

Ian Ashpole Transcript

Now. My name is Jennifer d'Alton. I'm a director of the British Balloon Museum and Library, and I'm extremely fortunate to, at last, find Ian Ashpole to talk to. And he is, what would you call yourself, a total madman? He's an adrenaline junkie, I think would be a good description.

Ian Ashpole

My answer to that would be a person that moves quite well and quite successfully in three dimensions

JDA

That is so cool. I'm going to have every grandchild in the world listening to this and working it out on their Game Boys, not Game Boys on their Nintendos. So Ian, you. I know you for ballooning. I know you for filming. Obviously. I know you through things that you've done with Birdman, Colin Prescot, Mark Wolff and but how did you get into this?

I mean, did you see a balloon when you were nine and want to be in it?

Ian Ashpole

I saw a film called the Red Balloon, which was made by a French director, which was in black and white and featured the only colour in it was a red balloon. And at the end, the kid who lost their red balloon. The balloons came from all over Paris and took them up.

And the final shot was this child being taken aloft over Paris in a lot of toy balloons. And I thought that's pretty cool.

One, the French, in theory, invented the Montgolfier hot air ballooning.

And two, that kind of inspired me.

I didn't get into it until I met someone who you do need to talk to is Mike Moore. Oh, yes, he is. You must talk to Mike Moore if you're producing something on history.

Yeah, when I was learning Mike and I was staying in Don Cameron's basement in Cotham while I was crewing and learning to fly. And Mike Moore got me into ballooning while I was working as a newspaper reporter in East London.

And Mike was one of the very first commercial balloonist, him and Peter Langford were actually the first. Robin came along a little later, but Peter Langford flying Esso and Mike Moore flying BP. And while I trained, I was a professional kite flyer with Mike, and we, we

lashed a seat to the bottom of the top of the Land Rover, and I would fly Peter Powell stunt kites as part of the whole promotion, while I was chasing Mike and learning to fly. And my first flight with Mike. I've got the log book.

Wow was on the - my First, yeah, my first flight with Mike was on the 23rd of the February, 1975 in an OH 84 Cameron in Essex, and I wrote an article on Mike, and I got it published.

And he was one of the first modern day balloonists.

He asked me to crew for him. I thought, yeah, why not? I was only 21 and at the age of 21 I got my licence, and apparently I became the youngest commercial pilot, that was long before the licensing had commercial pilots, but someone that could fly a balloon and get paid for it.

So that was in 75 so you do need to speak to Mike, because he will have some incredible stories. You need to catch us before we, you know, before we peg it.

JDA

Oh, don't say that. My first flight was with Mark Westwood in 1969, the fifth of September 1969 so I beat you there.

Ian Ashpole

You did. They were the earliest.

And as you know, it slowly grew, became into an industry.

And that's where all the idiocy and the fun and the playfulness started because we had the magic ingredient, budgies.

Lots of budgie.

How much budgie have we got for this?

Well, this clients prepare to pay. What do you got? Yeah, they'll go for that. Well, we need new parachutes. We need helicopters, we need three teams. We need to rehearse it. It's going to cost 60 grand.

We've got the budgie Yay.

So we got to play and do it safely, because we had people prepared to sponsor us, and the more you did it professionally, and wrote up the paperwork properly, and you kept the CAA involved. You had to sell it to everyone.

You had to sell all the idiots. Stuff that I did, which was aerial theatre, it was just aerial theatre. It was nothing dangerous. It was just designed to put vertigo on a screen.

Get a client's name on the screen. Keep everyone happy, keep the CAA happy, keep the clients happy, keep the lawyers happy, keep the insurers happy. Make sure your pilots, crews and everyone was safe, and they all got the kudos from it.

So it was about having a fun time and getting paid for it. And it took a lot of

it wasn't rocket science. You just had to write it down as a ex-journo. It had to be in a very simple style. I use the Sun style sheet, not big, long words, you know, just keep it you know, this is what we're doing, who, why, when and where. This is what the risks are. This is why we've mitigated it. And you drop it on the CAAs desk, you drop it on the lawyer's desk, the clients desk, everyone, and they all come back. Yeah, that looks alright.

JDA

[Were you ever turned down? Sorry? Were you ever turned down?](#)

Ian Ashpole

No, I turned clients down. Did you because I thought it was a gimmick too far, right and unnecessary.

I wanted it to be quality, not quantity.

JDA

[The first thing I found film-wise of you, is 96 the Flying Circus, the Sainsbury's one.](#)

Ian Ashpole

Oh yeah, that was, again, just a real so much fun. Yeah, it was. It was a simple thing. We needed to produce 15 minute video. We did it here in Ross. We do most of our stuff in ROSS on Wye?

Because we're clear to 24,000 feet. So if we want to do world records or anything, and the big problem with World Records is the headache has to run out of steam by 12 and a half 13.

So that's why most of our records, none of us, and I've had a few, it's nice people doing what I did and breaking it, but generally we all try and break it by just a few 100 feet, because if we're filming it properly, the helicopters can't keep up, and it's all about, you know, giving the client value for money. So you've got to have the helicopter there,

because once you get to 20,000 feet, it ain't being filmed unless you've got a few GoPros.

So, and it's going to be simple, you want to have it turned around within two three hours, all back in the restaurant, having a nice breakfast, celebrating with champagne. Job done, everyone happy.

JDA

Mark Wolff was a helicopter pilot, par- extraordinaire, and he worked with you, didn't he?

Ian Ashpole

Mark is probably the best helicopter film pilot going, he's filmed a hell of a lot of our stuff, and I was instrumental in teaching him to fly balloons.

He took serious liberties with the helicopter and us.

We were filming in **Iguazú Falls** for Maxwell House. And we took two Maxwell House envelopes out there because we figured we were going to trash one, so we had to have a spare.



And the magic shot was, we want Maxwell House right next to **Iguazú Falls** and there were shot in film, not video. So three camera positions and Mark flying the helicopter, and we got out in the lagoon beneath by a motorboat. And then we released, and I had Lucius Peart our operations, marketing man on board, and I said, You happy with this? Luis said, Yeah.

Said, All right. Well, we're looking good. And so we drifted towards the falls and was speaking to Mark, and they're all flying around. I said, Look, we're getting the money shot. Now we've got the money shot, and we were literally 20 feet above the falls and about 20 feet away

from I said, this is perfect Mark.

What a shot came flying straight over the top. The turbulence from the helicopter pushed us down, and we're both going down the side of these Falls hundreds of feet, burners on

JDA

Bloody hell.

Ian Ashpole

Holding our breath. I thought, and I don't know if you've ever held a spoon next to a tap. Do you know if a tap's running and you hold a spoon, it sucks the back of the spoon in?

JDA

Yes, yes.

Ian Ashpole

I think there's an effect for it. But we were getting close to it. I thought, if we because it's a Maxwell House coffee jar, yeah, with the baskets much closer to the water, and if it started going in, we were going down anyway. We turned the burners on, and we ended up 1000 feet above the rainforest. No. And Mark said, I'm sorry about that

Mark. What was that all about?

Actually, it was more discreet because it was an open channel.

They said, Okay, I'm gonna fly ahead. I'll see if I because it was just rainforest all the way nowhere to land your old point.

Stay in the bowl and come back down and get towed back to the beach. Yeah. Anyway, he went ahead and went,

'Trust me on this one. If you keep flying at tree top height, I'll tell you when to rip' No.

All right. All right. Mark. Anyway, we were literally just a walking pace. It wasn't dramatic, you know, we weren't doing 10-15 knots. And he said, 'Trust me, there is a there is. It's a perimeter track they use to service the whole area. It's all there is. You've got to make it'.

And as we came over, just dumped, and he got this fantastic picture of hundreds of square miles of rainforest in the top of a Maxwell House coffee jar just sitting on this track. And we got recovered by but you know, he's, he does play fast and loose with us, but he is the best.

JDA

Oh, my Goodness me. That is incredible. But you've done some ridiculous other things as well, and you're a parachutist?

Ian Ashpole

That was integral on a whole lot of stunts. I figure if you're going to do aerial theatre, you need help to know how to use a parachute.

JDA

So where did you train?

Ian Ashpole

Training? I was flying balloons in the States for many years when Freddie Laker started the Sky Train. I've been doing the world championships at Castle Howard, and there were quite a few Americans came over, and I was an observer, just helping out. And a lot of them invited me back.

And I had heard Star Wars was going to be shown in USA before it was shown in the UK, and I'd done a season flying in the UK, and I had a little bit of money, and I thought, I'm a science fiction nut, I want to see Star Wars.

And I invited so I went to I jumped on a Freddie Laker SkyTrain, landed in New York and stayed with Brian Boland and a couple of other people. I thought, well, I can't outstay my welcome.

So I went to cafe. But what am I going to do? And it said, drive our destination cars to Florida. Thought I've heard of Florida. That was good, so I called them up. I'll go to Florida and I'll watch Star Wars. And they said,

We haven't got one going to Star Wars. Sorry to Florida today, but we got one going to Tucson.

I said, Where's Tucson? It's kind of a bit right of Florida. Okay, I'll do it. So the next morning, I turned up for an aging Volkswagen Variant. I spent four days driving across the States, arrived at the destination car place and signed in.

They said, yeah, come back in the morning. We'll sort the paperwork.

I went and saw Star Wars. Wasn't disappointed, went back in the morning and sorted the paperwork out.

And there was another destination car driver, and he said,

'Where are you from? '

I said, 'from England'.

'What are you doing?'

'So, not much. I'm just at a loose end.'

'So, well, I'm driving to Roswell. '

I thought, Roswell, New Mexico, that's a sci fi place, and there happened to be a balloon meet going on there, and so I got a lift with him, and I ended up at Roswell.

And in those days, being English and a balloon pilot was quite niche. So I was embraced.

Frank Ryder took me on board and David Levin, and they said,

‘Well, do you want to jump?’ Raj said, yeah.

So I went and flew for the balloon ranch for many years and the Windy City balloon park at Windy City,

yeah, Windy, Windy City balloon port. And Rosewell is flying circus in Orlando, and David and I set up the first operations in Steamboat Springs, which is where my skydiving chums were.

Have you ever read Richard Barr, Richard Barr, yeah, his probably famous one is Jonathan Livingston Seagull, oh, yeah, yeah.

But if you read some of his other stuff, the Reluctant Messiah, they're called the Bandits, but they fly, and they have an ethos that everyone should fly, and there's no snobbery, no nothing. And they keep their aircraft maintained to higher standards than whatever the FAA or the CAA, but they play and party hard anyway.

They taught me to skydive.

They'd crash their plane, and we were flying balloons, and said, Can we jump your balloons? Yeah, so we were our introductory, introductory stuff at Steamboat, establishing balloons over Steamboat and were chucking out skydivers, and they were a wild bunch, but some of the best people I ever met, old fashioned cowboys, and they taught me to skydive.

And I loved it, so I'd spend years with them, with decide, are ‘We going to ski this winter? Or are we going to go skydiving?’

Toss, yeah, with a ski this winter. Now, where are we going to go? Then, if we go skydiving, well, Z hills, yeah. What about should we go to Lake Elsinore and we just toss a coin, and we'd drive across the states and spend three months skydiving and just partying.

So we did bonkers stuff, learned to fly planes, went in zipper hills, but the ability to use a parachute comfortably meant all the stunts weren't dangerous. You know, I ain't got to walk across a tightrope at 14,000 feet without a parachute.

You know, I might do it with safety kit, but, you know, half the fun if you want to put something on at the end, which makes people say he's falling off. Okay, you got a

parachute, but most people don't do that. But it's still exciting. So it makes for better TV. So that's how that happened.

JDA

And you've got also, actually, as a balloon pilot, when someone jumps out of the basket to parachute, it's a different way of flying, making sure your descent is right, isn't it?

Ian Ashpole

Yeah, yeah. I mean, if you're in a if just one person's going out, it's not too serious, to be fair. David Fish did, did the best.

We set a world record. I think it was flying a 300 and about 16 of us jumped out at once. No, oh, I'm serious. It's, it's on my website, and I was still chief pilot of the company.

I said, David, are you happy doing this? Because I'm wearing a parachute. He had one too. I'm going,

Hey, this is, this is pretty serious. Even I'm I'm not really happy about that. And the pictures are stunning. 16 of us left the basket at once, and he said it was a wild ride, but he got it down and he did it.

So one thing, you know, chucking out one or two, easy peasy. You let 16 go out of a big balloon, and then you're landing a 300 by yourself.

JDA

Different world. So you've done .When did you start doing all these crazy things for Tessa and Colin and you were Jo Philp weren't you as well?

Ian Ashpole

Joe was part of our company. Yeah, yeah.

JDA

I know all your people.

Ian Ashpole

Yeah, no, Joe was there.

The first stunt I actually did was I made my own cloud hopper. Mike had a balloon 31 and I thought, well, the baskets pretty tame. So I made a sling seat and hung a Worthington tank on the back. And my dad came out, and he was pretty good, because in those days, we kind of had crash helmets, and particularly if you're doing something a bit dodgy when you weren't sure what was going to happen.

These days, if I need a crash helmet, to me, that's dodgy. I feel if you planned it right, you shouldn't need a crash helmet anyway.

So my father, who's a journalist, he affectionately took my crash helmet when I told him what I was going to do, and he wrote the words 'DIG HERE' on it, which I thought was very affectionate for a Dad.

Anyway, I took off in this thing and made the Reveille, probably before your time, Reveille, which I think was a Sunday rag, and I got Mike, Mike's balloon for Budget Rent - A-Car on a double page spread in a newspaper.

So it started with Mike, because my background is journalism

You think, Well, if I was reporting, this would be a great story, great pictures, I'd love it. So that was where it started, with Reveille and making my own cloud Hopper, before Colin, Per and myself put more technical ones together be fair. Ed Yost did it before me.

Ed Yost did it with NASA, experimenting with recovery systems for spacecraft and propane. Ed Yoast was ahead on that. But after that, you know when I did two seasons with Mike Moore and then Colin started with Tessa, and he asked Mike Moore, do you know anyone that might want to join the company?

And because he didn't have much work for me so well, Ian Ashpole, so I went and joined Colin and Tessa and Julian Nott and then Robin, then Joe, and then numerous people, and I ended up chief pilot of the company and on the board, and we had a riot, and we actually employed a lot of people and gave a lot of people a lot of fun. And yeah,

JDA

[Absolutely. And you mentioned your father. Did you ever fly your parents in a balloon?](#)

Ian Ashpole

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I flew them in balloons and planes. Yeah, absolutely,

JDA

[They didn't think you were mad?](#)

Ian Ashpole

No, well, my dad, you know, we used to fly model airplanes as kids and build kites, and he learned to fly, and I'd go over to the Aero Club at Stapleford, and on a Sunday afternoon while he was learning to fly. And, yeah, it was flying was always, always part of it was always there.

JDA

So what was your what was your most favourite stunt or event that you actually participated in over the years? Have you got a favourite?

Ian Ashpole

They were all incredibly good with great people. The main thing is, I had my people.

My number one go to when I knew it had to be done would be Chris Dunkley, oh yes, if you want to have a good chat with someone, Chris is amazing.

But Chris would be my coach, but I don't want to separate them, because I've had great times with Richard Turnbull, huge history going back with Richard, they're all different. Richard. Lenny Vaughan, Trish Watkins, Sue Carden, we've worked with all of them.

They are all so professional. I could trust them anything.

But if I get Chris and Chris 'Alright, boy, let's do it. Okay, come on'.

No, yeah, come on. So Chris, you had to be very careful with because he would go for it. But my word, he would make it happen.

But all of them were so professional. But I would say the funnest one was the very first time, because visually, it looked amazing that the tightrope walks were great.

Richard and I did the first one. We were at Leeds Castle, and the only reason it came about is because they were having a competition, and the French had been doing it for ages, where you tie some tissue paper between two balloons, and you had to fly away and see how long you could keep the tissue paper before it broke.

I said, Richard, it's rubbish. Why don't we cheat?

Listen, we've got some tether rope here. Let's just quick. Put a couple of quick releases on and we'll just fly.

Said, Yeah, I'm in right. So we took off, and we're just flying around the rotation vents. And how are they doing that? This is easy. You know, once you have the tension between the two balloons, it flies like a unit, and so you landed.

Well, that was uneventful because we didn't know what was going to happen. Hey, this gives me an idea.

I reckon we could stick a tightrope or a tightrope bar between these two. And so from there, we did the first one, and then we did bungee jumps, whatever.

But I think the most memorable to be fair at Christmas still goes back to the red balloon, French film where the child gets taken away in a black and white movie, hanging on balloons. And I think that had an effect on me.

Anyone one Christmas as a balloonist, we all have helium, lots of helium, and so Christmas, I'd blow up lots of balloons. And champagne, one of our clients, we had lots of good balloons.

Wonder how much that can lift? So I put a weight on it. Hmm, that's quite a lot.

So I dropped the calculator out. Yeah, I reckon 600 of those we can fly.

JDA

How many? 600!

Ian Ashpole

A lot of people do it with met balloons and everything, but I don't think many have done it with toy balloons. I understand why, because it can have problems, which is why I think the very first one, when I was selling it for the first time, we were at Ross on Wye, and I got a balloon company who were doing a lot of our balloon inflations, and they spent the day blowing them up.

Chris Dunkley, my safety pilot, I'm not sure, safety and pilot come in the same phrases. He's, he's the guy would trust her in my life. And I have,

I said, All right, Chris, here's the plan. I'm gonna go up with you and see if this thing works.

So to get all right, boy and I thought, we better make it look good.

So I'm wearing a James Bond, you know, white shirt, black tie trousers, leather shoes, parachute radio, the whole lot. And so we take off, camera people on board and, yeah, okay, 5000 feet helicopter. I think it was Mark flying.

We've got the shot. This is to sell it. This is to sell it to the client, which is what they allowed us to do. We do it in camera first before we actually say we can do it properly. So if it goes wrong, there's no comeback on the client.

And then went on up to about 10,000 feet dropping sand, and the helicopter followed me up, and I thought, this is really cool. Beautiful evening above Ross on Wye, where I am now,

JDA

okay, right.

Ian Ashpole

Let's make this look good. So I had my knife and I started. I'd got rid of all my ballast so it wasn't much on board.

Cut away a few balloons. Oh, that's good.

Now I'm starting a descent, which is good. I want a descent. This is good. This must really look good on camera. So let's cut away a few more. Ah. Now I'm going, like the clappers, back to Earth and then out of nowhere, because I hadn't thought about this all the balloons stripped, I had about three or 400 nylon lines stream. I thought, that's not good.

I've got a parachute to open this load of lines. Okay, flip over, and I looked, and all the lines were around me.

JDA

My God.

Ian Ashpole

Thought, This isn't good. Okay, how much time you got? What have you got the rest of your life to sort it out? So I went down into a head down dive, and by going into head down dive, all the lines went down between my legs.

So I cut them clear and open the parachute. Very clever, clear. I think that was the most exciting, because I learned enough from that to know how to do it properly on the numerous times I did it afterwards, and it looked good, bow tie, white shirt. It looked very Bond, but it could have gone wrong.

JDA

Oh, my God, that's awful.

Ian Ashpole

It was good. I'm still here.

JDA

And how did you meet your wife? Is it Whizz? No,

Ian Ashpole

yeah, it's Whizz, yeah. She was one of the few people I know who was born in ROSS on Wye. And I walked into where she was working in a news agent.

And I walked in with another good friend of mine, Mark Lissamore, who sadly died. He was flying in in the Mara I taught him to fly, and he was flying at Governor camp for many years.

There was a mix up between oxygen and nitrogen, and there was an explosion, and he died in that explosion.

But lovely guy. Anyway, he and I walked in and Whizz was being her cheeky self, and we both said, She's really nice. So yeah, she is.

I'm going to ask her to go flying ,all right. Anyway, I took her flying, and, yeah, the rest is history.

JDA

Wonderful. Did she become a pilot? Nope.

Ian Ashpole

She ran Wye Valley Aviation for many years. While we had an AOC operation, we were flying 240s, 105, and boy, can she reverse a Land Rover with a big trailer with 12 people. Skilful.

JDA

All right. So have you got any balloons of your own?

Ian Ashpole

42:58

I have three envelopes at the moment, no basket. I've got the green ice cloud Hopper envelope and the green ice bottom end, which God knows, Robin myself. Colin and Graham Elson actually flew those incredible so they were death traps.

But what we did in Mexico that time was pretty wild. So yes, I have a Green Ice cloud hopper. I have two lovely envelopes. I've got a 105 and a 77 both Agfa and my client gave them to me. I don't have a bottom end, but Dunkley has said, If I pull my finger out, he'll lend me a bottom end if I want to go ballooning.

But I like jumping into my plane and turning the key, really, learning was wonderful, and skydiving and airships and everything that happened were to die for. But I'm not as

physically fit as I used to be, so 10 minutes from here to my strip, getting in a plane and just rampaging around gives me enough of a buzz. Wow.

JDA

Well, if you ever want somewhere to put your green ice Hopper, we have two of them already in the museum,

Ian Ashpole

I'm sure. And Whizz did say, because they're sitting there doing nothing, we may well donate them to you.

JDA

You're a poppet. Thank you. Maybe we could persuade you to come down to the luncheon, which is the end of October. It's a Sunday, the clocks go back so you can lie in bed.

Drive from Ross have lunch with all the people you know. Listen to David Bareford. I think this year, yeah, they're just coming. They're flooding in. You're not a member of the museum, which is a real shame. But why don't I secretly send you a magazine electronically, and you can go with the magazine.

Ian Ashpole

As all this is slowly ebbing away, I'm not averse to actually having a last hurrah. So send, send me what you've got. We've got this far now, so let's see what we can do.

JDA

Okay, well, maybe I should say Ian Ashpole, thank you so much for sparing so much of your time, and I'm sure the minute we've stopped talking, you're going to remember all the other things you should have told me about so far. Thank you. Ian,

Ian Ashpole

Jenny, not a problem. And you know, if we had four hours, I can rampage and bore you.