

microlight

FLYING

October 2021 • PUBLISHED BY THE BMAA • bmaa.org

INSIDE

Adam & Atos:
Made for each other

Hot ships for short strips

The Kippers of Kilkeel

It made a man out of me

High-vis jackets, sheep, peers of the realm and a first solo – for **Graham Naismith**, it was a truly epic five days



“EVERYONE has a plan until they’re punched in the face,” Mike Tyson famously said. The same could be true for flying and British summer weather.

My particular plan started when I realised that after 25h of training on the C42 at Flight Sport Aviation, I’d hit a bit of a plateau because of the infrequency of flying, due to both Covid and weather restrictions.

“So would I benefit from an intense period of practice?” I asked instructor Luke Christophides as we flew south from FSA HQ at Deanland in East Sussex one day.

“Definitely,” said Luke, perhaps too eagerly. “We could go to France.”

Covid quickly put that out the picture, so after a rethink, Luke suggested an attempt to fly to the Isles of Scilly, then North Wales and back to Deanland over five days.

As a result, we found ourselves meeting at a desolate Deanland at 7am on a Monday morning. ▶

Graham after his solo at Llanbedr with a prematurely aged Luke (right)



Above Just landed at Salcombe Bolt Head

Below Safely over the Bristol Channel into South Wales

▷ The route planned was west to Compton Abbas and Salcombe Bolt Head, then overnight to Perranporth, with accommodation booked in the nearby picture-postcard St Agnes.

In the event, the weather changed Compton Abbas to Sandown on the Isle of Wight. On final there, we ominously passed over a Gulfstream Tiger, prop down in the ground off the end of the runway.

The weather cleared a bit at lunchtime, and we made a dash to Exeter, a superb contrast to grassy ATC-less Deanland. In my head I felt like an airline pilot as we approached on final from 15nm out.

At an airport more used to commercial jets, it was no surprise that the friendly fuel man asked us to repeat our request for 20 litres of avgas three times.

Despite all the trappings of an international airport, there were no tie-down points for our aircraft, so many thanks to the really helpful Aviation South-



West flying school and aircraft maintenance firm Iscavia who assisted with hangarage.

Tuesday morning saw a breakfast over maps and apps that would decide the day's route. Fortunately, Salcombe Bolt Head, the former RAF grass strip and site of a recently sold substantial nuclear bunker, looked feasible. The stunning approach was over Salcombe harbour and its high cliffs onto its 600m Runway 29.

We completed our visitor paperwork in isolation in a terminal building that was smaller than my garden shed. Compared to Exeter, it was chalk and cheese, but these small unmanned grass strips represented the flying that I wanted to do. A nearby farmhouse with an honesty box served as a place for cream teas and further planning.

By now I was starting to get more involved in the planning, looking at the weather and contingencies – something that wasn't necessary on my familiar circuits at Deanland.

Bodmin was next and proved to be a really friendly airfield; a pattern that was to remain throughout the trip. With the weather holding fast, we decided on a short shimmy over nearby Bodmin Moor, where I summoned a friend and his wife out of their remote cottage to wave up to our little dot in the sky.

Back at Bodmin, a chatty taxi driver called Rob took us into Wadebridge 20 minutes away, where we had rooms in a pub and the hope of a curry.

The Indian was closed – perhaps a good thing two days running in such a small aircraft – but Rob was still chatty when he picked us up at 7am the following morning, hopeful of a return day trip to the Isles of Scilly.

Dispensing with our weather checks and Luke's 1500+h of flying, Rob glanced past his air fresheners to the sky and declared that it would be fine.

And after a morning of IMC conditions, he was right. We stopped briefly at Land's End to PPR for Scilly and don lifejackets.

It's 27nm between Land's End and St Mary's. All my flying to date has been pretty much above the comfort blanket of patchwork fields, and I soon realised that at 4000ft, when the SkyDemon glide circle has blue around all its borders, your ears become super-sensitive to the steady noise of the engine, your eyes flicker to the temperature and pressure gauges every couple of seconds, and you absorb yourself in an internal discussion on the statistics around the probability of engine failure.

The beached islands and transparent seas seemed very un-UK like, and the approach, again over cliffs, onto the humpbacked runway was a delightful tick in the box of scenic landings I'm unlikely to equal again.

As we parked, we were greeted by a madly waving former pilot from Deanland, Claire Godfrey, who had been tracking our arrival on Flight Radar. She was now resident on the island, and uncomplainingly spent the next few hours answering my litany of questions as we sat outside a café a few yards away from the islands' only pub and supermarket.

Before we departed, Luke went for a 60-second

dip on one of the almost deserted beaches, blaming the underfoot seaweed for his rapid exit.

It was early afternoon when we waved goodbye to this hidden British secret, dropped in on the previous day's target of Perranporth to refuel, and headed for Llanbedr, where virtually nil wind offered up the option of 5km of landing on the three runways at this former RAF airstrip.

We left our C42 in one of the two main hangars which Red Bull's Paul Bonhomme and Steve Jones flew through in 2014 at 185mph in their Xtreme Air XA41s. Maybe next time in the C42...

A summer's stroll to the excellent Hafan Artro hotel in Llanbedr preceded our reflection on the day's 5.5h of flying from the very southwest tip of the country to the mountains of North Wales.

On the Thursday morning, Billy Mackintosh in the tower and Les, the site manager, couldn't have done more for us. The conditions were excellent as Luke and I took off for circuits on the expansive runways.

After five of them, Luke popped out the right-hand door and sent me on my first solo as he watched from the tower.

I knew this moment would come eventually, but nothing quite prepares you for it, and although my radio comms were more akin to 1970s CB radio traffic, all my procedures kicked in as I lined up on one of the shorter runways, at a mere 1400m.

The passenger-less aircraft rocketed into the sky, and although my first landing could've been smoother, the second one was much better. I parked by the tower, the congratulations of Billy ringing in my ears, and jumped out to be greeted by a smiling Luke, who looked older than I'd remembered.

With our final day looming, we toured round Snowdon before refuelling at gorgeous Welshpool then touching down at Eastbach Spence airfield.

Little is written about this remote and hilly airstrip in the middle of the Forest of Dean with no address on the internet or knowledge from local taxi firms. Owners Bruce and Wendy Morgan greeted us, and Bruce gave us a lift into Coleford, driving over two large fields in the process, and agreed to pick us up the following morning.

There was no landing fee, just a donation to the Air Ambulance service which was called to the airfield nine years ago for a PA-28 accident that fortunately resulted in only minor injuries.

After a curry in Coleford, the delightful Bruce and Wendy collected us the following morning, and Bruce presented me with the airfield wings in recognition of my solo achievement, which made me feel 10ft tall; until he told me he'd gone solo after 2h in 1962! Oh well, they say pride does come before a fall.

These small airstrips and friendly people are to me the backbone of flying in this country, and something I want to experience more of. One minute you're at Exeter with your fluorescents on, taxiing to various hold points, and next minute you have Bruce telling you that he will just clear the sheep off the runway before you set off.

Our final day took us to Charlton Park, site of the



annual WOMAD festival and home of Lord Suffolk, who surreally answered the phone when I rang for PPR. He came over to say hello when we landed and revealed that, at 86, he'd only just stopped flying that year. With a bit of luck, I'll have passed my GST by the time I'm his age.

And then it was the flat Dorset fields below and a burger at busy Compton Abbas before heading back to Deanland.

As we approached our home airfield, we struggled to make out the bunting and the crowds for what felt like a big achievement.

It had been a highly enjoyable five days in which I'd learnt about planning, navigation, weather, flexibility and procedures, and met amazing people like Bruce and Wendy. □

“““

Small airstrips and friendly people are the backbone of flying



Left A crop circle in Dorset

Above Just out of glide reach on the way to Scilly, and listening very carefully to the engine