

UP, UP & AWAY



I don't know why I've always been interested in aviation; after all, my father was in the Navy and not on a carrier either! Right from my earliest years, flying and aeroplanes have always held a fascination for me and I have been lucky enough to enjoy powered and unpowered flights in a variety of machines dating from the 1930s to the very recent and have also had the opportunity to take the controls on various occasions. However, among the helicopters, planes and gliders the one big gap in my experience to date has been ballooning, something which I never seemed to get around to organising.

It was a chance remark by a friend that one of his daughters wanted to go ballooning but didn't know anyone else interested in doing so that finally gave me the impetus to do what I had been thinking about for so long and the tickets were soon purchased. Checking the mutually convenient dates meant that only ten days later we found ourselves at Kemble airfield near Cirencester on what appeared to be a perfect afternoon for an evening ascent and before long the balloon team arrived.



They unloaded the basket (still actually a traditional woven basket – light but strong) and unrolled the balloon into a very long strip, none



of it really looking like the £100000-worth that it actually was. The flight information stated that passengers would participate fully in the whole

experience, but perhaps was deliberately vague over what this might involve! We soon found out though as we were allocated various jobs, such as spreading the balloon out or using large fans to inflate it and it soon began to take on its correct shape, albeit still horizontal. When sufficiently inflated the burners were used to increase the volume of air to allow the envelope and the basket to assume an upright position and at this point, despite already being ballasted by eight passengers and anchored to two large 4x4's, it was very keen to leave the ground!

At the command word the other eight passengers quickly scrambled aboard using the cutouts in the basket sides and the pilot gave what should have been the final blasts from the burners to ensure full inflation. However, just at this moment the breeze increased



and changed direction and despite some frantic work the heat from the burners was being dissipated and the balloon began to deflate. The order was give to abandon ship (or rather, abandon basket!) and it became apparent that if the procedure was not successful in the next ten minutes the flight would have to be aborted. This was an unfortunate situation for us, but some of the other passengers had already been unable to fly on up to four occasions due to changing weather conditions.

However, the wind began to cooperate again and after some flat-out preparation we again took our seats for lift-off. When sitting in the basket -as you must for ascending and descending- you are unable to see over the sides, so it came as quite a shock when we were told that



we could stand a short time later to find that we were already many hundreds of feet above the ground. The temperature was if anything warmer as we continued to rise and the heat from the burners could be quite intense (hence

the instruction to bring a hat), the landscape and buildings highlighted by the low sun as we drifted slowly in a pleasantly aimless manner. After rising to 5000 feet the wind picked up and we not only began to make better progress but also out came the Champaign! Could there be anything more relaxing than floating a mile above the earth with a tumbler in your hand in perfect weather conditions?

Still, all good things must come to an end and after just over an hour we found some farmland which looked promising as a landing area.

The balloon is fitted with modern navigational aids, although the pilot also uses a powerful pair of binoculars when searching for somewhere to touch down! Due to our delayed departure the sun had now set and while this revealed more wildlife as we lost height the twilight also made things like power lines far less visible, so after returning to our seats we accomplished a soft and gentle landing. Although on



farmland we were near to a track leading to the main road and with slight operation of the burners to keep the basket just off the ground we manhandled the (now incredibly heavy and unwieldy) balloon and basket over to the track, where there was also an area suitable for deflation.

With the light fading rapidly we set about expelling the air and then returning the envelope to the long thin shape we had first seen. This took quite a while and by the time we came to feed it into what initially looked like far too small a bag it was pitch black. During all this the

remainder of the team arrived and after installing all the components on the trailer we rode down to the main road, where a minibus collected us and took us back to the airfield. The whole experience had taken about four hours and while it would have been easy to just



turn up, fly, get out and walk away, being involved from start to finish made things so much more interesting and brought everyone together. The evening certainly lived up to my expectations, in fact it probably exceeded them and everyone else seemed equally happy

too. The only problem was that –like all forms of flying– it had the usual effect of leaving me wanting more, so here’s to the next time.

MJB

