



Up, up, finally, and away

Heaven Crawley joins a bunch of other lady pilots and PuTs for a Women's Meet that actually takes to the skies

It was a cold, crisp January morning when I first met Allie Dunnington at the Icicle balloon meet. I had just struggled to get our rather tired Viva 77 on to its feet and sent my partner Paul Dopson off to play with the trees when Allie approached and asked if I would be interested in taking part in the third annual Women's Meet due to be held in October 2012. It seemed like an interesting idea but both it – and my PPL – felt like a distant dream.

I had been struggling with a fear of heights since I had started my training three years earlier. Flying solo at a balloon meet felt impossible but Allie reassured me that I could take part even if I was still in training and we agreed that I would.

Nine months, one PPL and a new balloon (G-HCPD) later and we were

heading to Welshpool. After two years when the event was unlucky with the weather and a long, wet summer, this time conditions were perfect – bright, crisp and calm.

It was my first balloon meet as P1 and with a lingering anxiety about heights I was feeling nervous and ever so slightly sick. But Allie and Phil greeted us like old friends when we arrived and before I knew it we were making our way up to Powis Castle and driving on to the Great Lawn to set up for our launch.

The setting was truly spectacular as 14 balloons laid out in four rows and then gradually lifted up into the evening sky. I hadn't flown for some time and had forgotten quite how light our new balloon is with just one person aboard so the departure was somewhat quicker

than I would have liked. Before I had time to worry about flying on my own among other balloons, I was several hundred feet above the castle looking back at the remaining balloons taking off behind me. It was truly an amazing sight for both pilots and spectators.

I headed across Welshpool and then up the valley towards Buttington. The challenge was finding somewhere dry to land but with the help of Paul, Kevin Meehan and a group of kids on a nearby football field who had seen me land, we packed away the balloon and made our way back to the Royal Oak for the evening meal.

A quick change into Indian tops and scarves and we made our way down for an Indian-themed dinner of curries, samosas, pepper salmon and spotted dick. Clive of India's son married into the family



Family fun: Local farmer James Dale and his son take to the air with Hannah and Ian Bridge

of the earls of Powis, hence the theme for the evening.

We had a great – if rather too late – night, meeting new friends and exchanging the inevitable tales of ballooning triumphs and near-misses. The fact that our dining companions were dressed from head to toe in cricketing whites (they had come as the Indian cricket team) only added to the experience!

On Sunday morning we flew again, this time from the airport. It was another fabulous flight with wonderful light winds and very good steerage. As I took off (a little less dramatically this time) I realised that there was a narrow band which was taking me in completely the opposite direction to everyone else and straight towards the castle. I nearly made it but then the morning sun burnt off the inversion layer and I found myself heading back towards the airport, past Hannah Cameron who was somehow managing to stay in the virtually same place that she had taken off from and over Lisa Cowlard, who normally flies Easyjet planes but was just landing after her first training flight in a balloon.

As we headed back for the prize-giving ceremony we saw the Cameron team were still flying above the airfield, where they remained for a further hour or so, flying for nearly three hours in total and eventually landing only a few hundred yards from the take-off site!

Eventually we all gathered for one last time at the airfield. Prizes went to the German team of Siegrid Ibes for the longest drive to attend the event, for

winning the hare and hounds and for a daring first flight on the Friday evening when the winds were not so calm.

Other prizes went to Mandy Dickinson (second on hare and hounds), Chloe Todd (for enthusiasm and for flying all slots), to Marie Banks (nee Orchard) and Jan Frazer for their continuous support of the event. The Truss “support” trophy went to Nick Banks and John Daniels for their continued support of their partners.

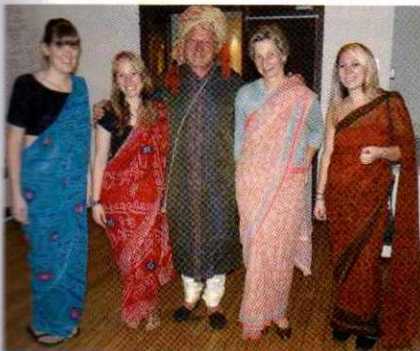
A prize was awarded to Lisa Cowlard for her first training lessons in a hot air balloon.

Last but not least, the main prize went to Hannah Cameron for her overall support of the event, her help in organising it and lending a balloon to pilots without a balloon, the very creative outfit worn at dinner (this was the Indian cricket team!) and the incredibly long flight that morning.

By the time we left the event I was buzzing. Both flights had been hugely enjoyable with great steerage, stunning views and, as it turned out, straightforward landings on lovely dry fields (not everyone was so lucky, unfortunately).

I met some wonderful women pilots (and a few men too!), flew for the first time as P1 at a balloon meet, and learnt a huge amount about ballooning – and myself – in the process.

Since the event, a Women in Ballooning Facebook group has been set up and we have exchanged photos and continued our discussions online. The fourth Women’s Balloon Meet is scheduled for October 25-27 next year (date to be confirmed).



All dressed up: Alex Saunders, Stephanie Bareford, Phil Dunnington, Karin Bareford and Beth Searle



Handbagged: Allie, right, presents Hannah with her trophy, the Anne Lewis-Smith award