

The view FROM ON HIGH...

Jacob Little takes to the skies above Dartmoor

PHOTOGRAPHS JACOB LITTLE



'The soaring pilot makes an aerial excursion, not an incursion. His passage leaves a whisper, not a shriek.'

A glider lies in wait at the start of the morning, ready for a long day of thermal hunting

Down an unassuming lane between Brentor and Mary Tavy, on the western edge of the moor, a small, hand-painted sign points the way to a clearing and some surprisingly well-hidden buildings. It's only when you get a little closer that you realise these relatively industrial-looking structures don't belong to any of the number of farms that surround the area. It's early morning on a sunny Saturday, and members of the local Gliding Society are putting plans in place for a day of soaring above the Dartmoor countryside.

Drifting, soaring, spiralling, rising – the poetic resonance of gliding vocabulary suggests a calmer, gentler approach to getting a different perspective on the world around you. It's a sport that has inspired for generations; the famous Cornish artist Peter Lanyon's famous series of gliding paintings taken from images above the west Cornish coast showcase a creativity and spirit that often eludes powered flight. A love of gliding had a huge impact on Lanyon's work, and his desire to 'experience the landscape as fully as possible'.

Gliding is creative in its approach to the club mentality, too. 'It's a team sport, you're here all day and you're multitasking. On an average day it takes six or seven people to launch a glider, so it's a different commitment to flying a powered aircraft,' says Mike Sloggett, a visiting instructor from North Hill airfield in East Devon. It's easy to see what Mike means while meeting people at the club, too. Homemade lunches packed, thermos flasks and bottles of water at the ready. It was clear for many that this is just as much a day out



Gliding is very much a team sport. A helping hand from and the dedication of club members is needed each weekend to ensure safe and smooth operation

as it is a chance to fly – and there's a suggestion that this is the only way the club works as well as it does. Camaraderie and sense of togetherness are obvious.

Indeed, the welcome given to a visitor to a gliding club is unique. It wasn't long before, cup of tea in hand, I was invited to get involved. All working together, gliders are brought to the launch site in custom-made trailers and assembled in situ. This usually means bolting the wings on and checking all elements are safe and ready for flight. It's jovial and the atmosphere is breezy and friendly, but

not without an air of professionalism and attention to detail. Gliding is accessible and a relatively inexpensive way to experience aviation, but it also attracts its fair share of pilots from other walks of life who use it as a way to unwind. Safety and diligence is built into their way of life. It's both impressive and reassuring.

Early in the morning I had an opportunity to accompany Steve, the Society's treasurer, on the first flight of the day. My apprehension in the face of trying a new form of flying was easily circumvented by the natural ease with which Steve talked about his sport. 'You'll be pleased to know I've done quite a few of these,' he claimed cheerily, 'I think last year I racked up about 200 launches.' Cries of 'all out' suggested that the winch had tightened and we were ready for the off, and rapid acceleration – twinned with an impressive rate of climb – opened up the majestic Dartmoor countryside below us. As the nose drops and the winch is released and is parachuted back to earth, a quiet and a stillness descends. Searching about for rising



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP The Dartmoor landscape stretches out beyond the glider just after take off; The basic cockpit of a glider displays everything you need to know when in the air: speed, height, vertical speed and speed across the ground; The graceful, almost silent landing of a glider towards the end of the day

air, it feels like a complex form of dancing, twisting in and out of currents and always looking for the next bit of lift. It was a calm, benign summer morning, and the sense of calm and peace was tangible. 'It's the closest thing to being a bird,' Mike tells me later. 'You have an unassailability, nobody can touch you.' From my brief experience, that's exactly how it felt.

The way that club members talk about their gliding experiences is refreshing and honest. Tales of bravado or extreme flying is kept to a minimum, and there's a humble attitude to the sport that puts the natural environment, the pilots' inherent empathy for their gliders and an appreciation of the world around them at the forefront of the activity. A visiting pilot from Kent commented on just that – 'Can't think of anywhere I'd rather be flying than around here... Just look at where we are!' Even in the complex world of recreational aviation, the grandeur of Dartmoor National Park reigns supreme.

That's not to say that gliding doesn't require a huge degree of technique and skill;

it's inspiring just watching the pilots go about their day at the club with professionalism, and admiring their adept handling of these beautiful fibreglass contraptions. The sense of enjoyment is catching, and at the end of the day it's hard to accept it has all come to an end. Club member Stephen Fletcher, who owns his own glider here, tells me that he enjoys the fact that the Dartmoor Gliding Club is friendly and approachable, and a small club where everyone knows everyone else.

'I like this feeling,' he says, after being asked to describe how he felt after his first trial flight. The smile on his face and nods of approval from other club members give me no reason to suggest he's telling anything but the truth. ■

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