

The Wanderings of a Flying Instructor

Now and again the odd long distance trip crops up. This year a plot was put in place to take myself plus Bob and Lesley Hart to the most northerly airport in the UK, namely Unst in the Shetland Island group.

The trip was planned for three days during the last week of August, which you might expect would produce so reasonable summer weather. However, southern England was covered in a warm moist southerly flow which generated a lot of low cloud and there were a couple of fronts straddled across Scotland and the Shetland Islands. Thus route planning could not be set in stone.

In the end the first leg was set to be Gloucester via overhead Halfpenny Green to Trent VOR, then overhead Leeds to St Abbs VOR and on to Wick for a fuel stop. From Wick we planned direct to Lerwick which was to be our first night stop.

Day1: Our trusty PA-28 Arrow G-OMNI is duly fuelled and loaded, weather, Notams, Royal Flights, and RA(T)s all checked and we're ready to go. As mentioned already the west coast route was really a no go option unless a lot of IFR was to be had and as one of the aims of the trip was to watch the scenery go by the eastern route was chosen as it appeared to offer less cloud.

So, with a left turn out off runway 27 we set course northwards at 1600 ft. The usual local land marks of Tewkesbury, Worcester and Kidderminster passed underneath and with a quick call to Halfpenny Green we turned overhead towards the Trent VOR. To our surprise the cloud kept its distance and we were able to view the Derbyshire Dales passing below as we passed Trent. Continuing north we passed Chatsworth House and eased our way down the west side of the new Doncaster airspace before calling Leeds for zone transit.

With the low cloud drifting off the Dales and Pennines to the north we were concerned that we did not encounter the large mast extending to 2000 ft amsl about 10 miles south of Leeds, so we flew a deliberate offset until sighting the mast and then regained track. Cloud was now increasing but we were able to stay VMC below till passing Harrogate, then a climb to 3000 ft put us above a broken layer of stratus, so viewing of the scenery was still possible.



Approaching the Vale of York the cloud broke up and left us with a vista of rolling countryside to the east which ended at the North Sea coast and cloud covered Pennines to the west. This continued as we passed Middlesbrough and Newcastle, to whom we chatted in turn and then passing to the east of the Spadeadam Ranges we approached St. Abbs Head on the Northumberland coast.

Crossing the Firth of Forth revealed Bass Rock and the Isle of May, both local bird sanctuaries. Fife was shrouded in cloud but we were able to view the golf courses at St. Andrews and see along the Tay estuary to Dundee. RAF Leuchars provided the ATC service for this area.

Scottish hills now on the horizon required that we climb to avoid them, so up to FL 65 we go. Due to the westerly wind some strong mountain wave was encountered and in the vicinity of Aviemore we encounter a particularly strong down draught that had us at full power, 85 mph and still going down at 500 ft per minute. Luckily it didn't last for too long and we suddenly found the situation reversed and the aircraft was flying at 170 mph and still climbing. Who needs a roller coaster?

Eventually we left the high ground and crossed the Moray Firth under the watchful eye of RAF Lossiemouth. Dropping below the cloud again revealed a watery sunlight silhouetting the high ground to the north of Inverness before the hills gave way to the coastal area that leads to Wick.



So 3½ hours after departing Gloucester we landed on runway 31 at Wick. Time to refuel both plan and crew and to phone Lerwick for PPR. A bit of a hitch developed when the bowser ran out of fuel and had to be replenished. This caused us some concern as we were getting short of time to reach Lerwick before the airfield closed. However all was well in the end and we left Wick with about half an hour to spare on our ETA at Lerwick.

From Wick we fly north-north east, past the end of mainland UK, namely John O'Groats and pass east of the Orkney Islands and across about 50 nms of North Sea before Shetland hove into view. Lerwick is about 20 nms north of the southern tip of Shetland and has a single runway airport of just under 800 m length. It, like many island airports in this part of the world is run almost as a one man band. The chap running AFIS was also airport fireman, baggage handler and manager.

High ground and wind farms surround the airfield so it is very much a VFR arrival. Upon first sight the terrain looks quite barren and the distinguishing feature of this part of the world is – no trees! We're told they can't stand up to the strong winds.



So, landed (talking of strong winds 270°/20kt, runway 20 – so that was interesting!), parked unloaded and just caught the last bus into town. Spent a nervous half hour at Lerwick bus station trying to book accommodation for the night. Didn't fancy the beach as it was a bit cool. Anyway, succeeded eventually and strolled around some of the town whilst looking for the hotel. A pleasant evening of sampling local produce (food and local alcoholic beverages) plus a bit of sight seeing was enjoyed. We noted that a Viking Long ship was in the harbour - didn't discover why though.

Day 2: The day dawned bright but overcast. Having taken a leisurely breakfast we arrived at the airport for 10am. By now a few light showers had developed but the visibility continued to hold up.

We hoped to visit Unst, but discovered the phone number in the flight guide was no longer used, so with help from the airport duty manager we eventually made contact and obtained permission for the landing. The local inter-island air service pilot was very helpful and obtained weather and Notam information for us.

Runway 20 again, this time wind down the runway at 10kt, so a straight forward take-off. We continued southwards to ensure we missed the high ground and wind farm to the southeast of the airfield and then made a left turn out to over fly Lerwick and proceed up the east coast of Shetland. A few helicopters were coming and going from Scatsta as we flew past and we could see the flare stacks of the Sollum Voe oil terminal in the distance.

Our track took us between the islands of Yell and Fetlar with Unst appearing ahead. We were able to join right base for runway 30 in the midst of a shower, which dissipated by the time we touched down. The word remote best describes the scenery. Small groups of house scattered across the hillsides and alongside the various inlets, very few vehicles about and not many people.

The airport had a single 790 metre runway and was not manned. It is mainly used for emergency flights these days. In fact the hangar is used by the local council to store vehicles and what was the terminal (a large portacabin) is now a small print works run by two of the local inhabitants. In fact they were very hospitable and we ended up sharing coffee with them in the print shop with magazines being produced around us.



Our next stop was to be Kirkwall. We knew the weather was close to IFR minima south of Shetland so there was a fair chance of an IFR arrival. But we decided to worry about that when we got there. The first priority now was sight seeing.



Took off on runway 12 (the wind had changed) and headed further north. In fact to $60^{\circ} 52'N$ $000^{\circ} 45'W$, the location of Muckle Flugga light house, the most northerly building in the UK. Along the way we flew past RAF Saxa Vord, a mothballed radar station perched on the cliff tops of the north end of Unst. It is a relic of the Cold War but some of the locals believe that the RAF are considering

reopening it now that Russian snooping flights have started again.

Now it was time to fly south again. We cruised down the west side of Yell and Shetland and could see that the weather was steadily getting worse. So when abeam Lerwick and down to 800 ft to stay VMC the decision was taken to continue IFR and a suitable clearance from Sumburgh was obtained. We climbed to 3,000 ft and routed direct to Kirkwall for an arc approach to the ILS for runway 27.

The ATIS had suggested cloud at 400 ft but in the end we broke cloud at about 800 ft and a fairly slow approach with the 20kt wind that was blowing. Interestingly, having been parked under the supervision of a marshaller the moment the engine stopped he disappeared and we were left to our own devices to wander airside as we needed. A bit unusual at an airport with commercial air transport operations going on.



After our experience in Lerwick we had already sorted accommodation for the night before leaving Lerwick earlier in the day. So it was just a case of secure the aircraft, hire a car, grab some lunch and then become tourists for the afternoon. It was windy, grey and there was drizzle in the air most of the afternoon but we had a good roam around mainland Orkney including viewing various historic sights

including Scara Brae (an Iron Age village), standing stone circles and some of the villages.

Our accommodation was in Kirkwall, the main town, dominated by a large church sat on rising ground in the centre of the town. Thursday night must have been eating out night as everywhere was very busy.

Day 3: It was raining quite hard when we first looked out. However by mid morning it had stopped, the cloud base had risen and it turned into a fine day. Spent the morning continuing our island tour, this time taking in the southern part of Mainland Orkney and South Ronaldsay. This took us round the edge of Scapa Flow, a major naval anchorage of both

world wars. Several sunken ships can still be seen in places which were deliberately used as barriers in World War II.

Time to think about heading home. The aim was to go VFR as much as possible so we planned to route down the east side of Scotland taking in the sights of the Moray Firth and the Cairngorm Mountains before having a pit stop and crew change at Glenrothes. The leg between Glenrothes and Gloucester would be decided later.

Airport formalities complete – including topping up with probably the most expensive AVGAS in the UK (£1.73 + VAT per litre) we departed off the 680 metre runway 15 with a left turn out to make an anticlockwise circuit of the Orkney Island group so we could indulge in so more sight seeing. Shapinsay to our left and Stronsay off our right-hand side were followed by Eday and Rousay. Then it was down the west side of Mainland Orkney, crossing to Hoy with a splendid view of the rock stack known as ‘The Old Man of Hoy’.



We left Orkney behind us and crossed the Pentland Firth to coast in over Dunnet Head with Thurso and Dounray off to our right. Continuing south we worked Wick Approach until passing Lybster where we made contact with RAF Lossiemouth. They kept an eye on us as we crossed the Moray Firth, over flew Kinloss and continued on over the Cairngorms. About 20 nms out from Lossiemouth we changed to Scottish Information with whom we stayed until nearing Dundee.

Crossing the Cairngorms VFR requires a cloud base of 4,000 ft or better. We were lucky this day as the cloud base was in our favour, so good views were had in all directions. We crossed the higher ground in the vicinity of Ballater, then it was downhill towards Glenrothes. We passed to the northwest of Dundee and worked both Dundee and Leuchars before arriving at Glenrothes.



The runway was cloaked by cloud shadow so it was a bit of a late sighting and a dirty dive from right base to get set up. All a bit rushed, really, which led to a slight bounce on landing. Glenrothes is a small but busy airfield with a very good restaurant. Anyway it was coffee and buns for the crew and fuel for the plane (at a more sensible £1.43 + VAT per litre). Also decision time – do we route east or west coast?

The west coast won, so it was to be Glenrothes – Talla – Dean Cross – Wallasey - Gloucester. The first ATC challenge after take-off was to obtain clearance through the Edinburgh Control Zone. There's only about 6 miles to achieve this without holding or dog legging so it gets a bit busy on the radio. In the event our clearance was granted promptly and required us to route via the Forth Bridges and overhead Edinburgh Airport. We had our clearance amended slightly as we passed the bridges, 'route behind the Ryanair Boeing 737 on final for 24'. As it transpired the 737 had just about touched down by the time our paths crossed so we didn't need to deviate much from track.

Having cleared the Edinburgh airspace to the south we transferred to Scottish Information who eventually monitored our progress until we passed Barrow in Furness. Approaching Talla the cloud was increasing so we elected to climb above and ended up at FL40 above a solid layer. We stayed at that height until we'd passed the Lake District then decided to descend again to watch the world go by.

The ground, and sea, became visible again just north of Blackpool, to whom we were now talking and we continued along the coast with Southport and Woodvale off to our left.

Wallasey is inside the Liverpool Control Zone. Unusually our request for zone transit was approved so we were able to cross the Mersey with views of Liverpool off to our left and over fly Birkenhead where the VOR is situated. On leaving the Liverpool Zone to the south it is only a short distance to Hawarden, the British Aerospace airfield at Chester. So we needed to be fairly snappy with frequency changes as our track took us directly overhead.

After Hawarden our track took us through the Shawbury MATZ, closed at the time of day we went though, so just a courtesy call to Slep to tell them we were over flying and then after passing the Wrekin, a 1300 ft hill near Telford, we could monitor Gloucester's frequency. Picked up Pete Dunkley flying with Jamie Towns - so that proved the instructing plan was still working.

From Telford we fly southeast passing the Cleve Hills, routing west of Worcester and over Malvern before arriving at Gloucester.

So 3 days, 10 hours flying and new territory for all and the weather turned out better than expected. The only disadvantage is that you can't get duty free if you cross the Scottish border from England!