

The forecast for May bank holiday weekend was quite good. A high moving across Britain was expected to produce northerlies on Saturday and southerlies on Sunday. Having recently concluded that I most like flying in big mountains I set off for the Lake District and met Marion and Vaughan Higgins at the Little Chef at Penrith for breakfast. With a strong north-westerly we were grounded until half past five when the wind dropped and we went up Ullock Pike. The evening sun and clear air produced excellent thermals enabling me to climb above the peak. This was one of the most delightful flights I can remember with a view right across the Lake District and out to sea.

A moderately starry night saw us on Jenkin Hill in the morning. It seemed very windy but several canopies were flying around the upper take off. I launched from quite low down and was immediately projected vertically to cloudbase. Using the speed bar I made my way forward over Latrigg where thermals were howling up almost continuously. Anticipating a rough landing almost anywhere in front of the hill I looked for alternatives. The permanent cloud over Skiddaw seemed to form a street stretching out over the relatively flat ground to the north and I felt there would be no difficulty clearing the range as long as I was at cloudbase over the highest part of the ridge. Taking a reasonably powerful thermal I hit cloudbase just in front of the ridge and decided the safest option was to keep climbing to maximise ground clearance. In the strong wind there was no doubt which way I was going to go and before long I had dropped out of the cloud and was working bits and pieces on the sunny side of the cloud street over Caldbeck Fells.

The cloud street was developing nicely in what was otherwise clean air. I was able to straight line it for a bit but past experience had taught me not to fall off the end of a street! To the east a really superb cloud street was also calling to me but I felt I probably couldn't reach it. I would have liked to fly eastwards to avoid having to cross the Solway Firth but had to accept that I had to stick with the street I was under if I was to stay airborne.

Passing just to the west of Great Orton wind farm the Solway was starting to look rather near and rather wide. The sky was still clear to the north but my street, which had been extruding nicely in front of me, began to break up into more separate clouds. It was apparent that there was no way I was going to fly around the end of the Solway so I had to think hard about crossing it.

I reckoned that I had enough height to glide across the five kilometres of tidal mud flats but wanted to have some height left to search for thermals on the other side. Turning into wind I tested penetration to make sure I wouldn't be blown across anyway. It seemed OK so I sat into wind and aimed for clouds coming towards me to try and get more height. After sinking some way I hit a thermal which started to drift across the Solway. The height I had lost whilst waiting for the thermal made me quite nervous and an attack of cold feet made me want to fly back. This I tried to do but the wind had increased and it was no longer possible to move against it.

Resisting the urge to simply fly downwind to get over safe ground I forced myself to thermal over the mud flats. Cloud formed above suggesting that I may have been in some sort of convergence but it was almost a relief when the thermal stopped working and I could glide directly for terra-firma with a clear conscience.

With no cloud in front of me I started looking for ground sources. The motorways north of Gretna provided some lift but it took some dark fields farther north to get me really climbing again. After the violence of the thermals farther south the climb was slow but relatively consistent and soon I was over the hills around Eskdale. Here I met

my first Scottish native in the form of a bird of prey flying with its talons outstretched. Fortunately, realising what a pathetic specimen of Sassenach had strayed across the border, it took pity and showed me where the core really was. A few three-sixties of international diplomacy later the bird left me wondering how to negotiate the Craik forest, one of the largest in Britain. Part of the solution was to try fairly poor looking clouds which seemed to be working quite well but on two occasions I was saved by heading for areas in the forest which had been left unplanted. These provided excellent sources, particularly as the proprietors had thoughtfully dug drainage ditches to keep them dry!

Finally the inevitable came and with no obvious sources and no cloud I set up on a downwind glide. Instinct led me to Cacara Hill which faced into wind but feeling in danger of being blown over the back I put the canopy into big ears and landed in the valley.

The people at Tushilaw Inn were very friendly and let me use my telephone chargecard to call Keswick police to let them know my car would probably be left overnight at Latrigg. (A chargecard is a must for cross country flying.) I ended up in a B&B at Hawick and next day I took the bus to Carlisle and train to Penrith in time to meet Marion and Vaughan for breakfast at the Little Chef. At 90.4Km and four and a half hours it had certainly been an eventful flight. It was probably fortunate that I didn't see a Landranger map of the Solway until I went to check the landing co-ordinates at the library!

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