

I persuaded my father when he was on leave from Germany in 1950 to take me to Friston and pay my first subscription to the Southdown Gliding Club. Apart from the gift of life itself he did me no greater service.

Once I had joined I found that a lift from Brighton from a car owning member was sometimes available, and that failing that the number 12 bus would on request stop at the end of the lane leading to the airfield.

The gliding club was a revelation! There were none of the blazer and RAF tie wearing braggarts reliving their war who were to be found at Shoreham and doubtless other aerodromes at that time. There was no bar nor were there any women members. There were no privately owned gliders at all.

At Friston everything was done by the members themselves. If you didn't work you didn't fly. Gliding was not then the competitive and highly expensive activity it has since become. There was, at the Southdown anyway, a true club spirit with a fifteen year old schoolboy accepted as a valuable member like anyone else who was prepared to do his share. As the fifteen year old schoolboy in question I thought it was marvellous!

Gliding as it existed then was for many a poor man's form of flying. There were exceptions to the general level of impecuniosity. Don Snodgrass had inherited a slide rule manufacturing business, Ray Brigden had taken over his father's garage in Brighton and Bill Jordan was an Eastbourne solicitor. Jordan rather stood out in another way as he was the only member with a 'Silver C'. He had acquired this when a member of the Surrey club at Redhill. 'Doc' Jameson was I think a GP. Everyone else seemed either to be a student or a fairly poorly paid member of the work force. The membership was extraordinarily young. Men of thirty were regarded as a bit long in the tooth and dear old Squeege Ashton, my first instructor, was so ancient that he was excused pushing gliders about or anything else of a physical nature. He was in his early fifties! Squeege's break for lunch, eaten in his car with a cloth on his knees and complete with salt and pepper pots, was respected as if it was a religious ceremony. Anyone seeking to interrupt him would be hurried away.

The airfield was a farmer's field on the cliffs between Seaford and Beachy Head. It had been used as an Emergency Landing Ground during the war, and briefly as the base for a Belgian Spitfire squadron covering the D-Day landings. The few RAF buildings adjacent to the coast road had been removed though their foundations remained.

The gliding club had been unable to resume activities at its pre-war site at the Devil's Dyke because the South Downs were littered with unexploded weapons from their time as a military training area. Access was not permitted for some years, and even when it was sheep and people occasionally blew themselves up. However the gliding club members had dismantled the old hangar and re-erected it in a chalk pit at Friston in, I think, 1948. The first storm of the first winter had shown up the deficiencies of this process because the hangar had collapsed! Apparently the roof was held up by the strongest structure present which was the Baynes Scud 2 owned at that time by Ray Brigden. This glider is still extant and looks astonishingly crude to the modern eye. I believe Ray did 'Silver C' height and distance in it.

In the hangar, rebuilt by the time of my arrival, were a Slingsby Cadet, actually an amalgam of various Cadets once used by the Air Training Corps, two Slingsby Tutors bought from the Army gliding club for £45 each, and a new T21b two-seater purchased with the aid of the Kemsley Trust. An SG38 primary, part of the war reparations from the defeated Germany issued to clubs by the BGA, had been used for solo training until the year before I joined. It was burnt in the autumn of my first year. Lastly, the remains of the original Southdown Grunau Baby were propped against the back wall of the hangar. It had been cartwheeled on landing by a member, and was later taken away for rebuilding from which it never returned. These gliders, a home-built winch towed into place by a car each day, and a couple of cut down Bullnose Morrisises for retrieving the cable (gliders were always brought back after landing by hand) constituted the entire wealth of the Southdown gliding club. Except of course that the spirit that permeated everything was utterly priceless.

The principal source of that spirit was Ray Brigden, the CFI. He was a noisy, quick tempered rather gauche man who had been a pre-war Southdown member as a youth and whose wartime service had been as a corporal in the RAF. For him, difficulties were there to be overcome. His vocabulary of swearwords was extensive and they were frequently deployed. There were many Brigden stories. One merits repetition. It concerns and was told by Jasper Partington, then a young reporter on the Eastbourne newspaper. One day Partington was on the winch, which one drove standing behind it. He found that he had an audience of Girl Guides, blushing maidens all, from a nearby campsite. Not one to miss such an opportunity Partington, who was to become a distinguished Daily Mail journalist (if that is not a contradiction in terms) and had a natural bent for bullshit, seized the moment. The really skilled job on a gliding site, he told the girls, was that of the winch driver. He happened to be a master of the art himself. He invited them to watch the launch he was about to carry out. A couple of noisy minutes later the T21b was overhead. As silence returned the girls looked up admiringly. Brigden's face appeared over the side of the cockpit, red with fury, moustache akimbo. Down floated the words 'Too fucking fast!'

My own instruction reflected the fact that solo training had only just been replaced by the use of the two seater. Squeege had been an instructor for years, despatching countless pupils on solo ground slides in Daglins, to be followed by low and high hops before circuits were attempted. When actually in the glider with the pupil Squeege had little idea what to do. His patter seemed to consist only of the phrase, uttered as he nervously took back control, 'I've got her, Old Boy'. He was a charming man. He had been an observer in Bristol Fighters in the first war. The story that he had been shot down by Baron von Richthofen was probably apocryphal but he had by his own account had a gliding-related encounter with the Germans during the second bout of unpleasantness. Performing a circuit in 1944 in a Grunau that was unofficially on the strength of the ATC gliding school in mid-Sussex at which he instructed he was passed by a V1 flying bomb going noisily the other way. 'I was looking down on the thing Old Boy!' There were, of course, no Airmiss reporting procedures in place. Had there been, one wonders to whom should it have been reported.

Squeege's gliding career had contained a lot of 'down' and not very much 'up'. Unaccountably detained on his way back to earth after a winch launch in the T21b one day by one of Friston's rare thermals ('Couldn't get her down, Old Boy') Squeege, his circuit planning all awry, landed in a fold in the ground out of sight of the people at the launch point. Asked how his landing had gone by those who arrived breathless at the scene, Squeege gave birth to a phrase which instantly entered club folklore: '*Light* as a feather Old Boy'.

It was noticed that I wasn't making much progress in Squeege's hands and he was quietly retired from instructing to spend more time with his luncheon basket, to my relief and his I think. I was transferred to Ray Brigden and was soon judged ready for solo. By today's standards my total number of launches at that point, seventeen, seems woefully inadequate. Of course, a number of things that would now be taught had been left out, probably because there was no syllabus to work from. It was felt that the flying I had scrounged as a hangar boy at Shoreham in the Auster and Magister had probably acquainted me with the primary effects of the controls so no time needed to be wasted there, which was fair enough I suppose.

However nobody mentioned the secondary effects of the controls at all! Indeed it may be that people didn't know much about them. After all, it was still argued by some experienced pilots that turns carried out when hill or ridge soaring were best made by using rudder alone. Flat turns were supposed to result in a smaller loss of height. The recovery from incipient stalls or spins was barely touched upon. On the other hand the dangers of getting too far behind the fence on the approach, and of failing to allow for the wind gradient, were stressed heavily. The lack of penetration of the gliders of the day ensured that those aspects of training were rightly given prominence.

First solos were, by modern standards, unusual in that they were not carried out in the glider used for dual instruction. The T21b was far too valuable to be risked. If anything happened to it training would come to a halt and the club would virtually cease to exist. Instead one was put in the Cadet single-seater which had very different handling characteristics and a vastly inferior performance. In a nod to the recently abandoned system of solo training, the first few solo launches were low and then high hops. Then the two circuits, one to the left and one to the right, for the 'B' certificate. For these, in defiance of all logic, the cable was attached to the *nose hook*, not the C of G or belly hook, 'because we don't want you to go too high at first'. This in a glider with the glide angle of about 1 in 10! In my case, which came when I was some weeks short of the then legal minimum age of sixteen, this resulted in two highly alarming continuous turns back onto the airfield from launches to about 350 feet which required no judgement at all, just luck! It was, I think, later realised that it was actually safer to allow the pilot on first solo a full launch to seven or eight hundred feet. People were learning.

I had read that cross country flights in gliders were possible, but I never saw one happen. The source of this information was a magazine called 'Sailplane and Glider'. This was later joined by a rival production, more approved of by the BGA I gathered, called 'Gliding'. Subsequently the two were combined into the illogically titled 'Sailplane and Gliding'. 'Gliding' was good for a sixteen year old because it fitted into the pocket of one's sports coat with the title protruding as one went home on the bus. This together with the badge in the button-hole, three gulls for the 'C', proclaimed to the world that one was a *glider pilot*! Actually the world seemed to take little notice. The pages of what became known as 'S&G' were full of references to the achievements of distinguished aviators who were always given their full titles, Mr PA Wills for example, and indigestible articles about some aspect of advanced aerodynamics by someone at Imperial College. The magazine was hardly worth the half crown it cost but we all dutifully bought it.

Winch launches were half a crown too. That's two shillings and sixpence, or 12 ½ pence in today's money. Unless one could persuade one's fellow members to get things going before 10 am in which case they were *one* shilling and sixpence. One of the younger members, Brian Buckley, used to walk

each day the four miles from Eastbourne. One day crossing Beachy Head he came upon a car stuck in mud. After helping to push it out he was presented with half a crown by its owner. He was exultant because that meant three circuits instead of the usual two that day! Sadly he died at an early age from natural causes but by then he had become not only the CFI of the Southdown Gliding Club but a captain with British Caledonian Airways.

Aerotowing was, of course, unknown at the Southdown though it was reputed to happen at the Surrey club at Redhill. There, the standard club glider was the Eon Olympia and the membership seemed to consist entirely of people with DFCs from the war, escapers from Colditz and female ATA Spitfire pilots. They visited us sometimes for the cliff soaring and the atmosphere became redolent with well-bred Home Counties voices. We Sussex bumpkins were suitably humbled.

In, I think, 1952 the Southdown acquired its own Olympia. Apart from the enormous leap in performance this brought about the introduction of airbrakes into the club. Hitherto the only means of increasing the rate of descent known to us, apart from side-slipping, were the T21b's spoilers. Even these fairly ineffective devices were regarded with extreme wariness. A landing with the use of spoilers required a special briefing, and was not to be undertaken lightly! It was not long before the Olympia took off with unlocked airbrakes and was slightly damaged in the subsequent unplanned cross-wind landing. I recall the name of the pilot who committed this *bêtise* perfectly, but will leave it unrecorded. He was quite a senior member. I was never to fly that Olympia, which was reserved for the club's pundits.

Even the Olympia had little chance of getting away in a thermal from a winch launch at Friston, such was the effect of the proximity of the sea or so it was supposed. However there was cliff soaring to be had in southerly or south westerly winds, as far as Beachy Head if one could cross Birling Gap, and occasionally a sort of weak wave known as an 'evening thermal' provided soaring over the Cuckmere valley. However limited ambition had to be, enthusiasm was boundless.

I progressed to cliff soaring, completing my five hours 'Silver C' duration in a Tutor at just turned seventeen, and went on a number of the club's expeditions. A catapult (bungee) launch at Bostal Hill near Firle to which a de-rigged Tutor was sometimes taken when the wind was northerly, a trip to the Long Mynd and another to Dunstable, home of the London Gliding Club. During that last expedition our Olympia, flown by John Murray, collided whilst ridge soaring with a unique glider that had been designed and I think built by John Sproule. It was called a Camel and was being flown that day by Jack Hanks, the Dunstable CFI. I watched this happen and remember the cracking sound of the two gliders coming together and the horrible and surprisingly loud thump as the Camel hit the hillside a few seconds later. John got the Olympia down with 8 feet of one wing missing which was quite a feat of airmanship. Sadly Hanks died.

John Murray was one of the two natural pilots in the club at that time in my opinion. The other was Chris Hughes. There have never been many at any one time in any club I have been a member of, but they are easily spotted. They seem to have an inbuilt ability to 'read' the sky and see lift when others cannot, or to be able to look at a range of hills and know where the hill lift is. It is a kind of sixth sense. I learned quite early on that I do not possess it.

The Southdown gliding club was a marvellous environment for a young boy to progress towards manhood. I think I gained more in confidence from being accepted as an equal by men I admired

than from the flying. Gliding also liberated a latent sense of humour. There was a great deal of laughing! Of the younger members Buckley, poor chap, had no sense of humour to liberate but my friend Roger Sweatman did. He and I were relentlessly, and entirely appropriately, disrespectful to our seniors which was everyone as we were the two youngest. They were amazingly tolerant of our behaviour. Roger was a Group Captain when he killed himself in a Chipmunk at RAF St Athan in 1993. I regret his absence.

The members of the Southdown gliding club in the early 1950s were not so very different from many of those who fly at Parham today. It is sobering to realise that I may be the only one left of that Band of Brothers from the cliffs. They were practical, kind enthusiastic men who enjoyed making things work and who loved to fly for the sake of it, not to out-perform others or to win some bloody silly competition. Brothers they were in their exclusive maleness, and if they had a collective weakness it was an inability to relax in the company of women. Most were bachelors and showed every sign of remaining so, though not for the reason that is nowadays so often advanced as an explanation. The arrival during my time at Friston of Joan Cloke, who was to become one of the greatest ever members of the Southdown gliding club, caused a number to reconsider their instinctive mistrust of the female sex I think.

I went on to the Army and other things after my three years or so of membership of the Southdown gliding club the richer for the experience. I have never since met as nice a group of people.

