

“The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men. Gang aft a-gley”

(Robert Burns 1785)



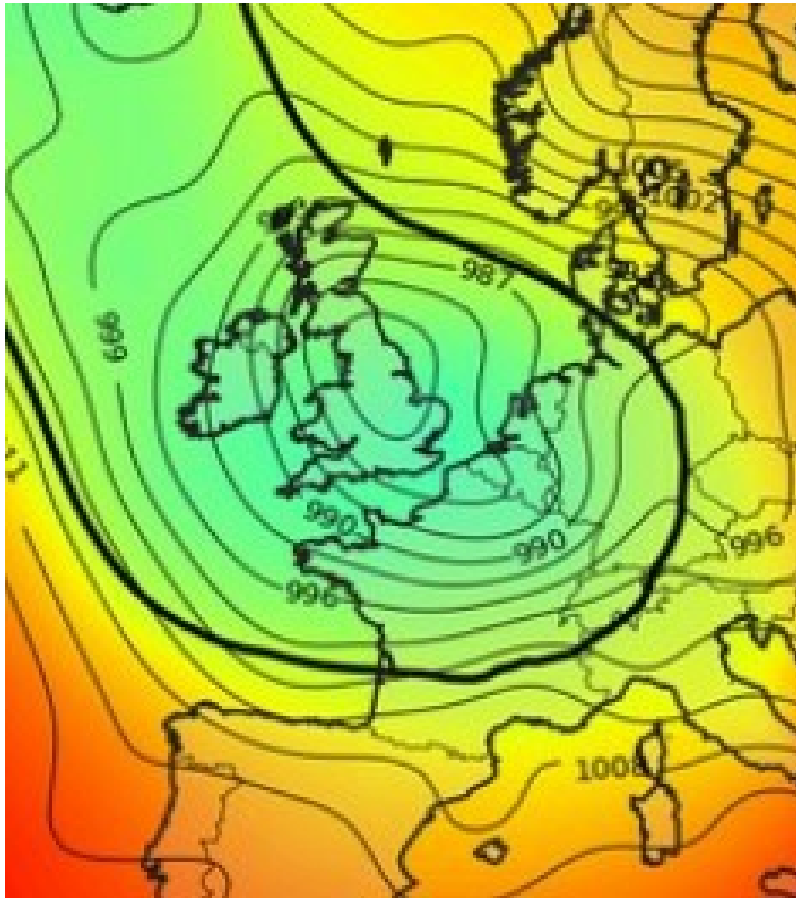
By David Rhys-Jones

No better schemes could have been laid than the Southdown Expedition to Denbigh. It was timed to coincide with James Hiley’s 50th Birthday which would be crowned with a Wave Climb to 5000 metres and the award of a Diamond Height Badge. October can be relied on to generate strong westerly winds which go over Snowdonia and produce rising air over the Vale of Clwyd. An oxygen set was rented at vast expense. Holidays and hotels were booked.

The Duo Discus was derigged and the trailer was just being closed when James’ phone rang. It was his wife to say that a total lockdown had been decreed for areas of North Wales, including Denbigh. The only other place where Wave is likely is Scotland. Feverish calls were made to the all the Gliding Clubs, but most were either not operating or had no wish to host a collection of covid ridden Sassenachs. However Les Blows was at Feshiebridge, the Cairngorm Gliding Club, and confirmed that they would be delighted to extend their OctoberFest for another week. Angus and Charles balked at the idea of a 600 mile tow and opted for Shobdon. They were frustrated by an RAF notam banning all flying in the wave area. Damian, James and David hitched up and headed North. However, they had not counted on **The Curse of the Wee Crankie**.

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At this point, it might be worth enlightening the southern readership about Scottish Witchcraft. From the days of Macbeth, Witches have always been a problem in Scotland. They are particularly adept at altering the weather and could have altered the history of Britain. When James 4th of Scotland, later James 1st of England, went to collect his wife, the Princess of Denmark, they created a massive storm in the North Sea. Their ship barely survived and was forced to shelter in Oslo where the couple spent their honeymoon. As it was difficult to establish which witches were responsible, it was decided to burn all of them. The witch finders rapidly became valued members of the civil administration.

Sadly, with the rise of feminism and diversity programmes, things have got rather out of hand and the witch population has taken off. They have got control of the Scottish National Party and are seeking independence. Their leader, Ms. Sturgeon, commonly known as The Wee Crankie, was clearly enraged by the idea of a bunch of Sassenachs coming up to Scotland as a second choice to Wales. All stops were pulled out and they succeeded in anchoring a massive depression over the UK. They called it Storm Alex after the disgraced First Minister and it dropped enough rain to fill Loch Ness. It rained from the time we left Sussex to the time we passed Stirling Castle on the return journey.

This is not to say that we did not have a thoroughly enjoyable stay at Feshie. This was entirely due to the members who had extended the Octoberfest for us and made us more than welcome. They have a large hangar with a considerable fleet of gliders. Part of the hangar is given over to the club house with a club room and a huge wood burning stove. There is a forest behind to provide Zero

Carbon heating. The walls are lined with the empty bottles of the more famous Malt Whiskies. It is run by Andy, a genial Glaswegian member, who maintains a well stocked bar. In non covid times, someone always cooks supper for whoever is there of a weekend. There is an 800 metre grass strip and a Robin Tow plane. They also have a Mayfest when the Wave is reckoned to be better. James and I have converted our oxygen set hire into an outright purchase for James's second Diamond attempt at Feshie next year.

Team Southdown made it to Feshie on the Saturday but the rain continued unabated for Sunday and Monday. Monday was devoted to the Dalwhinnie Whiskey Distillery, producers of one of the more famous Spey Malts. The distillery is a striking collection of whitewashed buildings, set high on a stretch of open moorland with access to pure spring water and cold burns that never run dry. The Spey Valley in autumn is incredibly beautiful, even in the rain, with a range of colours from purple to vivid yellow.



Arrival at Freshie

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The Dalwhinnie Stills



Spey Valley

Tuesday produced breaks in the cloud with little wind and we chased weak thermals round the valley for an hour. The Spey Valley, in the bursts of sunlight, looked glorious. Wednesday looked more promising with reasonable wind and the prospect of Wave. We launched and were towed straight into Wave. Wave only happens above the inversion and in summer, this can be as high as 10,000 in the Alps. Unless you are rich enough to tow to this height, the only solution is to find a violent rotor thermal which will get you there. In October in the Highlands the inversion can be at 2000 feet above the valley floor.



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There was a mountain of cloud above Cairngorm and the Duo climbed rapidly up its face into the brilliant sunlight. There was a forecast of reduced wind at 10,000 where the wave would stop. We found a small area of weak lift that kept us rising and gradually got stronger until we reached 14,000. At this point we could see an amazing cloudscape, mirroring the mountains below and covering the Highland and Islands. There were isolated lenticular clouds of curious shapes, stretching to the horizon. The long drive and the abysmal weather were suddenly worth it. Damian was far more adventurous and completed a 328 kilometer flight, mostly at 10,000 feet.

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The following day, there were few breaks in the cloud, but sufficient wind to make the bowls on the south side of Cairngorm work. We did some “rock polishing” to hone our skills, but the cloudbase was only just above the mountain tops. Rain showers soon put a stop to this and it seemed at first to be a sad end to James’ birthday. The Feshie Members however had other ideas. They decided that this was the occasion for a “Feshie Socially Distanced Spag Bol” A huge caldron was put on the stove, Birthday Cakes and Bottles of Whiskey were purchased and taxis ordered. A thoroughly enjoyable night was had by all.



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Loch Tay from 10,000

Friday, wave was promised, but we were greeted by showers and we had a brief flight and contemplated de-rigging and an early return. Suddenly there was an opening in the clouds. Damian immediately self launched into strong wave and James and I towed to the launch point.

We eventually got towed into 6 knot wave and were soon climbing through 6000 feet. At this point we were in a huge canyon between the mountain of cloud over Cairngorm and the incoming shower front. If we continued, we might emerge in glorious sunlight and bide our time at 10,000 until the shower passed. Equally, the lift might die out and face us with a descent through the freezing rain cloud. We delayed too long and made a full airbrake descent towards the only remaining gap in the clouds. It was rapidly closing.

What happened next seemed like half an hour, but was probably little more than five minutes. The gap got smaller as we entered it and eventually closed completely, putting us in dense cloud with rain. The canopy completely misted up and the airspeed indicator stopped working. Rain had got into the pitot tube. Fortunately the amazing LX9000 continued to work. It gave us an artificial horizon in the front seat and a moving map in the back seat. The fabulous Duo behaved impeccably and we were able to make a reasonably controlled descent without hitting any of the more solid bits of cloud. Damian was way above all this and completed a 275 k flight across the Highlands.

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The following day, James and I derigged and Damian waited for a gap in the cloud which never came. As we passed Stirling Castle, The Wee Crankie gave us a parting two fingers. The dying sun illuminated a wave bar with roll cloud topped by a perfect lenticular. We will return.

