, but they suggested that conditions might not be so difficult everywhere. I had heard Martin Hastings in the K-6 local soaring over Banbury at 5800ft and it sounded as if the forecast was turning out to be true, at least in some limited patches.

By this time LB and 721 had disappeared to the south at a respectable height, and I began to feel a bit aggrieved at getting left behind. There were a number of gliders attempting to local soar from HB but the nearest one was waffling around in zero with about 10 degrees of bank, which was no good to me at all. I recalled a previous occasion when I had found a thermal in blue conditions over the quarry just to the north of the site but I didn't have enough height to try it. Frustratingly, a field fire was going off about five miles further to the north. It looked delicious, and slightly illegal on a Sunday.

Approaching the HB circuit and down to 600ft again I noticed a Kestrel doing tight circles at my altitude as if to centre in a very small core. Before I got there he gave up and went in to land. There was something there, and I played with it idly, not holding out any hope but wanting to delay my circuit until I saw where the Kestrel landed. I watched his approach, tail chute deployed, and then his ground run kicking up dust on the airfield. A Chipmunk had also just landed and was taxiing towards the launch point.

However, I was still holding altitude at 600ft while the airfield was drifting by down below. About a mile downwind, just as I was deciding to give up and glide straight in, another bubble of lift shoved at the wings and I was in a gradual climb once more. Circle, circle, sweat, sweat, drink. The Cirrus was alive in my hands, responding to every movement in the thermal. Every twitch of the altimeter needle was in the right direction, and I began to look upwards again.

The sky patterns had assumed eerie proportions, some of the strangest cirrus I had ever seen. In places the threads clumped together to produce tangled knots causing more dark smudges on the ground beneath. Elsewhere there were curves and angular bars like some strange alien writing. And yet almost two-thirds of the sky was still clear blue allowing hot sunshine to get through. And the cirrus was moving. I watched a clump congealing into a dark blob only to

open out and disperse again. The majority of the movement seemed to be towards the east, directly opposite to the low-level wind. I was convinced that this was a good thing because it meant the large gloomy bit over Northampton (that Glenn had warned me about) would be moving away.

I noticed a gaggle of gliders circling about a thousand feet higher than myself and about two miles to the south. I didn't think these were from HB. They may have been from the Lasham competition, which started this weekend. It took some time to reach 1700ft but by then I felt confident to edge southwards to find what they were in. Encouragingly, small cloud tops were still appearing from time to time towards the south-west.

Still drifting westwards in the breeze I found the lift underneath the gaggle and began to climb at a healthy two knots. Soon I was back over the motorway and drifting towards the Rugby aerals, but I wasn't too worried about this because it was keeping me away from the muck over Northampton. The thermal was slow but very steady. The gaggle of about 10 gliders departed from the top one by one, heading south. Passing 3500ft I wondered when the thermal would stop. Passing 4000ft I wondered if I had reached one of the patches where the weather forecast was holding true. *Passing 5000ft I knew I had.* Happily, I retrieved my warm soggy banana from its last resting place and ate it.

Up here the air was a little bit cooler, which made a very pleasant change. I set off following the A5 on a glide to Towcester, which must have been at least 20 miles away. The upper cloud had now condensed into one tangled area that still cast a shadow on Northampton, and looking ahead I estimated that Towcester was right on the edge of it. I thought: *with this cloud still retreating against the wind, the longer it takes me to get there, the better things will be.* The air had certainly changed because I was still in bubbly conditions at heights far in excess of

anything I had achieved on the first leg of the task.

At 3500ft I stopped in another steady thermal that put an extra thousand feet in the bank, before resuming the height-consuming glide towards Towcester. There was another glider circling very high a few miles to the east under the edge of the upper cloud, but I decided not to detour again. Approaching the race-course at last I could see Glenn's Cirrus plonked right in the middle, amongst rows of cut straw. The race-course is roughly triangular with the grandstand on the eastern side. I asked him what the surface was like, since I recalled Jane Randle saying it was ridge-and-furrow. He reported it was a bit on the rough side but OK, and the direction he had landed (towards the south-east) was uphill. Apparently he had been scanning the northern horizon expecting me to join him at any moment, whereas in actual fact I was still at 3200ft making sure that he was included in my photos of the grandstand!

I also spoke to Caroline on the radio at about this time, just as she was setting out from Enstone to rescue Glenn. I was now pointing back into the clear part of the sky, but the air felt very steady and I was less hopeful of finding more lift. With a tailwind component at last, things were passing by more quickly, even with a reduced cruising speed of 50 knots. I knew that a field landing would not be necessary now, because I had plenty of height to reach Hinton-in-the-Hedges. There were some OGC members there for aerotow practice, since the parachute competition was going on at Weston.

Approaching Hinton I diverted to the left over sunlit Brackley but there was nothing worth having. Twiddling with the calculator I estimated that I was about 500ft below final glide into Enstone. I remembered what a good thermal source the middle of Hinton airfield is, and began to scratch around directly overhead at about 1500ft. Sure enough a bubble came up and I began to drift along with it. Below me I could see the

Oxford K-13 being aerotowed off by the Pawnee tug.

At this stage I was spending a lot of time weighing things up in my mind. With the Enstone Regional competition starting in 6 days time I didn't want to risk the glider any more in a field landing. I had been much too close to the ground already today. So if I couldn't be sure of getting home I had decided to land at Hinton. But I didn't think anyone else had finished the task and it was tantalising to be so close to it myself. I spoke to the finish line observers and imagined them waiting anxiously to see me. Although the wind was drifting me towards Banbury I would still have only a quartering tailwind if I decided to go for the finish.

At first the safety of the glider won in these mental arguments, and I turned back from my zero-sink bubble because I couldn't guarantee that it would last long enough to get me home. Another bubble rising from Hinton was about the same and I allowed myself to drift along with it for a while, going over the same discussion in my mind before turning back a second time. However my luck was in, for a third bubble was found in the same place over the Hinton hangar, and it was immediately obvious that this was the one I needed. I worked it up to 2100ft to give

myself some leeway for navigational problems looking into the evening sun, then set off over the M40 road works to the west of Hinton.

The final glide over Barford St John was quiet and uneventful. During the last couple of miles I was looking for the small group of cars at the northern end of the north-south runway at Enstone. To reach them I would have to cross some trees at the airfield boundary. I realised that it was possible to monitor the progress of my final glide by keeping the cars just above the trees. Whenever they rose too high I speeded up, and whenever they tended to disappear I slowed down a bit. Passing the trees at last I dived across the intervening field, aiming at the group of spectators on the finish line. They were waving and cheering like mad. Then the circuit and landing followed by a neat bit of taxiing off at the runway intersection.

Martin "Haste" Hastings was running towards me and shouting "Now that's what I *call* a pundit!" John and Christine were there, Graham and Lynne, and Carole. Gordon Camp walked across and chatted for a while. No other competitor had got back and everyone was very impressed. But Tony Cox still didn't want to buy a Cirrus!