



Spring Careen

Fearing another year without his habitual pilgrimage to the Alps, Soperman headed north to try his luck on a run of stellar spring forecasts.

←*Drifting over Devizes*

"I'm not coming home until I've flown 100 km," I declared as I walked out the door. First stop on my way up country: Selsley Common on the edge of the Cotswolds. There's no better motivation for leaving the hill than rough air, and there was plenty of that. I scuttled over to Frocester and found a climb, not as strong as I'd have liked, but the gliding club was commencing towing, so I stuck with it. Half a league, half a league onward I drifted. Rain to right of me, sleet to left of me, I tried to thread a line through the petulant sky. Sadly, that line intersected Salisbury Plain before too long, though I was happy with 59 km for my first inland XC of the year. I parleyed with the grumpy farmer, hid Smurphy's trusty RS in his barn once he'd left and hiked the 9 km into Devizes, my hitching thumb having failed me. A welcome fish & chips kept hypothermia at bay while unseasonal hail lashed the bus shelter. The bus did its best impression of a twin-engine aeroplane with one engine inoperative and the other with an out of balance prop, but I managed to keep the fish & chips down. An incongruous coating of snow greeted me back at the car in the last rays of a golden April sunset. It was 2100 by the time I fetched the glider, and gone 0200 when I parked up at Carlton Bank, in eager anticipation of The Big One on the morrow.

I awoke at dawn; icicles had formed on the wrong side of the windshield, and I was inadequately dressed to appreciate them, despite mummifying myself within my flying suit and every other piece of fabric in the car. The best I could do was run up to takeoff to defrost some limbs. What a view! The North York Moors glistened, full of promise, as curlews serenaded the new day. The first wisps could be seen advancing across the Cleveland Plain even as I nursed my cold oats – the sky was cranking up early. But so too was the wind.

That said, the direction was bang on. I found a section of the edge that looked a little less knobbly than the rest, and set goal to smash my PB. Carrying forward, I levelled the wings, lowered the nose, took a deep breath and...it all happened rather quickly. A gust lifted the left wing vertically. I glanced down the right leading edge to see the wingtip lodge in the heather. It snapped, we scribed a no doubt graceful semicircle, then I came to rest upsidedown, staring up at a record-worthy XC sky. I would've cried except my phone pinged – fishing it out provided a timely relief from my predicament. Suddenly my problems paled into insignificance. My grandma had just died. The drive back down the length of the country, once I'd bundled the broken wing off the hill, was a long one.

She had been a keen supporter of my hang gliding, traipsing out onto the hills well into her eighties to watch me take flight. As one of the interwar generation whose upper lips were exceptionally stiff, she would not have condoned moping, so the very next day, I was back on the road. Fortunately, Carl Wallbank had the requisite spares in stock. Though the sun was already exiting stage left behind the Malverns, he was more than happy to restore his former (2007 world championship-winning) wing to working order. "This is proper hang gliding," he declared fondly, waxing lyrical about the long drives and late-night tinkering in pursuit of open distance. The distances within my grasp wouldn't even be worth getting out of bed for to him, but I appreciated

the encouragement from this skygod nonetheless. I set off sometime around 2200, reaching Wether Fell way past my bedtime, where I was rocked to sleep by gale force sleet.

One problem with waking up on site is that impatience can see me off the hill too early. A lull in the wind put me in a small excuse for a field at the bottom of the valley after half an hour bobbing up and down. I derigged and ran back up with my harness in time to see Tony Fillingham lob off. After retrieving and rerigging, I took off just as he too graced the valley floor. Diving over the back lower than ideal, my unfounded optimism went unrewarded, and I soon had another round of dodgems with drystone walls, this time two dales over at Halton Gill. 7 minutes as the crow flies, 2 hours bounding in a straight line on foot through sepia sunlit brooks and bogs, and 90 minutes of Brownian motion in the car to fetch the glider. I demolished a pizza in Settle then turned my sights to Ingleton, where I was kindly hosted by my friend Ryan, who knocked me out with a Namibian nightcap before I could completely empty his fridge.



Sliding past Buttermere

On the promise of even less wind, the following morning I sidled across to Burnbank in the northern Lake District. The proliferation of paragliders ogled at the strange bird being hauled up the fell, the first many had seen in the Lakes. No HG record having been recorded, as long as I made it further than the bottom landing, it could be mine for the taking. Despite the promising sky of puffy cumuli, the airborne PGs weren't doing much better than the parawaiters, so upon launching I gave them a wide berth and headed straight for the adjacent bluff, where I worked a bubble for a while until it popped. Casting around the lake, I realised I would soon have to commit if I wanted to make the official bottom landing. To spare HG the embarrassment, I snuck around the corner out of sight of the PGs to look for an alternative. As I began lowering my undercarriage, a small waft tickled the wing. It was drifting me towards higher ground, but I clung on like a limpet, and gradually it strengthened into a fully-fledged elevator to cloudbase. Suddenly, the whole of Lakeland became my oyster. Yet there was no pause to luxuriate in my new found ambitions, since white flakes started to land on my nose. I pinged from cloud to cloud, each one overripening just

as I arrived. Burnbank, only 20 minutes ago a picture of summer, was now subsumed by a polar squall. I pressed on. At 5000', the thermometer read -7 C; beyond that, I devoted my attention to preserving my fingers. Scafell, Langdale, Conistone...the pinnacles of earlier terrestrial endeavours flashed by. Chased out of the Lakes by what had become a bona fide snowstorm, I emerged over Morecambe Bay at 6000', ending up between Carnforth and Bolton le Sands to claim a new overall site record at 69 km. With 3" of the white stuff having fallen in places, the train journey back could've been the Trans-Siberian!



Admiring Angle Tarn

Clearly having spent all my Lake District beginner's luck, the next day's even bigger carry up Clough Head yielded only a top to bottom, thankfully witnessed by far fewer PGs. The east coast proved no better on the morrow, bagging no more than 14 minutes total airtime despite carrying glider and harness back up Model Ridge for a second bite at the cherry. On my first visit to the bottom landing, my shadow had scattered all but one sheep, which provided the ideal candidate for target fixation in the middle of the vast field. Closer inspection revealed a distinctly moribund posture with legs pointing stiffly skywards. On my second visit, however, preceded by Richard Lovelace, the corpse had vanished, leaving me nothing to aim for and miss except Richard's Combat. I mentioned that I had seen neither the farmer nor vultures capable of airlifting a sheep; he replied that he hadn't seen any dead ones, but he had rejuvenated one that had keeled over. Far from the medal this heroic aerial vet deserves, he and I were rewarded with a long carry out through locked fields.

The Malverns were shaping up for later in the week, so I wended my way back down south, calling in at Penycloddiau, where a 6 minute sled ride terminated in a field which turned out to be owned by a friend of a friend, who gave me a lift back to the car. At last, the Malverns, less than 2 hours from home, provided the 100 km flight that I had driven ten times as far in search of. Without the southerly component in the wind of my previous adventures from there, my track took me south of Hereford and over the chaps flying at Pandy. Whilst the cloud street marched

inpuidently straight through Sennybridge, I begrudgingly pushed out into the blue, falling short of the Brecon Beacons but slithering low over their flanks with some kites for the last 20 km, landing at Llangadog for 120 km after 5 hours. Here I picked up a pizza and a lift into Llandovery, only to find the train had been cancelled without a replacement bus. With the evening on the wane, the passing traffic thinned from sparse to non-existent, the Telegram retrieve groups were characteristically unforthcoming, and I steeled myself for a night in the harness on the station platform. At this point, Soperman Sr took pity on me, gallantly offering to drive 3 hours out to recover me so that I wouldn't miss the next day's 5* RASP. I can't pretend I accepted reluctantly, but I vowed not to fall back on this "nuclear option" again.



Bested by the Beacons

Starting the day more aggressively to ensure I didn't deny myself a potential trip to the beach by being too slow like yesterday, I was the first to leave the hill, finding two strong climbs in quick succession, feeling at one with the wing and in tune with the air. Naturally, I never found a third, bombing out on the outskirts of Hereford. A similarly frustrating day at the Blorenges followed, with two powerful blue thermals taking me west along the ridge to Talybont on Usk, but three subsequent textbook thermal triggers seemingly cancelling each other out and withholding a third climb. I opted to land in the only flat field without a glut of power lines, trees, sheep or crop and was given an earful by the self-professed "reasonable" farmer who had "no problem" with me landing there on this occasion but assured me it would not be in my interest to do so again. Determined to see out the entire run of bumper forecasts, I returned once more to the Blorenges, resisting the draw of Castle Meadows for all of 24 minutes. Thus concluded my springtime backyard adventure, not with a bang but a whimper. 12 flights in 12 days totalling 13h45m proved that if you're willing to drive, the UK does have its bouts of consistently flyable weather. These included 6 XCs averaging 53 km – 2 worth writing home about – and 6 top to bottoms; not an exceptional ratio but enough to keep me greedy for more.