

Lindsay Muir

Lindsay (72%), Jennifer (28%)

My name is Jennifer d'Alton. Director of the British Balloon Museum. I'm really excited to be talking to Lindsay Muir, who is a legend in ballooning, but it's also her birthday. So happy birthday, Lindsay.

Thank you. Thank you.

So when did you actually see your first balloon?

Well, actually, it was - I'm not really sure. But a balloon flew past my house probably in the early 70s. And it was the Bluebird toffee factory balloon.

Really?

Yes. Because I was not far down the road from where we live from the Bluebird toffee factory. But my real introduction to ballooning was at Bath University.

They had a hot air balloon club, and I joined the club had a couple of flights and just got completely and utterly hooked.

Which university

Bath University

Oh, Bath, all right.

Yeah, yeah. I was there actually doing a PhD.

What, in what were you doing a PhD in?

Biochemistry?

Right. Yeah.

Nothing to do with aviation at all.

No but it begins with a with a 'B' like ballooning?

True and Bath. Yeah. dabbings. So you joined their balloon club, what was their balloon?

The balloon was sponsored by Initial Services- . And actually, my very first flight was on the 21st of November 1983.

When - no really!

Yeah. And it was a brand new balloon. It was the first flight of this particular balloon. And there was myself and another person on board another lady on board, doing our first flights. So a lot of firsts on that day.

It was and just for anyone who's listening who has no idea why that date is phenomenally important. On the 21st of November 1783, was the first man carrying balloon in France. So the

Yeah, I think I mean, it was just a such a fantastic flight. And then I just had one more flight after that. I thought, That's it. I can't go into in a balloon without being able to learn to fly. And I was in a very good position, I think it was probably coming up to holiday time most of the students would have gone home but as a PhD student, I was there sort of all the time.

And I think what they were doing was lining up a new student or first year student to teach to fly so they can keep the club going for the next three years.

The first year student decided to drop out at that point. And I said, Well, look, if I can organise all the flights, and this and the other, can I learn to fly?

So that's what I did. And it's just a great start to my ballooning career.

Who taught you?

I did several flights with Oh my god. I have to look this up. Let me... Oh, got my logbook here. Find the right one. Find number one. Well, actually it's number nought. Now we'll go back to this. Karen Coombs, did a lot of my training.

Don't know that name.

Dave, but I did a flight with Dave Boxall, Andy Davey. Andy Smith, Andrew Smith used to run the club at Bath University.

Andy Evans did my check flight eventually with Mike Moore. He also had a flight with a flight with you can always read the signature 'My name is Mike Moore'. Ian Kerr, Oh Chris Davey

Well, yeah, loads. So yeah, you've got your licence, and you've got your PhD. So do we call you Doctor now?

I did go back to call myself, doctor, and I didn't for an awful long time. When Graham died I decided that's what I would do is to actually use doctor, and I think that was partly to sort of I've never called myself 'Mrs'.

No?

I was always Muir. Yes. Didn't don't change my name when I got married. And I thought that I could use Dr because I'm widowed. Didn't quite sound right Miss doesn't quite sound right. So sod it, I used doctor as an argument with the hospital at the point who treated Graham. And I thought right I'm going to call myself Dr. Muir. See if I get a bit of respect with this complaint I'm making

Oh, you complained?

So I complained But. that's another long story but Graham's cancer diagnosis came just before the start of COVID. And I felt that the consultant was being particularly unhelpful and we got really once COVID had started, basically I felt we've been abandoned completely. I thought I can't let this go just for the sake of other people. You know, I'm tough enough to argue, but but I think a lot of people would just sit there and let it go. Right?

Anyway, so that's that. Did I get anywhere?

No, but I'd made my point.

Right. Well, Dr. Muir, maybe you could tell me after you've got your PhD. You've got your ballooning licence. How did you go from there? Um,

Oh, my check flight was on the day we moved house. So I do all sorts of strange things on strange times. We what, we were moving from Somerset up to London. So the removal men came in the day I did my check flight, and we moved up to Surrey,

Graham got a job working for British Aerospace. And I eventually got a job in medical research. So I did that for about three years. But once we moved up to Surrey, we spent a lot of time we bought a second-hand balloon and we spent a lot of time going into balloon meets all over the place.

And in 1989, they introduced the commercial licence for ballooning. So I got my commercial licence at that stage and then gave up medical research, and went into flying passengers.

So effectively from 1989 until actually 19, about 2019 when I stopped because Graham was ill. I spent 30 years of flying passengers, but also spent an awful lot of time in between, I got into competition flying.

I'd seen an article in Aerostat about some of the competitions that competitions club have been doing. And all that looks interesting and then they were running Grand Prix series at the time and I went along to one of them.

I hadn't a clue, not a clue what was going on. I think the first one we had I think it was a Hesitation Waltz goal. So you could choose which one you will fly to when you get there. Drop a marker and then there was a fly-on. And because I'd gone straight between the two goals. I didn't declare a fly-on goal.

And I didn't drop any markers either. And then I got points and I was thinking so I didn't drop a marker and still got points. So what if I dropped a marker? How much better will it be and I just got hooked into competition flying at that point.

And Graham as well?

Not Graham. I taught him to fly. But he was never really into competition flying. He was always there as my crew chief. I'd hardly say it was dragging him around because it did involve a lot of Beer at those at that stage. So yes,

He was always my right hand man. And I entered the Nationals in 1988. And it was a very poor week of flying weather was just atrocious and we did two flights. And I won.

Ah, well done.

Yeah, I think I think there was a lot of grumbling from the much more experienced pilots this this first time and this newcomer had come along and won and a woman to boot.

But it got me a place to compete in the next world championships. And I just well that so the next World Championships was in Japan. I was way out of my depth completely out of my depth and there were times when you'd spent four hours flying and landing and you still got all the markers in your basket.

Having said that, the first task I did I actually won the task, which really was, it was just so amazing. It was just exciting. A great big learning curve all around the world. Now I've got friends in lots of different countries who I've known for many years. Because back in those days, we also used to have observers so there'd be somebody who was could be a pilot, but not necessarily a pilot, but they were independent. So you'd be assigned this independent person with your team who would record where you dropped the marker, when you drop the marker, and measure the distances.

So we became friends with an awful lot of these observers as well. So it's it was it's, it's an international friendship that we made, which still carries on to this day.

I saw somebody last year in Japan who I've first met in 1989 and whose partner lent me a balloon. And she came across specifically to find me all those years later, She came along with presents as Japanese always do. It's just - it's a it's a wonderful international community. It

Ballooning is though where ever you go .But you also teach people to fly, don't you?

Oh yes, I actually really enjoy it. I haven't actually managed to do very much in the last few years. I went out last night and did an instructor flight with a young guy. And it was lovely. I really really enjoyed it.

He is very keen, but you get to the end of it and you need to think have you passed on some of your knowledge. And either they get to the end of it and thinking yeah, I've think I've achieved something so it's i

Yeah, many years ago. I did some flying with Janet Folkes

Yeah,

I remember this one flight we did. And we were coming into land between some trees and I said, it'll be fine. We've got plenty of room to get through that , and we hit the dead branch on the right hand side and got an enormous rip in the balloon.

You were the instructor

and I was the instructor. Yes, yes.

She was a great nutcase. Janet?

Yes, she was she was yes. Yeah.

So when you first started flying What did you What did your parents think of you wandering off in a basket possibly made by the blind?

I think my father was always very supportive of whatever I did Mum's a timid person. And I think she wants us to go around and tell people that I was completely mad. Although I think there was probably a few comments about actually she's not mad, really. But I took her for a flight once.

Oh, we're out in America and in Battle Creek, and she'd come over. She was looking after my daughter Chloe.

Chloe was about 11 months, nearly a year at that stage and she was really there as babysitter. And sometimes she'd come out with us in the morning, but virtually always in the evening, and sometimes she'd stay in the hotel room. And I finally managed to get it to get the flight right at the end of the championships. And she was absolutely petrified.

She's probably the most frightened person I've ever flown. know like, Yeah, and I've 30 years of flying passengers. I've flown 1000s of people and she was petrified.

She never took a hands off. off the side of the basket. She did say she'd like a gin and tonic before we took off but so I will find you on Monday. But I don't think she would have gone again. But she'd certainly enjoyed that flight. I didn't take my dad for a flight once and he enjoyed it. Took my oldest brother he was another one that held on to be right all the way through the flight because he would said he was scared of heights. I still haven't taken that my second brother. Still StillStill.

And Chloe? When did you give her her first flight?

So she was probably about three or four. And we again were to a balloon competition our national championships in France. And they cancelled the task flight because they thought it was a little bit too windy. And I said okay, well we can go for a flight who wants to come for flight and this little voice said I do.

So she climbed on board and it was really quite fascinating. Because she was looking out of the foot hole. And she hadn't seen most of these things from above. So thereshe was and I think I'd her vocabulary wasn't brilliant. And she said what are those pointy things down there?

And to this day, I don't know if she was talking about water towers. Or she was talking about trees seen from above.

When you are three, things are different.

Yeah, yeah, that's right. So but she went on, when she's now a pilot the competition pilot as well. And an air traffic controller. So I didn't put her off.

You have been flying people for quite some time now commercially, have you had any moments which you thought were really weird or exciting?

I've had the odd flight where I think oh, maybe I shouldn't have taken off in the first place.

I tend to sort of err a lot on the cautious side when I'm flying passengers. Because what you really don't know is what their physical ability is anything if you stand there and say Is everybody okay? Has everybody Anybody got any medical complaints?

They won't tell you because they don't want to be denied the flight. So you almost have to work on the assumption that there may be somebody with an issue on board. I did cancel a flight two or three years ago even though it looked fine.

The forecast was perfectly good, but when I let a balloon off, it went off very fast. And after a couple of test balloons, I decided we're not going to fly and explain why.

And then two people came up to me afterwards and said, thank you very much for that. One of them had bone cancer, and one of them had a brain tumour. And I was thinking, right, well there we go.

Um, it backs up my decision not to fly in the first place because if we'd have had a fast drag landing, you don't know what would have happened. Yes, I've had some lovely flights with passengers. You really don't know who's going to be on board with you, you know.

I had a fast jet pilot fly me with one day and I put a balloon into quite a small space and he was just so impressed. 'God I didn't know you could do that.' Yeah, see?

You have made a lot of flights with just you and your own balloon and lots of flights with passengers, have any have any of them been incredibly dramatic?

I've got a lot really, there is couple of really special ones. I did a flight "we had the World Air Games were held in Dubai in I think it was 2014. And at the end of the competition the organisers said we have got permission to fly from the World Islands because they're owned by the Sheikh.

Access is is not open to anybody, but they got permission to do this. So the idea was we would fly from the World islands back to the mainland. They had to get special landing boats to get the Retrieve Vehicles across, so it was quite a performance to get the vehicles across there and then they also had to get some back onto mainland to retrieve the balloons once we had all taken off, and actually it was very windy.

This this these islands are in the middle of the Persian Gulf, not in the middle but you know what I mean, they're out the Persian Gulf. It was the middle of the afternoon, hot day, one hell of a sea breeze blowing.

And the event director said right we've got permission to climb a bit high and we've got permission to climb up to 3000 feet. Bearing in mind the main airport is not very far away,

granted with extra height so we could climb to get some left to go inland. Because the wind at the time was blowing parallel with the coast on the surface.

I mean, what the organisers then also asked is would it be possible to come and land on the parachute drop zone after the end of the closing ceremony! That now the parachute drop zone is a little sort of peninsula of land that sticks out the Persian Gulf and I would say it's no more than a kilometre in area. It had a whole load of marquees on it.

There's the runway of the little airport that's there and lots of spectators and then think that's a tiny place. It's difficult maybe beginning to drop a marker but to fly to there and land on there is asking something but Okay,

Well we'll take off and see what happens. And as I think out of the 30 or 40 balloons that went over to the island, probably only half decided they would have a go at it. And out of that probably only .. there were several who couldn't physically get the balloon off the ground because it was so windy.

So Graham and I took off, didn't do any checks, just threw everything in the basket took off and thought right okay, we're now at 2,500 - 3000 feet, we're turning left we're going inland that's all fine. And then you look around at the other balloons and thinking they were mostly ahead of me thinking, Oh, God, they're going to the drop zone. Okay, I'll follow them.

So then you have to descend, you're going to turn right and there's this tiny little spit of land in the distance, and you think I've got I've got one chance of getting in there. And if I don't make it, I've got climb over 1000 feet to get over the high rise blocks of office blocks/flats to go into the desert and then land and it's we're heading towards sunset.

But I managed it, I was it was just so fantastic. I actually got on to the runway. There were loads of people there who were just coming across and grabbing all the balloons coming in and dragging across the tarmac. And it was just so exciting and it was just so brilliant. I think yeah, I think about it now and it just it's just fabulous.

Well done.

Yeah, it was Yeah. It's the best of the best way out of that competition. Anything. And not everybody made the runway.

Well done. Yes, I don't think I'd like to have missed it.

Yeah, I think it's one of those flights where you you could be safe and some balloons just took the option of staying high to start with, going inland and landing safely but this competition pilot in my in me just said right I'm gonna follow everybody else and give it a go. But say to get it right was just so so wonderful.

And I rang up my crew and said I'm on, Chloe was my daughter was crewing for me. And I called her up and said, you know, we're on the drop zone we find a sigh of relief because then they didn't have to disappear into the desert to try and find me in the dark.

This is one of the very skilful things. I mean, you're known as a very skilful pilot. And that is just one of the examples. But there must have been like all of us a really bad decision that you've made until I didn't want to land there.

Yeah, I'm just flying some passengers one day and I'd push, I think I'd pushed it a little bit too much. There were showers around but I thought we're okay we're in there. I've got a good enough gap here. And I'll land as soon as I can, and I couldn't find any placeto land and all of a sudden, I found I was being sucked up into a cloud!

And I'm, I'm climbing rapidly without putting a burner on. And we're moving fast at this stage as well. And luckily for me, downwind of me was a grass... there was an airfield, a small airfield. It did have a tarmac runway, but it's it was running right angles to me. So I had probably sort of 900 meters to hit this runway. So I'm saying to the passengers, right, I'm going to I'm going to land on that airfield. "Right, are you allowed to?"

But I just didn't even answer the question, because I had to concentrate 100% on what I was doing. And I'm just telling my passengers right, this is going to be a fast landing. We're going to be dragging across the field so you need to be ready for the landing. And then I think it cost me coming down really hard. Coming down really fast. Okay, right.

This is gonna be hard vertical landing now. Actually, I managed to round out okay, but it did drag a long way and drag across the grass across a broken up runway and onto the tarmac. And I wanted to kiss the tarmac after it landed. Thank goodness we we're all safe. It's fine. But we did go through three bottles of champagne. After that landed. Yeah,

Well done. So Chloe is now flying and she got her own balloon.

Um, well, I've got three balloons so she flies any of those. She's doesn't really have anywhere where she lives to store the balloons. So she comes up and uses, so one of the balloons is actually hers, the registration number is her initials. So it's effectively her balloon.

So have you got any plans to do anything wild or fly somewhere most peculiar in the future?

There are so many places I'd still like to fly, this there's a couple of I've got a couple of projects in mind. You know, the one thing I would always love to do is to fly across the Atlantic. Always want to do that for many years and want to fly across the Atlantic. It's hard to find the sponsorship. I'm not that sort of person who can find sponsorship easily. But if somebody said would you like to do it I'd jump at it. Like a shot.

Well, this is getting out on the World Wide Web say never say never. Just a little Facebook message at the moment. Yeah,

I did. A number of years ago when I did I was trying to do a 24 hour flight and a hot air balloon gets it's really difficult to do unless you've got a well modified balloon and I didn't quite make it. I managed 19 hours and ended up landing in the dark. And I'd like to have another go at that. That'd be good.

Where? what country England?

Well, this particular flight that actually two of us took off side by side, I was flying solo. And David Bareford flying in the second balloon alongside, and we took off from Kent and we flew into France.

And everything was going really well except that it wasn't quite quick enough because we want to do a distance as well but the weather wasn't right. Not enough wind to do the distance. So that won't do the 24 hours.

But what happened is, is a front came in and the wind direction changed partway through the night. We're now flying back towards the French coastline and this is back in the days when there are no moving maps. You're not really sure where you are at all.

The difficulty with flying a hot air balloon in the dark is when you put the burner on. You're completely blinded by the light from the burner, so you can't see the ground either. So you sort it and then you realise you're running out of fuel. You got , I knew I would run out of fuel by about 2.30 in the morning. And about I landed about 1.30

But I'm coming down and coming down coming down. I've got crew on the ground saying on the radio saying there's nothing in the field underneath you, there's no power lines to worry about and I think I can't see the ground I've no idea where it is. So I flew on for a bit longer came down just gently gently gently hit a tree so I must be quite close to ground then.

Hit the ground and thought right, I'll stay here and afterward the crew appeared we packed up the balloon and then the heavens opened and it chucked it down.

But it'd be nice to go back and have another go at that. You could do 24 hours flights on the right conditions in the UK. You can try it from I did a flight from England into France quite a number years ago. One of the things I'd really love to do is fly over the Alps a nice long flight over the Alps and that would be brilliant and I think if anybody said would you like to come to such and such a place? I would say Yes, yes. Yes.

Have you ever flown with kerosene burners?

No, I haven't. No, no, that was yeah, we're going back to Andy Elson now aren't we with the kerosene?

I talked with him about kerosene and how much lighter it is to fly with and how much longer, thinking of your 24 hours. Have you thought about it?

No, I think nowadays you build a double skin balloon, and that just makes everything so much better. It's retaining the heat that's in the balloon. And what you don't realize as well is how much different solar gain makes to balloon.

So when it got dark on this 24 hour flight I was trying to do I had done a calculation just before sunset and decided that I'd got enough fuel on my rate of fuel usage to get through to daylight, but it got dark when it got dark the fuel consumption doubled and that I hadn't accounted for that in the middle of the day because it was very, very sunny day.

Why? I was doing up to 15 minutes between burns, which is extraordinary but it's in the dark, so it all changed and it's a burn every sort of 30 seconds not minutes, something like that.

Yes, you are flying with David Bareford who obviously took off at the same time. Did he also have the same problem and start moving backwards?

Yeah. Yeah, roughly the same time when he landed? Well, this is the extraordinary thing, we were near each other for most of the flights. And we talked to each other before it got dark and we were fairly close to each other. Then in the dark. I just completely lost sight of David just no idea where he was.

When we came into land. We were 200 meters apart. No. Yeah. I couldn't believe it. We took off side by side. And you know 19 hours later, we landed virtually side by side.

Good heavens!. Wow.

It must be something about David and I. We've done an awful lot of competition flying together and a lot of communicating between us as to what the winds doing on the surface where we're going at heights where the goal is.

We were reminiscing A little while back. I think we talked about the good old days of competition flying when we didn't have all the electronics when it was all marker flying at marker dropping. When we had observers, very different competition. And we did you did work an awful lot as a team. So frequently. Frequently it was David Bareford, Crispin Williams and myself working together. Yeah, good teamwork between us.

Incredible and we're waiting we're on standby for David Hempleman Adams and Burt Padelt to do the Atlantic at the moment. And as you probably know, yeah. I wonder when you will do it, when you'll do the Atlantic. Would you be open basket or capsule?

Well, it's possible in open baskets. You know, it's been done several times in an open basket. It's I don't really know. It's a very simple answer. I've done a few gas balloon flights and flying gas balloon is a very different beast

I bet it is.

It's there interesting things gas balloons in there tend to sort of find their own buoyancy point and sit there. So you don't have to fly them so much. You have to keep an eye on it, but you don't have to fly them so much and then you go into the Rozier balloons which is a different kettle of fish altogether. Yeah, I need to find a sponsor. You got a sponsor out there. I'll go do it.

Did you hear that? Anyone who's in? Yeah, yes.

We just wanted to be the first women all women's team to fly across the Atlantic.

That'd be very good. Yeah. Yes.

I've never really been a victim I think because my father was very open minded about women doing whatever. He says, here's a spanner this is what you do. So I've always just got on with things as a woman.

But I beginning to think we do need to promote ourselves more there. We're still in this situation in ballooning in that. That for many years when I was competing, 1% of the competitors was a female, or maybe 2%. And we still haven't got much above that

They started all women's events probably 10 years ago. Now. Remember, we were only up to about five or 10 percents of female competitors in major international competition. And I think we need to do more to push people to push women in sport, but not just in competing on the official side of things.

There are very few women officials.

Really?

Yes. So there are was a pool of about 30 international jury members of which I'm one and I'm now up at senior level. And there's only two of us, two women that senior level is no maybe one recognized female event director.

Oh, who ?

said oh, she's German it'll come back to me Sylvia Mindell. There we go Sylvia Mindell. We were trying to organise an all women's, there are all women's, European and World Championships.

And there was a lot of fuss about why do you want to host an all women's event because women are just as good as men competing. There's no physical difference. And yet, but the opportunity is not there for women in the same way.

So if you've got a family, it's usually the father the son that gets the balloon ahead of the wife and the daughter. So our idea was to run a women's event, Women's Championship World

Championships where the major officials that's the that's the the event director, the chief scorer and various other senior officials were all women.

We haven't quite got there yet because the funding for the event we were working on, didn't come through, but we hope to do this in the future is to run it as an all women's events with the key personnel in the organizing team or being women as well.

That'd be fantastic. We've got a female team representing Great Britain in the Gordon Bennett this year.

Yeah, yeah. Great. Yes.

Have Debbie and Ann, during that Debbie Scholes and Ann Rich for anyone who doesn't know what I'm talking about, and the year is 2024 because I know this goes on forever these things Yeah. Wasn't it a brilliant idea.

Oh, come back to you on that one.

Yeah, this is my friend. Zeus is Susanna Briand who is the chief scorer. And she she and I chat quite a lot about this. And we're getting Ally, Alison Odell involved in the whole thing as well. So there's a core group of women who are trying to push things forward for women women are fascinating.

I think that's incredible. Well, you have I can't thank you enough for giving me all this time. This morning when I know you've got a birthday lunch to go to. Very good luck on a getting sponsorship to go across the Atlantic or be getting sponsorship and for an all woman's event, I think Lindsay Muir Thank you very much indeed for all your time. Thank you.

You're welcome. You're welcome.