

*The shape of things to come.
Impression of the wind
turbines near site*



Club Focus

The trials and tribulations of model site ownership

The Huddersfield Club has been in existence as the Huddersfield Air League from 1943 and at some time, shortly after the war finished, changed its name to the Huddersfield and District Model Aircraft Club, the name by which it is still known today; though usually abbreviated to HDMAC.

Up until 1989 the club had, as most clubs did, rented flying sites, with no security of tenure and when an owner or some official needed the site the club had to move on. I can think of about a dozen sites since I, as a relative newcomer, joined the club in 1975. Some interesting ones that were obviously not going to last were, a golf course under construction where carrier deck landings on the raised tees were an indication of your skill level; another was a section of the M62 also under construction, but I kept that one mostly to myself and also the Corporation playing fields.

This latter site presented its own challenges being only a mile from the town centre and surrounded by houses and quite often full of footballers. This was in the days when the safety elf must still have only been a pixie and the noise fairy had yet to be conceived. We finally lost the use of the playing fields when officialdom realised that overflying the ICI with models controlled by 27MHz radio, close to a main road used by trucks chatting on CB radio, was probably another Flixborough waiting to happen. The local MP did find us an alternative at a High School but within two years expansion of the school prevented power flying though we still fly small electric models and gliders from the field.

The club had an average membership of between thirty and forty but as radio became more reliable and in real terms less expensive, membership started to grow and there was pressure to look for a permanent home. During the eighties we only rented two fields, lost when the farmer wanted them back or sold them out from under us. The time and effort involved in turning

farmland, particularly land high in the Pennines, into a decent flying site only to lose it a few years later was disheartening in the extreme. The final straw came in mid-1988 when our landlord of about four years informed us that he had sold the particular field that we flew from and the new owner did not want us on the site. He surprised us by offering, not the whole sixty acres, but an almost three acre plot and a four metre wide track to the road. He also promised to include recovery rights in our deeds to all his surrounding fields.

Necessary Finance

We managed to raise the necessary finance to purchase the Whams, which is the name on the OS map for the area. We later found out that Whams is an old name for "Marsh" and sometimes it does tend to get very wet underfoot though some six foot deep, drainage work carried out by our local undertaker friend helped a lot. With the help of a very generous loan from a member we purchased the field. The complications of owning our own field however manifested themselves even before the sale was completed.



Car park in limestone and some of the 2000 plants in place



Some of the club members with their models. Author Alec Barber is on the left.

Getting the necessary planning permission required to change the use of land in a green belt to recreational use was far more involved than anticipated. We had to lobby our local councillors to overturn the very restricted flying hours the local Planning Officer wanted to impose. Having the councillors on side worked well as we have daily almost unrestricted use of the field. Some opposition came from an unexpected source, a small but very strong group of our own members. Their fear being that we would run the club into debt and the land would be sold and the club cease to exist. At a very stormy EGM it was agreed that we would go ahead with the purchase though we actually lost two members over the manner in which the loan was to be financed. After twenty years of absence it was nice to see one of those two re-join the club together with his two sons.

Construction

One could be excused for thinking that having overcome the financial, legal and planning hurdles there would be little or nothing to do other than a bit of grass cutting and an awful lot of flying. Not so! We needed to construct the 200 metre long track to the field. Thanks to the generosity of a local clay pipe company we managed to tip and roll 200 tonnes of broken pipe to form the base and later another 140 tonnes of old tarmac to top it off into a fairly decent roadway. The work was carried out largely by members, who were determined to reach the flying site without having to wade through acres of very wet mud. Other issues come with ownership; almost immediately a cattle proof boundary fence was required, again not much to look at on the plans but more than 600 metres of it on the ground.

We acquired cabins for shelter and a container for a new mower. The latter forced upon us because we assumed that as we were located in wide open spaces nobody was watching us. It didn't take the local cowboys long to find our carefully hidden mower and very smartly spirit it away.

One of the benefits of ownership is that membership increases in direct proportion to the facilities offered and the quality of the flying surface provided. For well over ten years, yearly membership has closed between 140 and 149; the magic 150 never having quite been reached.

With our fortunate position out in the country we were even able to run thermal cross-country events around a ten mile course surrounding the field where competitors followed their models in the back of pickups. We also ran some 0.75cc power cross-country races but the competitors had to travel on foot. This was usually won by the fittest junior. Another benefit of owning a field is that long term plans can be made and budgeted for with some assurance that you will still be on site to reap the benefit.

During the past twenty one years having our own base has allowed us to develop the site and what started as a two and a

half acre field with a 100 foot runway now comprises a two and a half acre runway with the pit area squashed up to one edge. All very nice but it does raise the question when you are able to land anywhere can you land where you should?

We reclaimed more of the site and provided shelters, starting benches, even a bridge over the stream to make recovery easier for those who can't manage to land on our bit. We also found that we had to move our cabins twice in the first ten years to accommodate the larger flying arrangements. By the millennium we were just about settled and until November 2007 we didn't change anything much but then the E-On bombshell hit us, actually a very near miss, in the South West corner of the field. E-On wanted to build a wind farm close to our site with one of the three turbines slightly less than two hundred metres from the edge of our field.



Hexapath car park surface being laid



Car park almost complete with the approach track in the background



Arthur Bradley about to fly his Rohma assisted by I think George Taylor? at Dunford Bridge

Image from the late sixties at Dunford Bridge site

Our first reaction to the news was how we could oppose the development effectively when we were the only group that could legitimately claim to be affected by it. Our advantage of being in the middle of nowhere now worked against us because these are the same conditions that wind turbines need to operate in. We decided to negotiate with E-On to make our field more flyable when their turbines arrived. Before we started talking to the energy company we first needed to know if flying would be possible in the lee of a 60 metre diameter fan. A mile down the road from the field is another wind farm comprising 13 turbines so one quiet evening a model was flown across the back of the first four and to everyone's surprise no adverse effects were experienced. We also received assurances from the Chester-Le-Street MAC who already fly from a site overshadowed by two turbines with no particular problem.

All things considered it appeared better to negotiate with E-On rather than oppose their scheme. Some of us were surprised by the warm reception we received from the company and to the extent that they were prepared to help us continue to fly from our site. Subject to obtaining planning permission they were prepared to finance a new car park and pay for the extension of the track to serve it, including the purchase price for some extra land from our neighbour, our legal and planning fees, together with the price of construction. The company also undertook to pay the club an annual compensation fee to cover the nuisance caused by the turbines for the life of the project once they are built. The planning consent is for twenty five years. They also agreed to indemnify us against damage to their property so long as we agreed not to deliberately fly towards their site. E-On eventually obtained their planning consent early in 2009 and very promptly paid all they had agreed.

The car park and track are just about complete and later in the year we will have to move our cabins and pit area to the other

side of the field in order that the car park, turbines and pit area are all behind the pilot line. It now looks as though the turbines will be at least another year before they arrive so for the time being we have the benefit of new facilities without the windmills in the background. Even when the turbines do eventually arrive we will not have lost any airspace because the area they occupy is roughly equal to the existing dead airspace over the present pit area and car parking arrangements.

Owning our own field presents challenges but the rewards are worth it. Our club benefits from an increased membership whose subscriptions pay for site maintenance together with fringe benefits such as another rented site of about sixty acres where thermal soars and quiet electric models are flown. We still have use of the high school where electric models still fit in with the other activities quite well and we use their sports hall during the winter for indoor meetings. Operating in the heart of the Pennines, the club has always had a strong slope soaring following and we enjoy the use of some very good public soaring sites and one superb private site.

Owning our club field has, and still does, cause some very heated debates. It is however the core element that holds all the diverse interests of our members together. The introduction of 2.4 GHz radio has enabled us to rent from our neighbour another patch of land very close to our field but far enough away for helicopters to fly at the same time as the fixed wing models, eliminating the need for slots. There are some risks with ownership, for instance walking away from neighbourhood disputes is not an option, but with sensible management and the backing of the members these risks are far outweighed by the benefits.

I wonder what challenges the next twenty one years will bring?

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