

We Set Off for Kirkwall and Ended Up in Sligo - Alastair Macdonald

Most of you will know that Alan, Jon and I have been planning for weeks to take ZF to Scotland. We reserved the week beginning 4th June for the 3-day trip and, as the date approached, various uncertainties crept in – would the weather be OK? Should we go to France instead? ZF only had 14 hrs left on its engine and its Annual was due on the Friday of our week. Would we run out of hours? Would the weather clamp us in Tiree as the Annual ran out? However, with Caroline's help, and after numerous calculations, all was well with the aircraft, the hours were deemed sufficient and, unbelievably, a high pressure began to build right on cue. Sunday 4th June dawned bright and clear. The trip was on and this short account is designed to whet others' appetites for what proved to be a hugely exciting and enjoyable trip.

Sunday 4th July

Alan departed Lee in superb CAVOK only 20 mins behind our target of 0900 local, bound for Kemble to pick up a life raft from a contact of Jon's. The visibility was limited only by earth curvature and our flight at 3000ft was without a tremor. There was general agreement that this was what flying was all about and we were soon lining up to land on Runway 26 at Kemble. A quick turnaround and we were off again with Jon flying and 3.5 hours endurance. As we had come onto the west side of the country, we elected to stay there and go for Prestwick 2h 20m away in one hop. The route took us up past Great Malvern and Shawbury where a weak front had produced a high overcast. By the time we reached the Mersey we were in sun again and transited Liverpool CTA via Runcorn Bridge. However, soon afterwards a heavier high overcast appeared and Blackpool Tower could only be seen in rather murky conditions. We crossed the top of Morecambe Bay and headed over the mountains of the Lake District, passing close abeam the summit of Scafell on one side and then Wastwater and Pillar mountain on the other. For someone like me who had scaled these mountains, it was fascinating to see them so close from the air. At Dean Cross VOR, we made a careful assessment of fuel remaining as Carlisle was the only feasible alternate. We decided that the weather was stable and giving no problems and that we would have enough fuel remaining for any delays at Prestwick and so on we went over the Solway Firth into Scotland. We were now working Scottish Information and were immediately struck by the trouble the controller was willing to go to on our behalf. A request for Oban weather was met with a willingness to phone the airfield and get a detailed picture of what was going on there – mainly a story of inbound aircraft turning back because of low cloud. It became clear that the "sea fog on western coasts" predicted in the Met had hung around all day. This was disappointing after all our high hopes and the lovely weather on departure. The lowering cloud base did not however affect our arrival at Prestwick although we did manage to coincide with Ryanair traffic and had to do a couple of orbits over Ayr racecourse before being cleared to finals on the 3000m runway 31 where we landed at

1330 local. Jon had been here before and elected to taxi to Prestwick Flight Centre rather than the GA Terminal thus avoiding handling charges. It is hidden away behind the Control Tower and is a long way from anywhere but it was worth the longer taxi. Much to our surprise, aircraft spotters lined up on an embankment were studying us with delight and even taking photographs of ZF – presumably its first visit there and a new registration for their records. Once in the Flight Centre, decisions had to be made. We began to realise that, in northern Scotland, diversions were few and far between and you needed to be really sure of your weather at destination and alternate. So Kirkwall, Wick and the Outer Islands were out, Inverness was possible in IMC (but we didn't come all this way to look at Scottish clouds), Perth and Dundee were clear but would not get us much further north. We waited until 1630 and then decided to try for Oban – the route suggested by local instructors was along the shore line of Loch Long to Lochgilphead where there is a gap in the hills that is followed by the Crinan Canal to reach the open sea. The hope was that the open sea would be clear and we could turn right and fly up to Oban in the clear. I took off just after 1700 after a long delay for a dosey American driven cargo jumbo, two Ryanair flights and three incoming light aircraft. Most of the time Prestwick is empty and quiet yet we had managed significant delays inbound and outbound! Prestwick weather was SCT at 1500 feet and nothing but sunshine above but we kept below and crossed the Firth of Clyde over a returning nuclear submarine, passed along the shore of Bute and picked up the Loch Long shoreline, all the while keeping a wary lookout on the weather behind us. Cloud began to increase and pushed us down to 1000ft and finally 800ft as we passed abeam of Lochgilphead and picked up the Crinan Canal to transit to the open sea. Sadly as we arrived over the sea, it was immediately apparent that weather to the north was far worse and cloud base there was virtually 0 ft. To the south, towards Jura, it was as much as 2000ft but this wasn't much use to us so we turned back, transited the Canal gap again at 800ft and returned to a sunny Prestwick gaining altitude all the time. We were lucky to phone a landlady who fixed us up with 2 beds in her house and one across the road. She said Prestwick was always busy because of cheap flights and golf and we were fortunate she had made a mess of her bookings and had a spare room as a result.

Monday 5th July

We pulled the curtains back and saw to our dismay that there was OVC at 300 feet. On arrival at the Flight Centre, we found the Met was continuing to give sea fog around the coasts with little prospect of improvement. We couldn't get out of Prestwick VFR anyway so we settled down to another wait. As the morning wore on and the cloud lifted and broke, it became clear that our only exit was Londonderry which was, for some reason, unaffected by the sea fog. So Kirkwall and the Hebrides were regrettably abandoned and Alan used all his charm to persuade Special Branch that we could set off for Northern Ireland at short notice. The route took us past the southern tips of Arran and the Mull of Kintyre. It was now a clear, cloudless day generally but with the Arran mountains in cloud and the stubborn sea fog lapping the western coasts. This made it a fascinating flight – Campelltown was reporting zero visibility at one end of the runway and CAVOK at the other as we passed

by. To the north, Islay and Jura were poking out of the fog and, to the south, the whole of the Irish Sea seemed choked with it. Ahead, however, the northern coast of Northern Ireland was completely clear and we were soon passing over the Giants Causeway and then looking out at the Maze Prison as we turned into Lough Foyle for the approach to Eglinton airport. Here we had to make further decisions – where next? We phoned Enniskillen to be told that it was closed on Mondays so Eire it had to be. We had a chart but no phone number but the lady at the information desk was able to come up with the number for Sligo Airport and they were happy to accept us. We had to file a flight plan for this flight and, shortly after takeoff, Jon was crossing the border into Donegal. The landscape was a mixture of barren moorland hills and scattered smallholdings in the green valleys. Every farmer seemed to be building a second two-storey house next door. We reached the west coast at Ballyshannon and switched to Sligo Control for the approach past the impressive cliffs of Truskmore. We entered the circuit over the huge expanse of sand at Rosses Point and landed at the very modern airport.



The contrast with Eglinton was considerable and it was immediately clear that Ireland is now a very prosperous country. A helpful taxi driver got us a good deal at a city centre hotel and the hotel staff obligingly got us onto the Weston Airport (Dublin) website to obtain the approach maps for the rather complex arrival route there. The weather was now very settled and, after an excellent meal, we went to bed relaxed about our last day.

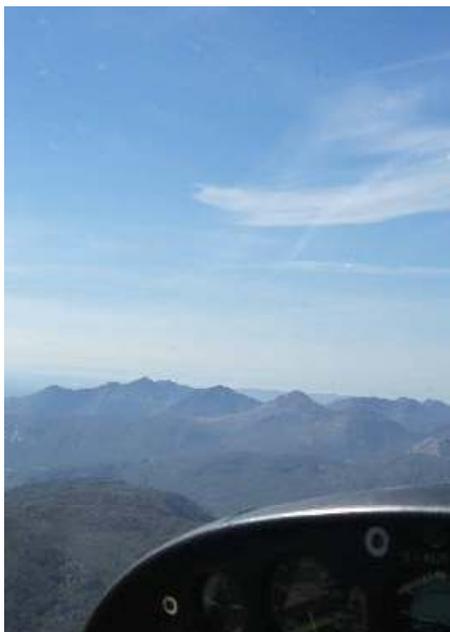
Tuesday 6th July

We were right, the weather was perfect and we were up early and at the airport by 0830. Unfortunately, Air Airrean's Dublin flight was on the tarmac and we were stuck on the grass in front of it unable to reach the fuel pumps until it departed. We had a slight panic over fuel when it transpired that "tabs" didn't mean much to the young fireman who served us and he went well over what we wanted. Fortunately, we were able to compensate with the second

tank without exceeding limits or unbalancing the aircraft. I took this flight and it turned out to be one of the most beautiful I have ever experienced.



The controller urged us to get on our way as she thought sea fog was rolling in but once we were off we were able to tell her that it was at least 10 miles offshore. At her suggestion, we elected to take a longer coastal route and this took us out among islands, bays, lakes and mountains, over a blue sea and sandy beaches and under a blue sky empty of traffic. Once again we could fly at summit height along uninhabited valleys between the mountains.



Shannon Information kept us in light touch with the rest of the world until we transferred to Galway Control as we approached that town over a long strange stretch of sea marsh dotted with little lakes. Jon took the next leg to Weston, Dublin's GA airfield. This was a huge contrast, dead flat, with big areas of peat stripping going on but much more habitation and cultivation than I had expected. More careful flying was needed to avoid Ballyconnell Military airbase and conform to the dogleg approach to Weston. Controllers however were delightfully cooperative and made it all very easy. Walking in to the Weston terminal was a shock – a brand new building furnished with repro (probably) Empire furniture and tiled

floors and looking more like a VIP terminal in a Middle East state than something appropriate to the pilots of ZF. Once again, everyone went out of their way to help us and you felt that we were treated no differently to a foreign head of state. However, we now had to face up to our ad hoc approach to destinations. We wanted to fly to Caernarfon but had not given the requisite 12 hrs notice and even when Alan phoned the North Wales Port Authority and used all his charm, they were unyielding. We had to find a 24hrs Customs entry point. Initially we lodged a plan for Liverpool but, during lunch, noticed that we could enter via Gloucester. This seemed more attractive and might avoid delays imposed by commercial traffic. So we refiled and planned for a crossing from Wicklow Head to Bardsey Island through D201. Departure from Weston is another complex manoeuvre, heading north in the climb before turning south to return over Weston not above 1500ft all under the control of Dublin Radar. This controller was the most brilliant example of all the Scottish and Irish controllers we met – they were all wonderful but he was a real character. In between working innumerable inbound Aer Lingus and Ryanair flights, he always had time for us. When Alan asked to be contacted London Mil for the Danger Area crossing, he responded “No, just leave that to me, I can phone a contact in Aberporth for you”. Sadly, permission was refused (“Sure and aren’t you the unlucky ones today” was the controller’s comment) – D201 was hot, as they say. So Jon took over as navigator, Alan turned onto 060 for the northern coast of Anglesey and waited for further instructions from Jon. It was an excellent example of two pilot operation and we eventually got clearance from Valley to cut the corner and pass down the west coast of Anglesey at FL050.



Passed the Menai Strait (photo), over Caernarfon and past Snowdon which was just peeping out of the clouds. From here, the clouds were higher and we had a good view of Cader Idris and the Barmouth estuary before crossing the Welsh mountains, passing over Builth Wells' showground (a good visual cue to remember) and finally being very impressed by Alan's impeccable overhead join at Gloucester. We thought we would be tight for an 1800 arrival at Lee but a carefully crafted phone call by Jon to the police elicited the information that 1800 was not being enforced (except on Sundays and Mondays) until the new gate was operational so, being Tuesday, we could relax and have a short rest after the long 2h 30 m flight from Weston. I flew this last flight in pleasant evening light and we got a clearance at 3000ft through Southampton Zone right over our house before a final landing on 05 at Lee.

It had been a truly memorable trip and I am afraid that hopping over to Bembridge will have lost a lot of its buzz as a result. We totalled 13 hours of flying in a variety of conditions and over almost entirely new country. There is something deeply satisfying and very exciting in just immersing yourself in flying and nothing else for three consecutive days; making decisions about weather, destinations, endurance and routings; seeing a huge variety of countryside, seascapes and cloudscapes; dealing with new controllers and experiencing the incredible kindness and helpfulness of everyone in the outer parts of UK and Ireland. We all enjoyed ourselves immensely and we all want to do it again. It is well worth saving up and doing it yourselves. Go for it !