

# Silent witness

The views are spectacular but nothing can prepare you for the peaceful silence of the sky, as **Nicola Rayner** discovers on a trip in a glider courtesy of the Dorset Gliding Company

**S**INCE Icarus, the temptation of the sky has proved too much for us to resist. Man's arrogance – or persistence – instilled in him the belief that whatever any other creature could do, he should be able to do also. These days, man is born wingless, but everywhere he is in the sky. Before joining the Dorset Gliding Company for a trial lesson I was a little unclear on the differences between gliding, hang gliding and paragliding. Instructor Nathan Hanney puts me straight about gliding: "I always say it's a pilot plane without an engine," he says. "The Wright brothers were the original gliders, then it became popular in Germany after the First World War."

The Treaty of Versailles imposed severe restrictions on the manufacture and use of single-seat powered aircraft in Germany. The Third Reich abrogated the treaty in preparation for World War II, but for most of the participants, their sport had no military overtones and, as a recreational activity since, gliding has taken off.



Dorset Gliding Club is based at Eyres Field just off the Puddletown Road in Bovington. The club has 50 members and, the week I visit, is enjoying a flying task week (which, as the name would suggest involves setting certain tasks for solo glider pilots such as cross-country flights to Longleat, or wherever).

There is a holiday atmosphere and members have pitched their tents near to the small clubhouse where many of them stay for the week, enjoying barbecues and camaraderie.

The ideal conditions for flying, Nathan tells me, are a blue sky, fluffy white clouds and a light breeze, but today the southerly wind is quite strong and the cloud coverage mixed – at times, quite thick.

Nathan says of gliding: "There's the intellectual challenge in that you learn about meteorology, the weather, and understand how to read the sky and exploit it that so you can keep flying without an engine. When the ground heats it up, it causes a thermal, so there will be a bubble of air rising and you can go up inside that bubble. Fluffy white clouds form on the top of the thermal."

While we are waiting for the sky to clear, I sign a form saying that I am safe to fly and

■ Left, CHW, the two-seater K13 model glider. Inset below, Echo reporter Nicola Rayner with instructor Nathan Hanney. Inset bottom left, Weymouth and Portland Harbour as viewed from a glider

Pictures: BRIAN JUNG/bj5822



Nathan talks me through the flight, specifically the safety and lookout procedures.

There are three ways of launching a glider: bungee launching, which is not very common nowadays and requires a hill with a strong wind blowing against it; launching from a winch ('a bit like running with a kite'); and the aerotow launch, being pulled up by a light aircraft. The third method will launch our flight.

"Once we get to 2,000ft, we release from the tow plane, so from that point, the flight is yours and I will demonstrate the effects of the controls," says Nathan, who is one of the club's seven or so British Gliding Association instructors and has been flying for 15 years.

continues: "The lookout is very important as the pupil are better than and two pairs of eyes are better than up one. There is free airspace above us up to 19,000 ft, but if you see another aeroplane, helicopter or glider, tell me and I will tell you."

Then Nathan says: "We all wear parachutes. Have you ever done a parachute jump before?" This question itself makes me feel a bit jumpy. Nor do I feel better when I try the parachute on (a cross between a giant nappy and a backpack). "That's the ripcord," says Nathan. "You push it away from you, but don't do it now."

Are there many accidents in gliding? "We have not had any notable accidents at this site. People do get killed, but I could not tell you how many a year. I always say it's more dangerous getting here on my motorbike than going gliding."

Next we go and meet our glider – CHW – who is a K13 model and made of wood and metal. As a training glider, she is bigger than most at about 17m in length with two seats: I will sit in the front.

"The only bit you can touch when we fly is the stick," says Nathan. "You hold it lightly with one hand. Do not



■ Above, Lulworth Cove as viewed from a glider. Inset left, a view of the tow plane as seen from the glider cockpit

shove it and make only very small movements. When I give control to you I will say, 'You have control.' And to confirm, you will say, 'I have control.'

We have a closer look at the dashboard on the glider. On the far left is the altimeter, which tells us how high we are going. Then, second left, is the air speed indicator, which tells us how fast we are going, and right of that the vario, which tells us whether we are going up or down because in the air you have no perception as to whether you are ascending or descending.

CHW has several older and more sophisticated siblings in the airfield for more experienced solo gliders: for example, Astir, a high-performing machine made of fibreglass with more technical controls, electronic flight aids and a retractable undercarriage.

Nathan tells me: "You can buy a glider for anything from £500 to £100,000. Most of us own one in a syndicate in between four of us. Then each flight will cost the price of the launch, which is £28."

The membership of the club costs £300 a year, 'which is comparable to a golf club and things like that', says Nathan. The youngest member of the club is 17, while the oldest

woman in the club. "It does attract more men than women," she muses. "I do not know what it is. It does not require a lot of physical strength. It's more thinking, planning ahead and anticipation."

Carol is keen to recruit me as the second female member, but first I must have my trial lesson.

The sky has cleared and we prepare to go. Several people ask me how much I weigh: for the flight, I believe, rather than out of impertinence. I put my parachute on 'for real' this time and climb into the front seat where I am strapped in, very firmly, although a twist of the central seat buckle would release me as quick as you like.

Nathan's colleagues carry out various safety checks, for example, to see that the tow release is working, and then the Perspex roof is pulled down and we are towed into the air. The take-off is not dissimilar from taking off in a plane, although, because of the wind, the first 500m are fairly turbulent. The exhilaration of the ascent dispels my nerves and, after my lookout duties have been performed, I become absorbed with watching how the land lies as it falls beneath me.

Monkey World from above is an intriguing maze. The tank training ground looks like a child's toy car set. Wool appears tiny and compact. Poole Harbour shimmers in the sunlight. When Nathan releases us from the tug plane, the silence is immediate. The views - beautiful as they are - I was expecting, but nothing could have prepared me for the utter quiet of the sky.

Now we are free agents, Nathan lets me take control. We follow the 'You have control' - 'I have control' routine. As with driving, I need to check for traffic before I move the glider. Nathan's instruction is calm and clear and all trace of my butterflies has now gone. And then I am flying the glider which, as promised, pitches forward with the slightest push forward on the stick. The roll from side to side is slower because of the length of the wings.

Time in the air passes very quickly and soon it is time for our landing for which I must surrender control. Landing is a little bumpy. But I am riding on a wave of the euphoria from the flight. Staggering out of the glider, I splutter words like 'fantastic' and 'wonderful', but I carry the peace I found in the sky with me for the rest of the day.

For information or to book a trial lesson, which costs £75, see [www.dorsetglidingclub.co.uk](http://www.dorsetglidingclub.co.uk)

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