

## PORTMOAK MEMORIES (1992)

There is no doubt that Portmoak and its surrounding area is a paradise for birdwatchers and golfers, regardless of weather conditions. However, it is only a paradise for glider pilots if the weather is right. Unfortunately during our week there, it wasn't.

Eight members took six gliders during the week of 19-26 September. The route is easy – just long and boring. Get on the motorway at Weston-on-the-Green and leave it 395 miles later with 3 miles to go on ordinary roads before you reach the airfield on the shores of Loch Leven. Towing a trailer at 60mph the journey takes about 8hrs including a couple of half-hour stops. The toll on the impressive Forth Road Bridge is 40p with a trailer, 20p without.

The airfield is flat, with trees between it and the loch. The two isolated hills rise to around 800ft above the site, Bishop Hill to the east and Benarty Hill to the south across the corner of the loch. Launching is by winch (Supacat) or aerotow (Pawnee) although the winch isn't used on Mondays and Tuesdays. In a reasonable wind Bishop hill is easily reached from a winch launch. Weekly membership is £20, aerotows £13.50 and winch launches £4. The winds during our 6-day stay were mainly in the northeast to southeast quadrant, so there was very little hill soaring and no wave activity. Much of England had torrential rains and disastrous flooding, but in Scotland the weather was quiet and autumnal most of the time.

Monday was the first good day, with cloud streets at around 3000ft base and lift moderate to good. Graham (Libelle) got stuck at Perth on the other side of a blue gap between the streets, and took hours and hours to get home. Andy (K6e) managed to land out on the top of a hill within sight of Portmoak, in a ploughed quagmire, and took hours and hours to be retrieved. Tom and Richard spent hours and hours dismantling the PIK-20E engine only to prove a fault in Simon's jump leads. The remainder of the OGC team spent hours and hours whizzing up and down the streets locally and admiring the view.

The next day Richard and Phil went bird-spotting whilst the others tried out the exotic swimming pool at Perth, with its flumes and wild water rapids. Feet first down the pitch-black flume pipe for the first time is a terrifying experience, but the second time is not so bad. Andy spent a character-building afternoon digging out half a Kinross-shire ploughed field from the K6e wheel box.

Wednesday's conditions were also good, with strong lift and a variable cloudbase up to 4000ft in places. Tom, Richard, Graham and Andy each covered over 100km mainly to the north and east of the site. Highlight of the day was Richard reporting eight buzzards sharing his thermal, followed by Dave Weekes remarking: "Total of 9 old buzzards, then." The weather for the rest of the week was not so good but a repeat trip to the flume at Perth was organised, together with the inevitable shopping trips to Perth and Dundee.

Loch Leven is a major attraction for wildlife. In particular geese, duck and curlew number in the thousands, and a good view is available from the RSPB hide at Vane Farm on the south shore of the loch. V formations and long straggling lines of honking geese (mainly pinkfoot and greylag) are often seen especially in early morning and at dusk. Several trips to the East Fife coast 30 miles away yielded a rich tally of marine birds including Fulmar, Razorbill, Bar-tail Godwit and the elegant Sandwich Tern. The species list maintained by

Richard and Phil had reached 83 by the end of the week. By far the strangest sighting was a pair of flamingo among the thousands of geese on the loch shore. We also saw a red squirrel during a trip around the highlands.

Golf is another sport that features strongly in this area of Scotland. St Andrews, Gleneagles and Carnoustie are all within 1hr drive of the airfield, and smaller clubs abound including two at Kinross, and a small one at Kinesswood only 2 miles from the airfield. All visiting golfer pilots would be wise to take the appropriate kit.

We chose to hire self-catering chalet accommodation rather than camping. In view of the damp climate at this time of year this was a good decision. Loch Leven Chalets are situated at Balgedie about 3 miles from the airfield. Colour TV, fully equipped kitchen, bath but no shower. With five sharing a chalet the cost was £32 each, the only extra being electricity at the end of the week. One bonus for self-caterers is the small supermarket in Kinross, which stays open to 9pm seven days a week.

So – was it worth it? Comparisons with the Black Mountains club at Talgarth spring to mind. It is about four times as far as Talgarth and it takes three times as long to get there. For experienced pilots the hills are not as challenging as those at Talgarth and there are no long ridges. In non-thermic weather the hill beats would be short and could become crowded. The likelihood of wave conditions occurring is probably no better than in South Wales, but if it does occur it is perhaps more likely to go higher.

On the other hand there is winch launching available to keep costs down, together with easier circuits and landings for inexperienced pilots. There is a lively club atmosphere, which you don't get at Talgarth, a bunkhouse, bar, and full meals available every night at reasonable prices. The bar staff can be persuaded to give pilots a lift back to the chalets at the end of the evening. After one particularly jovial session with games like table traversing, bar-climbing and poking your finger up the little green goblin's bum (ask Tom Lamb) one of the locals remarked "you lot should come here more often." Perhaps we will. I could get tempted.