



First on Foula

FEATURE
OF THE MONTH



WINS AN
AIRBOX AWARE 5

He'd just had three engine failures and the weather was looking dodgy to the north, so what did Fly-UK organiser Tom Dawson do? He climbed into his Shadow and headed north across miles of wild water to Unst, the UK's most northerly airfield, that's what...



I WAS at 1200ft when the engine stopped.

It was only then that I realised the ground was at 550ft – not much time to pick a field, and in mid-June there was standing hay everywhere. I saw half a field that had been cleared, and put down.

A quick fix only led to another failure on takeoff and an even more thorough check of the fuel system did not help. So after three forced landings, each two hay fields apart, I elected to be towed home.

It wasn't a good start to the trip – I'd only flown half an hour from my home field at Plaistows.

Not only was my engine playing up, but Fly-UK week had forecasts of strong winds on the south coast and heavy rain to the north.

We were starting at Boston, Lincolnshire, so we had a choice whether to fly north or south, and I had been carrying a wish for the past two years to fly beyond Orkney to the most northerly airfield in the UK, at Unst in Shetland, but 2009 and 2010 just did not have suitable weather.

Now this year looked hopeless too, not to mention the fact that, after three engine failures, would I trust my Shadow across the water?

I was asking myself just that question as I fitted a replacement

filter, took off on a Saturday afternoon, and watched the compass slowly turn to north...

After a 4h flight to Bagby in Yorkshire, I caught up with my mate Colin and the other lead aircraft who had heard my incoming radio calls and waited for me. A quick refuel and a sandwich, then we were off. It looked like solid rain to the north, so we turned due west over the Yorkshire Dales to Cark on the northern coast of Morecambe Bay.

Cark welcomed us and were happy for us to stay overnight, despite a private party being held on the airfield. We discovered later that microlights are not supposed to be welcome there, but if so, they have a very tolerant way of showing it.

By mid-afternoon on the Sunday the weather had softened a little and we escaped westwards to a windy Kirkbride, arriving in plenty of time for an evening meal at the White Heather Hotel, located in the former officers' mess.

Al and Paul in two flexis arrived just in time for the last dinner orders, which made about nine of us camping overnight in the lee of the huge wartime hangars.

On Monday morning the weather had improved enough for an early start, and by lunchtime we were touching down at Glenforsa.

Dave Howitt gave us his usual welcome and loan of his car for a number of fuel runs, then with lunch behind us and all fuelled up, we set our sights on Plockton. This lovely airfield, close to the Isle of Skye, is used regularly by Navy helicopters, and as we waited for a chance to leave between busy rotary comings and goings, I arranged a crossing of the Highlands Restricted Area from Plockton to Dingwall by calling the Low Flying Booking Cell at RAF Wittering.

This route over Achansheen is used by helicopters and follows the road, river and railway. I'm sure that the operator thought I was a helicopter, since she finally gave clearance "not above 800ft".

That doesn't sound too bad until you realise that Scotland is higher in the middle than it is at either coast, and with mountains rising above 3000ft on either side of us we slipped through the gap at the top of the valley with less than 150ft to spare above the road. By 7pm we had arrived at Dornoch, a favourite spot of mine, just in time for an evening meal.

Grounded by rain to the north on the Tuesday, we were invited ▷



“I HAD BEEN WARNED OF THE SKUAS THAT PERCH AT THE FAIR ISLE THRESHOLD AND THAT FLY UP JUST AS AN AIRCRAFT IS ABOUT TO PASS OVERHEAD”

Facing page On the strip at Fair Isle (photo courtesy Dave Wheeler Photography, Fair Isle; www.davewheelerphotography.com)

This page (top) Camped under a lowering sky at Cark; and (left) Muckle Flugga, the most northerly UK lighthouse



▷ by two local pilots to visit their new strip at Tain, a short strip of peri-track with a distinct curve to it on the edge of the disused airfield, plus two grass runways.

We gained clearance from Tain Range and with only 30min available we dropped our tents, packed quickly, and landed at Tain just before the first of two Tornados started bombing.

We spent the day there in the hospitality of James, Brian and Ross, who arranged for us to visit the control tower on the range, with a grandstand view of the bombing runs.

Colin later had the opportunity to see the targets, two large red and green tanks, and reported that they were undamaged!

As the sky cleared in the afternoon, we set our sights on Tommy Sinclair's island of Lamb Holm. Tommy was very welcoming and took us for a fuel run, including a detour to see Kirkwall harbour and town.

“AT FOULA A LOCAL MAN SAID WE WERE THE FIRST MICROLIGHTS TO HAVE LANDED ON THE ISLAND”

Wednesday was my big day, as I wanted to reach Unst, at the top of Shetland and the most northerly airfield in the UK.

Mark and Rob were also very keen on the challenge, so with lifejackets and immersion suits on, we left Lamb Holm for Fair Isle, midway between Orkney and Shetland and some 30 miles across the water from both. The approach is over cliffs with a risk of turbulence, so I approached under power, keeping speed and manoeuvrability high until over the runway threshold.

I had been warned of the skuas that perch there and fly up just as an aircraft is about to pass overhead.

Fortunately we were spared that, but the strip introduced us to the design of most airfields which we would find in Shetland – hump-backed and very gravelly. Some of the stones are almost the size of golf balls, but we had a very warm welcome from Dave Wheeler, who looks after the strip, and John Best, a local microlight pilot.

After a break, we took off heading for Sumburgh, the commercial airport which handles much of the tourist trade into Shetland.

In the strong, gusty crosswind, Rob used almost the entire 1426m of asphalt to get his wheels down, then taxied 1000m of that back to where we were sheltering and refuelling behind the terminal building.

Next stop was Tingwall just outside Lerwick, where I made a cheeky call asking to land at Scatsta, the very busy commercial airfield which handles much of the North Sea oil rig traffic. As expected, a landing was not permitted, but I persevered and was delighted to be given clearance for a touch and go.

We came in over the hill and lined up over the illuminated landing lights, flew the length of the 1360m runway with a touch

in full view of the tower and climbed away to Fetlar, a stony field on rising ground which got another touch and go. Then it was on to Unst.

But not before flying over Muckle Flugga, the most northerly lighthouse and beyond that, to Out Stack, the Top Rock of the British Isles. My GPS recorded 60°51'50" as I flew to the north of the rock, then back to Unst, landing at 7.30pm.

To celebrate our arrival we decided on B&B instead of camping, only to phone the local hotel and find that everywhere on the island was fully booked.

However, Steve the hotelier offered to pick us up for a meal and drop us back afterwards, and while we waited we found that the house nearest the airfield had some beds available, so we were sorted.

With our offer to Steve of a flight the next day, he gave us a bottle of wine with our meal, 10% discount and a glass of port before departure! Excellent!

On Thursday we took Steve and his chef round Muckle Flugga, and his father and waitress for a flight around the local area. Then to complete our challenge we set out to land on every airfield in the islands, including as many closed ones as we could get our wheels down on, and including some not shown on the charts.

So it was touch and gos at Out Skerries, Whalsay, Papa Stour and a landing on Foula, where we were greeted by a local man, Magnus, who said we were the first microlights to have landed on the island. Foula is little more than a 1400ft-high mountain jutting out of the Atlantic 14 miles west of Shetland, so it is very exposed.

Rotor can make it particularly dangerous to light aircraft, so we were fortunate that the winds were in a favourable direction for our visit.

Then it was 50 miles over water to North Ronaldsay, followed by Sanday, Stronsay, Eday, Papa Westray, Westray and a low pass over Twatt, which is now unserviceable, before turning to Skeabrae, where one runway is being improved by John Bain, BMAA senior inspector and Islander pilot serving the islands. He and his wife Senga both fly microlights.

As Mark pointed out, we flew the 50 miles from Foula to North Ronaldsay at 2000ft. He would have needed about 14,000ft to glide clear in the event of an engine out.

And finally, a last leg to Lamb Holm just in time for a meal at the hotel. Mission accomplished by three very happy pilots!

Friday was a pleasant day. Our target was to get to East Fortune ready for a short hop to Eshott on Saturday morning, so we left with a flight round Scapa Flow, looking down onto the *Ark Royal*, which was sunk by German torpedoes in 1941, and past the Old Man of Hoy.

We had plenty of time, so we visited a few airfields to help our Alphabet Challenge scores. Viewfield was high on my list as this is a proper V, of which there are very few.



“TO COMPLETE OUR CHALLENGE WE SET OUT TO LAND ON EVERY AIRFIELD IN THE ISLANDS, INCLUDING AS MANY CLOSED ONES AS WE COULD GET OUR WHEELS DOWN ON, AND INCLUDING SOME NOT SHOWN ON THE CHARTS”

At East Fortune, our hosts Gordon and Jill gave us a lift into Haddington where there are some rather pleasant pubs. The River Tyne looked so inviting that I took a short swim, but no one else could be persuaded to join me.

Saturday morning saw us making our final flight to Eshott in time to enjoy the Great North Fly-in weekend and the perfect end to Fly-UK.

The best bits? Flying over 1800 miles in a week despite the weather. Reaching Unst and flying the hotel staff around Muckle Flugga lighthouse. Being the first microlights to land on Foula. Not having my engine stop again!

The worst bit? Discovering later that we had missed one airfield on Orkney – Kirkwall! How did that happen? □

- To sign up for this year's Fly-UK on 15-24 June – motto “To fly by day and socialise by night” – visit www.fly-uk.org or contact Tom Dawson at 020 8967 7621, 078 666 36492, tom@fly-uk.org.

Facing page Magnus, Mark and Tom's Shadow at Foula

This page (top) Preparing the aircraft for the next leg from Fair Isle (photo Dave Wheeler); and (bottom) waiting for the military at Plockton