

Peter Sadler, Oldest Retired Balloon Pilot.

BBAC Membership Number 128

It appears that I am the oldest retired balloon pilot. My lifelong enthusiasm for airships and balloons began in a most dramatic way. As a schoolboy in the playground, the nose of the Hindenburg suddenly appeared above the roofs of the houses opposite. It was so low that as the nose disappeared over the houses behind, the tail had only just appeared. I can still hear the roar of all the engines.

I lived in Sheringham and sometimes saw airships from the Pulham base in South Norfolk, flying along just out over the sea.

Moving to Hemel Hempstead to 1948, not far from the Dunstable gliding club, it was there, after firstly being dragged across the airfield in an open Dagling, I later qualified as a glider pilot.

It was at the gliding club I heard that a balloon club was being formed, the first balloon club meetings were held in the Cranfield club then run by Anthony Smith. He wrote a newsletter or two or three which became the future Aerostat.

Wanting to fly in a balloon, my wife and I would go to gas balloon meetings, and lifted sandbags down the netting as the balloons were inflated. My first balloon flight was in Wing Commander Gerry Turnbull's gas balloon 'Omega'. Don Piccard, (the son of Professor Piccard) with his wife and two daughters brought a balloon from America.

We saw him demonstrate it in Gerry Turnbull's airfield at Weston on the Green.

Some of the Dunstable members got themselves a balloon, the London Pride. A balloon weekend was held at the club. Anthony Smith brought his gas balloon Jambo, also there was the Bristol Belle..

Lady Gwen Bellew was in a wheelchair with the bandaged ankle after a heavy fall in her bathroom.

There was a descendant of James Sadler there later in the afternoon, he flew off in a hot air balloon and hurt his leg in the landing. He was never seen again among the ballooning fraternity.

During that day I gathered together a Serendipity Ballooning Group. First of all, a friend met at a gas balloon meeting, Joe Philp who enthusiastically agreed to join. Rodney Whitaker made 2. Charles Meisl asked if he could join and made-up the four required. he was our already qualified pilot and always made flights exciting.

Don Cameron made us a 28 thousand cubic foot balloon G-AZBH.

Tom Sage and I were both working next near one another, myself an architect, was working for Sir Roderick Gifford in a small group of five, designing Heathrow terminal one. Tom and I designed Serendipity's colour scheme.

After about a year of flying, Joe Philp, an extreme enthusiast, who wanted to use the balloon more often, left the group and bought his one-man balloon, The Dream Machine.

Those were the days of dropping trail ropes when landing, having cremation Charlies and their singed eyebrows The basket was attached to the burner with steel cables, not semi rigid supports, so on landing the burner sometimes came down and hit the occupants on the head. So crash helmets were necessary.

A single burner was only hinged to go backwards and forwards when first inflating the balloon on the ground, in order to get the flame directed either left or right the frame itself was pushed with one's feet. That frame was later passed to the Cameron museum.

When I made my solo flight to qualify as a balloon pilot, Anthony Smith was one of those doing the 'hands off' procedure at the take-off.

He was the pilot of the airship made for the film Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. The flights for the film took place over countryside between Turville, and Stokenchurch Buckinghamshire. I saw it on its first flight flying very high, too high to be of any use for the film.

Other flights were similar height As a result in the film there are almost no genuine views of the airship flying.

A small group of men moved it about in a field near Turville when it was kept. Naturally I joined the group. Anthony told us that with increasing speed to make any forward progress, caused the airship to climb. Apparently its shape had been decided by a design team which didn't seem to include air engineers.

The notable member of the group had been a pilot of the naval small, inflated patrol to man airships during the war. He wrote an excellent book about these airships, annoyingly I cannot remember his name. He was most enthusiastic about the creation of hot air airships and was able to advise and help from their beginning.

The airship was kept in a field and watched over by Malcolm Brighton, a gas balloon pilot living in a caravan with his wife and small child by the fields edge.

Rodney and I frequently flew Serendipity at Fetes, balloons being rare and unknown for some time.

On one flight, Rodney and I took Charles Dolfus for a flight, and with great care making sure he was held gently at the landing.

Serendipity. After 12 years the balloon became so porous that it needed far too much use of the burner.

To replace it we had a three-person balloon, Serendipity 2, G BZBH. It made its maiden flight at the 1980s icicle meet from the crisp frozen snow-covered fields , with my wife Mary and two daughters crewing and retrieving.

Serendipity 2 was sold in 1990 and I became a retired balloon pilot.

As reported in the aerostat some time ago, a half dozen of us met together with Gwen Bellew in her front dining room and there decided a balloon museum had to be created, no one then had any idea of the extent to which it would grow.

Many times I flew thousands of souvenir envelopes for the RAF museum Hendon.

This came about because Group Captain Bill Randall of the museum and myself were for some part both on an aero Philatelic committee. These envelopes commemorated balloon events, such as James Sadler's flight from Oxford.

They were sold in the Cameron gift shop to the philatelic fans.

However as a vice president of the British Balloon Museum & Library, I am keen to know what is happening, and I am kindly sent a copy of the minutes of every committee meeting.

Peter Edward Sadler

the end

