

Portmoak Expedition 2016

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Dina (pictured) and Qin hiked up Bishop Hill for a great view of Loch Leven

From March 25 to April 2, 2016 a crew of six OUGC members (Dinant, Jonathan, Qin, Dina, Taskeen, and me) and a team of Bicester instructors made the nine (in some cases twelve!) hour drive up to Portmoak, Scotland. Located halfway between Perth and Edinburgh, the Portmoak airfield sits on the eastern side of Loch Leven and between two mountain ridges – Benarty and Bishop. Due to the combination of these two ridges, westerly winds, and thermals, Portmoak is a fantastic place for long soaring flights using ridge soaring and thermalling. Yet we were cautiously optimistic as we drove up the English countryside – rain or non-existent wind or excessive turbulence could spell long days in the bar rather than in the air.

Indeed, we were grounded for our first day in Scotland due to light rain and lack of wind. With our newfound free time we began to get to know and stock up our cottage – a quaint bed-no-breakfast located in Kinesswood on the northeastern side of Loch Leven. We also spent time getting to know or catching up with the other university students. The annual Portmoak week is a university expedition organized by Bicester's own OJ Garrity in which students from a number of British universities have a chance to experience soaring flights. This year, we soared with Nottingham University and University College London, who brought their own K21 two-seater, *EDW*.



Our fancy rental car towing FEF, resting on of our many bathroom stops on the way up to Scotland

OUGC brought our beloved single-seat Astir *FEF*, allowing our post-solo pilots a chance to soar solo (and free up two-seaters for the pre-solo pilots!). Dinant, Jonathan, and Qin were quick to take advantage of this opportunity. The weather quickly improved and within the first two days Dinant and Jonathan had already completed check flights to familiarize themselves with Benarty, Bishop, Portmoak, and the surrounding airfields. By our third day at Portmoak thermals began forming and the ridges were incredibly active owing to strong westerly winds, allowing both Dinant and Jonathan to reach heights exceeding 3000 feet! Portmoak also offered cheap aerotows – cheaper than winch launches – and Dinant was sure to follow the 18-year-old tuggy to great heights. Jonathan fought off his bladder and boredom to accomplish both his one-hour and two-hour soaring flights, and is therefore well on his way to cross-country endorsement!

With the help of good weather, Bicester instructor Gareth, and a chubby toddler's worth of ballast, OUGC veteran Qin Cao made incredible progress this week. After a series of check-flights Qin soon went solo in Portmoak's curiously-named K21 *HPV*. OUGC recently acquired ballast weights for *FEF*, which lowered the minimum solo weight enough to allow Qin to fly in *FEF*. So after a briefing with Gareth, Qin went solo for the very first time in *FEF*, culminating in some soaring flights along Bishop! Additionally, with the help of OJ and the aforementioned economical aerotows, Qin made strong progress on the way to doing solo aerotows in Portmoak's spanking new K21, the smooth and gentle *LOV*.



Qin after completing her first solo flight in FEF

Thanks to well-behaved weather, OUGC's pre-solo pilots also had many opportunities to experience soaring flights in Portmoak's three K21s: *HPV*, *HPW*, and *LOV*. With instruction from Bicester's ever kind Debbie, lovely Roger, and Portmoak's own Chris, all three of us had a chance to nearly double our number of flights and check marks in our progress cards. Dina was in the air for a nearly two-hour long soaring flight, and had the chance to practice her round outs in order to perfect her landings, and (although she might not admit it) is very nearly close to being solo. After scaring Debbie a couple of times, I gained a better sense of the exact height to round out, and after a frightening near-miss he learned that in heavily congested glider traffic, it's the gliders that *aren't* moving on your canopy one must worry about the most. Long soaring flights also afforded enough time to practice our coordination and lookout, and when the ridges were not active, we were ever the more eager to practice our launches, landings, approaches, and circuit planning on quick circuit flights. Taskeen arrived to Portmoak on our last couple of days there, and with the help of a 2000 ft aerotow with Gareth was able to touch up on skills she learned in OUGC's Winter Training Camp. Cheap aerotows were especially beneficial to us, because it allowed us more space to complete our stalling exercises.

When not in the air, we had the opportunity to learn about the workings of a different airfield from familiar Bicester. Dina was eager to practice her radio-voice, becoming a familiar to all those on the airfield as she announced to the winch driver the upcoming gliders. Others learned the hand signals for (and when those weren't

enough how to shout really loudly), “take up slack!” and “all-out!” Those of us managing the log book also had a chance to surreptitiously remind ourselves of the names of the other pilots, and keep a ground lookout for landing gliders. Unlike Bicester, at Portmoak gliders would land hundreds of yards away on North or South field, requiring not only binoculars in the control trailer, but also retrieve trucks for ever landing.



Bishop Hill, as viewed from a glider

Thankfully, most flights were not circuits, so the ratio of retrieve time to flight time was not excessive. Lastly, grounded pilots also had the opportunity to get to know Portmoak locals, including several 14 year olds who were already solo glider pilots itching to turn 16 in order to try motor flying.

Off the airfield, everyone got a chance to showcase their culinary, debate, and bathroom-racing skills. Daily dinners were on a rotating scheduling, giving us a taste of Dinant’s lightening-fast pasta, Qin’s chicken, Jonathan’s pizzas, and my non-existent hamburgers. Dinners also provided the perfect ambiance for the required Oxfordian debates over everything from Kantian moral philosophy to the uses of an adjustable MacCready speed-to-fly ring. In certain cases (from whether a certain someone deserves a certain scholarship to the meaning of life), these dissolved from academic arguments to friendly shouting matches, but in all cases were entertaining. Dinant introduced us to his childhood past-time Loopin’ Louie, Qin chose an eclectic selection of red wine, Taskeen helped ensure we ordered delicious Indian food, and Dina made sure our fridge was always stocked with cider.

Following a fruitless search for whiskey distilleries, the expedition was brought to a close with an outdoor laser tag game with the two other universities. With Nottingham and Oxford pitted against the massive UCL crew, glider pilots battled it

out on land through a series of death-matches, capture the flag, and safeguard. Rolling in rain and astroturf, Oxford & Nottingham alas were handily defeated by the UCL. For our last night in Scotland we dined with Bicester instructors, finally getting a taste of the delicious Scottish cuisine – namely haggis and scotch whiskey, while thanking OJ and Debbie for their hard work in organizing this amazing expedition.

Portmoak offered not only an opportunity to improve our gliding and soaring skills, but also a chance to get to know our fellow OUGC members and other university pilots better, all while exploring the beautiful Scottish countryside both from the air and on ground excursions. It was a perfect end to a long and rainy Hilary Term. We are incredibly grateful to OJ for organizing such an exciting opportunity with the Portmoak airfield, to the Bicester instructors for their time and dedication to help us progress, to Jonathan for meticulously serving as expedition treasurer, and to Dinant for organizing the entire expedition from the OUGC side, especially the logistics and leadership necessary for such a rewarding week.



Bidding farewell to our cottage (Left to Right: Taskeen, Jonathan, Dinant, Elliot, Dina, Qin)