

Soaring Adventure

A guide for club pilots

Mike Fox



How to use this book and disclaimer

Dear reader,

This book attempts to encourage glider pilots to develop their skills, and I sincerely hope that it will work for you. Within the following pages, you will find stories, techniques, suggestions and theories which you may wish to implement within your own flying. However, I have found over many years of instructing that it is very easy to interpret a particular suggestion in a way that was not intended. While I have attempted to avoid this situation by being as clear as I possibly can throughout and keeping one eye on safety, it is probable that something will indeed be misinterpreted.

Therefore:

After reading any content, you must not implement the ideas or techniques contained therein before talking to, and heeding the advice of, an instructor experienced in the sort of flying you are about to try. Your instructor will have the ability to discuss and get to the bottom of any misconceptions.

In addition, this book does not in any way over-rule or counter any instruction from any of the approved sources of aviation information, such as the BGA, CAA or EASA. Aeronautical information from these sources does change over time, and it is always the pilot's responsibility to keep up to date and to comply with these rules and regulations.

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Contents

This book contains many examples, stories and pictures. The vast majority of the pictures and examples in this book are cited and taken in the British Isles. Most are in the region from Northern England, through wales to the South coast. You do not have to go abroad to have a gliding adventure. The UK has some of the most varied, picturesque, interesting conditions and terrain in the world. You just have to wait for the weather!

Chapter 1 - Don't follow me!

A couple of stories as an introduction to the sort of flying that this book attempts to encourage.

Chapter 2 - Introduction

Getting the most out of your gliding.

Chapter 3 - Being in the right place at the right time

How to forecast well enough that you can organise a day to fly.

Chapter 4 - Launching and getting away

A practical guide to soaring in ridge, wave and thermal; what to think about before and after launching.

Chapter 5 - Flying away from home

A chapter on the thought process of leaving home and forging out on your first cross country flights.

Chapter 6 - Making progress

Going from local soaring to your first steps away from home and making good cross country progress.

Chapter 7 - Kit, Kites and Sites

Some thoughts on gliders, instruments and where to fly to maximise your available time and resources.

Chapter 8 - Proving your worth

Some advice for flying badges and your first competition.

Chapter 9 - Planning for adventure

A bit on the psychology and practice of keeping the flying spark alive for you.

Epilogue

Acknowledgements

Creating this book has been one of the most enjoyable things I have done. Some may say that creating something like this is rather self-indulgent. However, I have been spurred on by many people over the years it has taken me to complete it. At any point, they could have easily demotivated me. They have done the opposite, and I thank them:

Steve Longland,
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Simon Adlard,
Gav Goudie,
Kate Byrne,
Dad (Bob Fox),
John Williams,
Robert Theil

Thanks also to all of the 200+ people who commented on the web-survey and especially the ones who wrote the most inspiring stories.

The one person to whom I owe a massive debt of gratitude is Anne Stotter. Anne heard I was writing this book and bravely offered to act as editor. I have sent her chapter after chapter, when time allowed, over the course of a number of years. Without fail, the text has come back with hundreds of suggestions, additions, corrections and no shortage of criticism! The text is far, far better for her efforts and I want to thank her very, very much.

Many thanks also to my wife Kate for listening to me prattling on about 'The book' for years and all her encouragement, suggestions, proof reading and discussion.

For Kate, Matthew
and Alex.



1 Don't follow me!

Sometimes it's not the longest or the fastest flights that leave us desperate for more. Sometimes it's the unexpectedly interesting flights that leave us buzzing. Often, we have to work hard to make a great flight happen.

It had been a long April week of work. There seemed to be a window of opportunity lining up on Wednesday between other priorities. I was really looking forward to some raucous thermal cross country in the LS4, but on Tuesday night the weather forecast looked terrible. Really strong NW wind, straight off the Irish Sea and over the Shropshire plain. Weak thermals and strong winds don't normally work terribly well, so I started to think that it'd be a day of fettling and telling embellished tales to anyone who came near (which is my normal style, I'm sure those who know me will confirm). However, I remembered that I had been keen to try the Wenlock Edge during the winter, but had been put off by the wetness of the fields in the valley. I had tried it out in our RF4 motor-glider, but longed to try it for 'real'. If I could get to the closest hill at the Wrekin, I'd be able to try Wenlock and then worry about getting home later (that's what trains and hitchhiking are for – right?).

Peter Lowe is rigging his Astir and I give him a hand. He asks me if I would like help to rig, so I think – why not? – put the wings on and see what the rest of the day brings. Having rigged, I think I might as well tow it down to the launch point, and after a bit of the aforementioned tall tales and helping out a bit, someone asks where I'm going in the LS4. 'I'm off to soar Wenlock edge,' I say, not really meaning it. Much.

The winch launch is silky smooth, and the small cumulus cloud nearby produces about 1.3knots lift, with the instruments very rapidly reporting 20+ knots of wind. Well – might as well try to get upwind. After the third thermal, I seem to be in approximately the same place.

Now I'm not one for local soaring – boredom sets in very quickly. This is enforced local soaring. I can feel restlessness encroaching, so I decide to throw caution to the wind and force the issue! I can hear the Ride of the

Left: Reaching the top of a thermal off Snowdon on a cross country out of Seighford in Staffordshire.

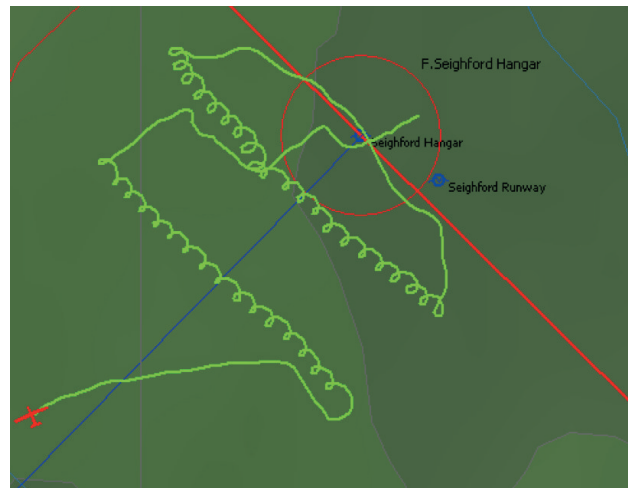
Valkyries playing through my mind as I head for Chetwynd airfield. Ah – here I am again at 800', now nearly at Telford. Well – at least I'm not local soaring any more! One more climb gets me back to 2000' and within range of the Wrekin ridge, so it's crunch time – glide to a ridge I have never soared before and hope it works? Why not. Good cut grass fields are available as land-

*Below:
Approaching the
Wrekin*

*Right:
Attempting to
get away*



The trip back is just as entertaining – trying to get upwind again in thermals leaves me talking to Shawbury on the radio and explaining that all is well despite my being less than 1000' above ground in a pure glider in the middle of the MATZ. 'Lots of fields here – don't worry,' I tell him cheerfully. Though I only feel truly cheerful



out options. The ridge works like a charm, and I'm soon back up to a reasonable height – I take a breather. The sky is perking up, so it's time to move onto the long Wenlock ridge, with the decent prospect of a thermal to get me home. This is a simple matter of diving off the Wrekin,

*Below: End of a
Wenlock run*



when my mental arithmetic tells me I can make it back to Seighford in time for beer and the obligatory tall tales. What a great flight - it takes me quite some time to stop grinning after landing.

Gliding is so often about putting together and trying out plans and ideas that might just work. From: that brown field over there might be just a bit warmer and produce the thermal to get me away, to putting together a whole flight using ridge, wave or thermal. Or perhaps all of them to create a chain of events that keeps us in the air and keeps us thinking and enjoying this great sport. Sometimes a good flight doesn't happen quite so much on the spur of the moment – sometimes you have to plan and work pretty hard for it.

downwind onto Wenlock edge, which works remarkably well given that it's only 3-500' above the valley floor. The edge itself runs for about 30Km, so I have some fun running along at 70 knots.

Its 8pm on a September Wednesday, and the kids are in bed. I've been monitoring the forecasts for Wednesdays and Thursdays (in winter I can sometimes get a day off work and childcare on these days) for the last couple of weeks, since I know that Dunstable are at Llanbedr, and the LS4 is in

the driveway at home. (I'm very lucky to be invited as a Dunstable 'interloper'.) But the wind will be too slack, according to the forecast, and Kate says she fancies going to the pool for a swim. I turn on the computer to do some work. As I idly flick through the BBC weather, I see that something has changed – the wind is now predicted easterly and just strong enough

North. Climbing in the silky air, I head for the lee of Snowdon and realise a dream: flying the Snowdon primary wave. Heading out to Anglesey, I take some photos of a holiday cottage our family stay in sometimes, before returning to the wave. This time it's more difficult. I meet Robin May in the EB28, gently climbing against the backdrop of the hills, the elegance of



on Thursday to make it look a little more interesting. 'Would you mind not going for a swim tonight?' I ask Kate. Her reply: 'I've got the boys - go for it!'

By 9pm the LS4 is off the drive and on the back of my small camper van, with all the overnight and flying kit, and I'm off to find somewhere near the airfield to sleep for the night. By 11pm I'm bedded down in a deserted car park. I wake up early to see the most gorgeous, lonely, dawn drenched lenticular through the trees. I get up very quickly indeed and head for the airfield.

By 07.30 I am rigged (along with everyone else – which has to be a record) and the Dunstable Duo is on aerotow! They confirm the lift and so, after wolfing some breakfast, I'm away. It takes a while but I eventually find lift in blue wave off the coastal ridge and I climb to about 10,000' to go exploring myself. The lift moves around, but I make my way down to Aberystwyth, breathing in the fantastic Welsh coast scenery. Morning mist still lies in the valleys beneath my almost silent lofty perch when I turn back

the EB's lines matching the dramatic scenery. After more pictures, it's time to head back to the lee of the main ridge, which is producing strong lift, and I linger there before cruising back in time for tea.

I have previously flown over 700km in my LS4, but this 200km has to rank as one of the most fantastic and memorable flights. It took a lot of effort to get those 5 hours in the air, but it was worth every bit of it! But how do we get to the stage where we are able to take advantage of opportunities like these? How can we figure out when the weather will be suitable for a given flight? If we have limited time or opportunity, sometimes it's worth thinking 'Where might I fly tomorrow given the weather I am presented with?' How can we gain the skills to make use of this weather – the navigation, handling and decision-making skills that take us from Bronze badge level to the versatility needed for the sorts of flights I've described? I hope that the contents of these pages will provide some answers to these questions.

Above: Rigging at 7AM for the reward of a fantastic flight