

Having had a good time at Husbands Bosworth task week in 1999 I just had to try again in 2000. This time I was a bit more organised and arrived on the Friday before it started to find the airfield busy on a fairly hot afternoon.

Saturday saw the first task set in very hot clear weather. I had no retrieve arrangement but managed to team up with a pilot called Sean Biggs from Booker and off we went.

Unfortunately, flying a blue sky in that heat was far too much for me and my rate of water consumption far too high. Arriving at the first turn point I found what looked like the whole pack in one thermal. Enough was enough. I chickened out and headed back to the airfield.

The next task day was Tuesday and a triangle was set. The first turning point was just south of Northampton at which we turned east. Pilots could then choose from a string of turn points at Bedford, Potton mast, Gransden Lodge, Shelford or Newmarket to fly a selection of possible triangles up to 217km.

I didn't start very well. The thermals seemed rough and climbs erratic but with help from a K6 and a Puchacz I managed to make my way to Northampton. Somewhere around the turn point I realised that the reason why the thermals seemed difficult was that I wasn't coring them tightly enough. A bit more concentration produced better climbs and I eventually joined my retrieve partner Sean in his Libelle in a thermal just southeast of Northampton. Sean shot off long before the top but I played it safe and climbed to cloudbase.

In the westsouthwestish wind it was sort of streeting and I soon made Bedford and was looking for Potton mast. Being a slim lattice tower it was worryingly difficult to spot for something so tall, but eventually I found it right underneath me. You can't look straight down from a sailplane the way you can from a paraglider! As things were going quite well I pushed on past Gransden Lodge and headed for the next turn point at Sheldon, just south of Cambridge. This was easy enough to find and it was time to decide whether to head for home or push on to Newmarket. East of Cambridge the sky was blue with just a single cloud over Newmarket. Feeling cooler and more confident than on the previous task I told myself not to be such a wimp and gave it a go.

What a long glide! At least it was downwind with odd bits of lift to help. Needless to say the cloud dissipated as I approached but there was a nice big racecourse to land on had it proven necessary.

Now, the task week is run like a sort of friendly competition divided into two classes. Class A is for gliders rated as the Discus or above (hot ships!) and Class B is for those, like my ASW15B and Seans' Libelle, below. Until about Gransden Lodge there were all sorts of gliders around me. But now, here I was, at the furthest point from home, suddenly aware that the only gliders in the area all looked very slick with funny shaped wingtips. My thirty year old Schleicher felt very passé.

Vanity suppressed I now found myself in a slow climb over the turn point just north of Newmarket wondering how to get back. The final leg to Hus-Bos was in a northwesterly direction, diagonally against the wind and blue for a fair distance. My cunning plan was to deal with the blue bit by moving more or less west into wind towards Cambridge to take advantage of any streeting. From there I could start hopping northwards across wind where there was more cloud to show the thermals. Accordingly I began making my way steadily without turning and just pulling back in the lift.

This was great! Jack the Lad was straight lining in a blue sky with no stopping to thermal, only a gradual loss of height overall and going on and on and on. That was, of course, until he hit a moderate thermal, decided to make a climb and was able to look back towards Newmarket in the turn. That's when the shock really hit. For all the distance I must have flown through the air Newmarket was only just behind me. How could I have flown in a straight line for so long and made so little distance? Could it really be that windy?

Climbing the thermal I gave myself a good talking to. Speed points weren't a big deal but if I was going to get back at all I would have to fly a lot faster against the wind. Leaving the thermal I put on more speed and eventually drew level with Cambridge where I turned

northwest to cross a big gap to a cloud more or less on track. Having been on my own so long (the trendy hot ships had long vanished) I was surprised to encounter Martin, one of the Hus-Bos hotshots, slightly below me in his blue nosed (and no doubt water laden) Libelle. Martin is one of those perverse pilots who flies a Class B glider in Class A. I stuck behind him for a while and was pleased to note that dolphining in my dry ASW was giving me a similar, if slower, glide to his. Great fun until he put his nose down and disappeared, not to be seen again until briefing the next day.

I reached the cloud and began a climb. The sky now looked ragged and was filling up a bit with high cloud creeping in. A push on to just south of St Ives seemed to take forever against the wind and at about 4000 feet I wondered if I should fly faster still and not worry about getting low. I compromised, put a bit more speed on and tried to make the best climb I could without turning whenever I hit lift. The countryside moved past painfully slowly. With the clouds now big, rather dark and some distance apart in a greying sky, I was trying to make everything count. The next decent looking cloud was over Grafham Water so I again diverted from track. This gave me a welcome climb to over 5000 feet and I plodded on towards a cloud over Thrapston, still dolphining as best I could and trying one or two weak thermals on the way. The cloud at Thrapston again gave me 5000 feet from which, assuming a 15 knot headwind, theory said I should be able to glide the 18nm to Hus-Bos. Everything now looked rather grey so I had little choice but to try and see how far I got.

Concentrating on speed to fly and height I made for a small, grey and lonely looking cloud in a grey and lonely looking sky over Kettering. I forced myself to relax in the glide and concentrated on identifying ground features, comparing position with height to see if I was gaining or losing on the theoretical glide. The maths seemed to work and arriving under the cloud at Kettering I reckoned that there was still enough height to glide in to Hus-Bos. So was I going to ignore the three knot thermal when it came? Not b----y likely! Over cautious perhaps, but I was quite happy to cross the airfield doing 90 knots at 2000 feet.

After four and a quarter hours of what for me was quite difficult flying, elation had to take third place behind relief and exhaustion. Arriving at the clubhouse completely drained I was horrified to see Seans' number on the 'Landed Out' blackboard. The people at the office seemed to think he had got a retrieve and I was unable to get an answer on his mobile phone. I checked his trailer which was empty so, figuring that there was nothing else useful I could do, I started de-rigging my glider. Thankfully I was not long into the business when Sean turned up in a car. He had landed quite close to the airfield and got a lift back to retrieve his Libelle himself.

Curiously, although most of Class B flew the shorter options, most of them earned more points than I did through making better speed. It doesn't bother me that much because I am sure I had far more fun, but it would be nice if the rules gave more encouragement to those who fly further and fight their way back again.

This may well have been my last cross country flight in a sailplane. I have enjoyed flying them immensely but their wings are heavy, tractor driving is bumpy and the pain in my back keeps telling me that the price of continuing may be too high. I'll just have to go back to paragliding. Anyone want to buy a glider?

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