

# Breaking the site barrier

**Chris Davison tells how, after a gap of nearly 14 years, flying in the Inter-Club League helped him break away from the airfield for only the second time.**

*July 22, 1985: North Hill, Silver Badge attempt. K-8 launches, soars locally, flies downwind and lands at Compton Abbas airfield. Distance 79km. P1 flying experience 49 hours. Time out of gliding range of site, circa 1.5 hours.*

*July 18, 1999: Dunstable, Inter-Club League. Libelle launches, soars locally, then flies to Didcot and back to Dunstable. Distance 155km, P1 flying experience... 241 hours. Time out of gliding range of site, circa two hours.*

STANDING on Compton Abbas airfield, I felt the world was at my feet. Silver Badge in my pocket, I was lost in dreams: the first Nationals pilot to win in a K-8 – the greatest pilot the world had seen.

Life, however, is less predictable. To summarise ten years in three words: job; wife; kids. At first I made it clear that gliding would not suffer from my having a family. But, as came to be the norm, I made the decisions and my wife said yes or no to them. Then I rejoined at Saltby, bought a K-6CR, lied about the cost and started getting a life.

At first, the fact I wasn't "going cross-country" didn't dawn on me. In my K-6 I could fly where I wanted, whenever I wanted; that I chose to stay local was irrelevant. It was only when people started asking where I'd been that I started to query my flying: what did they mean? I went out to the mast, up to Belvoir Castle and sometimes to the A1. The castle was a good 8km away from the site – and you had to get back.

Then a BGA soaring course was held at Saltby. I learned more that week than in years of local flying. The trouble was, it was all theory – the great British summer had arrived. We did get one flying day, I took the BGA Discus. Wow! It went forward into a headwind or when you put the nose down. It had a trimmer.

I made a chart for the K-6 which showed how far I could glide at a cautious 25:1 for every thousand feet. I checked the maths and my map three times, but it still said I could get back from the castle from 1000ft plus circuit height. I'd never been over the castle at less than 3500ft. One windless day I tried it, allowing a good 1000ft for a circuit, just in case. I flew out, and out, and out. I arrived over the castle at 2000ft and turned for home.

Home? There, barely visible behind what must have been the curvature of the earth, some 8km away, was Saltby.

I think they call it a "rush". Despite flying at what felt close to VNE, I arrived with height to spare: it had worked. Next, I bought a GPS. They have two wonderful functions: a big pointy arrow that shows where home is, and little numbers that tell you how far it is. This meant I could fly much further (okay, a bit further) and still not get out of range. Now if only I had one of those Discuses, I could fly for miles and stay in range.

Then our CFI asked if I would fly in the Inter-Club. At last, my trips to the castle and beyond had been recognised and the Nationals dream, albeit in a K-6 now, was rekindled. As an Inter-Club pilot I was bound to do it, fly cross-country.

But I'd underestimated both Britain's weather and my natural cowardice. The

## “Didn't they know there were dragons out there?”

novice class was cancelled due to high winds. Two Discuses and an LS-7 were not happy; one K-6 was. On the second attempt, at Cranwell, it was windy again, but we flew anyway. I landed at another airfield about 10km away into wind. Had I engaged my brain I could have got back with ease. I debated whether landing in range of where I had launched, at an airfield with more than a kilometre of runway, counted as a cross-country. I decided it probably didn't. And that was it. 1998 was windy and I had a K-6CR.

Fed up with flying backwards in wind I sold it and found a nice Libelle. (I lied to the wife again.) It was a revelation. It went forward in wind and only slightly nose down when you went faster, I could go places in this. I made a new chart (goodbye 25:1, hello 35:1) and discovered a new rule: the higher performance glider you fly, the further you have to go to be out of gliding range, so the less inclined you are to fly cross-country at all. I flew over my castle at 1500ft and got back with height to spare. A whole new territory and no danger of being out of gliding range. I was happy.

This idyllic picture was smashed by another tap on the shoulder: would I

organise an Inter-Club team? I was delighted and said yes. Then the awful truth dawned. Not only was I exposed to the possibility of having to fly cross-country, but all my stock excuses had gone when I sold the K-6. I had to think fast. Yes: unfamiliarity with a new glider. Phew. A brilliant plan evolved: using a two-seater and a real live pundit, I could fly Inter-Club, go cross-country and still avoid doing it myself. The day came, the sun shone, I did my captain's bit. The team seemed happy to set off with only the vague promise of lift, let alone a retrieve. Didn't they know there were dragons out there? We got back in the Puchacz, no dragons encountered. Now all I had to do was ditch the pundit.

Over the next few weeks I flew locally and on a couple of occasions almost pressed on. I got so close to rounding a turning point at the next Inter-Club it was untrue, but I wimped out at the lack of fields and headed home. So close yet so far. I had it all, glider, crew, task, weather and a motive, but just could not do it. I was getting annoyed, seriously annoyed. And so came the last Inter-Club of the year, at Dunstable.

On Day One the thermals were not brilliant. The first turning point of Leighton Buzzard, 8km away, was within gliding range. I rounded it three times. Others landed out. I spent a happy hour soaring the bowl – now that is local soaring.

On Day Two, my crew mutinied. I was to fly and not come back. The start time was put back and put back – then someone said "go". I launched, called start and headed towards a solitary cloud. It didn't work and was off track, anyway. I took some deep breaths and headed back. Then I hit a corker, or rather it hit me: 3,000ft, it was now or never. I called start. The first turning point was out of range. I was halfway there but there was no lift. Should I press on or turn back? If I turned back I could start again; if I pressed on into a field at least I'd have some honour. Then, in the distance, I spotted the glint of a circling glider. I pressed on. I was out of gliding distance. I had done it.

The rest of the flight is a blur. The thermals got better and better. (I should know, my logger shows I circled in 11 in the space of 30km!) Didcot was turned at cloudbase and I was on the way back. I calmed down a bit then. I finished last but didn't care: I was just so, so happy. Nearly 14 years to the day after finishing my Silver I had flown out of gliding range again. The gap to my next cross-country will, I hope, be a little shorter.