

## TESTIMONIALS AND MEMORIES about Cairngorm Gliding Club

*Archived in 2026. To contribute, email to [info@gliding.org](mailto:info@gliding.org)*

“We had a flight each on the 3rd Sept 26 it was a great exp. Both myself and my son had a wonderful time. All members made it a day to remember.”

*The 2 Johns from Jersey Channel Islands*

“Is Black Mill airstrip, Feshiebridge the most beautiful airfield in Britain? It was to us one August evening 26 years ago. With my friend Robbie, we flew up from Kimberley – a farm strip in Norfolk – Sassenachs after a Highland adventure, visiting a mutual friend near Grantown. Flying in our Thruster, Golf-Mike-Zulu-Hotel-Alpha: a side-by-side, three-axis machine (like Santos-Dumont’s Demoiselle, the plane flown by the Frenchman in Those Magnificent Men) – it was our first proper flying adventure since brushing with some power lines two years earlier in The 1996 Round Britain Rally (if you’re interested, see my flying memoir, Propellerhead, HarperCollins 2003).

“Now in a spanking new machine, complete with dual ignition, we set out on 8 August 1998. Low cloud over the Pennines forced a detour to Rufforth, near York, thence via sandy Falgunzeon to East Fortune on the shoulder of Britain. There, Edinburgh Air Traffic told us to climb to 5,000 feet before crossing the Firth (and the main flight path into Edinburgh International). This chilly and time-consuming procedure in Zulu-Hotel-Alpha was obviously something Edinburgh ATC grasped fully, for on reporting we’d cleared their air space we got a cheerful ‘Well done Zulu-Hotel-Alpha’ over the cans followed by a ripple of applause. Now that’s a Highland welcome ...

“A delay refuelling at Inch meant it was after 7pm before we were on our final leg to Feshiebridge, the sun in our eyes as we headed due west to meet the Spey valley near Grantown and follow it to the Feshie. What we had not bargained for was fog fast-forming beneath our wheels - the notorious haar, or sea mist, that regularly rolls up the Spey valley of a summer evening (we later learned) quietly hiding those friendly flood plain fields the two-stroke aviator finds so comforting. For 45 minutes we raced the ghostly foe beneath us and car headlights were coming on as, neck-in-neck, we spotted where the Feshie joined the Spey. Then we saw the bridge ... and then the dear, beautiful 900 metres of grass - still clearly visible. Receiving no reply to our by now slightly dry-mouthed radio greetings we joined the circuit and landed on 03, taxiing gratefully up to the clubhouse as tendrils of mist crept around us like the opening of a Hammer horror film.

“Next day was clear and sunny. We spent it offering joy rides to our Grantown friend, and his friends, and talked airily of pressing on north-west, perhaps taking in some island-hopping around the Hebrides. What actually happened the next day, of course, was low cloud, thick and set in. We waited a day ... two days ... the rest of the week ... but the cloud didn’t lift enough for us to leave. After that, our jobs called us south. We roped down Zulu-Hotel-Alpha with dog ties, leaving her to the ever-accommodating Cairngorm Glider Club and Scottish weather, then took the train ignominiously home. We would return in a week or two ... But the weather remained unsettled. A week became a month. Autumn became winter. Winter became spring.

“A break in the weather didn't coincide with a weekend we could both get away for almost 11 months. On 7 June 1999, on a wave of high pressure, we flew up to Inverness. Lesson finally learned - don't trust Scottish weather! - we were at Feshiebridge by 7am, a hearty Highland breakfast of black pudding and scrambled eggs inside us. There was Zulu-Hotel-Alpha still. We wiped the bird droppings from her leading edges, drained pints of water (and some stale four star) from her tank, and refuelled her. Then we hauled her starter cord and, in a cloud of blue smoke, broke her hibernation. We tossed a coin. I lost, and, after taxiing her up and down FB's long grass runway a couple of times, I took off and climbed up into the morning sunshine on a short tester flight. All was fine, and after that, having said our thank yous and bid our farewells we climbed to 3,000 feet and, with stupendous views of Cairn Toul and Braeriach and Ben Macdui and Cairn Gorm, turned south. The escapade rests sweetly in our memories still.

“As for Feshiebridge, I say again—is there a more beautiful airfield in Britain?

*Antony Woodward*

My best flight of 2023 was at the Feshie ICL round.

What a place!!!

*Stewart Reid*

I've undoubtedly had my best flights at Feshie airfield. Your mountains always trump our hills for lift, space and views. Thanks for accommodating an occasional visitor with other things I need to consider on an Aviemore holiday with wife and dogs. All I need now is a bit more cooperation from the weather.

*John Thomas*

Having a glider flight was on my 70th birthday year To-Do list. On 15 April this was achieved. I am so grateful to Phil H for making this happen. Having a bird's eye view of an area I know and love was breathtaking and very special. Phil's knowledge and experience was invaluable. I knew I was in safe hands from the safety brief, to takeoff, flight and landing. My flight was in DaisyETA - 40 years old this year. Memorable. The experience was one of the best things I have ever done. I appreciate that this involved teamwork of Gliding Club members. I am grateful to Phil and Fiona H, and the Club for this opportunity.

*Jean Weir*

Had my first ever glider flight with Phil at the controls of Daisyetta, taken up by the tow plane. Although not ideal weather conditions for gliding that day, with difficult opportunities for lift, Phil was able to make use of the scant thermals to make the best flight possible. After the safety briefing, and throughout the flight, he explained all that was to happen. I could see a wide expanse of sky and ground, plus I could watch various dials and follow the beeps of the sensor telling us when the air was rising. An unexpected bonus - Phil even allowed me to pull the cord to release the tow plane! He pointed out all the features of my home area that I know from the ground, that he knows so well from his long experience at the club... our favourite lochs, peaks, rivers... even buildings and estate features. An absolutely brilliant experience. A massive thanks to Phil and to all the members and supporters that day who made it happen. A really memorable afternoon.

*Rachel Higgins*

I had a great visit to the club and a fantastic flight with Phil. The club is always so welcoming and the setting is amazing. It must be the most perfect setting for a glider club.

*Les Smith*

I had a fantastic time at the club today. My wife felt very welcomed and enjoyed the clubhouse while I went out to play. Thank you so much for a wonderful day!

*Tim and Jan Hardin, Higden, Arkansas, USA.*

We just dropped by the valley to see the gliders. However, when looking over the fence one of the members asked if our children (three of them) wanted to take a look inside the glider. The massive grins from all three was answer enough. Phil talked to them about the glider controls, how they work and shared a genuine passion for gliding. Aaryn, Alanna and Amelia would like to say thank you. It has been one of their highlights of the year.

*Michael Betts*

“In the first week of September 1976, a couple of Sassenachs) sallied forth over the border to Kincaig, to conquer the basics of gliding. On our first day, we were introduced to our instructor (I think his name was Iain Barr?), a wizard of an instructor. The glider was a sleek looking Bocian, which I understood to be of Polish origin.

“Our first lesson, was all about the pre-flight checks (CBSITCB), I think these days I’d have a problem with the ballast bit. Then in turns we had our first flight, Iain at the controls for the launch. In those days it was a winch, and you were lucky if you got a thousand feet, before dropping the winch cable.

“After we’d dropped the cable, Iain, gave me instruction on the controls, which went like: Push the left rudder she yaws to the left, push the right rudder, she yaws to the right. Pull the stick back, the nose comes up, push it forward, the nose goes down. Push the stick to the right, she rolls to the right, push it to the left, she rolls to the left. You have the controls!

“By the end of the second day, we were all doing the launch and flying around. On day three, after dropping the cable Iain said “there’s not a lot of lift today; so we’ll turn west, fly south parallel to the river, then turn in for a landing approach from the south”. Which, I duly did. As we descended, I called to Iain, “you have?”. He responded “Nope you’re doing OK”. We got lower “you have”, “nope carry on”.

“Iain, are you sure?”. “Yep, just let her drift over the ground, and gently ease back on the stick to stall her”. Wow, my first landing!

“The previous month, August, had been an absolute cracker, lots of sun and warmth. The first week in September? Yeah, it broke, as we huddled together like King Emperor Penguins, lashed by rain, hail and snow alongside the runway. Yes, we got battered by the Scottish Highland weather, but we still had a fantastic time. The views from the cockpit, were astounding. Thanks to the club, for a wonderful experience.

Bob Jones

What a wonderful place! My wife, myself and my father-in-law had a fantastic time at this little paradise in the heart of the Cairngorms. Both my father-in-law and wife managed their first flights. I met some wonderful people from all walks of life but more important I met my old friend and colleague Alf (Andy Farr). I loved it and we will return...

*Glen and Tina Fotheringham*

I had the absolute privilege of visiting this super friendly club at the start of Sept 2021. Absolutely everyone welcomed me and my family on site, all being extremely hospitable, warm, encouraging and happy to chat and teach us about gliding. When it was my turn to go up in the glider, Andy was absolutely amazing. Lots of excellent teaching and information on gliding and the glider and so much knowledge of the local area. It isn't possible I could have had a better day. I'm still looking at the photos and videos nearly a month later and grinning. Such a phenomenal day. The memories will stay with me forever. So grateful for the experience and how incredibly friendly everyone was on the day. A really special place.

*Gillian Caine*

Came up from London with a friend to finish my ATC course about 1972. It happened to be the week after a girl damaged the Sedburgh and just left the Bocian to fly with K (Ken?) Stewart. The girl was on her 3rd solo and stayed on for our week to help as she felt so guilty! Great week and good weather most of the time.

*Bob Servante*

Lovely people. Obviously a club of kind, generous and welcoming people. Well organised and safety conscious. Andy was just superb - a great guide and an experienced and encouraging pilot. John was very kind showing us around the place. The craic was great. Brilliant day out. Thank you all. And thank you Phil for the use of your fabulous glider!

*Hamish Napier*

Well, I finally achieved a long term ambition, with many, many thanks to Phil Hawkins. Phil and I are allotment holders at the Kingussie allotments and we have on occasion spoke about gliding. A week or so ago, during one of our conversations, Phil asked if I would like to have a flight? I jumped at the offer. After arriving at the airfield at about 13:30 on the 17<sup>th</sup> June 2021, Phil showed me around some of the gliders on the ground and gave me a rundown on the procedures involved in getting airborne. Then the time came, parachute on, strapped in and tow line connected. From then to the moment of perfect landing about an hour and forty-five minutes later I was, please excuse the pun, as high as a kite! Such a fabulous experience, far exceeding my expectations. Having walked all of the Feshie hills seeing them from above gave the whole activity a different perspective. During the flight Phil kept me informed about wind lift and thermal activity and how gliders respond differently to both. We found a thermal which Phil skilfully utilised to gain enough altitude for us to glide through to Kingussie and then home. A day I will never forget. Many thanks for your generosity Phil, in allowing me to achieve my ambition.

*John Bratchell-Hunt*