

# A brief history of the Midland Gliding Club



Although England's first official gliding meeting took place at Firle Beacon near Itford in 1922 the gliding movement in this country did not really get under way until 1930. Early glider pilots soared mainly in the hill lift generated when the wind is forced upwards over a suitable ridge. During 1932-34, with a few friends, Birmingham stockbroker Espin Hardwick travelled regularly to the London Gliding Club at Dunstable where he learned to fly. To avoid the lengthy journey to Dunstable Hardwick searched the West Midlands for a ridge facing the prevailing wind above which to soar and the top of which was landable. He identified Shropshire's Long Mynd with its six miles of westerly facing ridge.

On 14 August 1934 a group including Fred Slingsby (of Slingsby Sailplanes, Kirkbymoorside) and Hardwick took a Falcon II sailplane to the Mynd. They were catapult launched into a westerly breeze and each soared for more than twenty minutes thus proving the Mynd's soarability.

These and other early flights were from a five acre patch of grazing pasture (north of the eventual site) rented from the tenant farmer but without the permission of the owner of the shooting rights. In 1935 he obtained a court injunction preventing gliding from that pasture. This prompted the Club to move a short distance south to a twenty-five acre site above the hamlet of Asterton. This land proved to be the nucleus of the 320 acres that now comprise the airfield the freehold of which, following various land purchases in 1974, 1980, 1988 and 1991, the Club owns. To prevent over-grazing by sheep the airfield was ring-fenced and under the CROW Act 2000 was declared as being not of open access.

Following appeals in Birmingham's newspapers Hardwick convened a meeting on 17 October 1934 at Birmingham's Mikado Restaurant when the Club was formally founded and Hardwick was elected as chairman. Concurrent with the early days on the Mynd a training ground was acquired at Handsworth, Birmingham where pilots enjoyed very short downhill flights in bungee launched primary gliders. At the start of WWII use of the training ground ceased as did activities on the Mynd. For the two years immediately prior to the war Amy Johnson was a member of the Club.

In 1936 the Club built the present hangar inside the western end of which was constructed a lean-to Clubhouse which today serves as the TV room and the Bar. Overnight accommodation was provided in the two bunkhouses in the northern half of a wooden building (ex Handsworth) the southern half of which served and still serves as workshops and garaging for winches etc. In 1954 a new Clubhouse was built as a westwards extension of the hangar. Sadly Hardwick died just before the new Clubhouse was completed. In 1963 the northern half of the wooden building was demolished to make way for the building of the present accommodation block.

When Club activities resumed after WWII new members included ERA racing motorist Prince Bira of Siam. The Club took on catering staff and employed an engineer to maintain the Club's fleet. In 1957 the Club employed its first professional instructor to run the programme of summer courses. From 1963 the senior professional instructor doubled as engineer until in 1993 the fleet maintenance was franchised. Other staff employed to support the Club's seven-days-a-week operation included a second professional instructor, professional winch drivers and an office manager. The Club ceased to employ catering staff in 1976 since when catering has been franchised.

Whilst bungee launching is still practised when conditions permit the predominant way of launching has been by winch. Early winches were adaptations of balloon winches but in 1956 a Rhoder winch was bought from Germany and fitted with a Humber Super-Snipe engine which later was replaced by a Jaguar engine to provide the extra power needed to launch heavier gliders. In 1991 the Club specified a new winch to be powered by a Chevrolet seven litre V8 engine. This became the prototype Skylaunch winch several dozen production versions of which have revolutionised winch launching throughout gliding. Whilst most clubs use a vehicle to pull cables back from the winch since 1959 the Club has, almost uniquely in the UK, used a retrieve winch system. This has at the launch point a small retrieve winch from which a light cable, attached to the main launching cable, is drawn out during the launch. On completion of the launch the retrieve winch pulls the main cable back for the next launch. The system is capable of a launch every three minutes.

Aerotowing featured briefly in the early '60s with an Auster Tugmaster. In the '80s a privately owned Condor struggled to launch the heavier two-seaters. In 1991 a Pawnee was purchased and subject to its write-off and re-purchase for twenty years provided aerotows although not as many as might have been the case were the winch launching not as efficient as it is. As a result the Pawnee was sold shortly after. Post WWII the Club's glider fleet comprised wooden gliders mainly Slingsby with some from Elliotts. In 1981 the Club bought its first glass glider – a K21 from Schleicher who before long replaced Slingsby as the Club's main manufacturer. In 2005 a DG505 two seat trainer was added to the fleet but was destroyed in an accident in the Pyrenees in 2012. It was temporarily replaced with a Grob Twin Astir.

Today the Club's fleet comprises a Schemp Discus B and from Schleicher a K21, a K23, a K13 and a K8 of which only the K13 and K8 are wooden, a Grob Twin Astir and a Skylark 3. The privately owned fleet comprises some forty gliders including an open cockpit T21 and a Falke 2000 motor-glider. Launching may be winch or bungee and the Clubhouse provides accommodation, catering and a bar.

In 2015, following an award of a £60,000 grant from Sport England, work started on a new workshop to replace the original buildings on site.

krm160511  
revised JMH140815