Bob & Carol Howes Transcript

So my name is Jennifer d'Alton. I'm a director of the British Balloon Museum and Library, and I'm really delighted to be talking to Bob and Carol Howes, who have been ballooning for ages, but building balloons too, and they've written the handbook of how to fly, how to build out everything.
So thank you both very much.
So tell me, how did you get into ballooning?

Bob Howes
It all started when our daughter, who was probably about two years old, I guess, was being looked after by a neighbour, and to keep her occupied, she'd given her an old Habitat magazine, and daughter was tearing pages out like you do. And one page she tore out, had a model of a hot air balloon that you could send for made in tissue paper.
We thought, oh, that should be fun. The kids would enjoy that.
So we sent for it. That was the beginning of the rot.

How long ago was that?

Bob Howes
It was 19 - well, probably 1973.
Yes, yes, yes.

Bob Howes
It was fairly, fairly soon followed up by a local Carnival in St Neots in Bedfordshire, where there was going to be a hot air balloon ascension. And we thought, Oh, we've got to go and see this.
And there was a very ancient Tim Godfrey
with his balloon, and we were thoroughly taken with it, and so were the children.
We tried to chase him after he'd taken off from the arena, but we didn't have a clue, and we lost him quite quickly.
But that was it, followed some weeks later by a small advertisement in the Sunday Express, which was advertising and balloon meet down at Cirencester.
We thought, well, that sounds fun.
And then we thought, hang on, we've got two very young children, Cirencester is a long way from here.
We can't possibly go together anyway.
So Carol and her sister disappeared for the day on the Saturday, and I and my father disappeared for the day on Sunday.
Passing like ships in the night,
No storytelling or anything as to what had happened because we didn't really see each other in between time.
And there, we were very fortunate that they flew both days, so we got to see balloons in action.
Got quite close to them too, which was very exciting for us.
And the outcome of that meeting was that an open invitation was given to anybody that was interested to join the British Balloon & Airship club.
And so that was it.
We joined.
And this was followed some while later by one of the first copies of Aerostat, which, as you probably know, was a sort of roneoed number of pages that were sent round.

saying that they were going to hold a balloon meet up at Castle Howard in Yorkshire and it offered free camping.
And as camping was the only holidays we could afford then, we thought, free camping, this has got to be for us.
So we went and we spent 10 days at Castle Howard.
It must have been seventy-four, no, it might have been 73 -74 somewhere there. Yes
And we were camped in front of Castle Howard in the ground alongside a very early balloonist, one of the first homebuilt balloons in fact in the UK.
It was Jeff Payne, and Jeff and Norma, his wife, and us, we got on our house on fire.
We didn't actually see a lot of each other over the week, because all the balloons that were there, were very short on crew.
I think there were about eight or ten balloons.
They were all short on crew, so anybody that was a loose end, which described us, was grabbed, and became instant crew.
And we worked our socks off for the 10 days with all sorts of different balloons, although we eventually settled on a balloon each, I think, and sort of stayed with them towards the end of the period.
And it culminated for me, flying as the hare on the very last night of the event, which was my first balloon flight in Shy Tot a small brown balloon, which was well known in those days, and that was it.
We were hooked, line and sinkered into ballooning.

Jennifer d'Alton
Did you at all? Carol, sorry, did you fly that weekend?

Carol Howes
No, no, I was looking after children in the meantime, you know, he go off and I was babysitting.

Bob Howes
The time we did spend was with Jeff and Norma Payne.
As the week went on, we obviously were talking balloons, and he, having built his own home, and built a balloon, he convinced us that, oh, it was a doddle.
Build your own.
That's the only way to do it. You know,
We thought, Well, all right.

Really we didn't have much of an idea, but we came away fully saturated with some pretty good crewing experience, both positive and negative.
We saw things that we didn't like happening, and we learned things that we did like, and so on, and it was our topic of conversation for days and days afterwards.
And we stayed in touch with Jeff and Norma, who lived over in Suffolk, and they invited us to come and camp over there.
I think it was in their garden, wasn't it?

Anyway, I can't remember, but anyway, we camped over in Suffolk with Jeff and Norma, and Carol. Spent the days on the beach with the children, awful , and yes and I spent the days with a slide rule and mega sheets of paper and pencil designing or trying to design a balloon.
And because Jeff was working, he was a local constable in Suffolk, when he got home for his from his shift, he would sit and critique my day's work, and he would never say I'd done anything wrong.

He wouldn't say I've done anything right, either. But he would question things until I was convinced that that particular bit was right or that particular bit need some adjustment.
After a couple of weeks of this, we came home and thought, well, how are we going to do this balloon?
I think the very first thing we saw was a second-hand industrial sewing machine in a shop in Bedford, and we didn't know much about it, but we bought it anyway, and then started to hunt for fabric, and so on and so on.
This took quite a long while, obviously.
And eventually we found a decent source of fabric, and we bought all we could buy from this guy.

Carol is passing me notes here.
I can't read it. I'm sorry, yes, as I say, we drew up patterns.
I worked at a primary school in the village by then, and we used the school hall draw out patterns and cut out our material, really, because we only had a small house, we hadn't got the spread and a very kind headmaster, let's do that.
And then we started sewing in the dining room at home, with all the dining room furniture.
on the mountain, the mountains of balloon grew and grew and we lost shoes, cutlery.
We lost all sorts of things in the fabric, although we didn't lose either child, did we?
Eventually we'd got a gore complete, and so back down to the school hall with it, and we got one at each end, sort of diagonally in the school hall and walked trying to fill it with air as we walked a little distance across the hall, and it appeared to be the right sort of banana shape, you know.
So we were quite encouraged by that. So Carol continued sewing and I continued cutting out and what have you, until the last thing we had to do was the crown of the balloon, which was separate in those days because we were going to make a Velcro rip. And I can remember a picture of Carol standing in the middle of the school hall with the Crown wrapped around her neck, saying, “This is the only time I shall wear a crown.”

Eventually, it all came together, and Jeff and Norma came across one weekend, and we did a test inflation on St Neots common which was quite successful. I don't think we found anything drastic in it at all.

It got together quite well.
So then we had to put our thoughts over onto a basket and burner, and what have you the burner.
We didn't know much about at all, but Jeff had designed his own, plus he had a tame stainless - steel welder back in Suffolk.
And so I sort of pushed the burner assembly to Jeff and said, right, this is what we're after.
You know more than I do about it, away you go, sort of thing.
So that was underway, and meanwhile, I had to sort out a basket. We bought, in the end one cwt of cane from a basket works down in East Anglia, who had spent their whole time building normal baskets, as it were, shopping baskets and what have you.

And we got this lot home, and I commenced to build a basket.
I built the basket in about a day and a bit.

He persuaded me to take the children away to my mother's for a weekend.

But the basket I built was before that. It was a wastepaper basket about eight inches tall.

That was to be my task. Anyway, Carol's going away for a long weekend to mums with the children, and I was left at home with the with the cane to build, which was fine.

She went on Friday. It was a bank holiday weekend.
She went on the Friday and I worked on making the floor of the basket just a rectangle and finished up on the Friday night with some very sore fingers and what have you but was quite pleased with the result.
Fed myself, went to bed, got up the next morning, I couldn't dress myself!
My fingers were swollen like a bunch of bananas.
They were square in section, and I couldn't do anything.
It took me about an hour and a half to get my fingers working again before I could get myself sorted out.

Wow.

Another hour after that, and I was away working again, not a big problem, but exactly the same happened on the Saturday night as well. Got up Sunday morning paddles you know, on the ends of my arms, and that was it.
Anyway, long story short, I built the basket, and after a few weeks, the burner was completed, and we were able to get the whole thing together.
And we actually did our first inflation of our balloon, which was called Griffin, approximately a year after that Castle Howard event,
So it took us about a year to put it together.
Not bad? yes, yes. Looking back,
I'm quite impressed with myself, ourselves.

But how big was? How big was Griffin?

Bob Howes
The balloon was 56,000 cubic feet, so two, possibly three person that was stretch.

Jennifer d'Alton
What was registration?

Carol Howes
Sorry. Registration, oh. G BDWO
B, T,
whisky, Oscar,
Oscar. GBD, yes.

Which one say it again? Name,

B, D, W,

Brilliant, thank you.
Yes, now your first flight. Who was in the basket?

Bob Howes
That was me and my instructor, Jeff. Jeff Payne
A super flight, I must admit, I can, I can visualize the take-off .

We operated out of the car park at Old Warden, the Shuttleworth collection, which was our favourite launch site for quite a long while, actually and quite a few months later,
I eventually got my pilot's licence, which was done mostly in Jeff's balloon, because I was actually training with Jeff before we'd completed Griffin. So most of it was done in in in his balloon Shoestring.
But once my balloon was up and running, then we tended to use mine.

That was the beginning of what we did.

Can I just say it up until the point we'd finished a balloon, I had never been in a balloon. I'd agreed to build it but had never flown.

When was your first flight? Then Carol,

Carol Howes
that was in, that was at Weston Park. In Contrary Mary which was another home built that belonged to Brian Ribbons.

I'm just flicking through, 1975 September, 75 and so Brian was your pilot. Brian Ribbans was - no actually, he was, he was still cleaning. Then I just wrote Colin Rudell was the p1 and it was at a balloon meet at Weston Park, a BBAC meet at Weston Park.
And again, that was sponsored by The Daily Express.

They have a lot to answer for.

They do, don't they?

Jennifer d'Alton
So you're also known for having AirTour balloons. When did you start making balloons for other people?

Because it's all the way back in March. I can't really remember. We've been at balloon meeting. yes, early 1983 we started it, and we, I don't know how many balloons we produced even. Well, oh, there we go, twelve balloons.
Not very many, really,

Jennifer d'Alton
For your dining room. It was a lot.

Bob Howes
Well, no. By then, we were in a factory at Cranfield, on the edge of Cranfield, which was part of the Airtour International Group. Um, group.

Jennifer d'Alton

So Airtour International, was that you both, Robert Pooley's group, of course.
And what happened to him?

He's down at Shoreham on the south coast.

He now owns what was Wilkinson's Sword, okay, but he has now renamed it Pooley's Swords, basically making Officers swords, Decorative swords and so on.
Internationally, really, oh, that's a rather, it's a very niche market,

yes, yes, yes,

Bob Howes
24:35
But yes, and that, of course, was, was after we closed Air Tour down that he moved on.

Jennifer d'Alton
So you were both flying. You obviously flew a lot in Griffin. Did you ever make yourself another balloon just for you two?

Bob Howes
I suppose we did, in a way, because obviously we test flew all the balloons that we built with Air Tour, but one of them in particular, which we built, which was a bigger balloon, a 77 and that was registered GBOB H, so you can understand why we sort of claimed that one, yes, which I flew up until, up until the mid-90s, which was or early 90s rather, which is when we closed Air Tour.
And it was owned by Air Tour technically. So that was when we separated from it.
Jennifer d'Alton
So while you were in your mad flying time, did you fly your parents?

Bob Howes
Yes, yes. All, all those that were, in fact, they were all four. We did fly all four. Yes, yes.

Did they think you were mad?

Probably, both fathers were quite keen.

Oh yes, yes,

Bob Howes
Our Mothers weren't, weren't so keen.
They did both fly, but they were quite happy to look after the grandchildren, who were more interesting to them. Yes, we actually flew quite a lot of family members over the years, although we did have one restriction, and that was that no family member could fly until they could see, standing in the basket, over the rim of the basket.

We did that too. Yes, yes.

Bob Howes
And my youngest daughter actually flew as a stowaway the first time she had her flight, a change of passenger and she hopped in at the back. When I did, I didn't know.

So all your hundreds of flights, have you had any really exciting ones and landings you can tell us about.

Bob Howes

Um, well, one exciting one that springs to mind was that we built a balloon in the same colour pattern as Lunardi original balloon. Oh, who was the first man to fly in the UK.

We built a replica of his in colour, red and blue, vertical stripes, and I was fortunate enough to fly out from the honourable artillery company in central London on the 200th anniversary of his first right in the UK. And for the occasion, we all dressed up, yes, and Carol was in a full crinoline and what have you. And I was in silk hose and powdered wig. And wig and we managed to fly, or I managed to fly. I flew solo out of there and flew across Battersea Power Station and down eventually to land on Streatham common.

Jennifer d'Alton

That's fantastic. This was a cat and a dog and a couple of pigeons.

No, no, no, no.I did have half a case of champagne on board, though, which, which actually sort of finishes the story, really, because I landed on Streatham Common.
This is very early in the morning, of course, on a summer's morning, because we had to be on the ground before Heathrow open for business, I landed on the common, and before I'd even deflated the balloon, it was a lovely stand-up landing.
Before I'd even deflated the balloon, I was surrounded by police in their cars.
And because the common was wet with dew, they were doing wheelies on the grass around me in these cars having great fun.
Anyway, we got the balloon down and sort of commenced packing it away. And there's the champagne.
And got the champagne out.
And as we were sort of getting organized, the senior policeman present was being talked to by his control room, and they were saying, Oh, check, check.
He's got a licence? Can you see?
Yes, he's got a licence check.
He's got permission?
And there were three or four statements like this.
And then it all went quiet, and we were all chatting about the flight and what have you, and we've got some plastic glasses in the bottom of the basket and said, 'Well, would you like a drink?
Well, we're about to go off duty, you know. Yes, lovely. Thank you.
And so the champagne went round, and then the radio broke in again, uh, 'breathalyse him,' and this very ancient, iconic policeman just flipped his microphone on his collar, and he said, Too late.
But the other slightly funny bit about that was Carol was driving our transit van to retrieve us.
And if you can imagine driving a transit van dressed in a crinoline!

I had to take my petticoat off.

30:58
Yes, you found him, though,

30:59
oh yes, yes, I didn't lose him.
Jennifer d'Alton

That was all right. Well, what you must have had some not so good landings,

Bob Howes
Power lines.
Yes, we got hooked on the earth line, on the top of a pylon, a row of pylon lines on one occasion, and the only reason we got hooked on it was because I'd got a basket with a plywood floor right, but woven sides, but a plywood four,
So the plywood floor stuck out of the edge of the weave by about an inch, and that inch was enough to catch the line as we frantically tried to clear this, this power line, but it eventually pinged off. And we were lucky.
We're also slightly lucky in that it's the only occasion I've ever been followed by a BBC TV crew on a flight, but we were one side of a wood as they frantically drove down the side of it to get round to us.
And the reason we got the power line is because it was right on the edge of the wood, and you couldn't see it, and we're on a descent coming out of the power, out of the wood, and suddenly there was a power line ahead of us, but we were off it before they arrived.

We did have another one that was quite amusing.
Carol used to retrieve before this was before that we had the transit actually, with our car and trailer. And she was retrieving on a local flight, and she had gone past where I was physically and she'd crossed the river, and I was tracking along the river, and I couldn't get off it.
Whatever I did. I stayed over this river, and I was desperate to land. And so she'd gone past and couldn't look because she was driving.
So she was asking the children, Is he down? Is he down? And they said, Yes, yes, he is. He is, but he's up. Pardon?
He's up. He's in the top of a tree. And I was, I was perched on the top of quite a large tree, but I was off the river. That was the important bit, you know. Yes.
Jennifer d'Alton

Did you do any flying overseas? Or were you mainly UK based?

Bob Howes

I got involved fairly early on with the competitions club, and so, yes, I competed overseas as well as sort of all around the UK for a few years.
Actually can't remember how many but, but the I also flew in Europe on a few occasions, because I used to fly as navigator with the JMB balloons, all right, with Phil Hutchins. And we used to go, you know, down to France and places like that, Poland, Germany.
So I got around quite a bit, which was rather nice.
And then, of course, competition wise, I flew in the World Championships a couple of times, which were both at Battle Creek in in the US, in Michigan, which was very nice.

And I flew in Russia.

I beg your pardon Carol,

I flew in Russia.

It was, I can't think who we went with
No, no, there was, I know there were several other balloons there. One was the London Flying Group or maybe not.
Anyway, that was really something, because our retrieve was the Red Army, and we had army trucks and young, nice young men to drivers who didn't speak a word of English, and we didn't speak a word of Russian. So it was quite fun. And so we would be driving along on retrieve. and they were singing the Volga Boat Song, is it?
It was lovely.
And I flew one day and I landed in the middle of nowhere.
But of course, the people came out from all over the place, and I gave -well -we taken a load of pencils and pens because we thought the children didn't get those very often.
And I gave this guy a couple of pencils, and he insisted on giving something back to me.
And he took his watch off the chain and gave me his watch chain. Even though they had nothing. These people were very touching.

Have you still got it?

Yes, I think it wasn't precious metal or anything. It was just a chain, and the thought as well. But it was the only thing he could give you know, it was amazing.

Jennifer d'Alton
So did you often split the flying one in one country and one in another?

Bob Howes
Well, with the children, you know, they, they weren't of an age that we could leave them easily. So it tended to work.

I did go to the world championships.

Bob Howes
Yes? You came to 85. Yes, yes, yes. By then they were in their early teens and trustworthy.

Bob Howes
But yes, yes, I think that was the only overseas. Oh no, we, went down to France. So you came with JMB, didn't you to France, yes,

I think my sister used to take them.

Tell me you've got two children. Are they pilots?

No, neither of them carry down the tradition.

One would possibly love to now, Sally, yes, the eldest one.
I think if, if things were right, she would probably love to, but, but she stayed aviation minded, because she's deeply into the air ambulance in Norfolk.

Oh, good.
So she's a, she's a volunteer there goes around teaching CPR and that sort of thing, trying to cadge a lift with the helicopter. She hasn't done it yet, but she'll do it one day.

Jennifer d'Alton

She will Yes, so you're both Norfolk based now. I mean, I know you were born in Norfolk, Bob, but Carol, your family moved there?

Yes, my family moved to Norfolk. And, yes, yes, we have a lot to blame Norfolk for, yes, I suppose put it that way, when we go down to Norfolk, as I explained, we go and see Sally. Now, it's always a feeling of going home, isn't it,

And do you think you ever will move back to Norfolk.

We always intended to, but we've got so much clutter and junk now, we might still do.

Have you flown in Norfolk?

Oh, yes, we used to fly a lot in Norfolk.

Bob Howes
Norfolk was where I did most of my training.

The Eastern Region of the BBAC was forming when we were flying.

Bob Howes
Yes. Well, we were part of the original founders of it, yes. So we knew quite a few of the balloonists in East Anglia very well.
Didn't fly so much in my area of Norfolk, but we flew on the edge of Norfolk, and certainly a lot in Suffolk.

And when was your last flight?

Bob Howes
My last - well,- my last flight as a pilot was in 2000 but I have flown as a guest a number of times since as a passenger, well, I've been given the helm, but technically I wasn't a pilot.
But yes, with my eyesight in 2000, I realized I couldn't see power lines that I should have been able to see, and decided to pull the plug there and then, because it wasn't fair to have other people with me when I couldn't be in full control. Or if I'm going to hit something.
Yes.

Jennifer d'Alton

Do I remember you saying that you built cars? Now?

Bob Howes

Yes, that's all happened since I gave up ballooning, really.

Quite a few balloonists go on to classic cars, don't they?

Bob Howes
Yes, Well, it was all part of the eyesight thing. Really, I was getting headaches and what have you, although I don't think they were really caused by the eyesight, they were caused more by the workload in the business I was in, and I went and saw my doctor, and he said, - and I've known him for many years. I've flown him and what have you. - and he said, 'Alright, Bob' he said, 'I know you, and I want to see you in a couple of months' time again, and I want to hear of the new hobby you've started because you need something outside work.'
And I was, I was working all hours.
Carol convinced me, because I'd been to a car show with somebody, and I'd come back, and I was all, all mouth about this car I'd seen, you know.
And she said, 'Why not build a car,' You know?
And the more I thought about it, the more I thought, Well, why not?
Let's have a go. So I proceeded, and spent the next five years, in fact, building this car, which was a replica of the 1920s and 30s, the old racing Bentleys. . And we still have it to this day. I mean, it's never been off the road and, but also, I've got a few other cars now. It's sort of a bit like, you know, it grew like topsy, you know.

Jennifer d'Alton
So moving to Norfolk, you need a garage, yes?

Bob Howes

Oh, they got plenty of big fields there.

Jennifer d'Alton

Oh, wonderful. And do you build cars as well? Carol, or have you taken it on?

No, I was quite happy for him to build this car, but I did make one stipulation was that he put a heater in it, because I wasn't driving around the countryside with cold feet.

Bob Howes
It works really well. Toes out. You can melt the patent leather, you know. I mean, it's a good, wow. But Carol, did do all the things like the tonneau and the seat covers and all that sort of thing. The fabric work.

Yes, because we've, we've retained an industrial machine, haven't we? Yes, yes.

Bob Howes
And so it was ideal for doing that heavy sort of work.

Jennifer d’Alton

Do you ever get asked to do balloon repairs? If the people know you've got the machine?

We did that for quite a while after we packed the flying up didn't we.
I had the machine in the garage, didn't I Just working from there, but now it just gets used for mending deck chairs and the grandson's leather fancy dress outfit.

Oh, and seriously, making scrubs during covid?
Yes, yes, I was making them for Bedford hospital during covid.

A good use for the machines. Yes,

Jennifer d’Alton

I'm incredibly honoured that you've actually got enough time between you to talk to me this afternoon.
Thank you so much.
You take care. Bye Bye.