

# The most improved pilot!

Kate Maddison's XC career moves up a gear

I have long resigned myself to the lot of the cautiously challenged pilot, on the basis that it's better to keep my nerve and fly than lose it and have to give up. I have been flying since 1996 and have made underwhelming progress since then, always learning, but so gradually that it has been hard to notice the landmarks in achievement.

In February this year I was awarded the Cockcroft Cup by the Dales Hang Gliding and Paragliding Club for being the Most Improved Pilot of 2006. It's an impressive looking silver trophy, worthy of any display cabinet, and looks particularly well on the mantelpiece. I feel unusually pleased to have been awarded it, and thankful that, ten years on, things came together and I stepped noticeably forward!

It began with a 66km flight on April 10th, one of the first-good looking days of the season. I arrived at Wether Fell in the Yorkshire Dales with a few keen XC pilots (John Ellison, Chris Fountain, James Goldsborough, Jake Herbert and others) who were giddy with excitement. I have always gone through the motions of being prepared for XC - map, GPS, warm clothes, etc - but I so rarely manage to feel comfortable enough with the wind strength and rough air that often accompany an unstable day that I had only managed to achieve 12km in the UK up until then.

The day was forecast for a 6,000ft cloudbase. When we arrived at the take-off site the conditions were thermic and everyone took off as soon as they could. Despite my attempt at speedy preparation I was still one of the last to take off. The lull that gave me the confidence to bring up the glider was the start of the thermal that we all climbed out in. Before I had time to consider my options I was over the back, committed to extreme altitude and cold (-8C on the vario), with a wing telling me much more than I wanted to know.

I felt as if I had hitched a ride with the big boys, and it was too late to wimp out. Once on my way, I resigned myself to doing what everyone else was and staying with the gaggle. The incentive to stay up

was greater than the lure of the ground below, with its complete lack of paths or roads. The moorland that stretched out before me was much more remote and extensive than it appears from the ground, the snow icing on the grass and heather seemed to go on as far as I could see.

I was too unnerved to look down much and concentrated on my vario beeps and staying with the other gliders. I knew that the kilometres were passing by and that this rare occurrence should be savoured, but I was shivering too much. I had lost all feeling in my hands and found it took all my concentration to keep going. I was familiar with the surroundings and amazed as I flew past Great Whernside, down Nidderdale (where I had lived 20 years ago), past the reservoirs and Pateley Bridge.

I could clearly see aeroplanes landing at Leeds-Bradford Airport in the distance to my right. I was mindful of the approaching airspace and consulted the map, which was difficult as I didn't want to let go of the brakes and my hands were set in clenched fists. I was beginning to wonder about frostbite as I noticed the "golfballs" of Menwith Hill, the American surveillance base, and wondered if they could hear us chattering on the radio.

As I drew nearer Harrogate the six or so gliders had dwindled away and I was on my own. I could still make out one or two in the distance but my chance of joining them was slim.

As the moors were replaced by the greener fields of the Vale of York, my anxiety turned to the concerns of continually seeking lift, then switched to avoiding it as cloudbase drew too close. I developed an irrational fear of flying over Harrogate as it approached. I had plenty of height but decided to fly round the sunnier south side and had a route planned to pass through a gap in airspace by keeping just to the west of the A1.

I marvelled at the contrast between the town centre tower blocks and the smart houses around the Stray as my glider juddered with my uncontrollable

shivering, and I set my sights on Wetherby as the next landmark. I was getting more and more ground-fixed with thoughts of the warmth below, but kept going and decided I needed to keep Wetherby to my right as the A1 became apparent. As I was passing Collingham after three hours in the air, the lure of comfort and possible teasops overcame me, and I turned back towards the town and began to lose height.

With considerable relief I warmed up as I descended and stopped shaking. I lined up for a vertical landing in a field by a road junction and began to waggle my legs, hoping they would work. My hands hurt but were functioning again, and as I packed up I finally began to experience a thawing sense of elation.

The journey home was made significantly easier by the lift offered by a passing motorist who turned out to be a lapsed paraglider pilot. He recognised the glider bag and, seeing me staring at the signpost, decided I needed a lift. Two rather surreal bus rides later, crushed in with the commuters, and I was back in Skipton.

I had managed more kilometres in one flight than my total in the UK up until then, and March was only halfway through! There followed two more notable flights that year, each shorter than the last, but somehow the knowledge that I could do it when the conditions were right was what I had needed to prove to myself.

What I have learnt from the experience? Two points seem to stand out. Firstly that stress from my work life has a bearing on my stress tolerance for flying. April 2006 was a rare window of low work pressure, and I plan to find ways to reduce this negative effect in the future. Secondly that I love flying but my motivation is fickle. It is not dominated by competitiveness or fuelled by adrenalin. It is thwarted by fear for my safety and any perception of lack of control, but it is helped enormously by being with positive people, getting stuck in... and not hanging around at take-off!

Those moors go on forever ALL PHOTOS: JAMES GOLDSBOROUGH

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