



THERE ARE MANY JEWELS IN OUR COUNTY'S CROWN. IN THE LATEST OF HIS OCCASIONAL SERIES, PLAYWRIGHT, POET AND FOLK SINGER **OWEN LEWIS** TAKES A LOOK AT THE MIDLAND GLIDING CLUB

SHEER TRANQUILLITY AT 2,000FT

Rising into the skies over the Long Mynd; below, Owen Lewis in the cockpit.

Where do you imagine you could hurtle along the ground experiencing the acceleration of an F1 car, then find yourself climbing at an alarming angle way up into the sky?

This was somewhere I found myself on what was an incredibly clear and beautiful day. For pilot Roger Andrews and I were flying at the Midland Gliding Club.

With names like Bungee Meadow, Vega Strip and Howard's Way you may be forgiven for feeling like you had fallen into a script conference for a soap opera. As all Shropshire glider pilots would inform you, these are some of the landing grounds at the club, on top of the Long Mynd.

Almost every resident of Shropshire is aware of the Midland Gliding Club. Admittedly they may not be so hot on the runway names but everybody knows it is there.

Although not the highest point of the Long Mynd – that is Pole Bank – I am informed that it is still the highest Ridge airfield. This gives the club the benefit of

being able to stay open all year. Lowland glider clubs tend to only open six months of the year. Not so our little gem.

Standing as a proud collection of buildings, new and old, the club offers so much more than the experience of flight. Some of the buildings go back to wartime

whereas others, courtesy of The National Lottery, have appeared on the skyline more recently. I was amazed to discover so much there in the way of aerodromes, garages, sheds, the clubhouse and, of course, gliders.

I was met at reception by Martin





Treasurer James Moore and Owen putting the wing tip together; below, office administrator Martin McCurdie.



McCurdie, a friendly but very busy man filling up members' envelopes with bits of info or maybe an invitation to a barbecue. I couldn't tell and I didn't ask, but Martin was busy enough for a little smile to appear as he was able to hand me over to James Moore for the rest of the tour. James is the club treasurer but has a wealth of knowledge about the airfield and its stories.

Bearing in mind powered flight only really appeared in the 1900s, I was surprised to hear that they have been shooting gliders off the Long Mynd since 1934. Having done so for a good while, the Midland Gliding Club was eventually formed. The founders all came from Birmingham and Wolverhampton so as a consequence Midland was included in the title.

It seemed a symbiotic existence between the sheep and grazers, the flyers and their runways and the grouse and their shooters!

Farmers would charge two shillings and six pence (12.5p) if you landed in their field, a nice little earner at the time. However, and here's a surprise, the grouse shooters didn't like it much, apparently.

There has always been an interest in powered flight or otherwise and the rich and famous were to be seen in the who's who of the Gliding Club. The world famous aviator, Amy Johnson became a member and there is photographic evidence that proves the point.

So the clouds darkened. Wild-Edric's Ghost was seen looking towards the East, a sure sign of trouble. Then it came. The year was 1939 and having only been a club for five years, activities of the more pleasurable side had to cease whilst glider pilots were trained for wartime action. Trenches were dug all around the modest little airfield in case we saw German invaders on top of the Long Mynd. Imagine the exchanges in The Chalet Pavilion in the Carding Mill Valley when the invaders discover we don't serve pumpernickel as a rule!

Peace descended with victory! All things flight became pleasurable again capturing not just the school boy's imaginations but the grown-up's too. It was during the 1950s, '60s and '70s that the club grew year on year and the garages and sheds were busy almost 24/7, keeping the fleet of club and members' gliders all ship shape.

As James and I looked around the hangars, I asked whether this is the sport of the wealthy and got a very resounding 'no'. One can join the club at any level and as they don't charge for instruction it works out at just £11 per winch. You are not charged for time spent in the air either.

A lot of fliers, after getting their pilot's licence, go on further to buy quarter shares in a glider. That may be something like £4,000 for which you own a glider for three months of the year. Not bad.

The Midland Gliding Club is not just about gliding and looking at the trees below. It can be all about competition and there are three trophies that the club is proud of holding. The Diamond 500 proves you have flown more than 500 kilometres (310 miles). The record held by the club is around 620 kilometres (385 miles). The other record they pursue is wave height; the record held by the club is over 20,000 feet.

Although the mathematics of wave height was explained to me, it confused such a humble land lubber. I believe it to be something to do with the wave of warm air that sweeps up the face of the ridge one uses that air to gain height.

The King of Siam was apparently a keen member and left a trophy to be remembered by.

By the mid-1960s membership reached an all-time high of 180 and the club started to lay on residential courses where one can start as a complete novice and leave with your solo wings.

Sat at the legendary middle table, I am told that the whole culture of the club centres around the stout wooden



Never mind a fear of heights ... it wouldn't do to be claustrophobic by the looks of things; top, James Moore putting the tail together.

structure in the middle of the clubhouse. This is where dining, planning, chatting and socialising all happens and the centre table is the spine to all events, but more so, this is where James Moore called the view through the huge clubhouse windows intoxicating. He is right.

This is the heart of our gem too. One can gaze upon The Stiperstones, The Long Mountain and Corndon Hill and, on a clear day, like the one we had, one can see the ominous tempting Welsh mountain Cader Idris. It was such a

beautiful vista one understood instantly the need to float into the air and be a part of it. It is the same allure as a deep blue swimming pool surrounded by white houses all on a hot day. Standing there looking out of the big bay windows I had a slight Icarus moment. Yes, he came to a bad end but hey, he was having fun at the time!

The day for my flight was called Task Day. I thought it was where they all had to take turns in washing up, but no – Task Day is tasks for the gliders and pilots. So



Legendary flier Amy Johnson, who set many long distance records in the 1930s, was a member of the club; right, Amy on the Long Mynd.



as we got across the airfield for my turn, gliders that had been aloft for two hours and covered courses of many miles were landing.

So, this is how Roger Andrews and I were hurtling along the grass nibbled runway and zooming straight up to 1,000 feet. It is quite a violent experience breaking the hold of gravity. So much energy is expended by the winches and, as we hurtled along, I had the little Perspex ventilation patch in the cockpit bubble open. The noise that whistled through as we became airborne was far louder than

I imagined it would be and as we reached the top of our climb I closed the little window, the cable fell away whistling beneath us and we entered a world of tranquillity and serenity.

It was one of the best days for clarity we had known all year and as I started to relax into my flight, Roger pointed out the highlights of this 360-degree panoramic view. Radnorshire, Powys, South Shropshire, Shrewsbury, Hereford and Cader Idris could be seen so clearly they looked perfect and in the clarity of the air, the ridges looked sharp.

Twirling like a leaf in the summer breeze, we spiralled up the thermal and I felt my body relax as I was overcome by a sense of calm.

The instruments registered 2,000 ft.

"Right, would you like to take control?" Roger asked me. I was thrilled and with gentle teases of rudder and joystick I got the beast to do my bidding. I could have lived there in that moment forever. This is a whole new calm and brand new set of feelings and emotions that can only be felt at 2,000ft above the Long Mynd on a perfect day.

All too soon Howard's Way beckoned and it was time to bring her in. So looping to the East we set position for landing over Minton Batch and seeing such beauty reminded me of just how wonderful this county is.

Then approach and bump as we reunited with gravity. As we halted our glider tilted its wing to allow us out.



Pilot Roger Andrews.

Given the excitement, the dynamics and the wonderful setting, I would have no option but to consider this a real Shropshire Gem.

Owen with club pilot David Crowson.



MIDLAND GLIDING CLUB	
Chairmen	
1934-37	C.E. HARDWICK
then President until 1954	
1937-38	D.A. HANNAY
1938-46	C.A. BILL
1946-50	C.J. WINGFIELD
1950-53	R.N. THWAITE
1953-67	R.L. NEILL
1967-87	K.R. MANSELL
1987-93	R.M. NEILL
1993-98	P.H. GARNHAM
1998-03	R.J. FACK
2003-08	C.F. CARTER
2008-16	J.M. HALL
2016	N. CLEMENTS
Chief Flying Instructors	
1937-38	H.C. WYNNE
1938-39	J.V. RUSHTON
1939-49	H.T. TESTAR
1949-52	D.H.G. INCE
1952-61	J.H. HICKLING
1961-68	K.R. MANSELL
1968-77	E. AINSCOUGH
1977-81	C.R. SCARBOROUGH
1981-85	C.J. ALLDIS
1985-88	P.A. KING
1988-93	E.S. ALLSOP
1993-98	C.I. HARRIS
1998-02	N. HERIZ-SMITH
2002-07	N. CLEMENTS
2007	S.A. ADLARD
2007-11	P.A. STANLEY
2011-16	M. GREENWOOD
2016	S. MALE
President	
1996-2011	K.R. MANSELL
2015	C.I. HARRIS