

CROSS-COUNTRY ON MAY DAY

If going solo marks the start of a glider pilot's flying career, the next milestone is 'earning' your Bronze badge and Cross-country endorsement. Both of them include a series of tests, which are listed on the BGA website. Though Cross-country seems one step ahead of Bronze, there is no rule saying you can't be trained for both at the same time. While the good weather persists, a cross-country flight with an instructor is a good way to start this process. In celebration of May Day, Ollie (instructor at Bicester) and I managed to 'hijack' GAM and declared a 100km task. Blessed by the slightly over-cast sky and many fluffy clouds, the whole flight was completed in 2 hours 24 minutes covering a distance of 102 km with an average speed of 55kph. Below is an account of our adventure from Ollie's perspective.

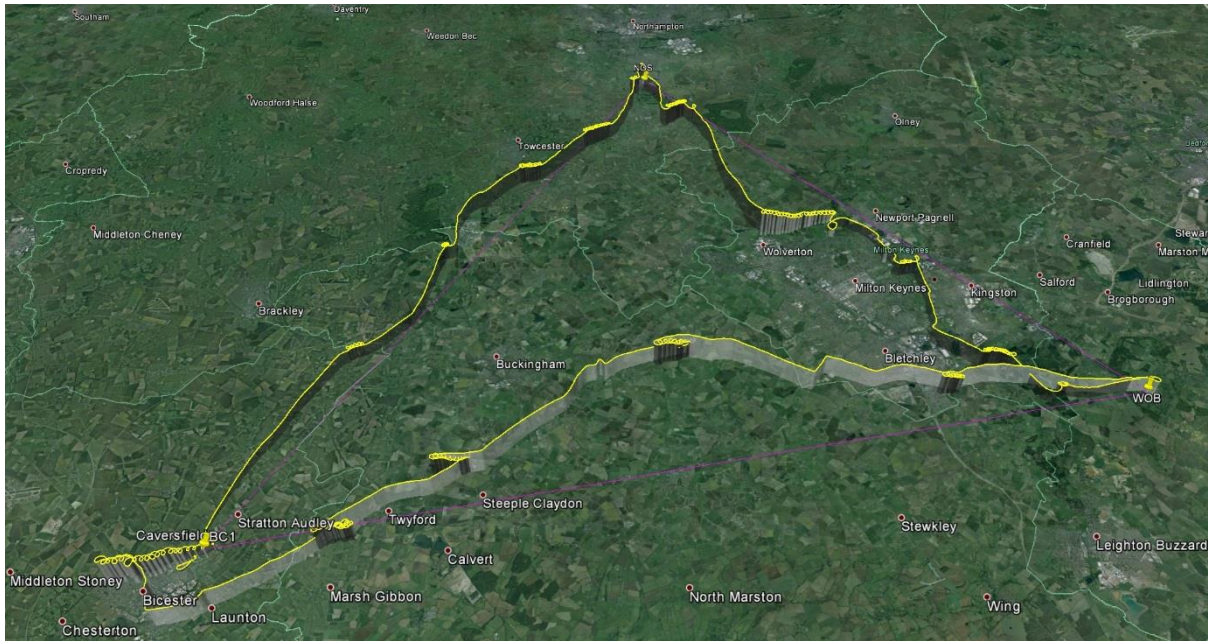
Qin Cao, LMH

On Friday 1st May I took Qin on her first cross-country flight. Cross-country (XC for short) can be done just for fun (sightseeing & photo taking), as a personal challenge (can I get round faster than last time?) or as a race. Most XC flights are planned around a series of turn points (notable ground features - the BGA publishes a list each year) and then back home. For this flight, I chose from Bicester to Woburn Abbey, then to Northampton South and back to Bicester. This gave us just over 100km distance and kept us in the forecasted good weather. There are many subtleties and tactics to advanced XC which can take years to grasp but really, all you need to take part is the ability to thermal well, some basic map-reading skills (both of which we can teach you) and a friendly instructor to

guide you. As it was Qin's first experience I chose not to overload her with planning and details. I simply presented her with a map with the “task” (glider-speak for route) already drawn on and shortly after we climbed into GAM ready to go. As we were expecting to be airborne for several hours we needed consider some practicalities: do we have enough food and - very importantly - water, and how do we go to the toilet? (That’s a fun but worthwhile conversation to have in advance).



Task on the aviation chart (pilots' map)



Trace of our actual flight on Google map

As this wasn't a standard instructional flight, I flew the winch launch to ensure we achieved maximum height and the best chance of finding our first thermal. Luckily another glider was already circling just to the south of the airfield so we joined underneath and began our climb. After we were comfortably established in the thermal I gave Qin the controls and she did most of the flying from then on.

Once we reached around 3,500ft we set off towards Woburn Abbey. Handily, there is a railway line running from Bicester most of the way there which helped us navigate. We spent some of the first leg talking about how to identify which town is which on the map (does it have a river running through it? Is it next to a disused airfield? What shape is it? etc.), and how to not get disorientated while thermalling. This can happen easily when flying over unfamiliar countryside and when you are spending quite some time continuously flying in circles. Either you need to identify a couple of features which are on the route ahead before you start turning, so when you're finished climbing you can point back towards these landmarks, or note which compass heading you are on before turning.

Unfortunately we couldn't simply fly along the railway line as the clouds producing lift weren't so conveniently lined up. So far all of your soaring will likely have been simply concentrating on the thermal you are currently in. XC flying required us to plan a wiggly route through the sky, looking 3 or 4 clouds ahead - like stepping stones towards our turn point. We also had to be selective about which clouds to stop under- If we stopped to circle in every little bit of lift we found we wouldn't have gotten very far, so we stayed in strong climbs and ignored weak ones.

As we started nearing Woburn Abbey Qin was struggling to make out where it was - turns out because she was expecting a fairy-tale castle with towers and flags, rather than the stately home surrounded by a safari park that it actually is! One tip to avoid this is to have a look at Google images of key features in advanced! There was a good thermal near the turn but we were close to cloudbase so the plan was to fly through it, reach the turn, then return to the same cloud lower down on our way to Northampton.

Reaching the Abbey we turned back towards our cloud. Around this time Qin jinxed the flight by stating she couldn't afford to "land out" as she had an engagement that evening. "Landing out" is what happens when you have to land somewhere other than Bicester - another airfield, farmer's field, etc. We flew straight under our cloud to find nothing. Oh well, on to the next one en route to Northampton...nothing! Nothing under the third one either. Down to around 1400ft, with me now in control, I was already considering which fields around us would be suitable to land in (one of the key training points before you go XC on your own), while still hunting around for an elusive thermal. Qin took the rather detailed view of the landscape below as a photo-opportunity while I was sweating

away in the back. Luckily we stumbled over a turbulent bubble which quickly had us climbing to a less sweat-inducing altitude.



Photo time!

One of the best things about going XC is that it is an adventure; you don't know how it's going to end until you land. You can go from cruising without a care in the world to a desperate scratch down in the weeds and back again (or not!) in a matter of minutes. Some of my most memorable XC flights are not the easy ones, but those which were most challenging and rewarding.

Anyway, having saved the day and with Qin back in control, we continued on towards our second turn point – a junction on the M1 motorway just to the south of Northampton. Handily, this time the M1 motorway ran all the way from Woburn Abbey up to the junction so navigation was simple. We reached the turn without any further drama, and set off for home with a nice tailwind helping us along. No obvious roads or railways to help us out this time, but the route home took us over Silverstone racetrack (a reliable thermal source) which was clearly

visible from Northampton, and from Silverstone, Bicester airfield could be seen. On the way home we began calculating how much height we needed to reach home with a comfortable margin. As we got closer to the airfield it became a matter of judging the glide the same way as you do a final approach, just from further away - is the reference point/airfield rising, falling or staying stationary in the canopy? If it's rising then you're undershooting and need to find another thermal. In our case we had an easy glide home and swooped across the finish line to complete Qin's first XC experience.



Approaching home- grass at Bicester looks greener than ever

Flying XC is not difficult so long as you can fly accurately, climb well and are able to prioritise and multitask effectively. You'll get the most out of it if you're already solo and on your way to Bronze, but I and many other instructors are always happy to take students on an adventure in GAM.

Oliver Bosanko