

Ladies who Launch

It hardly seems five minutes, let alone five years, since Allie Dunnington organised the inaugural meet of female pilots, which, for a growing number of us, has now become a fond fixture in our diaries. Some previous meets have seen more social activity than flying due to the weather conspiring against us and, after a glorious September, it looked like it would test our patience once again. But with girls and their teams coming from far and wide, including across the channel, it was business as usual at planning HQ and so to Stratford-upon-Avon for the 5th UK Women's Balloon Meet. For the second year, the beautiful privately owned Alscot Estate welcomed us with Stratford Racecourse providing an alternative launch site and the conveniently placed NFU Mutual became our briefing room and social base, thanks to their great hospitality.

One thing that Allie has always striven for through this meet is to encourage more female pilots into the sport and to create a social network around the flying, matching willing crew to pilots in need and balloon-less pilots to a team with a space. Her tireless efforts and enthusiasm over the years have been gratefully received by all of us and have really helped to promote greater

participation, particularly for female pilots with children who may find it harder than the men to get up early and go flying leaving the kids behind. The meet has also been linked with the British Women's Pilot Association (BWPA) and we've had a great time in the past swapping stories (and flights) with both fixed wing and helicopter pilots. We've even managed to recruit a serious PuT from the fixed wing world – welcome, Lisa Humphrey, to the unpredictable but very fun world of ballooning!

This year we were really pleased that Caitlin Rich, the youngest pilot at the meet, could get her first P1 hours under her belt, and the review of the meet comes from her eyes.

After all she's done to promote women in ballooning, Allie has decided to take a break from the organisation and I've agreed to take up the reigns. I'd like to thank Allie for all her hard work in setting up the event, since it gives me an easier job in taking it over. Look out for details of next year's event, to be held around the same time of year – late Sept/ early Oct. You can keep up to date and see more photos of our antics on the Facebook page Women in Ballooning and maybe the Ladies that Launch will welcome you along next year!

Marie Banks



The rules of the Women's Meet state that anyone can attend, as long as the P1, or PuT, when flying is a woman. Having gained my licence only the week before, and being female, I felt it was an opportunity not to be missed.

The Met forecast for Saturday morning looked dire, so it was instead dedicated to a much-appreciated lie-in followed by introductions over coffee in the NFU Lounge. Lisa Humphrey, an easyJet captain and now aspiring balloon pilot, also treated us to a talk. Then, for those of us who wished, we were kindly given permission to look around the beautiful Alscot Estate (which I will buy as my second home/ private launch field when I become a billionaire).

Saturday evening didn't look too promising, but out of optimism we headed to Stratford Racecourse to further dither about. We set up a German Schröder balloon with a variety of interesting gadgets to have a look at. We were particularly taken by the quick release, which was attached across the side of the basket and could be released from inside without anyone getting hit by swinging metal. We then had a quick photo shoot while we waited for the winds to drop. Over an hour later, the trees were still visibly swaying, but the Spanish team decided to inflate their Ultramagic lightweight balloon anyway. They had a lovely flight and landed safely, but watching them shoot off into the distance put everyone else off flying that evening.

The theme for the group meal this year was The Beatles, much to the amusement of the local pub-goers. Costumes ranged from Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club to an Abbey Road ensemble, which won the fancy dress prize alongside my family's Beatles medley. We all looked fabulous. Alex



Photos by Phil Dunnington

and Marie also arranged a fun Beatles pub quiz (which my team won – go Blue Meanies!).

After our not-so-early night, briefing came quickly the next morning, but as it was the best-looking slot of the event, we all made it out of bed. A convoy of trailers rolled onto the launch field, this time back at Alscot Estate. A met balloon was let off and travelled in a direction that could accurately be described as vertical, and soon 11 balloons were standing up in a line along the bottom of the field. We all appeared to be at a stalemate, so I took the liberty of taking off first. There were three pilots in the basket, but as this was my first opportunity to be P1, my mum and Claire had to take a back seat. "Three females in the basket!?" Joke all you like, but we navigated perfectly with a paper map, and had no parking difficulties.

The next few balloons were quick to follow, demonstrating the variable winds. Balloons below were travelling much

faster and at 90 degrees to our direction. Our aim was to land at Wellesbourne Airfield (with permission, of course). We needed to stay high to keep our direction, and we managed to fly right over the runway. Unfortunately as we descended a fast cross wind kicked in at about 100 feet, despite the fact that the windsock on the ground wasn't moving at all. We flew on for a while, and now I have the first two hours as P1 in my logbook!

After packing up and a much-deserved breakfast, we all headed to The Bell pub, also owned by the Alscot Estate, and enjoyed coffee and prize giving in lovely sunshine. As I've mentioned, my team won a prize for fancy dress and winning the quiz the night before, and I also won the prize for being the youngest P1; but we didn't clean up. Some of the other prizes went to: Heike Schmitt for the longest distance travelled with a balloon, from Germany, and for impressively managing to coerce

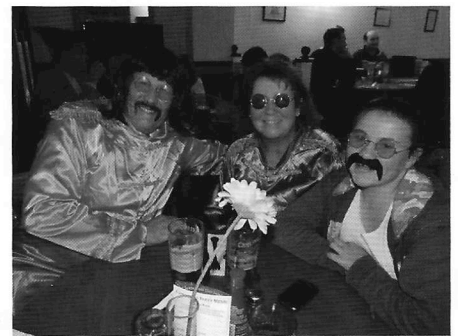
a brand new crew member to travel with her having never seen a balloon before; the Ultramagic girls from Spain, Montserrat and Constance Llado, for their fearless flight on Saturday night to kick off the meet; Jackie Magnani for bringing the largest support team; and the coveted 'Male Truss' support trophy went to Phil Dunnington for supporting Allie (and putting up with her bad moods due to appalling weather forecasts). Finally, the main trophy of the event, a fabulous handbag crafted from old balloon parts, went to Marie Banks for also supporting Allie this year and agreeing to take on the event for next year.

It was a great place for my first P1 flight, with lots of support from the sisterhood, and not forgetting the male half of the family who provided the ground crew and many of the quiz answers. Thanks to Allie Dunnington for once again arranging this great meet!

Caitlin Rich



This is our easyJet pilot, Lisa Humphrey at the controls. She joined the BBAC after the event and wants to buy her own balloon and start full training! It was the third time she's joined the Women's Meet. any support for her to achieve getting her balloon licence would be greatly appreciated. She also has a 1 year old daughter!



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