

# The Story of the Black Mountains Gliding Club



Derrick Eckley

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*by*  
**Derrick Eckley**



*Sammy, the club's  
mascot for 14 years*

Published 2007  
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Typeset by Logaston Press, Herefordshire  
and printed in Great Britain by  
PIP Printing, Hereford

*Front Cover: The Club's Junior glider  
being flown above the Wye valley by the author  
doing his five hours*

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Thanks must go to my father and of course my mother for not having  
a headache on that cold January night in 1933 and then,  
nine months later, I was born on 23rd September.  
But it took forty-six years before we start flying at Talgarth –  
so read on and join me down memory lane.

# Foreword

The reason for writing these memoirs was so that those of you who follow will have some idea of what went on to create the best gliding site in the country. And also many of the members said to me before you ‘pop your clogs’ – ‘get typing before its too late’.

I started writing this story in 2004 but it turned out to be terrible year for me. In August I discovered I had got Parkinson’s and then I lost my wife on New Year’s Eve. About ten days before Gwenllian had slipped on some ice and broken her arm. It wasn’t healing so they decided to pin it together. but tragically Gwen died on the operating table.

I had lost my wife of forty-seven years plus six years courting, whilst the family had lost their mum and grandma and the community a well respected hard working member, and this was shown by the large number of people at the funeral. Gwenllian was an integral part of the gliding club through the years. She was for ever answering the telephone and giving out information as best she could. Breakfast would be the worst time with members wanting to now what the weather was like. Her contribution in the early days in the forming of the club was immense.



*Gwenllian*

*This booklet is dedicated to my wife, Gwenllian*

# 1 Early Dreaming

The story of how the club was formed goes back a long way. I need to go back to my childhood when, during the war, as a young lad of about nine or ten, I came home from school one day to be told by my father that three Auster aircraft had landed behind the church at Garthbrenny which was about three miles north-west of Brecon.

For people then living in the eastern part of England, the skies would have been full of aircraft, but in the Brecon area it would have still been a rare sight. The aircraft had landed about half a mile from where I lived; my home was at a farm called Talwern Fawr, four miles north of Brecon. So we had a rushed tea, and my brother, Glyn, and I went to find the aircraft behind the church. I was so excited although I am not sure how my brother felt. At first we were afraid to go into the field but, luckily for us, one of the pilots came across and invited my brother and I to have a look at the aircraft. I have been back to have a look at this field and I have no idea how they managed to get in and out, it was so short. Looking back, I often wonder what the exercise was that they were practising. I remember seeing the men, they were all army personnel.

You are probably asking yourself what on earth has all this got to do with the birth of the Black Mountains Gliding Club. Well before you can give birth you have to conceive, and I'm sure that seeing those aircraft instilled into me the urge to want to fly, but this was going to be a very long project. In fact, according to my log book, it was thirty years later that I was sent solo at Shobdon by Anthony Mavro Carado and another six years after that that the Black Mountains Gliding Club was formed.

Shall we go back to my teenage days? I left school at fourteen and for the next eleven years worked on my father's farm. Still dreaming of



*Above: Derrick. Right: The author again – no comments please – but what a lovely boy!*



flying it was on a holiday at Blackpool that I had my first flight, it was from Squires Gate in a Rapide, and the feeling as we took off was magic and I wanted more. Coincidentally, Gerry Martin also had his first flight in the same Rapide some years later. Gerry was to become the Chief Flying Instructor (CFI) of the Black Mountains Gliding Club, a post he held for many years.

In 1956 Gwenllian and I became engaged and we spent the next twelve months looking for a farm. This is where things could have gone wrong as far as this gliding club was concerned because we almost rented a farm in the Brecon area, then we were runners-up on the farm next door to Troed-Yr-Harn (but lost out to a wartime Hurricane pilot!). Finally, in May 1957, Troed-Yr-Harn farm was put up for sale and we were the successful bidders – another link in the forming of the Black Mountains Gliding Club, but still a long way to go.

On 28 September 1957 we got married and started raising a family, we had three boys and a girl – Kevin, Andrew, Gareth and Alyson.

In about 1960 I got in touch with a flying club at Rhooze airport, still desperate to fly, and I made a booking for a flight, so off I went in my

Morris van. In those days there were no motorways so it took ages to get to Rhoose.

After arriving, I reported to the clubhouse and, as far as I can remember, I received a warm welcome. As we all know, your first visit is quite nerve racking; you think you have parked your car in a safe place, but some bright spark will shout at you that you cannot park it there, which doesn't help your confidence, and he probably would have been a newish member starting to throw his weight about.

After a while I was allocated a pilot to take me on my half hour trip, and I had that wonderful feeling you get as you leave the ground, and which I still get after more than 3,000 flights!

We climbed away to a safe height, and he asked if I would like to have a go and, of course, I said yes. Now, those of us who instruct know that, if you haven't briefed your pupil to move the controls gently you will end up either diving into a twenty acre wheat field or with your toes in the air about to stall, and maybe with the pupil ending up being sick as well.

So, this so-called instructor handed the aircraft over to me, with no briefing on how to handle the controls and we were facing straight into the sun, so naturally, I made a balls-up of it. That's fair enough, but what upset me was his attitude towards me, as he showed his impatience at my inability to control the aircraft. This had a profound affect on me and my immediate reaction was to say to myself 'Derrick, go back to your farm and leave flying to those who are far cleverer than you'. I would love to get hold of that instructor now, put him in the front seat of a two seat glider, zap him around our mountains at about fifty feet off the ground and I think I would show him what controlling an aircraft is all about!



*Gerry Martin was Chief Flying Instructor of the club for 13 years*

So, back to the farm and to raising a family, to a twelve hour day slog – no time for flying – up to our eyeballs in debt with a massive overdraft, so no way could I have afforded any flying anyway.

In 1968 something happened which, when you look back on all the events that took place in the build up to the birth of the Black Mountains Gliding Club, proved to be one of the most important.

Like all businesses, we would get our fair share of commercial travellers coming to the farm and on one particular day a guy named Clive Ashcroft called – he was selling animal medicines. While he was there we somehow got on to the subject of gliding and it turned out that he was a member of the South Wales Gliding Club (SWGC), and he told me that they were flying from a site on top of a mountain called Mynydd Mayo, apparently quite a difficult site. Clive made a remark about the mountains behind us, and asked whether anybody had thought of forming a gliding site in the area. As far as I was concerned the answer was no, but Clive went on to say that the SWGC was looking for a new site, so I suggested to Clive that someone from the club should pay me a visit! So now I was thinking I might have got enough room on my farm to fulfill my dream!

A few weeks passed and then I had a phone call from Ivor Shattock, a member of the club – unknown to me at the time I was talking to the number one glider pilot in South Wales, respectfully known as the Welsh Wizard. We made arrangements to meet the following Sunday. Ivor had with him Adrian Thomas, another well known glider pilot from the SWGC, but they were not around long before they told me that my field was too small. They then went to have a look at Rhos Fawr Common, but that was a non-starter as the commoners would not have allowed them to use it.



*Ivor Shattock*

So yet another disappointment for me, but not long after this the SWGC found a site at Usk, near Raglan and so I joined them in 1970. I had my first flight in a T31 and my instructor was Danny Roberts, a super guy who died at a young age some years later with a heart complaint.

I was beginning to get fed up with my progress at Usk, I had had 33 launches, averaging four and a half minutes per flight! Apart from that, I had spent hours on the tractors retrieving cables, remembering that as a farmer I was sitting on bloody tractors all week! Luckily, in 1973 the Herefordshire Gliding Club was formed and I joined them. I had my first flight at Shobdon on 15 April 1973, then, two months later on 15 June, after eleven aero-tows, Anthony Mavro Carado sent me solo.

Some say your first solo is better than sex; I am not so sure about that but I will say it's a damn close second. So slowly we are getting there but still six years to go to that magic day of the birth of BMGC. As those of you who run businesses know, to be successful you have to put a lot of your time in to it and farming is no different, in those six years I did very little flying. During the last two years I only managed three instructional flights, one with Richard Marsden on 30 June 1979. The following weekend I did an hour with Dennis, I cannot remember his surname, but he used to fly in green wellies even in the summer! So in my log I have him down as Dennis Wellies, and then another one the next weekend with Ron Aspin. On the same day I flew solo for one hour. Now this was the build up for the impending birth of the BMGC, which was to be in ten days time on 25 July 1979.

For the final link we have to step back just over a year, to when I met John Bally, and at the time I was not aware that my way of life was going to change for ever, but it most certainly did!

John and Evelyn had bought some farm buildings at Llwyn-y-bach Lodge in 1977 and with that the last piece of the jigsaw was now nearly in place. John completed the renovation of the lodge in the spring of 1978, so Gwen and I, with some of our friends, went to their opening night. Being nosey we wanted to have a look at this new development that had been going on for the last twelve months.

So I went up to the bar to order some drinks, it must have been my round again! I am not sure whether I was drinking sherry in those days or not! John Bally was serving behind the bar and he noticed that I was

wearing a BGA tie with a glider on it, and he asked me if I flew. I said that I had done some gliding, John then asked me if I had got room for an airstrip on my farm? I had been dreaming of flying from the farm ever since I had gone solo at Shobdon.

John and I arranged to meet next day at the farm. I can remember it as if it was yesterday – he arrived in this yellow MG and I was starting to think ‘what am I letting myself in for?’. When I showed John the field he thought that it was a bit short, we paced it several times thinking it was very tight. (Bear in mind that at that time the field ended with a hedge where the road now goes across the runway, and also at the western end there was another hedge and a ditch! Well, we paced it one last time and decided it was another five yards longer so we agreed to give it a go.



*John and Derrick converting a sheep shed into a temporary hanger  
in 1979*

## 2 The First (and nearly Last) Take-off



*The runway in the early days, showing the filled in ditch in the centre and the removed hedgeline beyond*

So during the summer of 1978 we removed the hedges (much to the disgust of my daughter, Alyson, who said they were the best for hazelnuts, on the farm!), filled in the ditches, and then we bought an Auster named Pamela with a 96 bhp engine (developing about 60 bhp). We initially based it at Shobdon as there was a crop of barley on the main part of the field and I had to wait until the end of September to harvest the crop. I suppose we were desperate to find out if the field was suitable, so we cut a runway-shaped strip out, baled up the straw and then I drove John down to Shobdon to get the Auster. When I

returned John had beaten me back and was already waiting in the field. So I jumped in the Auster and off we went, we flew around for while, landed and took off again. After the second landing John said 'let's try taking off towards the mountain'. I remember not being happy with this as I was getting the vibes that I really should not be in this aircraft and so I said to John 'you go on your own'. However, I stayed in the aircraft while he taxied back to the end of the west runway (where the electric fence is currently) then I said 'OK, I will come with you' but, looking back, oh boy! I wish I'd gone with my initial instincts!

There were just too many of those ten per cents stacked against us:

- 1) Uphill
- 2) About six inches of stubble
- 3) A pile of bales fifty yards from the hedge
- 4) The hedge itself (which we later removed for the south-west runway)
- 5) A thirty foot plus oak tree
- 6) Two-up in an underpowered aircraft

Now you would think that that would have been enough reasons not to do it, but off we went anyway. It did not take long for me to realise



*The day we almost killed ourselves*



*Myself with John Bally*

that this was going to be a very interesting flight, the acceleration was terrible and we arrived at the pile of bales with just enough speed to bounce over them with about sixty yards to go. John held her down to the last moment and we cleared the hedge by inches. The next problem was the oak tree. How we got over the tree I will never know! And I doubt if John does either! John then pushed the stick forward and now we were diving at Hoel-Rowland Cottage and we missed that by feet. Still the drama continued, now we were right in the Ennig valley floor with the ground rising in front of us at about the same rate as our little Auster's rate of climb was achieving. We were so low we were looking up at the trees on

both sides of us. After what seemed an age to me we cleared the valley floor, but were still very low. I turned to John and said to him 'that was [bloody] close', and I used the word in as strong away as possible feeling it had been close to the end of both of us. John was literally as white as a sheet, and it takes some doing to upset John.

All along I have pointed out the various things that could have gone wrong and if we had been killed the BMGC would most certainly not have

been formed. The sad thing would have been that, after John and I had done so much hard work – bulldozing hedges and filling ditches etc – it would have been all in vain. However, we survived to tell the tale and learnt the hard way not to take off towards the mountain in future!

*Right: Tim Wilkinson with a new four blade propellor for the tug which would help dramtically reduce the aircraft's noise.*

*He was a great supporter of the club in its early days, but became a commercial pilot, ran his own club and his sheep scanning business, and so eventually lacked the time to spend at Talgarth*



*In the early days with the Rallye and Blanik*

### 3 The Day the Dream Became Reality

Now we move on to the spring of 1979. We were looking for a way to start a gliding club at Troed-Yr-Harn farm and fortunately for us Herefordshire Gliding Club were selling their Rallye and Blanik; I believe they were looking for funds to buy a Twin Astir. So John Bally, Derek Price and I bought the combination. Derek only stayed with us for a short time. He had probably by now thought that we were a pair of nutters and best not to be involved with us. Looking back he probably wasn't so far off the mark.



*This is the view I would have had on my first flight ... no undershoot  
– you have to get it right first time!*

This is where things became very interesting because, in spite of what's on our website stating that John was a gliding instructor, this is far from the truth. John, at the time, was a low hour power pilot with no gliding experience at all! In fact he did a (crash) course in gliding at Shobdon to be able to sit in the Blanik to fly it into Talgarth on 25 July 1979. My entry in my logbook for that day reads like this: 'John Bally towed from Shobdon in the morning – First landing of the Blanik at Troed-Yr-Harn. I was towed out in the afternoon – The first flight of the Black Mountain Gliding Club.'

At last the Black Mountains Gliding Club was born and it happened because I had had a dream and, with the help of John Bally and a lot of persistence, that dream came true.

Looking back I find it amazing how John and I survived those early days, remembering that we had no more than a dozen solo hours between us. John would probably have got five or six when he did his course the previous week and I had nine hours fifty-one minutes in six years (of which in the last two years I had done one hour solo and that was ten days before I did my first flight at Talgarth).

Not only was I sitting on my own in the Blanik for the first flight (try doing that nowadays at a new club if you've got less than two hours a year, the CFI would politely decline!). It was also the first time that we had towed with the Rallye. We had no idea what the performance was going to be like but we soon found out that it was not the greatest of towing aircraft and we ended up just clearing the oak trees at the end of the overshoot field.

John towed me to the ridge and again it was another first for me – ridge soaring. I stayed for about an hour of magical flying. No more going around and around in a thermal. Instead, with the wings straight and level and the hill working all the way down to Hay Bluff I experienced miles of constant energy, what more could I want?

So after about 55 minutes I decided to land. I expect I was getting concerned about the landing and if I wasn't I most certainly should have been because in those days we only had one runway and that was the westerly one with no undershoot at all. I came through the gap in the hedge on the eastern edge of the runway but lady luck was with me and I made a successful landing.

But sadly John was unable to have a flight on that day as we didn't have a tug pilot to launch him.

## **4 Troubles with the Planning Authorities**

What a memorable day! My dream had come true! 'The birth of the BMGC', but little did John and I know that waiting in front of us was a battle royal with the National Parks Authority. Ironically, the Parks now regard us as a very important part of the tourist industry in this area and we are featured in their advertising material!

Without wishing to bore you, I think I should say a few words on the battle we had with the Parks. John and I had got the flying side going but we were soon to realise that that was the easy part of setting up the club.

In the autumn of 1979 we thought we had better think about planning and so we applied for planning permission. They promptly turned us down, so we then applied for temporary planning permission so that we could demonstrate to the planning committee that we would not be the environmental problem they thought we would be.

There were two things that were in our favour: one, I knew quite a few of the members of the planning committee and so I was able to put our point of view forward on a more personal basis, and two, we had managed to get them to have a site meeting.

There were quite a number of the Park's members who turned up for the demonstration. Now John and I had already decided that the best way to demonstrate the take off would be to tow the Swallow out as it was the lightest glider we had and we could pull the revs back on the Rallye as far as possible to reduce the sound.

Those of you who are familiar with the Rallye will know that it has leading edge flaps which pop out when the aircraft is about to stall. With John flying as slow as possible the flaps were going in and out like a machine gun, creating probably more noise than the engine!

We were trying to demonstrate to the members that the noise factor would be acceptable and it worked. Shortly afterwards we were given planning permission. Unfortunately, with some unbelievable restrictions, the most onerous one being that we were not allowed to fly on Bank Holidays.

Take the first Bank Holiday of the year, Easter, when everyone would be looking forward to a long weekend, those of us who glide were unable to take part in our chosen sport. It meant that Good Friday was out and also the Monday and every other Bank Holiday throughout the year.

We were not happy with this situation so we applied to the Parks to have the restriction lifted, but they turned our application down.

For John and I this was a very frustrating time as, at the same time, we were dealing with some very difficult planning officers who were in a different world to us, and not only us but also other activity projects in the area who were having the same problem. Here we were in an area crying out for tourist attractions and we had to fight the planning officers all the way. John and I could see that under these conditions we would not be able to build the club up into anything viable. Then something happened at Christmas 1984 which changed everything. We had lots of visitors, but, like most Christmases, the weather was lousy until New Year's Eve when we had a north-westerly wave going to diamond height – so every one had a fantastic day. The next day we had the same conditions but it was a Bank Holiday so, if we flew we would risk an enforcement order and



*A Hercules flies over the airfield*

maybe lose our planning permission. We took the risk and the Blanik took off. However the combination hadn't even reached the mountain before the phone rang with a complaint. The person who rang the club lived in a cottage to the north-east of the field at the base of Y-Das and reminded us that we were contravening the planning conditions. Now what should we do? We had about a dozen gliders rigged ready to launch and there was wave everywhere.

For some reason the members volunteered me to be chief negotiator. Now, those of you who know me well would have doubted their choice, because in those days I would not have been the most diplomatic of persons; I think I've mellowed a little in the last twenty years!

So off I went to see if I could reason with the lady in the cottage. I knocked on the door with some trepidation. The door opened and I introduced myself and went on to explain to her that we had glider pilots who had been unable to fly because of the bad weather over the Christmas period so that yesterday and today were the only days they were able to fly. Her reply to me was 'that's your problem' and slammed the door shut.

So back to the field I went, and gave instructions to our tug pilot to carry on flying and damn the consequences! A good day's flying was had by all, but John and I knew that in a very short time we would receive an enforcement order and sure enough within about ten days we received that order.

It may seem strange now but at the time we were quite relieved because after four years of trying to run the club under the National Parks' restrictions we were looking for a chance to go for an appeal to the then Welsh Office. We'd set the bait and the National Parks had taken it.

The situation was desperate: if we had lost this appeal to the Welsh Office we would most likely have had to close down. So the summer of 1985 was very busy for both of us as we were running our separate businesses and trying to get our defence together, and going around all the B & Bs, hotels, restaurants, newsagents, butchers etc for their feedback. We were very pleased to find out that their response was positive and that they gave us their full support. Also the local farmers supported us and I, being a farmer myself, knew that that would have helped the situation.

The date for the appeal was set for the 13 December 1985. The Inspector's name was T.W.B. Barnes who, luckily for us, turned out to be a very switched-on guy.

So the fateful day dawned. The hearing was set for the town hall in Talgarth. John and I were prepared for battle. Both John and I had to give statements and then be cross-examined on our statements, so it was quite a nerve racking experience but we were fighting like alley cats for the future of the gliding club. Bill Scull gave a statement on behalf of the British Gliding Association, which helped put the official view on our situation. Also other members of the club gave statements. The hall was packed with members of the club and the public and the atmosphere was very tense to say the least.

The enquiry took a full day plus two hours on the following morning. We then adjourned to the airfield, the reason being that John had arranged for two Hawks to fly up the Cwmdru valley and dive in over the field as they used to do before the gliding club was there. Back in the 70s, the Cwmdru/Talgarth valley was a common low-level exercise area and aircraft would frequently head for the Sennybridge Range before the two mile exclusion zone around the gliding club was enforced. What we were trying to do was to demonstrate to the Inspector which would be preferable for the local community, the RAF or the gliding club?. Well, spot on time the two jets came over Castle Dinas, dived in over the field and the place was vibrating. The leader called 'Shall we do it again?' so we said 'Affirmative'. It turned out that the two pilots were having a great time so the next time they came over they almost took the old club house roof off and I have a bombing run picture to prove it.

By now we thought the Inspector was getting a fair idea of the gliding club versus RAF on the noise factor. The opposition's argument was based mainly on the noise factor plus some off-the-wall objections such as the entire wildlife population would disappear from around the airfield!

About four years ago this argument was proved fallacious when we discovered that a pair of curlews had nested forty yards from the north runway and reared their young successfully. We could not believe it, especially with the tug at maximum revs so close to the nest. It's amazing to see how those curlews have adapted to that environment as they have nested each year since. They successfully reared three young in 2003 and each year their numbers are increasing, so we must be doing our bit towards their conservation. To hear the trill of the Curlews as they glide over the farm is a most wonderful sound. Another great experience was flying with

Lizzy Fish in the K13 when a Common Buzzard formatted on our wing tip and flew around with us for quite a while and that was wonderful. I distinctly had the feeling that he was saying ‘follow me ... I’ll show you how to thermal’.

We know that, in a planning application, nature is often used as a reason for refusal and it can be quite an emotive subject and many applications have been turned down because the lesser spotted whatever might be upset. However, I think our experiences show that nature will adapt to changing circumstances,

We go back to the inquiry and at the end of the first day the Inspector asked John and I to bring our views next day about what would be a workable formula for the club to survive.

Now the ball was firmly put in our court, this was the last thing we expected from the Inspector. He was asking us that evening to come up with a set of conditions that would be acceptable to us and allow the club to survive.

Well the midnight oil was most certainly burned that night. John and I had a problem, we were not sure whether the Inspector was for us or against us. So we spent a lot of time discussing various aspects of the conditions and in the end came up with a formula which we felt would be fair to both parties.

Waiting for the Inspector’s report seemed to take an age but at the end of February we had his findings – all that we’d asked for the Inspector had agreed with, and the conditions that we fly under today were worked out by two very tired characters.

We have flown here since 1985 under these condition with no complaints from our neighbours, so we feel that the rules were fair to both sides. But we cannot be complacent. One thing that concerns me for the future of the club is what is happening in the property market, especially in the farming world where some farmers are selling their farmhouse and the farm buildings with a field or two and then selling the rest of the land to local farmers.

You may ask why this should be a problem, well the type of person who would be able to afford that property will most certainly not be local, their money would be from selling property in and around London and there is no way that local people can compete with them. So you end up with what

we locals call incomers whose perception of country life comes from the Archers or Emmerdale Farm and they think that the countryside should be as silent as a morgue!

There is another point that I would like to draw your attention to – it is very important not to upset your immediate neighbours. They could make things very difficult but, at the moment, they are very supportive. I wonder how many of you realize that the overshoot field to the west of the airfield, belongs to John, my brother-in-law, and he is unable to farm the field as he would like to, he is unable to put cattle in that field because he is afraid the cattle would ignore the electric fence and stray on to the airfield and damage the gliders. So we owe John and his son, Stephen, a lot for putting up with the club, remembering that they would be in their rights to put up a permanent fence, and of course that would be a disaster for us. But do not worry, they have assured us that they will not be doing that, they will just put up with the inconvenience.

## 5 Getting our First Single-Seat Glider

Perhaps I should write a little bit about the early days and the sort of problems we had and some interesting happenings.

One thing we did was to buy a Diamant from Tony Maitland and Phil King, they had probably been trying to sell this glider for the previous twelve months. I was not very happy that this high performance glider was going to be my first single seater but there was I being dragged along by John's enthusiasm like a water skier behind a high powered speed boat!

There was no way that I was going to fly the Diamant from Talgarth, so we decided to fly it from the large flat strip at Shobdon. However, before they would let me fly solo they gave me two check flights; one hour with Phil King and a half hour with Dennis, they then consulted with Charles,



*Left to right: John Bally, Derrick Eckley, Mary and Barney Banks*



*Going from a Blanik to a Diamant for my first single seat glider  
– absolutely crazy*

the CFI, and between them they decided not to let me fly – probably they felt that they didn't want bits of the Diamant all over the runway!

So what now, we asked ourselves, but all was not lost as one of our members, Barney Banks who was the CFI of Pershore, suggested that we take the glider down to his club and I could have a go from there. So off we went down to Pershore aero-towing the Diamant with the Rallye.

Peter James was the tug pilot, Peter was a school-teacher from Merthyr Tydfil. He just lived for flying, and in the early days he was our main tug pilot, a super guy, sadly no longer with us. Off we went, Peter and I in the tug and John in the Diamant, and in front of us another 'interesting' day! We climbed up to cloud base and happily set off for Pershore. We were towing him on the inversion and with about fifteen miles to run to Pershore he had had enough and decided to go off on his own. Peter and I didn't admit it at the time but we hadn't a clue when he pulled off so we merrily continued on to Pershore.

We arrived and Barney was waiting for us. We greeted him with 'Hi, seen John?' . 'No' said Barney. Oh dear where the hell was he? (Remember, we didn't have mobile phones in those days so keeping in touch wasn't so easy).

After what seemed ages we saw this lone figure in the distance clambering over the security fence. It was our John! He had landed about two miles away in a silage field and he wasn't a happy bunny to say the least. So, after giving Pete and me some verbal for the tow, we all set off to have

a look at the field to find out if it would be long enough for an aero tow out.

We decided, in spite of the Rallye's low performance, that it would just do, but we hadn't reckoned on John going out with his air-brakes fully open! Pete was chimney top height all the way back to Pershore. It wasn't until John went to pull air brakes to land that he realized that they were already open. So when Barney and I arrived he was almost on his knees apologising to Pete. 15-All.

Now, down to the reason why we were at Pershore, for me to fly the Diamant back to Talgarth. Looking back, going from a Blanik to a Diamant is not to be recommended. There I was strapped in the glider, and it was not the most comfortable of cockpits because you were lying very flat and I found it very claustrophobic. I received a briefing from John who had probably no more than two flights in the Diamant himself.

Cable on and away I went. Well, glory alleluia! The Blanik stick and the Diamant stick respond differently, as I quickly found out. When she lifted off, I shot up in to the air, stick forward – hit the ground, I thought I had taken the undercarriage out, stick back and I shot up again, stick forward and I just held her off; my heart rate must have gone off the scale. I had three more launches before I got the Pilot Induced Oscillation (PIO) under control. I did about two hours of soaring and, finally, started to get the hang of the frisky Diamant.

The journey back to Talgarth wasn't without its drama either. Orders from John Bally were to tow high and go around the CuNims that were forming, so by the time we got to Hereford we were at about 8,000ft and very low on fuel. We could see Hay Bluff in the distance but we were looking for fields all the way and it seemed to take for ever, but we made it.

I had another flight at Talgarth that day, soared for about one hour, what a day, I didn't need rocking that night!

Another interesting day was when we towed the Swallow from Keevil. On the way down I towed the Blanik to Nympsfield for its Certificate of Airworthiness and then went on to Keevil to pick up the Swallow. Here we went again, into the unknown. I'd never flown a Swallow before and it was just as twitchy as the Diamant. I find it amazing that in the past you would train in a T21, our similar machine, and have your first solo in a Swallow. Absolutely crazy!



*Myself doing some low ridge running in the swallow – great fun*

So, off I went in the Swallow with John towing in the Rallye, I got settled down after a few PIO, and we headed back towards Talgarth over the Severn estuary – beautiful views – but, unknown to me at that stage, there were problems ahead! We arrived at the bottom of the Cwmdy valley and ahead was a cloud which was easily avoidable, but what does John do – fly straight into it. When we cleared the cloud I was almost alongside him and high. There was no way I was going to be able to get back, so I pulled the yellow knob. By now I had had enough, I had towed the Blanik to Nympsfield in the morning and after about one hour in the Swallow I was getting fairly tired and the last thing I wanted was a landing out in the bottom of the Cwmdy valley in a glider that I had never landed before. So I chose the largest field that was available and landed by the A40 in one of Sian Legge-Bourke's fields.

John landed along side me and, after I had told him what I thought of him for towing me into cloud, we walked the field to check if it was long enough. We thought it was marginal, but we decided we would give it a go.

Sian Legge-Bourke arrived with Harry, her son. I got John to do the apologies as it was his fault we were in her field in the first place. So Harry held the wing and off we went, just managing to clear the hedge! We were at roof-top height over Bwlch, then over Llangorse and back to the airfield and when we landed I said to myself 'that's enough for one day!'

## 6 G-AZPA – The Pawnee

The Swallow had a big part to play in the next story. On my first flight in the Swallow, I mentioned how twitchy she was, well about a week later, I cannot remember his name, but this guy was going to have a go in the Swallow. Fred Bishop from Ringmere Gliding Club, who has supported us from the early days, went up to the glider and asked the pilot if he had flown a Swallow before and the answer was ‘no’, so Fred started to brief him on the aircraft but Fred was told in no uncertain terms that ‘I’m an instructor and know what I’m doing’, so Fred said ‘fair enough’ and stood back.

What happened next was horrific! John lined up the Rallye and we hooked the glider on and off they went. The Swallow lifted off and immediately went out to the right, came back behind the tug and then out to the right again, but this time he went high as well. All this happened just as John was lifting off, this threw John back on to the ground pulling the tail of the Rallye sideways and the glider back released as it flew over the tug and went on to land in the valley!

For those of us at the launch point, the sound of the crash was horrendous. We ran as fast as we could, fearing the worst, and were very relieved to see John out of the aircraft and safe with no injuries. Witnesses said he was out almost before the aircraft had stopped! If John had been five feet higher, the tug would probably have cartwheeled and then most certainly there would have been a different ending.

But now we were without a tug. John and I looked at many tugs but we felt that they were not powerful enough. However, this was about the time that crop spraying was becoming unpopular, especially for those who lived next door to large potato fields – you got sprayed whether you liked



*The end of our Rallye*



*The replacement Pawnee*

it or not. So we both thought that the Piper Pawnee would make a good tug aircraft. I think we were the first club to use the Pawnee as a towing plane and what a difference it made to the tugging, no longer skimming the oak tree, a much safer operation!

## **7 The Development of the Airfield**

The west runway had been developed in 1978 but one of the problems we had was that we didn't have a road running through the airfield, so, in the spring of 1983, I along with and my farm worker laid 36 loads of concrete. That was a great improvement, especially in the winter!

The next thing I did was to remove the hedge on the east side of the field which then gave us a south-west runway. Using the west runway meant that you had to land through the gap in the hedge, over the top of the gliders waiting to launch, with no undershoot option and very often with a cross wind to contend with. With the choice of runways this was quite an improvement in terms of safety and operationally.

But the most important improvement that was made was when I removed the hedge on the northern side of the field and extended the airfield into another field, giving us a longer runway with no obstacles to clear and with the ground dropping away quite steeply. In fact, I would think that 80 to 90 per cent of our take offs are now on the north runway. We then surrounded the old oak tree with an ex-army hut and a mobile home. We linked the two together and this remained as our clubhouse until the new clubhouse became available in 2002. That original area has now been landscaped. I made a picket fence and Tim Barton did a super job surrounding the tree with a seat. The area is now used for barbecuing and many a good night has been had by all, including myself.

In the beginning John and I supplied the tugging and the gliders, but we soon realised that, to remain legal, we would have to join the BGA. So in 1982 we formed the Black Mountains Gliding Club. The club operated the gliders and John and I the tugging. In 1988 John decided to try farming while I was thinking of packing farming in, so we parted company and I

was left holding the baby. I continued supplying the towing for another ten years until 1998 when the club purchased the airfield and the Pawnee.

There was one thing I did pride myself on and that was that there was always, or nearly always, a tug available, because the punter coming through the gate would not be interested in my problems, he or she had come to fly. I am sure that most of the members would not have realised the pressure that I was under. If I was on the airfield, I would be watching the take offs and landings and listening to the tug engine – hoping she would last the season. If I was down the farmyard and for some reason the tug aborted the glider, I would be up to the field in minutes. It used to be a standing joke on how long it would take me to get there! Also I was doing a lot of instructing. On a Sunday evening, cashing up for the club and the tugging used to take hours and on top that I was running the farm as well, so my life was indeed pretty hectic.



*Looking across the airfield to the northern hedge  
which we removed to provide a longer runway*

## 8 Celebrations

In the 1980s we held regular parties at Troed-Yr-Harn that provided an opportunity for local people and members of the gliding club to meet and have a good time. On other occasions we held barbecues at the airfield which were intended more for members of the club and visitors.



*The group includes some of my neighbours  
and my brother and sister-in-law*



*Another group*



*Fancy trusting these three to run the bar. Left to right: Mike Hutchinson, Dave Unwin and Martin Brockington*

## 9 A Few Stories

### **Surviving Oragraphic Cloud**

The day I lost control of the Diamant ... what an experience that was! I was climbing in wave in front of the main ridge between Lord Hereford's knob (local terminology) and the trig point.

I had climbed to about 5,000ft, at this stage I had done very little wave flying and here I was making the classic mistake of not increasing speed with height and suddenly I was enveloped in oragraphic cloud – as many others have found themselves. At the same time John Bally gave me a call on the radio and I took my eyes off of the instruments and looked down for the microphone. Well, from then on it was like a fairground ride, one minute my feet were above my head, the next I was doing 80 knots with the stick fully back. At the time I had no idea what was happening (very frightening!). With hindsight, of course, I now know exactly what was happening. I was in a spiral dive, the canopy was frozen up, I couldn't see a thing. Now something strange happened, a calmness came over me and I was resigned to being killed, so I relaxed my grip on the stick and just waited for what I thought was the end.

Then suddenly the canopy cleared and I could see the ground, I was right wing down so I levelled the wings and just missed the top of the mountain. All of this was seen by the son of the landlord of the Tower Hotel. He was out shooting on the mountain, and his story was that he could hear the sound of the glider above him, but couldn't see it, and then I broke cloud and he said I was so close to hitting the mountain I was very lucky to have got away with it.

I broke cloud between the Twmpa and the trig point and as soon as I saw the ground I was no longer resigned to being killed – I was in full

survival mode and I needed to be. I was on the back end of a wave system. It was as rough as hell. I was so close to the ground with nowhere to land with my adrenaline pumping away. I was flying over the reservoir, then down the Gwynne Fawr valley, then over Crickhowell and finally landed at Llangattock.

The landing itself was quite interesting. I had a field lined up but at the last moment I could see that I would not be able to reach it, I looked to my left and there was this very small field, I banked the glider and levelled the wings. I seemed to put my toes on the hedge and by now I must have been about on the stall because, when I paced the field afterwards, it was only one hundred and twenty yards long and I was in the middle of it – my landing run was just sixty yards long!

Well it doesn't take much imagination to understand that by now I was completely drained, I had been through about fifteen minutes of sheer hell. So, off I went to find the owner of the field and, having found him, the first thing I asked him for was a class of water. My mouth was so dry that I could hardly speak – I believe I drank two glasses.

John Bally flew over me and I heard him saying on the radio that he had found me but couldn't understand how I had got in to such a small field! Neither could I! At one hundred and twenty yards long I should have been half way through the hedge at the other end – not in the middle of the field.

### **A Day with Tony Burton**

As I have said before, my life changed completely when John and I got together. I was now meeting people from all walks of life, some very interesting people, some nice, some not so nice – but they were few and far between. As I owned the airfield, at that time, I was able to show them the gate in the corner of the field, the one that they had come in through. That, however, was a very rare occasion.

I think I should mention one of our members, Tony Burton What a character! Tony still holds the club height record which I feel will never be broken, now that's a challenge to someone, but the height to beat is 32,000ft – and he did it in a suit and tie! It is rumoured that he took a week to recover from hypothermia – probably not true. But sadly, Tony is no longer with us, he died in 2002.



*Tony Burton on the left and Derrick Eckley in the K 13*

There is an interesting story about Tony and myself flying together. I had noticed that he always towed out to the valley and, if he didn't find lift, he would land back – even with the hill working. So I said to him one day, 'why don't you fly on the ridge' and his reply was 'I hate flying close to the mountain'. Now for someone who was prepared to go to 32,000ft, this was amazing so I went on to say, 'Tony, I regard the mountain as my friend not my enemy'.

Tony then said to me 'tell you what, Derrick, you show me how to fly close to the hill and I will show you how to fly in cloud!'. So I said OK, Tony, you're on'. He knew full well that I was hopeless in cloud, but I didn't know how terrified he was of being close to the mountain, but I soon found out!

So of we went in the K 13, right-hand out heading for Y-Das, so at about a thousand feet I pulled off as I had done many times before, but as far as Tony was concerned the umbilical cord had been cut and we were still a long way from the hill. We were heading for the mountain and by now we would have been nearly level with the top, so that, by the time we

got to the ridge I would be in a perfect position to be able to demonstrate scratching away from the ridge because we would have been below hill height.

I soon realised that Tony was not happy with the situation and he was getting very agitated. He asked me to turn away from the ridge but, of course, I was now in trouble because I needed to be close to the ridge to stay airborne, so I tried to persuade him to hang on and that it was perfectly safe to do so. But Tony wasn't having any of it, probably thinking to himself 'what am I doing sitting in the front seat of a K 13 been flown by a Welsh pig and sheep farmer', so I reluctantly pulled away from the mountain.

Luckily we found some weak lift which developed into a useful cloud, so here we go, my turn now, so Tony flew into the cloud, settled the glider down and said to me 'you have control'. I repeated 'I have control' but it wasn't for long. I soon lost it, but Tony's reassuring voice stating 'I have control' was very welcoming and this was repeated several times until we broke cloud.

Tony then said to me 'take over, Derrick, I have to take some tablets.' 'What are they for, Tony?' I was thinking they were for indigestion. He said 'I have a heart problem'. I thought to myself 'Oh, my God, what am I doing here?'

Not long after that flight Tony had a heart bypass operation, which was successful, and he underlined it by going to 32,000ft, but I never got him to fly the ridge again. What a character and sadly missed.

Another interesting entry in my log book was on the 19



*Edna and Peter Foster and myself*

April 1981 when I became a grandad for the first time, and now that little girl, called Rhian, is at Plymouth University studying Marine Biology, how time flies!

### **Several Small Snippets**

One day I was flying with a guy called Dave Tack, another character from the past, and we ended up having to land out at Llangorse because we got the wrong side of the wave bar, but, as I was P1, I really should say I got it wrong!

Another great character was Peter Foster, sadly Peter suffered from MS but that didn't stop him from flying. Peter and I flew many times together in the IS32. Although Peter was wheelchair bound, once he was in a glider he was on a par with the rest of us.

In spite of his problems, he was a very smooth flyer,. You didn't need an audio vario once you were in lift because Peter's voice would go into a high pitch squeal of excitement. We had a lot of fun together, and as well with his devoted wife, Edna. They were regular visitors to Talgarth and we became good friends.

### **Various mishaps**

In the early days John and I learnt to fly the mountains on our own, there was nobody there to hold our hands and tell us what to do. So, when pilots from flat sites, who had considerably more hours than we had, made mistakes, we found it difficult to understand,. We soon realised that flat site flying and ridge flying were miles apart. On a flat site your lift is created by a thermal, you find one and away you go, on a ridge site, before you take off, you have to make sure you know your wind direction and which part of the mountain is working because, when you arrive at the ridge, you must stay on the windward facing side of the ridge.

A classic example of this was when our Swallow was landed out in the Hermitage valley. The pilot was flying on the Cwmdru ridge and allowed himself to slip back over the ridge and ended up having to land out.

Now to retrieve the glider by road would have been very difficult, so we decided to fly the Swallow out! So Peter Wolf, an ex-Luftwaffe pilot, took the Pawnee in and made a heavy landing and broke the bungee. That meant that John and I had two-thirds of our fleet stuck on top of a Welsh mountain



*Two-thirds of the fleet in the Hermitage valley. Top: Eckley rather apprehensively waiting for the tow-out; bottom: repairing the pawnee*

and we were not very happy with this situation! It took us four days to sort the problem out which meant that we lost four days' income.

The 'retrieve' itself was interesting – sitting in the Swallow I was looking into the back end of the Cwmdu ridge and to my right there was nowhere to land if we had a cable brake. To my left there was a field that might have been survivable, so I said to John 'tow me out to the left'. However, what does he do? He tows me out to the right but with our adrenaline flowing nicely we survived!

Another horrendous story involves a member from the Booker Gliding Club, but no names as he has since died and it would be unfair as he could not defend his actions. He was given a check flight and was cleared to fly our K18 but with strict instructions to return to the airfield if there was any chance of a possible snowstorm. This was in the middle of February.

I was down at the farm and saw John take off in the tug without a glider on tow so I said to myself 'what's up now?' I shot up to the airfield at a great rate of knots and there was John flying up and down the ridge trying to find our K18! After a while John landed and said 'well he's not this side of the mountain'. So John and I were hoping that he had landed in the Cwmdu valley, but a snowstorm had gone through earlier and our gut feeling was that he was on the top of the mountain.

Well what now. The first thing we did was to let the police know of our problem. Being realistic, there wasn't a lot that they could do.

John and I were, by now, getting very worried as the light was fading fast so we felt the only thing we could do was to sit by the telephone and hope. Well it was a long wait but at about seven thirty the phone rang and it was Hubert Gwilliam who lived at Ffostyll Farm and he said 'have you lost a glider pilot?'. We were not sure who had lost whom, but we felt strongly that he had lost us.

So off we went to Ffostyll Farm to retrieve our lost pilot. When we arrived we found a very wet and bedraggled glider pilot with hypothermia setting in. So I took him back to my place as he was staying B & B with us. We then took him to the Castle pub at Pengenfford and fed him.

And then the interrogation. Where had he landed our lovely K18 and how much damage was there to the glider?

What followed turned out to be a cock and bull story. He claimed to have landed in a gully close to the reservoir and said that the glider was

not badly damaged. Next morning the three of us set off to find out where our K18 had been parked. The journey around the mountain was about 16 miles plus another two that you had to walk. Looking back I think it would have been quicker to have gone up the path that goes over Y-Das.

Anyway we didn't take that option and so here we were, clambering up the side of the reservoir and then we set out along the shores to the west end. After a while, I could not believe my eyes, I said John 'it's in the



*The K18 in the reservoir with, in the lower picture, Mike Hutchinson on the left donning a wetsuit to go and rescue the instruments whilst Gerry Martin and Dan Cardew stand by*

bloody water' and we said to our glider pilot 'you told us that the glider was in a gully'. He made some silly excuse. Why he had elected to land in the reservoir, we will never know. On each side there was a landable area but of course this could have been covered in cloud.

But whatever was happening in that cockpit, it must have been a very frightening situation. He had ended up with the nose of the glider on the edge of the reservoir. Picture the situation. If he was heading for a sheer rock face, he was in a no-win situation, if he had left it too late before touch down, he would have crashed into the rock face and would most certainly have been killed. If he had touched down too soon, he would have been out in the water and would have drowned. One wonders how far a K18 would travel after touching down on water, twenty yards, thirty maybe. So the window he was working with was very narrow indeed. We believe he spent some time in the water as the parachute had absorbed a fair amount of water.

His next move was to get on to the footpath heading north-west, now this was the path created by the workers who built the reservoir, some of them lived in and around Talgarth. They used to walk up the path around Y-Das in the morning and then, after a hard day's work, walk back again and that would have taken them three to four hours, unbelievable!

How he survived the trek over the top of the mountain we will never know but he did even though he was soaking wet from being in the water and wearing only slip-on shoes, the type you would wear to the office. But in fairness to him, he hung in there and finally got to safety.

So what now,. How were we to retrieve our K18? The following day a gang of us set off to work out how to do it. When we arrived, we found the glider had floated across the reservoir to the west bank! Mike Hutchinson put on a wet suit, he was well prepared, and retrieved the instruments, we then tied the glider to a tree and left it.

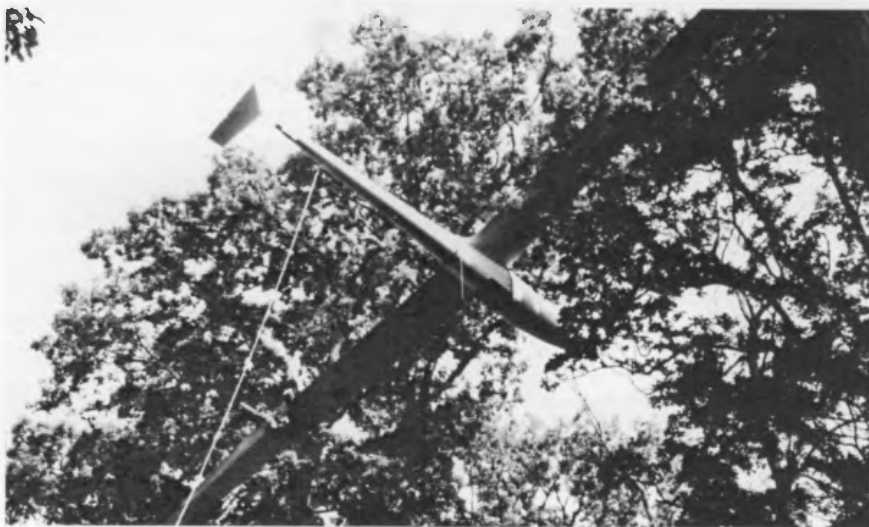
It was two weeks before we made another attempt because the weather had not been very good. By now the Welsh Water Authority were leaning on us, they thought it was about time we removed our glider out of their property! So the plan was to float it across the water to the east bank where we had managed to get a trailer, we borrowed a dinghy from someone, put Gerry Martin in charge as he was ex-navy, and rowed across the water, towing the glider behind. That was the end of our K18.

On another occasion we had a glider in the oak trees. This was a nice one. Over the radio came a may-day call stating that a glider had crashed into some trees near the airfield. As all our gliders were accounted for we wondered who it could be. So we sent the tug out to try to find the glider. The tug was out for quite a while but could not find him. It was only when approaching from the west that the tug pilot saw the glider in the oak trees at the end of the over-shoot field.

The glider was suspended by one wing tip in one oak tree and by the other in another tree, about thirty feet off the ground! The pilot's concern was that the glider would dislodge and crash to the ground, and this concern he was going to have for the next hour and half while we sorted the problem out.

The first thing I did was to ring John Bally and put him in the picture, then I rang the fire brigade and explained the problem we had and that there was no great panic. No need to rush! Forget it! In about four minutes I could hear the klaxon coming through Talgarth and they kept it on all way to the farm. With a very nervous pilot this was the last thing we wanted.

To get to the scene of the accident, they had to clamber over two fences and they had with them a brand spanking new ladder specially made for difficult situations. This was a golden opportunity to try it out!



*A glider suspended in the oak trees*

Rules and regulations! I could not believe my eyes. It was a hot summer's day and these firemen had to wear their waterproof jackets and so'wester hats while they struggled with the ladder. They were in danger of heat stroke. They finally arrived at the scene, but the ladder itself was of no great help and the firemen themselves were at a loss at what to do,. Then John arrived on his motorbike with all guns blazing. He had ropes and various rescue equipment with him and he quickly took charge!

The first thing he did was to secure the left wing to the tree because, by now, the wind had strengthened and the glider was rocking nicely – but I can assure you the pilot wasn't going to sleep!



*The glider which landed  
in the oak trees being air  
lifted out of them*

The next step was to persuade the pilot to get out of the cockpit and walk up the wing. Remembering that he was about thirty feet off the ground this was going to take some courage. John got him to tie a rope around his middle and after a few anxious moments he was successfully rescued.

We found out afterwards that he was on a task out of Lasham and got low over Talgarth and tried to land at the airfield. He was seen by several witnesses heading for the oak trees and he had pulled up in an attempt to clear them but stalled and ended up in the middle of the trees.

How to remove the glider from the trees was the next problem, not an easy one to solve, but after a few days we managed to get a helicopter from the SAS. Someone asked the pilot what if things went wrong while attempting to retrieve the glider and his reply was 'don't worry, the buck stops with me' and I thought to myself 'wow, how many million pounds worth of helicopter was he in charge of? What power!'.

The pilot then removed the seats and any other objects that were not needed, to reduce

the overall weight of the aircraft. He would have known the lifting power of the helicopter but the unknown would have been the drag created by the trees as the glider was lifted out. With great difficulty John managed to get a strap around the fuselage and then a rope back to the tail section so that when the lift took place the glider would come out tail first.

So now we are ready for the lift. You would have expected bits of the glider to be left behind in the trees, but it was such a well controlled lift that there was no damage done during the lift itself and on closer inspection the only damage was a small split in the cockpit area! So the outcome was one very happy owner and a successful exercise for the SAS!

One day, whilst Jack Bailey and I were busy renovating the old farmhouse, a project which took most of the '90s to complete, we suddenly had a power failure. I jokingly said to Jack 'I wonder what they have been up to at the gliding club', not thinking that they had actually been up to no good. You might ask yourself what could they possibly do to disrupt the power supply. Well, they had managed to wipe out the supply from Llangorse to Hay Bluff!

We were in the process of changing our tug pilot at the time and a chap called Dave Unwin had applied for the job. Dave was having a check flight with a visiting instructor, and on the way back, they got low coming around Y-Das. At this stage they should have headed back to the field but Dave continued to soar the ridge although he knew he was getting low but, by now a right mother of a misunderstanding was developing.

Dave was probably thinking 'well, he knows what he's doing' so he said 'you have control' and the instructor said 'no, I leave it to you'. He just didn't want to know! What happened next could have ended up with two pilots killed – they hit the high powered electric cables bringing them together. Luckily, they fused and blew apart. If they hadn't, it would have been a different outcome. But the story isn't over yet, when they hit the cable they were about one mile from the airfield with a difference of one hundred feet above the airfield. How Dave managed to get the Blanik back on the field I will never know! Dave went on to become manager and tug pilot.

On another occasion, a glider pilot from Bolland Gliding Club, Martin Fish, came down on a course with his daughter, Lizzie, to learn to glide. They were getting on well until it was noted that, during lectures, Lizzie



*These two photos tell the story when one visiting pilot from Nympsfield airfield, nr. Stroud in Gloucestershire, failed to come out of one valley and clipped the top of the mountain. We had to organise a recovery party, led, in the lower photograph, by Bill Morgan and Mike Hutchinson*



*Lizzie's solo flight*

wasn't paying full attention, she was watching the tug and its pilot! Romance was in the air! Martin was not a happy father, he had brought his daughter down to Talgarth to learn to glide and here she was cavorting with a gliding bum! Not what Martin had planned for his darling daughter. Not to worry, things turned out alright. Dave became editor of a flying magazine called *Today's Pilot*, Lizzie worked for a large estate and, then, came the wedding. One of the best I have been to – and now they have little boy called William.

### **A Few Personal Stories about Ridge Flying**

A few words on ridge flying. Remember that I was the first to fly the ridge from Talgarth. There was no one to hold my hand so I treated the hill with the greatest of respect and quietly came down lower and lower until I would be at hill height or below. A marvellous feeling as you followed the contours of the hill. As for going down the Cwmdy valley, it took me quite a while to get enough courage to go down there! I used to go down at low level, tucking into every gully and arriving at the north side of the scree, wondering if it would work or not, thinking whether I should turn back. If I found I was too low I needed the scree slope to get myself out of trouble! When I arrived at the scree slope, I hoped that it would be working. I would look up at the walkers hoping that, on the next pass, that I would be looking down on them!

A lot of my flying was checking visiting pilots to show them how to get the most out of gliding at Talgarth. I would be flying with pilots who would have many hours under their belts but, when moisture would appear on the canopy above their heads I knew that I had got them under pressure!

When a pilot had joined the scree slope below hill height and with the wing tip tucked in, quietly gaining height over this stone clad hill, I would sometimes pull the airbrakes out to demonstrate close-in flying.

One exercise I used to do with the pilots was to come back up the Cwmdru valley low down with the footpath on my right-hand side looking up at the burnt area – adrenaline flowing – thinking ‘you’ve over cooked it this time Eckley’, I would arrive below hilltop height and as I came around the corner I would put airbrakes out and lose another hundred feet! This wasn’t me trying to be clever, there was a reason for doing it. It was to show the pilot what to do if he found himself in that unique situation. And what you do is continue into the south bowl, it does look a bit formidable, but by the time you get to the end of the bowl you will be in lift and away you go. I have heard some visiting pilots say that after a while they find ridge flying boring, well all I can say to that is ‘you are not using the ridge as we do!’

### **A Few Personal Stories about Wave Flying**

Every pilot’s aim is to fly wave and we have some of the best in the country! We get wave conditions around the compass: south-west off the Brecon Beacons, north off the Radnor hills and our favourite wave system is the easterly wave coming off the back end of the Black Mountains. So, a few memories of discovering and flying the wave!

My first encounter happened one day when I was being towed out to the valley and then when coming back over the field, we hit the most horrendous rotor. The tug disappeared below me. I pulled the plug and the Blanik was bouncing all over the place. I headed back to the field at a great rate of knots. I had frightened the life out of myself. That was my introduction to wave at Talgarth and that was from an easterly direction. But as time went on you learnt what to expect and how to handle it.

I got my gold height on a south-west wind over Llangorse lake. I had been busy down at the farm but, for some reason, I had gone up to the airfield with Mike Young, our tug pilot at the time, said ‘there is wave over the lake, why don’t you go for it?’ I said I was too busy, but Mike said ‘I

will get the K18 out and on line'. So, I said 'alright'. I had to go back down to the farm and when I returned the glider was on line ready to go. I jumped in and off we went. It wasn't long before I was topping out at 12,000ft.

As I started to descend, I thought 'have I done it?' I tried to do the calculation and I found it difficult to do. I was showing signs of oxygen starvation. So, if you are going high, be careful – it can quite easily catch you out! The wave bar was prefrontal and was already collapsing when I started to descend. I found myself descending into a black hole, it was raining and I could not see the ground. I finally got back to the airfield adrenalin pumping nicely.

There cannot be many glider pilots who one minute are cleaning pig pens and twenty minutes later find themselves sitting on the top of a wave bar at 12,000 feet!

We then de-rigged the K18 and I thanked Mike for organising the flight and then I went back down to the farm to continue cleaning out the pig pens – all done in about an hour and a half – with a smile on my face!

The north-west wave mostly sits over the Wye and is much gentler. There are two ways to get into the system when it's working – you can get towed straight into it, or tow to the ridge and wait for the wave to set up, which it often does later in the day. Get as much height as possible, 2,000 or more, remember you are flying through sink. But the easterly wave is the one that creates the most excitement. You need a wind strength of between five and ten knots, any higher and the wave tends to turn into rotor.

### **A Nice Little Story about Predicting Wave**

When I was running the club I used to watch the farming forecast on a Sunday to get some idea what the weather would be like for the next week. I studied the synoptic chart on this particular Sunday so I felt quite confident that if the chart stayed the same it would be a cracking day on the Friday – six days ahead.

So I told Anne and Tony Crowden 'Friday's going to be the day!' and they said 'we will believe it when we see it!'

Well, come Friday there was the largest bar we have seen for a long time just waiting to be flown. We quickly rigged Tony, and Anne and I got the Blanik on line.

Tony took the first launch and we followed him. I believe he was at 6,000 feet before we had even got launched. I remember getting into the

wave very low and you could feel the tremendous energy all around and it was not long before we were up with Tony, I am not sure what height we got to – I think it was about 6,000 feet.

One thing that amazed me was that, with all that energy there, you would have expected to have seen several secondary bars downwind. I pointed this out to Tony and he said he hadn't a clue but he knew someone who would know! That someone was Tom Bradbury, a meteorologist and glider pilot. Tony wrote an article in *Sailplane & Gliding* on this phenomena and Tom's reply was that this is an excellent example of the type of wave flow which can develop just to the lee of a steep ridge when the wind profile shows a decrease in speed with height at some level just above the ridge line. It is not that rare, but does not seem to be described in text books anywhere.

Now, on days like that, you would descend through a black hole and, with the lift so strong, it would be quite difficult to get down. I used to slide myself down the slope of Y-Das in the sink area and then you can get into the circuit and, boy, that can be interesting too! Rough as hell! By the time you had landed you would think you had been in the Calgary stampede!

I think those of us who have experienced those conditions are very fortunate: To listen to pilots who haven't flown in such rough conditions before, there is a mixture of fear and adrenaline flowing and to hear the expletives after they have landed would be something else as he or she got out of the glider. But a change of wind direction by a few degrees, although the wave would still be there, would be nowhere near as rough.

The club members also used to give me stick about the cost of the aero tows, saying that I was making a fortune. Now that the members own the tug, I think they realize that it wasn't all profit, there was always some problem which would appear – new engine, repaint struts, etc., and many other problems. The year 2003 was a very good example of how expensive the annual check can be when a bill came in over £28,000 which meant that the whole of the income from the tug for 2003 went towards repairs.

The second reason was that we desperately needed a new hangar as the old one was just about to collapse around our ears. Now, to qualify for a lottery grant, you either had to own the land or have at least a 25 year lease, I wasn't happy with a lease so my wife, Gwenllian, and I decided to sell the airfield and the tug to the club members.

This was a big decision for the club members, but they bit the bullet and did the deal. To finance the deal quite a number of the members gave loans.

At the time I felt quite sad at selling a big chunk of our land and losing control of my life, but looking back it was the right decision to make.

The club then applied for a lottery grant and was successful. In 2001 work started on the new hangar and was completed the following year. The building was to be erected by the Lloyd family, Ken, Steve and his brother-in-law, Carl. Steve and his dad, Ken. But tragedy struck just before they were due to commence work when Ken fell off a roof and was killed. Naturally the family were devastated and so was I as I had been involved in persuading the committee to use the Lloyd family to build our hangar. Another member of the club who was very upset was Martin Brockington who had spent a lot of time with Ken working out the plans with him and we were looking forward to working together but, sadly, that was not to be.



*Left to right: Derrick Eckley, Mick Hutchinson, Don Gosden, John Clarke, Martin Brockington and builders Ken Lloyd and son Steve with the confirmation of the lottery grant*

Now Ken was the powerhouse in this outfit, a quiet, rather shy, but a very clever person. You have heard the saying – ‘plans on the back of a fag packet’ – well, this was how he operated and very successfully too. Now we had a problem, were these two young lads without their dad capable of building the hangar? They said ‘yes, we will give it a go’. Some of the committee members were naturally a little apprehensive but at this late stage we didn’t have much option, so we gave them the go ahead.

Looking back it was indeed the right decision because these two boys were amazing. They would arrive at eight in the morning and finish at eight in the evening – Monday to Saturday – over seventy hours a week, and the final result was a superb hangar.

Steve and Carl did the blockwork for the clubhouse and utility rooms, but the refurbishing was done by the members led by John Horley and his assistant, Steve Blackman. In January 2004 all that was left to do was to put the insulation in the roof space and I think that all the members that helped in this project can feel very satisfied and at last we have some descent facilities for our members and visitors with the new clubhouse. I have noticed the club has become more vibrant and there is always a good club spirit.

All this would not have happened if I hadn’t met John Bally or J.B. as he is affectionately known, and between us we had a lot of fun creating one of the best gliding clubs in the country. When I go up to the gliding club I find it very satisfying to see so many people enjoying themselves. Today, the BMGC is a thriving, internationally recognised gliding club – a mecca for gliding!



*The old hangar in use*



*The new buildings going up*

I end this story with a quotation from Martin Luther King and a picture of Gwenllian, J.B. and I at the 25th commemoration celebration – raising our glasses to a success story.

**‘I had a dream and I made that dream come true’**





Above: A hole in the cloud cover which will provide wonderful lift

In this booklet I set out to tell the story of the formation and development of the Black Mountains Gliding Club, with all its highs and lows and various mishaps.

Below: Looking over the airfield

