

I first met Barry and Mo Meeks during camping weekends at Bidford-on-Avon. Teams from the Oxford GC visited regularly for Inter Club League meetings. This piece was written in May 1992, the first full season in which I flew the Mini-Nimbus and I was just getting to grips with the flap handle. This pre-dates mobile phones and GPS loggers, of course. In those far-off days we still used clockwork barographs and instamatic cameras...

NON-JETTISONABLE BALLAST

There it is, on the counter, nestling cosily under a clear plastic dome. Chunky and solid, mouth-watering in appearance, somewhat indeterminate in composition, even more unprepossessing in colour, non-jettisonable ballast!

Eagerly I wolf it down, followed by half a cup of tea. The tea is fine but I don't drink much at breakfast time before flying. But Mo's bread pudding, that is another matter entirely.

The Oxford crew are uncharacteristically pessimistic about the weather. Warm front, *mutter mutter*, no thermals, *mutter mutter*, not worth rigging, we're in the lead anyway, *heh heh!*

The Mini-Nimbus is perched at the bottom of the lumpy Bidford field, sleek and shiny in her new wax coating, waiting to droop her flaps at the merest whisper of lift. And the clouds appear below the mottled grey top cover, woolly at first but promising a day of gentle scratching in the Inter Club League.

By the time briefing and map scribbling are over, however, the clouds have already started to thin out again. And by the time "Tulip" in the Pirat and "Haste" in the Cirrus are launched off ahead of me, the sky looks just streaky grey with a few amorphous lumps scattered through it. Remarkably like the bread pudding, in fact. This comforting thought amuses me as I work through my checklist. Barograph sealed and signed, *check*. Right way up and ticking, *check*. Food, barley sugars, drink, drinking tube OK (no earwigs), telephone money, wing pickets, calculator, *check*. Map folded and marked, magnetic tracks, wind speed and direction, start and finish lines, altimeter settings, *check*. Tail wheel off, car keys definitely in the car, *check*.

My crew chief informs me that the guy in front has just filled up with water because he's heard there are 8 knot thermals. I gaze at the bread pudding overhead. Does he mean in this country? I've already declared myself "dry."

Off tow, weak lift as expected but I find that I can make progress into wind quite easily. Whilst waiting for the start line to open I explore the loops in the river around Evesham.

There is one cloud remaining when the start line opens, and that is a couple of miles on track towards the east. I scratch for a while, drifting towards the line, then make a crossing at best glide speed, heading for this single cloud.

After this, at 2700ft, there is nothing, but no point in going back. South-east towards the distant ridge looks sunnier so I head that way. Already I'm alone, the local soarers left behind. A few vague movements in the air are the only hopeful signs that thermic activity is still around.

Field-hopping now, south of Gaydon. Pick a brown one, with a nice track through a fence for the trailer, then the audio burps and I circle. The field drifts away and I pick another. Brown with hints of green, sloping up slightly but into wind. Then another. *And another.*

This is hard on the nerves. The thermals are there but the workable height band seems to be about 1000 to 1500ft above Bidford, which means somewhat less above anywhere else.

Inevitably I seem to have missed the next thermal. This is it then, 900ft indicated, pasture field below with no stock in it but typical fan-shaped pattern of dirt marks through the gateway. Slope indeterminate from directly overhead but it will do, especially with Mini-Nimbus brakes.

Whee! Another push. *Clunk!* go the flaps into K-8 mode and round we go. This feels better, but my pasture field is drifting away. Concentrate, concentrate. I feel the warm glow from the bread pudding spreading to my fingers and toes. No messing about at this height with such a squirry little thermal. Plenty of speed, plenty of bank and aggressive centring will do it. Be ruthless, work it hard.

Even so, I am amazed when the lift develops into a steady 3 knots. Passing 2000ft I can relax a little and eat some lunch. A light sandwich to complement the pudding in its endeavours down below.

Time to start navigating again. Byfield tower in nearby, and having quadrupled my height to 4000ft I set course for Daventry. Both the Pirat and the Cirrus have landed their pilots out, who are both trying to call me at the same time. *Banana mobile, 147, Tulip's near Edge Hill and will ring in, Haste has landed at HB. No, he wants a road retrieve.*

TP1 is the Watford Gap services footbridge on the M1. There is a road bridge there as well, which I had forgotten. The view southwest on the second leg shows a gorgeous burgeoning carpet of new cumulus, but playing safe I head back towards Byfield tower in order to stay upwind of track.

But there are no more problems for a while. I pass the glittering rows of cars on Chipping Warden airfield, and the M40 and Banbury can then be seen. After clicking TP2 (the M40 junction) I head west towards Edge Hill. Can't see the Pirat anywhere. The cumulus stops abruptly at the ridge top.

Decision time. I have a headwind component of perhaps 15 knots on the way home, and the direct track via Shipston looks dead. I could continue southwest following the high ground and hope to skip across to Bidford from the nearest point. But the into-sun visibility is poor and I can't see how far the clouds continue in that direction.

Northwards, however, are more distant clouds, maybe reachable with a bit of luck. Drifting backwards over Edge Hill I climb as high as possible but only 2800ft is available here. The height lasts well at 60 knots with the flaps set to Cirrus mode, of course. There are a couple of weak thermals west of Gaydon which help me across the gap. I reach the clouds at 1500ft just overhead Wellesbourne and find a reasonable climb. The wind strength seems to be increasing, but perhaps it's my imagination. Dolphin ahead towards Stratford with the flaps clunking from Cirrus to K-8 and back to Cirrus,

again and again. These weakish clouds seem to be appearing regularly now and I can dolphin my way home with any luck.

The Avon finish line don't seem to be expecting any finishers. Further west the visibility looks better, the sun is warmer, more cumulus are popping, but the task is over. The non-jettisonable ballast has done its job, dissipating its energy throughout my system just as the sky is clearing overhead.

Taxying down the slope towards the trailer, bumping and rattling. It's a funny old game. Secret weapons? Nah. Isotonic sweets? Yuppie rubbish. McCready rings? Don't believe in them – haven't even got one. But the ballast, that's what you need. Home in on it, *consume it*, then go and do your thing. I'm coming back for more.

Phil Hawkins, Oxford GC