

A Cautionary Tale of Endurance.

So what did you do on the hottest day ever? This is what happened to me at in August 2003 on the hottest day ever recorded in the UK when two hobbies collided with dramatic effect and resulted in a cautionary tale of endurance.



I went to the SAM35 Gala at Old Warden with a simple plan. Turn up on Sunday, have a check flight with a newly repaired “New Look”, crank on some turns to see how high it would go, DT on the field and put it away until the Wakefield Mass Launch at 3.00pm. To digress. In earlier times this event was known as the “Chobham Trophy” at OW “Vintage Day” and was for 4 and 8 ounce Vintage Wakefield models all launched together with the highest model after 45 seconds being the winner. Gradually the event waned in popularity probably due to a succession of annual meetings with poor weather, or wind direction, plus a diminishing base of hardy souls. Mike Kemp was the founding spark for these contests and as I recall the judges were usually Dick Hardwick and Don (“The Bulk”) Knight who positioned themselves at a good distance across wind and made their judgement accordingly. Nevertheless it was always spectacular with as many as twenty Wakefield flyers competing for the spoils. And of course the rules encouraged fliers to crank on the turns usually with a couple of extra strands too. Despite some occasional carnage I can never remember a mid-air collision. I recall winning just once with a Warring “Zombie V” and collecting the trophy from the venerable Ron Moulton. The other photo shows one of the launches when I was using Warring’s “Voodoo”. The things we got up to for a brainless wooden plaque?



I would then make a few flights with my fickle “Northern Arrows” and generally have a nice relaxing day. No problemo! Done it many times before. Flying Wakefields on full chat at OW is good for the soul, an exercise in DT control and the model-flying equivalent of Target Golf. Well, that was the plan but it didn’t turn out that way. With the drift fluking in every direction, the check flights went OK and the prior destructive hard landing on a block of concrete at the Barkston Nationals hadn’t affected the trim. In fact it was prolly better!



Now my “New Look” has an all up weight of 11.5 ounces! Yes, I know! My perverse theory is, if I can stuff enough turns into it, and the trim is right, and I avoid rank bad air then I should get enough max’s to keep a bloke happy. And because it is robust, it rarely comes back damaged, blocks of Barkston concrete notwithstanding. The second check flight got quite high and things were looking tickety-boo. After a light snack and cool drink I’m thinking “Just one more”. Fatal, or what? It was 1 pm and getting quite hot. I think the heat created even more rubber energy while I waited until the drift was favourable, aiming to DT down near the windsock.



“New Look”, under full chat from 110 grams of ¼” TAN II arranged into 16 strands, clawing the air with it’s single-bladed 19 inch canoe paddle, screamed silently upwards, not hesitating for a tail slide as sometimes happens, flattened out and cruised through to prop fold at about 1m 35s. If on schedule, the DT shoulda popped soon after, at 2m 45s.



Trouble never comes singly, and the trouble with Tomy timers is they jump up and bite you every so often! And this day, “New Look’s” Tomy did just that and set off a disturbing chain reaction. After years of reliable operation, the tailplane stayed stubbornly horizontal and “New Look” was headed upwards on the glide. At least the tracker signal was coming in loud and clear! With the drift all over the place, all one could do was grab a shaded chair, sit back, admire and wait. But wait for what? Option 1 – Thermal decays and “New Look” lands on the glide somewhere nearby. Option 2 – Wait for the oft-dreaded Hammerhead pattern to set in and “New Look” stalls out of the sky for a hard landing, again, somewhere nearby. Option 3 – Get the Binos out and set up the Yagi tracker aerial. After about 15 minutes of perfectly trimmed flight, circling OW, with radio tracker beeping comfortingly on the receiver, “New Look” was testing my new left eye to it’s visual limit and Option 3 was in progress.

Did I tell you I’d recently got a new eye? It’s a free one from the NHS which you get by waiting around for a few years and moaning a lot to a hospital consultant’s secretary. I tell you what though; they really do work well, and guess what? I got a second new one ten months later and two new eyes are even better than one. I can now see forever, and what’s more, I can see into the future too! Yours truly is going to give up this stupid pastime! But I digress.

I start to visualise with the binos as “New Look” headed off north, and going higher, towards the village, beyond the wood adjacent to the main entrance. Just as I was thinking that the game was up and “New Look” would soon become “Old Look”, the image in the bins started to grow as she began to move back towards the field. Was I going to be lucky? Well in two words. No! And No! Then it happened! John Hook spotted it first, the thermal was gradually collapsing and “New Look” started to descend, slowly at first, then later, like a shot duck. Nose down and headed for firm terra in no uncertain manner. Eventually it disappeared behind the wood, certainly less than a mile away and definitely within normal retrieving distance. On a normal day, that is! The flight time? Nothing special, ‘though no one had a watch on it, it proly did 25 minutes.



But this day was not normal. It was to be the hottest day ever recorded in the UK and not one for an extended walk, ‘specially when my Rover Vitesse (the Red one) was sitting there with it’s Air Conditioning beckoning me to join the chase by car. And anyway, I still had to get back for the mass launch. That’s a laugh for a start-off,

nobody turned up 'cept one person so it was cancelled. But I didn't make it back, did I? And here's why!

Using GPS, I set up a "GOTO" track to the model, loaded a few bottles of pop in the car and made sure I'd got all my equipment on board. Binos, Compass, Tracker Radio, Yagi, GPS (Switched on, and recording my every movement), Mobile Phone, and of course Ramon Alban's "Famous" Poles (Quote - Mike Kemp) for extracting trees from model aeroplanes (just in case it's hung up). Out the gate and turn left, up the hill and turn right, down the hill and park up. Get out the tracker and climb the banking right onto the GPS track, to get some height facing north. No signals on the Rubber duck but something on the Yagi. Conclusion: More than 300 yards but less than 1 ¼ miles.

Trouble is, there is no way through from here. Being a local, I reckon I can get around from another road. So back in the car, about turn, up the hill, turn right, passed another large wood, and look for a gateway on the right. Sure enough there it is. An entrance to one of the Shuttleworth Trust Farms, just where it would be really convenient to get back on line. Down the farm track, about 600 yards but strangely, I can't seem to cross the GPS track by car from here. Must be running parallel. Get out and try receiving again. Just a trace on Rubber Duck but loud and clear on Yagi. Near, but could be nearer! Another 400 yards but the farm track has turned away from the strongest signal. Try again! Nothing on Rubber Duck! Gone too far! Need to turn around!

Now, Dear Reader, the following passage should not be read by the fainthearted or those who worry about your scribe's health and well being. 'Specially 'er indoors. It's coming along two o'clock on the hottest day ever and I'm about to do a three-point turn on a farm track. Those of you who may have eyeballed my Vitesse from time to time know that under normal circumstances it just clears an ordinary road. It dislikes sleeping policemen and is no stranger to gravel rash.

This day it did it in spades! Fully grounded with the rear wheel churning loose ballast, slap bang across a cambered farm track. Never saw it coming, and gross stupidity ain't fussy whom it attacks! Everybody gets some sooner or later. At least it was opposite a field gateway. Lucky or what?

So let's reflect for a moment? It's a Sunday! It's Blooming Hot! There's no shade anywhere!



There's no one for miles (poetic license)! "New Look" is apparently less than 600 yards away! The (subsequently cancelled) mass launch is due off in an hour and I'm stuck fast on this remote farm track! This is no way to treat a Concours d'Elegance show car example of the finest Rover ever built. The 1986 Fuel Injected Rover Vitesse with its Lotus engineered Twin Plenum 3.5 litre engine. This car was designed for Boy Racer Executives who wanted something more than the Vanden Plas luxury versions could offer. I have owned it since 1993 and have personally restored it to the condition seen in the photos. No! This is definitely not the way to treat this motor car.

Even with my new eye, I can hardly see the damn farm! The good news is, I do have my mobile phone on me, but first of all I reckon some self help is in order. Under the car the chassis is grounded on very loose gravel. So, out with the jack and prop up one wheel. Reach under the car and with a walking stick (kept handy for my dicky knee), scrape away all loose gravel from under both chassis rails. Push gravel under the propped up wheel. Prop up the other wheel and repeat.

Lower the car and start the 3.5 litre motor and gently on the clutch, try to reverse thro' the gateway into the field. Now I think you may be ahead of me here? No chance, eh? Trouble is "3.5 litres" and

“Gently” is an oxymoron; mutually exclusive and just don’t go well together. More gravel churning, dust everywhere, stones flying, lots of gravel rash. Back to square one. After a cooling drinky-poops, try the whole process again. God it’s hot! Dust and sweat amalgamating on my exposed skin and I’m not feeling too good either.

After the fruitless second attempt I reckon I definitely need help. Shall it be the RAC or Mrs A? Now I live only 5 miles away and I got all the tools I need at home to solve this problem, including a trolley jack and some planks of wood. So for Plan “A”, I phone Mo on the mobile and get her to load her car with said items and give her a verbal map to find me out here in the boonies. In preparation for her imminent arrival, decide to have another go at clearing gravel with my stick and what with all that dust flying I catch sight of my reflection in the wing mirror. I could have auditioned for the Black and White Minstrel Show right there and then and I was up the “Swanee” big-time. All of a sudden there is another vehicle approaching from the invisibly distant farmhouse.



Now picture this? On the hottest day ever, this young chap comes around the corner to be confronted with a sideways Rover Vitesse completely beached with me prone on the floor alongside. First off, he prolly thought I was dead and I certainly felt close to it. I struggled to my feet using the walking stick to verticate. So OK, if I wasn’t dead, then the way he saw it, at the very least, I’m a disabled Indian.

Out he jumps to help and as I gather my senses I relate the reason why I’m here. Now this young fella most likely couldn’t make any sensible connection between an

Old Codger, black as yer hat, dressed in shorts, singlet and headband, struggling around with a walking stick claiming to be searching for a lost model plane and this beached Rover on his farm track. Worse, he was in a hurry to deal with a swarm of wasps in Luton (A pest control operator, I kid you not) and going absolutely nowhere whilst I’m blocking his path.

I explained that help was coming, but he had a better idea. Back at the farm he’s got a thick rope and a 4 x 4 pick-up that will make short work of our mutual problem. His Plan “B” looks infinitely superior my plan “A”. Within minutes he’s returned and we hook the 4 x 4 up to my tow-bar. He hauls the Vitesse into the field where I am able to manoeuvre and get pointed back towards the farm track. Now with traction on all corners, 3.5 litres and one giant leap, I was free! Groggy, but free!

In this infinitesimally small world it transpires this chap knew my family, and me. He hailed from the same village and went through school with my youngest kid. He departed with my gratitude ringing in his ears. At that moment, Mo arrives with the tools for a redundant plan “A”. Never mind though, cos I badly need her help. I’m feeling really ill now, the heat is intolerable and we have still got some problems. 1) A lost model, 2) Lots of gear still at OW and 3) I gotta drive to OW and then home, surely to expire, or so it seemed. Sod the model, it will have to wait and after more guzzled drink, we have a convoy! Back to OW there is now a devil of a gale blowing and all flying has virtually ceased. Weird or what?

With model boxes and field gear stowed in my car I lead the two car convoy slowly back home where Mo doles out some hot tea, ice packs, foot-bath and cold towels to get me cleaned up and back to the land of the living. After an hour’s rest I’m actually feeling 100% again when it suddenly dawned on me that I had left some other gear at OW. Mo said she will drive and (wait for it?) suggested while we were at it, why not pack the radio retrieval gear just in case! Back to OW, we found my missing equipment and repaired to the dreaded farm to resume the hunt for “New Look”!

It's now 5.30pm. Two abortive searches in the wrong direction led us to, and through, a new area consisting of random swaths of 8 ft high Corn with game birds running hither and thither, a large spinney, impenetrable brush and mesh fences and, I reckon, the only remaining uncut wheat field in Bedfordshire. The Rubber Duck was indicating this giant field as suspect No1 but we had to go all around Will's Mother's just to get into it. Eventually we found a way through and circled the field for a sensible direction signal. I could not figure it out at all, signals seemed to come from everywhere and GPS was not helpful 'cos I had previously switched it off and lost my track. (On reflection I could have used my target waypoint and the back bearing to generate a new track, but Hey! I was not thinking very straight). Trouble was we were too close to the model for the Yagi and the Rubber Duck was all over the place, so I backed off 400 yards. Because the transmitter signal is polarised by the (normally) upright aerial, rotating the Yagi towards the horizontal produces a much narrower fan from the incoming signal which can attenuate to almost nothing and allows for a really directional reception. With this technique I took its directional response as an absolute gospel and ploughed a line straight across the field.

You already know, late summer wheat has a very unique injurious quality, 'specially after months of drought. "Fields of a Thousand Cuts" I call 'em, and me in shorts too. It's a good reason for keeping to the tractor lanes but my Yagi ploy took me straight to a completely undamaged "New Look". As I picked it up, the Tomy started to run again and the DT popped 15 seconds later. Don't that beat all? It was now 7 pm! We extracted ourselves from the vicinity and arrived back home bang on the half-hour for a welcome cup o' tea and a long hot bath. Needless to say I left unpacking the car until the next day. I slept well that night! Well you would, wouldn't you?

So there you have it! What not to do on the hottest day ever! My two passionate hobbies combined together to threaten me with a near death experience. Model flying is not s'posed to be ugly like this. Talking about ugly, in penning the original version of this essay I reckon I had me a dyslectic keyboard, 'cos I've had to make so many spelling corrections it's a real pain. And it was mostly D's causing the problem. Still, it occurs to me to leave you with this thought.

If the letter "D" was ever completely discarded from our alphabet, that famous actor Edward Woodward would be forever known as Ewar Woowar! And as for the hottest day ever, I haven't had so much fun since our pet pig ate my sister!

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