

AERONAUTICAL INFORMATION CIRCULAR Y 027/2023

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GLIDING ACTIVITY IN THE UK

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Gliding is a weather dependent air sport activity and although most active from March - October the activity takes place throughout the year during daylight hours. The vast majority of gliders launch from notified gliding sites. A number of self-launching gliders operate from other sites. Gliding sites where winch launching is carried out present a hazard to en-route aircraft due to risk of collision with winch cables, which may be encountered up to 3000 FT AGL at some sites. Gliding sites are marked on CAA charts but may not be marked on third party charts or moving map displays.
- 1.2 Gliding sites routinely experience intense activity within 5 NM of the site and thus can present an increased risk of midair collision. Gliders routinely fly cross country using rising air and glide angles of around 1 in 50 to achieve cruising speeds not dissimilar to a typical small single engine piston aircraft. Occasionally, large numbers of gliders fly the same cross country route. In certain parts of the country gliders routinely fly above FL 100 in the lee of mountain ranges, or at lower levels along ridge lines. They will also seek to derive the maximum lift along less obvious vertical features such as the Chiltern escarpment.
- 1.3 This Circular is intended to raise awareness of gliding activity within UK airspace.

2 See and Avoid

- 2.1 Gliders have a low frontal area, and similarly to other composite aircraft are usually white in colour. This means gliders can be hard to spot head on. They become much easier to see when manoeuvring, for example when thermalling. Gliders are most likely to be found below cumulus clouds and in particular lines of cumulus clouds, on the windward side of ridges and upwind of lenticular clouds.
- 2.2 The majority of gliders are equipped with FLARM, an electronic supplement to effective lookout that provides visual and aural warnings of other FLARM equipped traffic on a collision vector within a few kilometres. This low-cost equipment can be fitted in any aircraft. PowerFLARM can be configured to allow any aircraft to detect both FLARM and transponder equipped traffic on a single instrument. Some PilotAware and SkyEcho units can receive FLARM information (depending on location and configuration). There is a network of FLARM ground receivers that covers much of the country, allowing gliding activity to be seen on such websites as live.glidernet.org, glideandseek.com, glidertracker.de and flightradar24.com.
- 2.3 Advice on effective lookout technique is published in CAA Safety Sense Leaflet No 13 available on the CAA website. Glider pilots are more used to flying in close proximity to other gliders than are many powered aircraft pilots. As the canopy construction of most gliders permits an excellent field of view then there is a good chance that a glider pilot will spot a powered aircraft or other airspace user first. However, good lookout is the responsibility of all airspace users and the Class G environment relies on all parties maintain an effective lookout in order to avoid collisions.

3 Launch Methods

- 3.1 There are three methods of launching, all of which can result in approximately 30 movements per hour at glider sites during peak times around the middle of the day. During sporting events, movement rates can peak as high 100 movements per hour.
- 3.2 Although launching takes place without any requirement for air traffic control, many clubs make use of VHF to increase situational awareness. A broadcast call from aircraft transiting adjacent to a gliding site increases everyone's situational awareness.

3.3 Winch Launching

- 3.3.1 Winch launching is where a thin steel or fibre cable connected to a powerful winch launches the glider to anywhere between 1000-3000 FT above the site elevation dependent on the site and launch permission; note some sites are positioned on the top of hills, and as high as 1400 FT above sea level. The glider pilot relies on an appointed ground crew to confirm that the area behind the launch is clear of potential conflicting traffic prior to launching at an approximate 45 degree angle.

It is dangerous to overfly gliding sites below the maximum launch height because of the lack of forward view, limited manoeuvrability of the glider during launching and the presence of the cable. Any low or fast aircraft on an over-flying course may

be difficult or impossible for the ground crew to see when initiating a glider launch. After release the cable falls rapidly to the ground slowed by a small parachute that is difficult to see.

Glider sites employing winch launch methods, and their maximum permitted launch heights, are promulgated in UK AIP ENR 5.5 and CAA Aeronautical charts. Note that the vertical limits published are the limits for winch launching, not for glider flying.

- 3.3.2 When no vertical limits are published, launching is by aerotow only.

3.4 Aerotow Launching and Self-Launching

- 3.4.1 Aerotow launching uses an aeroplane to tow the glider into the air. Aerotowing aeroplane and glider combinations will generally climb at approximately half the tow aeroplane's normal performance. Aerotows are carried out by light aircraft, often ex-crop sprayers, with a light rope connecting the glider, and tows will normally be to between 2000 FT and 4000 FT AGL depending on what the glider pilot is planning to do. Returning aircraft may be trailing a long rope. During the tow, both aircraft and glider are less manoeuvrable than normal and the Rules of the Air require powered aircraft converging with an aerotow combination to give way.

Self-launch is limited to pure motor gliders. Many self-launching gliders can climb at 1000'/min.

- 3.4.2 There is an increasing interest in the discipline of gliding aerobatics, so aerotows could be flown up to 5000 FT above those sites. Glider aerobatics take place above or in close proximity to gliding sites in locally agreed aerobatic boxes, usually up to 4000 FT AGL.

4 Circuit Patterns Around Gliding Sites

- 4.1 A glider circuit is a conventional descending pattern starting at approximately 800 FT AAL. Traffic flow frequently results in circuits on each side of the aerodrome and multiple parallel approach paths. Effective lookout and operating 'as expected' is vitally important. Glider taxiing capability is limited to a turn at the end of a ground run but normal practice is to maintain a straight line to a stop. Once committed to the final approach a glider has no other options and consequently effective sequencing on the final approach is critical to avoid unintended consequences.
- 4.2 All gliding sites are PPR and most have websites which include visiting aircraft briefings. Overhead joins should be avoided (cables) and noise abatement is a very significant issue. Glider tugs often do short circuits of different shapes and onto selected areas of the aerodrome to fit with the local operations; a briefing on tug activity should be obtained when obtaining permission. For airfields where landing is restricted to runways, it is vitally important that visiting aircraft do not block the runway by, for example, backtracking when a glider needs to land.
- 4.3 Details of gliding sites are available at <https://www.gliding.co.uk/club-finder/> and in the UK AIP ENR 5.5.

5 Cross-Country Gliding Activity

- 5.1 Although many gliders stay local to their launch sites, it is normal for glider pilots to plan and execute cross country flights. Gliders operating locally to their launch sites will normally be operating clear of controlled airspace up to cloud base and within a 5 NM radius of the site. The longest cross country flight in a glider in the UK to date is 1100 KM. A typical cross country flight is 300 KM in an A-B-C-A format. Gliders use rising air to climb and use a combination of rising air and their glide performance to cruise. At the end of the flying day, if the glider has not completed its task it will either start up its get-you-home engine (a turbo), if fitted, or land at either an aerodrome or in a suitable field. Occasionally gliders are subsequently towed out of fields by tug aircraft. Although cross country gliding is the predominant activity, glider aerobatics are increasingly popular.

6 Ridge Flying

- 6.1 Air flowing up a ridge and/or the sun heating a south facing slope will result in rising air. In the UK, the topography can result in the rising air from ridges being useable by gliders up to two or three times the height of the ridge. This depends on the strength of the wind. In some areas in the UK, ridge formations facilitate cross country flights by gliders in meteorological conditions that would not generate other types of rising air. An example is the South Downs where throughout the winter months and primarily with strong northerly winds, cross country flying by gliders takes place along a line running east/west along the South Downs ridges. Similarly, in the Black Mountains, gliders fly cross country using a complex formation of ridges which can be used in various wind directions. The Cotswold Edge from Bath to Broadway is another example in W to NW winds.

7 Thermal Flying

- 7.1 Thermals form when air heated by the ground rises through unstable air. A thermal stops rising when the thermal cools to the same temperature as the surrounding air. Where the condensation level is at a lower level than the inversion, cumulus cloud will form at the top of the thermal. The ideal but certainly not the only meteorological conditions for this type of gliding are increasing atmospheric pressure and an unstable airmass, for example in the days following the passage of a cold front ahead of a building ridge of high pressure. In the UK summer months, thermals generally start to become useable by gliders from approximately 10 am until around 7 pm (BST), with peak conditions for gliding cross country flying occurring from approximately midday to 5 pm.
- 7.2 Gliders usually operate in the higher half of the thermic layer below cloud base. For example, on a typical day where the cloud base is around 4000 FT AGL, glider pilots will aim to operate above 2000 FT AGL. If the cloud base is high, for example 7500 FT above sea level or more, gliders will be using that airspace if possible. Fair weather cumulus is the most common form of thermal indicator. Sea breezes and convergences can also provide similar soaring conditions. When these conditions are forecast, gliders will often follow the sea breeze line, which may establish itself along the coast or several miles inland. Very occasionally, where the pilot and glider is equipped to do so, a glider may climb in a cumulus cloud to cross a large area of stable air.
- 7.3 Cross country routes are planned to avoid notified airspace restrictions and relevant navigation warnings. Gliders will, subject to soaring conditions, usually operate within 10 NM either side of the planned track and turn within 0.5 KM of the planned turning points. In some parts of the UK, airspace design results in cross country routes passing through relatively narrow portions of Class

G Airspace. In these areas and particularly in the summer months, it is inevitable that gliders (and other Class G users) will generate a higher than usual density of Class G traffic. Meticulous lookout is essential to safe flight in these areas.

- 7.4 Thermals may result in a large group of gliders operating in close proximity to a source of lift, whatever that might be. Gliders will often spend up to 50% of their time circling continuously with approximately 30 degrees or more of bank to optimise their climb within a thermal. In conditions with cumulus clouds, these thermals and associated circling gliders will classically be found from the centre to the upwind side of the cumulus and will usually climb to close to cloud base or until the climb rate reduces before leaving the thermal and moving on elsewhere. All gliders in a particular thermal will turn in the same direction as the first glider present and join the thermal at their cruise altitude. Thermalling gliders attract other gliders to the lift source, so if you are passing a group of thermalling gliders look out for others joining the stack.

8 Wave Flying

- 8.1 Lee waves are caused by air flowing over a significant obstacle and then effectively bouncing to generate an atmospheric standing wave. These occur throughout the UK but are most used for soaring close to and downwind of mountain ranges. The ideal conditions for wave soaring in the most predominant wave areas is a relatively stable airmass flowing across topography at more than 15 KT and with little change of direction with height. A low pressure centred north or east of Scotland generating a strong west or northwesterly wind across the Scottish mountains is a good example.

Gliders are either launched into lee wave rising air or climb using other rising air to transition to a lee wave. Lee waves may generate lenticular cloud formations lying across the wind which are typically identified by a solid leading edge, a laminar smooth top and a ragged trailing edge.

Wave flying can take place from dawn to dusk.

- 8.2 Gliders flying in lee wave operate in clear air above gaps formed by wave in the lower cloud, or when climbing past clouds, they operate upwind of those clouds in clear air. Glider pilots who are flying cross country in wave will operate where possible between the base of any cloud formation and FL 195. Gliders can occasionally be found above FL 195 in notified and activated TRA(G).

9 Competitions

- 9.1 As gliding is an air sport, competition flying is a normal activity. British Gliding Association competitions are notified by NOTAM. Adhoc competitions are not usually subject to NOTAM, but they rarely exceed 15-20 gliders.

Cross country competitions typically involve up to 80 gliders launching during a window of opportunity, usually around the middle of the day, prior to setting off on a typically A-B-C-A task at different times. Scoring is based on time taken to complete the GPS logger recorded task rather than racing to first past the post.

Aerobatic competitions are subject to NOTAM. BGA Competitions, and their daily tasks, are normally promulgated on <https://glidingtasks.co.uk/> although it should be noted that tasks can be changed at short notice for meteorological reasons. A competition NOTAM will include details to allow pilots to contact the competition organisers.

10 Further Information

- 10.1 All gliding clubs are members of the British Gliding Association. For further details of gliding sites please see <https://www.gliding.co.uk/club-finder/> or UK AIP ENR 5.5.