

Portmoak ICL 2017: the crew's perspective

by *Phil Hawkins*

FRIDAY 23rd JUNE

In the morning I was busy packing the trailer for our weekend trip. Tent, airbed, pump, folding chairs, table, gas stove, gas bottles, various blankets and a carpet square to go on the ground sheet, wellies and walking boots, brollies, torches, snacky food items such as biscuits and breakfast cereals, tea, coffee, bowls, plates, cups, kettle, teapot, cutlery etc. We don't do travelling light when it comes to camping! I also loaded my spinning wheel into the back of the car and put our bikes onto the rack, so it was quite a load once it was all ready. Fiona had an equally busy time sorting out bedding and packing clothes, and making sandwiches and drinks for the trip. They weren't sausage sandwiches but smoked salmon comes a close second! We also took the ICOM radio and the laptop.

We set off from home just after 12 noon. The weather was initially a bit damp and gloomy but it definitely improved on the other side of Drumochter, with higher cloudbase and more sunny gaps. After a small traffic delay at Perth we arrived on Portmoak airfield around 2pm. The camp site was located at the end of a little lane in the middle of the airfield near the caravan park. There is a loo block handy, an outside tap with hosepipe for filling water containers, and a heritage notice board telling us about the history of the local area including the ruins of the Chapel of Portmoak and the nearby Portmoak Priory.

As forecast the day was turning windy, but with plenty of sunshine. We chose to pitch the tent on the north side of the trees, which was slightly more sheltered from the wind. This was at the edge of the aerotow field, with big trees behind us, including a huge leafy sycamore that seemed to be alive with a whole flock of twittering goldfinches. Numerous swallows and a few swifts swooped and zoomed low over the closely-mown grass on the airfield, and across the swathes of waist-high weeds surrounding the caravan site, patrolling for flying insects. They seemed to follow moving vehicles on the airfield, doing suicidal dives inches from the ground in front of the wheels to pick up any disturbed bugs.

The woody scent from the elderflowers nearby perfectly complemented the summer setting. Time to put the kettle on and relax...

...but not for long! Mike Morrison's Ventus trailer was already parked nearby, and the remainder of the team turned up about 4.30pm consisting of Nick towing the ASH, with Stephen Struthers and Bill Anderson towing their Cirrus. They shared tea and cake with us, then put up their tents, and later I helped with rigging gliders. Mike had not appeared at this time, and Stephen went off home later, not intending to stop for the weekend. I noticed the winch was still in action at 7.30pm with K21s going onto the Bishop Hill ridge.

For dinner it was just the four of us, therefore, and Fiona booked at the Well Country Inn in Scotlandwell for 8pm. The inn is just a couple of miles from the airfield, and has a lot more in common with your average English pub than it does with a Scottish hotel bar. Between us we tried the steak pie, gammon, chicken fajitas and fish'n'chips, and all were pretty good. The place was more or less deserted apart from a couple sitting at the bar, which was somehow sad on a Friday night. It should have been heaving. But the service was quick and the waitresses were pretty, what more can you ask? The dinner was Nick's treat, so thanks very much for that.

When we returned to the airfield in the summer twilight, Mike had appeared in the club bar with John Smyth and a few stragglers from Aboyne and Easterton. Portmoak members were strangely conspicuous by their absence. Maybe they knew something about Saturday's weather that we didn't! The bar at Portmoak seemed vaguely familiar, and indeed I was here in 1992 during an expedition from Oxford with a completely different group of friends. I remember the diminutive Graham Barrett doing the bar-climbing game, a complete circuit around the walls without touching the floor. He was good at table-traversing as well, I remember. Starting from a sitting position on a small table, the idea was to climb under the table between the legs and back up the other side, also without touching the floor. Imagine that ~ not easy! On the

same occasion long ago, another friend who is sadly no longer with us introduced a game called “poking your finger up the little green goblin’s bum” which amused the girls.

Anyway, various wee drams were sampled and we retired to our tents about 11.30pm in the continuing ‘summer dim.’ The wind had died down to some extent, but the trees were still swishing softly as we climbed into bed. The only bird sounds at this time were occasional peeps from distant oystercatchers and curlews. The intermittent loud bangs from a crow-scarer device at the far end of the airfield had mercifully been switched off overnight.

SATURDAY 24th JUNE

We were awake early in the tent after a relatively cosy night’s sleep. The morning sky was largely cloudy but with promising gaps letting in some sun here and there, and the wind was still brisk, flapping the tent madly at times. Cereal breakfast while looking at the view of Bishop Hill and spotting footpaths on it through the binoculars.

The morning briefing at 9.30am in the clubhouse was a bit long-winded and rambling at times but there was admittedly a lot of information to get through. We learned that assigned area tasks were set for all classes, mostly towards the north coast. The minimum task distance for the novices was something like 130km, the maximum for the pundits well over 700km. The forecast suggested a lot of wave activity with bars aligned north-south in the westerly wind.

I was involved then with getting the team and their gliders ready at the grid area, at the eastern end of the airfield. Nick has his own tow-out gear, so I helped Mike while Bill was still fettling. By the time I’d got Mike into position the rest of the grid was forming up around us. Nick and John Smyth in the ASH were first off to launch, but there was only one tug available so progress with launching was relatively slow. The other problem was that John Williams the local pundit had recommended a launch height of 3,500ft in order to give pilots a good chance of contacting the wave, so all aerotows were quite time-consuming.

Mike had discovered a problem with his GPS connections and was tinkering under his

instrument panel cowling, so I phoned Fiona at the tent and asked her to help Bill with towing out the Cirrus, using our car. I was watching their progress across the airfield but they stopped short of the windssock where I had suggested they turn left towards the grid. Apparently the clutch in the car had started smoking and Fiona baled out in a hurry! I left the car parked with its bonnet up near the hedge to cool off, and a friendly neighbour towed Bill the rest of the way.

Portmoak being a huge club was fielding no less than four complete ICL teams, but the organisers were being very fair about the launch queue, only allowing the A team to be launched off with the visiting gliders. The B, C and D teams were placed at the end of the grid after all other competitors had lined up. Bill therefore ended up much nearer to the front of the queue than he initially expected.

Launches were interesting in the rough gusty wind, but at least no-one was coming back. Even the club gliders in the winch queue away to our left were heading straight onto Bishop Hill. I noticed the yellow Bocian was getting the best winch launches, at least 1500ft and maybe more. After Mike went off into a promising blue gap, Bill was only two places behind him in the queue, but had to simmer in frustration for an additional 12 minutes while the tug was re-fuelled. He got off without incident about 1.30pm.

Fiona and I then did a short expedition off site into Glenrothes to find the local Tesco. The car seemed to be running normally, except for the burning clutch smell, which I know from experience will take a week or two to wear off. Certain parts of Glenrothes are very run-down, to put it politely. I remember I have been here once before, as part of the 1992 expedition, to go tenpin bowling on a non-flying day. I wonder if the bowling alley is still there? On the way back to the airfield we called briefly at the Lochend Farm Shop and bought some scotch eggs to go with our Tesco sandwich lunches. Quite by chance we picked up a plain one and a chilli/garlic one, without noticing the difference in the labelling. Lucky, as I don’t do ‘hot’ stuff, especially as we didn’t realise the difference until after we had started eating them.

Before we had finished lunch back at the tent, Mike’s Ventus appeared on the airfield and I

towed him back to the trailer. He said the conditions were awful, he couldn't get any further than the other side of the loch. He hadn't contacted wave at all, but had spent his time on the hill repeatedly topping up to cloudbase and then making fruitless forays upwind. Bill also came back some time later, having found wave up to 4,500ft but was unable to do much with this. Nick and John Smyth, however, apparently completed the whole pundit task at heights up to 16,000ft. They hung about playing with the ridge for a while after finishing, but apparently it was still too rough up there. They said later the wind speed at 15,000ft was 65 knots.

No retrievals required, crew and pilots were happy, the gliders were pegged out for the night, and once again the wind dropped a little towards dusk. The club had organised an American themed evening meal including BBQ ribs and fried chicken, burgers with bacon and cheese, sweetcorn and various salads. It wasn't bad and we were all hungry, but debatable whether it was worth £15 each. The cash and carry desserts afterwards would have been best avoided, but Fiona fetched me a cheesecake with fruit topping and ice cream. Just a bit too much after what was already a good feed.

Julia Henderson was there chatting happily with Fiona at one point, and she wants to order more CGC shirts, but I think she will look at what is available on the Zippy Embroidery web site before ordering.

SUNDAY 25th JUNE

I woke briefly at 3.30am, disturbing herons and rabbits on the airfield, and stood for a while admiring the peachy pre-dawn glow framing the edges of Bishop Hill. The sparkly orange pinpoint lights of streetlights in Kinnesswood village were curling their way up the left-hand slope. That was a magic moment. Breakfast about 6.30am next time I woke up, in warm sunshine under a largely clear sky, although deputy crew (Fiona) continued snoozing until about 8am. The wind at the camp site was definitely lighter today, but out on the airfield it seemed just as bad if not worse, and the sky looked less wavy than yesterday. Fewer blue holes in the cloud, which seemed more ragged and fragmentary.

I took the laptop to the clubhouse about 8am to catch up with writing, as the battery had died last night. It appeared that Nick had flown 530km yesterday, much to his surprise. He had calculated it to be much less. The unluckiest pilot yesterday was Amy-Jo Randalls, one of the Portmoak novices. She had flown 45km and landed out north of Dundee, far exceeding all other novices, but scored zero because she didn't fly through the start line. That was a bit harsh, I thought. To keep the true spirit of the ICL she could have been scored from takeoff. The Sunday forecast at the 9.30am briefing seemed a bit optimistic to me, but they were saying the wave wasn't expected to last all day. All classes were given the same assigned area task that the novices had yesterday, to keep the flying times short. Prizegiving was scheduled for 5pm after a hopefully early finish.

First launch was due at 11am so it was all systems go to get the team onto the grid. Nick had found one of the local juniors to be his P2 for the day, in the regrettable absence of any other interested Feshie members. They were manoeuvring the ASH into position while I towed out Mike's Ventus behind his car. Bill had finished fettling before we had done with the car, but he had to wait a few minutes as I didn't want the Astra clutch burnt out completely! The tickover rate is definitely too high. Eventually we were all ready, the Pawnee tug was parked at the front of the grid and we were just waiting for 11am and the signal to go. 11am came and ... and ... and ... the tug pilot decided to taxi off for re-fuelling! As you can imagine, a few heads were being scratched vigorously at this point.

Anyway by about 11.20 launches were happening into the scrambled egg sky. Once again progress was extremely slow, only three or four launches per hour due to the fact that only the one tug was available and all launches were going high.

The steady gale blowing across Portmoak airfield is the abiding memory of this weekend. Most people were wearing their winter jackets and at times I wished I hadn't left mine in the tent. Today the ASH and the Ventus were adjacent in the queue, with Bill's Cirrus much further back. John Smyth was helping so that made things easier. With his engineer's ingenuity he was able to carry out a temporary repair to the canopy catch on Bill's

Cirrus using tiny rubber grommets that he took from his clip-on sunglasses! He had earlier been for a half-hour flight in a K21, doing some exercises with a local instructor. The conditions were unfortunately too rough for doing Bronze C field landings in the Falke, otherwise he would have been doing that too.

It was about 12.45 by the time our pilots had bounced and wobbled away into the wild grey yonder. A quick dash to the clubroom next, to buy all-day brunches from the cheerful smiling Donna in the kitchen. But it wasn't long before Mike and Bill were both back on the airfield and we were scrambling again to tow them off. Having John there with his car certainly helped. When Nick landed he confirmed what the others had said, that today's conditions had been fairly hopeless. We later learned that a few pilots in the novice class had scored points, due to the fact that their minimum scoring distance was 1km, but all of the pundits and intermediates scored zero. Nick towed the ASH across the field to the winch queue and had a hill soaring flight with CGC member Jim McQuade, so that was his reward for merely turning up! The degree of bend in the ASH's wings while going up on the wire was very impressive.

I helped to de-rig the Ventus and then went to help Fiona to clear out the tent and de-camp. Plenty of hands were available at this time for de-rigging the Cirrus and the ASH. There was a brief light shower of rain just at the wrong moment as we were packing tent bits and other stuff into the trailer, but we can spread things out to dry properly in the garage at home.

Prizegiving was held on schedule at 5pm, with Sant(iago) Cervantes the local ICL organiser making kind remarks about our team in general and Nick's abilities in particular. Fiona took the team photo, and Nick kindly gave Fiona his winning bottle of fizz.

We were off back up the M90 motorway towards Perth before 5.30pm. It was turning into a fine sunny afternoon for the drive over the mountains. We passed a few homeward bound trailers on the way including Mike at Drumochter, but the weather once again changed as we came over the mountains, with occasional rain. We bought dinner at the Newtonmore Grill before parking up at home. News came this evening that Ray Hill had sent Miles Davies on his first solo today at Feshie, so it's been a memorable weekend for all.

I'm not sure how, but we desperately need to interest more club members in fostering the ICL tradition at Feshie. It's bad enough finding pilots to fly in all three classes, finding support crews has been almost impossible. Yet visiting other sites can be such an eye-opening and worthwhile experience, with different gliders, different instructors, different terrain, different weather, different wildlife, making new friends and supporting your team at the same time. Quite why the majority of our club members are so indifferent to these wonderful opportunities completely beats me. I have always loved the idea of the Inter Club League and although I no longer compete I will always support it.

Next year we will have our home meeting at Feshie again, so the support issue will be less acute, but there will also be a weekend away at Aboyne. Why not join us in supporting your champion team? And I don't mean that as a rhetorical question ~ I'd actually be interested to hear your reasons why not. It might help me to understand why I was hurrying around trying to keep tabs on three nervous pilots and their gliders instead of doing a proper job looking after one. Over to you!