

I couldn't help it. With a forecast of light northerlies on Saturday and easterlies on Sunday I just had to go to the Lakes. Typically as I approached the Lake District a layer of cloud was shading the mountains while everywhere else looked good. Not to be put off I arrived at the foot of the track up to Wolf Crag and bumped into John English. We spent the rest of the day fouling up attempts to get away.

Next day the forecast light easterly saw us early on Souther Fell. The morning sun was just about perpendicular to the hillside and soon we were having a great time in the light thermals. John soon had to leave for a lunch appointment with some nearby friends which he achieved by literally 'dropping in' to their garden. Finding myself alone I worked some thermals out in front of the ridge and made a climb through cloudbase at about 3400 feet to about 5000 feet drifting slowly back towards Blencathra and again made a good climb. This time when the thermal stopped I headed south west and emerged from cloud to find the ground mainly overcast. Nevertheless a patch of sunlight in the area of Dale Bottom gave me my third good climb.

As I thermalled I noted two interesting things. The light drift had enabled me to fly unusually accurately on compass bearings, even if I had limited my headings to forty five degree segments. Also the patch of sunlight I was climbing over remained more or less unchanged throughout my climb in and otherwise overcast sky.

This time the lift decayed at about cloudbase and I flew west across the north end of Derwent Water towards sunnier ground. As I worked odd bits and pieces of lift on the way it became clear that I wasn't going to reach the main area of sunshine. The only bit of sunlit ground within reach was a small area around Cat Bells which also had a steep east face. I arrived at about a hundred feet over the top and after waving to some of the tourists I was again heading for cloudbase. Before entering cloud I noted that the Rosthwaite area of Borrowdale was in sunshine and with an easterly face running all the way there it seemed like a good target. Climbing into cloud I again doubted the wisdom of flying towards high ground that I knew poorly in relatively low cloud. I continued after reminding myself that the unusually light wind should make my track accurate and enable the big peaks to be flown safely.

As the short climb ended I headed due south and came out of cloudbase near the end of Derwent Water over Black Crag, which, true to it's name was looking very dark and was also producing sink. Pushing on with the speedbar I managed to scratch onto Nitting Haws and Low Scawdel. On the edge of the patch of sunshine illuminating Rosthwaite this rugged crag produced enough lift to keep me airborne as long as I carefully scratched the rock surfaces which faced south east. The word 'carefully' may be an understatement. It's one thing to brush the grass on a Derbyshire hillside and quite another to fly across mangled rocks a mountain goat wouldn't bother with. In such situations I just have to say to myself, 'OK, you've had a good flight even if you sink out now. Just enjoy the scratching, explore the face, and perhaps something will take you up'.

So I did. With the edge of the sunshine coming and going I flew everywhere on that face as well as out over Castle Crag in the permanently sunlit area. The lift improved as the cloud dissipated and after about fifty minutes a thermal from a sizeable gully took me up.

What a view! For a few minutes I could see Wast Water, Ennerdale Water, Crummock Water, Buttermere and Derwent Water all at once before again entering cloud. Leaving on a southerly heading I glided across Honister Pass towards Base Brown but only made it to Grey Knotts and found myself looking into Gillercombe. Feeling very unsure

of what to do next I flew along the south east face and decided to glide into Borrowdale. This would give me a chance of getting onto the east face of Base Brown low down. As I left Grey Knotts a moderate thermal popped me out of Gillercombe enabling me to glide onto Base Brown just below the peak.

I was now looking along the 'U' shaped pass which led into Wasdale at another stunning view which so awed me that I almost sunk out. I had to calm myself, get into scratch mode and recover the lost height. Working along the side of Green Gable a thermal from Aaron Slack carried me to the summit from where I crossed Windy Gap onto Great Gable. I was staggered to realise I had flown up a mountain that had taken a whole day to visit on foot. By this time I must have been quite tired and somewhat disoriented because I then flew around the corner of Great Gable onto the west face. Fortunately I had given myself a large safety margin because I found myself flying downwind and sinking like a stone. Turning quickly I pushed back around the corner to the south face and began to scratch up to recover lost height. The next logical step would have been to try to gain height over Great Gable with a view to getting on to Scafell but, realising I was making poor judgements, I decided to take the simple option of gliding into Wasdale. I crossed onto Kirk Fell and flew along the side of Yewbarrow using what lift I could find to extend my glide. Cars lined the edge of Wast Water but I eventually found a gap to land in. The reason for the gap was, of course, a bog which came up to my ankles! Luckily my canopy fell onto dry ground and I proceeded to extricate myself whilst answering the inevitable questions from tourists. One of them, whose friend was a hang-glider pilot, gave me a lift to Workington from where I easily hitched back to my car. His friend hadn't bothered to fly that day because he didn't think conditions were any good!

It had taken three and a half hours to fly thirty kilometres. No record or personal best, but still the best flight I have made. There is no doubt that the Lake District provides superb flying when the conditions are right. The difficulty, of course, is getting to be there when they are!

Copyright © Nigel Page - March 2003 - www.50k-or-bust.com