

I suspected it might be a difficult day. Following a trip to Piedrahita I had purchased a posh new harness to go with my Whisper megaship that had proved such a nice piece of kit. Unfortunately due to bad weather and my usual caution with new gear I had only had a five minute flydown in the previous six weeks and was still at the 'treat like glass' stage with the new harness. In this state of mind I arrived at the hill to be greeted with the news that an instructor had just given an aerobatic display colourfully described as a 'cascade', a definite cue for my 'rig slow and watch what happens to the others' routine. Seeing lots of people bouncing around the sky did nothing to improve my mood, especially as one or two for whom the sky was not enough were also bouncing on the ground. To cap it all some self appointed fashion guru was saying particularly unpleasant things about my favourite flying pullover. Nothing is sacred.

The lift was cycling on and off so I waited for relative calm when the bouncers were in ground mode and took off. It took about 10 seconds of wobbling for me to realise that my new harness did not get on very well with my glider. The harness also felt too big for me and I became seriously worried whether I would be able to handle an asymmetric tuck should one happen low down. We all know the expression "It's better to be down on the ground wishing you were up in the air than up in the air wishing you were down on the ground". This was definitely in the second category. I considered the best method of escape for about another 20 seconds when I hit, or more accurately, was hit by, a bit of a core. As things started to buck about there was no sensible option but to ride it out in the safest place. i.e. The middle of the core. Thankfully the thermal worked well and with some relief I watched the hard stuff retreat to a safe distance.

Calming down a bit I decided that the best place to land would be somewhere nice and flat away from the edge. Drifting rapidly downwind a cloud began to form above me, the first one to form over the back since three people had got away more than an hour earlier, and I resolved to make the best of it.

The climb was slow but steady and I was soon drifting just north of Chesterfield under good looking clouds and heading for the motorway. The fast drift seemed to run out at about Clumber Park south of Worksop when the sky began to get messy. I hung back and meandered about placing the emphasis on staying up rather than speeding on as the wind seemed to veer and drop. Another problem. I had not been airborne across the motorway that far north before and, because I had not got my stuff sorted out on the new harness, I had no map or compass. I would have to go with the cloud streets, look ahead as best as I could and rummage around in my head for what I could remember about the area. Moving on slowly I recognized Gamston airfield from having a sailplane retrieve and to avoid it I was forced to go to a small cloud to the south, away from the obvious street. The harness was being a pain. As well as being rather wobbly it had not occurred to me that a side mounted reserve might interfere with my controls. Whenever I tried to pull into a tight right hand core my hand hit the reserve pack and I was terrified of accidentally hooking the release handle. Additionally I had obviously set up the speed bar wrongly. To get even a moderate amount of extra speed I had to brace myself as best as I could against the shoulder straps which were too far apart for my weedy shoulders and try not to get my feet tangled in the strange two step bar which had come with the Whisper. I had my Platypus but the tube was too short and to get a drink I had to perform a contortion which, with the airbag behind, must have made me look like some kind of airborne Quasimodo.

So what? It was all time spent away from the hill. If the glider was going to fall out of

the sky it would have done so by then and my much maligned pullover was keeping me nice and warm at about 4500 feet.

It was achingly slow going past the three power stations on the Trent with clouds dissipating as I flew to them and twice I had to fly back upwind to stay airborne. Eventually I drifted away to the south east and recognised, by it's cathedral, the city of Lincoln coming up on my left. I crept on slowly to the south of Waddington ATZ where it all got very difficult and started to re-direct my major attention from the clouds to the ground. Down to about 400 feet I went for some brown fields by a village and easily picked up a nice smooth save. What more can you ask? I was now in the middle of two overlapping MATZ's but, being a Sunday, the military were quiet and I saw only a few civilian light aircraft and sailplanes. That area is a definite no go zone during the week unless you like loud noises and the smell of jet fuel.

Things were looking quite good. I followed the clouds almost due south over the top of Cranwell ATZ and was joined by a couple of sailplanes for a while. You would think that one of them could not have seen a paraglider before if the closeness of the examination he gave me was anything to go by. I am not sure that I approved. I sauntered on and finally started to go down in sea breeze just short of what I figured must be Boston. An earlier experience of landing in a sea breeze involved having to line up a field behind me and fly in backwards in the strong wind. Bearing this and my wobbly harness in mind and I decided to forgo the last possible kilometer or so, selected one of three big set aside fields nicely in line with the wind and landed without incident after four hours and 106 Km.

I suspect that if I had tried to push further south I might have stayed out of the sea breeze on this occasion. The last clouds I encountered may well have been a sea breeze front and it might have been possible to follow this around the Wash, but without a map or knowing the area well I had little chance of figuring it all out. Never mind. My first UK paraglider cross country for seven years and first 100Km had definitely benefited from my sailplane experience. The clouds were thin with a base of about 4000 feet rising to about 5500 feet as the afternoon wore on and the sailplane pilots concept of the 'energy line' had paid off well.

So what is this 'energy line'? Wherever we go we are trying to stay in lift. The 'energy line' is an imaginary line joining up the clouds along which the pilot believes the maximum lift energy lies. It is suprising how much lift can sometimes be had between clouds, not necessarily that we can climb on, but that will considerably reduce our sink rate and stretch our glide. The 'energy line' is very much a sort of model, belief or concept rather than the application of scientifically determined facts. If you believe that there is such a line through a system of clouds then you can search for it and with experience begin to predict where it is likely to be. Sounds a bit spiritual? You might think that thermals are really the magic breath of invisible dragons which only come out in nice weather and sometimes like flying in straight lines downwind. Being dragons they do not like shady damp ground but do like to sun themselves on south facing slopes. It does not matter if you believe in dragons (have you come across Fiona on a bad day?) if the model works for you. It is definitely easier to develop the concept of 'energy lines' flying sailplanes because you can more easily explore areas of lift without going down if you make mistakes. Nevertheless the idea still seems to work on a paraglider and we can augment the process with our better view of cloud shadows on the ground in front of us.

The harness problem was later solved by a telephone call to Chris at Airways who unhesitatingly offered to change it. A trip to Northern Paragliding, the Sup-Air importers, produced a certified ABS harness which I should have bought in the first place to match the Whisper.

The whole adventure? Not quite. Getting back from Boston was a different game. I easily hitched to Newark and got a train to Doncaster which was supposed to connect to Sheffield and the last train through the Hope Valley. Unfortunately the train indicators were wrong. Instead of the Sheffield local on platform 3A I managed to get on the London express on 3B and ended up at Peterborough. I was not particularly amused and ended up spending a cold night on a bench in the forecourt of Doncaster railway station comforted only by my flying suit, memories of flight and, of course, my magic cross country pullover.

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