

Sara Williams 31st October 2024

So hello, and my name is Jennifer d'Alton. I'm the Director of the British Balloon Museum and Library, and I'm really excited to, at last, be talking to Sara Williams, who actually got her licence a very long time ago, not just for balloons, but for light aircraft. So what was the first light aircraft you ever flew in?

Oh, that's a very good point. It was a Tiger Moth. I'm going to have to look it up, aren't I? Auster first, oh, an Auster.

It was an Auster, yeah, and that I flew in, you mean, or in, either I flew in, yes, really, yes. Well, we had, we had lots of friends. Oh, hang on, I've got a log book here.

And in 1971, I started, I flew in an Auster, an Auster J1n, I think, yes,

Um, did you have a licence? Then?

No, no, no, What year did I get my licence? I should have got that written down,

But you got your balloon license in 71 Yes, 71 you got your flight in and Auster? Yes, you checked out with Lauri Ryan in 1977 for balloons.

I remember it well. Yes, he was jolly good. Yeah, yeah.

He was a real character, wasn't he? Yes, yes. Didn't he live in a caravan on the side of the airfield? He lived on caravan at the side of Dunstable airfield.

That's right, London Gliding Club. Yes, remember all those as probably Crispin and you do, and he was there until he got too ill and went into a home,

Yes, well, at least they could look after him. I mean, you there must be a limit to how you could, how long you can live in a caravan on your own on the edge of an airfield, even if you love it. I think it was best.

David Body used to go and see him. and he used to ring me up and tell me how he was.

Those weren't nasty bits. They were good memories, brilliant memories. And when Richard, Laurie checked Richard out, and I think just before his solo, he took his leg off and threw it out of the basket, then hopped out, told Richard to fly on.

Oh, Now that must have been so disconcerting. Oh, goodness gracious. But everybody knew he'd only got one leg, yes, but he didn't usually demonstrate it. In that matter,

He was having fun. I think it was yes. Yes, that was alright.

So going back you after you were flying around in an Auster and getting your fixed wing licence, how come you got into ballooning? Was that through Crispin or through other friends, or did you just decide

By chance I saw a balloon flying by. I mean, back in 1970 something, was it? And I thought, That looks amazing. I'd love to try that. So I turned to Crispin and I said, that's what we're going to do next. And we're so lucky because our Auster was based at oh what was the name, it'll come. Bedford. Bedford, and we knew a lot of people at, you know, with aeronautical interests, yeah, and somebody, somehow, in Old Warden, an Old Warden where, oh, yeah, we used to go there.

We used to fly a Jackaroo out of Old Warden. And there was a group getting together talking about ballooning, and we thought this sounds interesting, and by complete coincidence, the meeting was being held sort of at the end of the drive of my old school in the pub, where we were never allowed. So I felt it was calling to us, definitely.

So we sort of got involved with these, these great, silly guys, and they decided they were going to buy a balloon, and Don Cameron delivered it to old warden one day. And the, these people have never been in one before, set off. And, you know, in Stars and Bars it was called because the the real motivator was a an American called Jessie Manning, who was stationed over in in Britain at the time, and we sort of all joined together and had extraordinary adventures.

You know, I would go fly, and I can't say that, you get away, did you? Don't you? Yes, and Crispin, with the children on board would follow, and then he gets so excited that he'd when we landed, he'd run across the field, park the car and leave the children there, but much the horror of one policeman, but I think the guy, the policeman was also intrigued by ballooning.

There were so very few balloons, then ?

Were there many people in your - I don't know, Consortium?

Oh, well, yes, it was going to be huge, wasn't it? There were 75 interested people.

Heavens

Oh, well, this is brilliant for crew.

Did they pay you something?

No, no, we didn't get paid or anything. No, there was a , - you joined the club and you paid towards the cost of flying and the fuel and that sort of thing, at three pounds an hour,

Wow, pretty good, isn't it?

Well, it was lucky, because we wouldn't have been able to afford much more in those days.

With two small girls, as well?

No so it worked quite well. And I think I can't remember how long after the balloon arrived, it was something like three weeks that Crispin and Mike Drinkwater grabbed the flying and got their licences.

Well, who checked them out? Then? Was Laurie doing things like that then?

oh, Laurie was doing things like that then. And it was Chris Chappell who, yeah, you know was we used to bang on his door at four o'clock in the morning and say, Chris, you're coming up. No, I don't want to.

Oh, yes, you are. I know. Yes, he did. He was very good. He put up with us. I don't know what his partner thought, but yeah, we didn't have any concerns about that. We were just concerned about getting into the air.

It is. It's obsessive, isn't it?

Yes, yes, yes, once you find it Yes, can't put it down.

Like Chocolate.

Oh, very like chocolate.

So the Stars and Bars and the registration, if I've got this right, was, B C E Z Bravo, Charlie, Echo. Zulu,

Yes.

That was a Cameron 84 is that right?

Yes, delivered by Don Cameron to Old Warden airfield, and then that was, that was quite, quite a thing. Wasn't it? Having it delivered? Well, I mean, you know, we assume that that's what everybody did, but didn't go on that much.

So what you got another balloon? I believe after that, what was that? Your balloon?

What do we get next. We bought, sorry, my prompt is here, because I can't remember. Yes, we, we had to move from Bedford. We were posted elsewhere. So we bought a share. Did we? Oh, yes, a Western.

Did you ? right.

A 56 Yes, AZUX, Alpha, Zulu, Uniform, X ray and so that. So now we were independent of our group, although we still stayed with them, if you know what I mean, but we moved to the other side of the country, or north, I think.

How did you end up? Why did you get a Western balloon and not another Cameron?

Second hand? Second hand.

Oh, yeah, I'd have gone there too. Was it very different? Did you find the flying system different between the two?

Not really, not within memory, you know,

yeah, long time ago, actually, yes,

oh, yes. So, so you had a semicircular velcro rip, semi circular. I've just seen in my head a triangular one, but a banana rip. Yes,

Do you remember those the ones you had to weave the Danish knotting one?

Oh, yes, yeah. Dutch Lacing,

Not Danish, that is something to do with bacon, sorry, Yeah. It's amazing how actually little things like that have changed, like having a scoop,

Yes, come to having a scoop. I mean, that didn't come in for a long time.

No, it didn't. I think we're talking eighties, nineties, something like that? Yes, very different. So you then were besotted with flying. You had two small children. Crispin was zooming around doing Airforce things. How did you get any time to fly and least of all this going across the channel with Renee.

Oh, well, that, that the Renee idea came up when we were at Balleroi, Antoine de Lane's place.

Ah, when you were at Balleroi.

Oh, yeah, Antoine de Lane's place, and that somehow or other, that a challenge was put out, an idea was put out. You know, gotta fly across the channel. I just been given a most beautiful – oh I've got it on - beautiful scarf by Antoine de Lane for flying out

there at an event of his. And we thought we might fly the channel. We thought Gwen was there. Oh, Gwen was there. Yes, Mum, yes. Yes, oh yes. An amazing woman.

I don't know what happened to Kathie Appleby, though I think she married someone.

I don't know what she did. Well, she went down to the West Country. Yeah, I think she might have gone to states, but she's come back from the States. I think she's, I feel as if she's down somewhere in Cornwall, because there was a, you know, or in that direction, but not involved with ballooning anymore. I can't think, I think somebody had met her the other day, not the other day, but, you know, within the last year.

Yes, oh, right,

So, but I didn't manage to follow up on that to see, see what, what else was going on with her. But, yeah, I think she is all I know about it. She's, she returned to the west country at some time. So she was alright, she, she, I don't think she did any more flying.

Ah, it was quite interesting reading the article about you three flying the channel, and you're described as blonde Mrs. Williams. Nobody else. It said Renee, who works for the John Lewis partnership,

But 'blonde' Mrs. Williams.

But obviously they know I haven't got a brain.

I don't think that's true.

I haven't got one

When you flew the channel. Was it an interesting flight? Can you remember?

Can I remember it was quite fast? Yeah, luckily. So it didn't last long, and we had, we were living up in Doncaster, and we'd had to drive down that morning, that morning, wow, well, overnight, really. And then I remember getting close to the where the balloon was? Well, no, we brought the balloon down with us, didn't we, so we trailed it all the way down.

I also had an immersion suit which I was supposed to wear, so I had to stop at a service area and change into this immersion suit, and that's the thing I remember best. I think.

Photographs. We need photographs.

Luckily, I don't think there are any. And then it was quite normal. Somehow, we sort of got the balloon out and inflated it not far inland. So actually, we didn't have much fail

safe there to be. But anyway, we inflated it. And the customs man came over and, well, he took our passports. I looked at our passports and and I'm going, I'm asking for a prompt. Did he do anything else make sure we weren't carrying any post?

Oh, yes, what we hadn't. We had no post, no letters or parcels.

You know, I thought you said toast.

We would probably have appreciated it, then probably a bit hungry, I think. Then we took off. We flew over. I mean, I took off and flew over, not too close to the water, and quite a nice height. I flew out over the aerial, didn't I Yeah, and straight over the top of the tall aerial and landed as on the hovercraft, or just beyond the hovercraft landing area, right?

That was clever.

That was le Touquet. Yes. It was jolly clever, I thought, yeah. And I decided to land as soon as possible, because it was quite fast in this ploughed field. Yeah, where the ploughed field? In the ploughed field? Yeah.

Why?

Because as far as I could see, there was a huge gully beyond. The field, and I wanted to get down, not into this, you know, I got across the channel. I'm going to stop now. Unfortunately, the edge of the basket caught on the plough, the rise of the plough and tipped over and tipped me out. And so it went on with one of my shoes in it. Now don't ask me how or why the shoe stayed in there, but it was so I was there in this slightly muddy French field, one shoe, one shoe, and a balloon over there, and presumably no radio or anything. It was all in the balloon. And so I wasn't quite sure what to do, and I did regret then not concentrating on my French lessons at school, because I've got to explain this. This is not, not easy.

Anyway, a lot of the farmer turned up and sort of picked me up well, you know, put me in his little truck thing and took me home. Took me to home, which I think was a cafe. I seem to remember, cafe involved.

I walked in, and I think he's rather suggested I might want to clean up. So as I was walking to the loo, his wife saw me, and she was horrified. She didn't know quite, you know, in this immersion suit or wet suit, which were not was not common in those days. No, no, no,

I haven't seen any in a cafe recently.

So that that was and somehow or other, the customs people found out I was there, well I don't remember phoning somebody.

Must have phoned them, but they could tell Crispin and the Retrieve vehicle exactly where we were, which I mean, you know, I was amazed about, because I'd had no contact with anybody, apart from this farmer and his nice wife who took me in

and gave you toast. Yes, yes. Where was the balloon? How much further had it gone?

I mean, obviously, burners are shut off and things, um, about 10 miles or 10 kilometres. It's in France, landed up in the village pond, really, with a load of firemen who got it out of the pond for me, for the pond, really, that's crazy, it it's a bit odd when you try and think about it logically, but have been all happened?

Did you get your other shoe back?

Do you know? I don't think so. No, not that I can remember.

But you were safe and your retrieve?

I was safe, and my retrieve was wonderful. And the balloon was damaged, of course, by the tribe getting it out of the pond more than anything else. And so we, we all got together, and we got back to England, and we went down to Frinton, where there's a nice wide green sward, and we inflated the balloon to see the damage.

Well, we managed to inflate it, and the damage wasn't that horrendous. But what really amused me was that the children, um, took collecting boxes around people, donations to the mending the balloon, crowd funding and we did not instigate that. We just had money.

Brilliant, okay, so you that was, that was a very dramatic landing. What happened to Renee and to Kathy? You were all at the same time taking off, at the same time,

We all took off at the same time Renee went - Renee went further south, much further south, right? I've flew for quite a long time.

Yeah, Kathy went north, and I don't really know, I don't think she had much of an adventure, did she I mean, I think it was all quite, quite straightforward. Yeah, you know, she landed, and her retrieve found her and which was quite nice, quite a relief.

It's a relief, isn't it, when you find them.

Yes. So you then went back and you got, you've got more balloons, but you've also got two small girls to look after. Oh, yes, well, so did they?

Are they pilots? Have they learnt to fly balloons?

Emma flew, the elder one? Emma, she got her licence quite early on. I can't remember how old she was, 17. So, yeah, as early as you can she was 17, right? And she did quite a lot of flying. She went after and during, I think, university used, she used to fly for ABC, Virgin- ABC, okay, because we were then living in Oswestry.

Oh, right, you moved.

Oh, yes,

RAF do move you there, don't they?

No, well, this time the RAF do move you but this time Emma was in Austria, we were in Austria, Emma had left school, university, left school. Anyway, was still at university, but she, she was, she helped with Virgin ABC was, I think it was paid her way. They paid her way through university flying balloons. Yeah, I mean, I think it showed style and determination.

Your other daughter, Amy, is it? Amy,

Yes, no, she didn't learn to fly. She's very good on the map and the retrieve and useful. Yes, exactly. But she she's too short. We did actually have smaller rigging for her, a lower rigging for her, but she didn't really approve of that.

And anyway, it was horrid because we kept hitting our heads because we weren't used to it. No, so, so she didn't, but as I say, she's always been involved. And, yeah, she decided not to be a pilot, but a brilliant retrieve driver.

So I believe that your mother and Nick's Pertwee mother are twins. Did he get into ballooning at the same time as you? Or was he in Camerons?

No, I can't actually remember. We used to do a balloon meet up in Eccles Hall, which where he was, which is a school up in Norfolk, yeah, which gave birth to an awful lot of balloonists or new pilots and stuff.

And, yes, he just got captivated by it. And then he, you know, started organizing these lovely weeks in France and trips to Thailand and with balloons, obviously. And I spoke to him today, it's his birthday,

So to help people who are listening, who no idea when this is, it is November? Is he still flying?

No, no, he's is - it's not very convenient. He did a lot of flying in Thailand, but he's, he's, I don't think he's fit enough. He's not agile enough now, yeah,

So you were up in Oswestry, which RAF station was Crispin attached to then?

Thunder and Colt. We'd left it for free and Thunder and Colt,

All right, so you were a balloon widow, really? Properly.

Properly, yes, yes. But actually, I was still having to earn the money by taking the balloon round to all the shows. Yes, that's that's what I did when Crispin was in the Air Force, because we needed a balloon, and he needed a balloon to fly in competitions, we had to earn it.

So we got, how many? We got Leed's and Holbert Building Society, which was Ghost, Ghost, yeah, and English Rose we got English Rose kitchens first, right? English Rose there's a complicated story about Crispin sent. No, you don't need to taking somebody up to London, rescuing them, and through that contact came English Rose kitchens.

But it was a little a little bit more complicated that, and things were never simple. But English Rose came, Leeds and Holbeck, building society came. What else came, and then the really glamorous Domestos.

Oh, be still my beating heart

Yes, well, you gotta take it, don't you, yes. And to follow that, we had NALGO, which is the National Wait a minute Association of Local Government offices, the National Association of Local Government offices.

So you were flying these for Thunder and Colt? Were you?

No, no, I was flying NALGO, or we were, should I say? For NALGO the union, private enterprise on their behalf, or my behalf, and they wanted a balloon taken around to the agricultural shows and various rallies and things.

I must admit, I did draw the line at going to a ban the bomb rally while Crispin with the balloon, while Crispin was in the Air Force, a tad tricky.

You were therefore your own little commercial setup. Did you have a name, what was, what did you fly under?

CNS Williams. CNS Williams, yes,

Makes it nice and snappy. Eh?

Yeah, absolutely right. Not snappy.

So how long did that go on for or is it still going on?

No, no, not, not, not like that, but it is for the commercial balloons. We needed to have an operating company if, if you see what I mean, so that what would have been, I can't remember what we've been flying recently commercially.

We haven't really, no, just go over it. Yes, yes. So we, we opt out, opt out of that. But Crispin, of course, when he was in the Air Force, shouldn't really have another means of employment. So, of course...

He did it for nothing. Bless his heart.

No, I did it and he did it for nothing. Yes, you're right,

So, but your husband has always been a very competitive pilot, did you take part in competition flying the two of you?

I didn't take part in competition flying, but I was in Oh, except in Japan, yes, because I was always busy rushing around on the ground trying to catch up with, yeah, keep, keep the the pilot in the air. But I did fly a couple of times with ladies things in Japan in 1991.

Oh, wow.

It was that was that they were lovely. They made such a fuss of you. It was good. But

Did they supply you with crew and retrieves and things? Yes, so the whole Japanese setup was built for foreign flyers. Was it?

Well, they accommodated the lady flyers. There weren't many Japanese lady flyers. But when, when we got there, the crew spoke the language at least. Yes, and had some English as well.

So you just bowed a lot and pointed.

Yes, yes, that's about right, yes, and we had a, what was she called, little little hen. Little Hen. We had a lovely Japanese lady who came out with me and with Crispin when he was doing something else.

And we had some lovely people out there. We flew in Saga and up in the north as well. No, it was a good place for Lady flyers .

And they shipped your balloon out there, or did you have to do it yourselves?

Well, we actually had to pack it up. I don't remember actually paying for it.

Oh, nice. We like that.

Yes, we like that. Somehow or other, they got out there and back again.

And so I suppose they must have given us a sub subsidy of some sort. I can't remember the detail of it.

Does it matter? If you have fun? You won. You won.

Yes, it's lovely. Yes, it was. It was a great, a great. It was lovely to fly in Japan, although we had some awful thunderstorms and great, great adventures.

So when you came meanwhile, this is going back to 90s, early 90s, so you've been flying for quite a long time then, so you're very experienced.

Oh, absolutely.

Had you thought about teaching, about being an instructor?

No, I haven't. I'm not very good at getting the idea across. I don't think I should have done really, but we got, we got enough instructors in the in the family, yeah, making me feel guilty.

No, I didn't mean to do that. No, I just think all the things you've done totally amazing to do commercial ballooning for that long.

Yeah,

So to subsidize your husband's play time in the Air Force.

Yes.

Superb. So, and how you - when was your last flight? Are you still flying?

Not as a P - as a pilot? Yeah.

So when was your last P1 then?

Oh, a long time ago. I think.

Was it a goodie? Can you remember?

Not a - was it a special? I can't remember. We can't remember my - my secretary here is looking it up in the in my log book, your log book ran out in 2000 ran out in 2000 .Havent I got another one? Okay, I think I would probably stop flying P1 in about 2000 which

So you've been flying balloons for quite a long time. Yes, what did your parents think? Did they approve of you dashing off and flying airplanes and then balloons with baskets made by the blind, or what?

My father would have been delighted, because it was because, when he died, he left me initially £1,000 back in 1972, something like that.

Wow, it's a lot of money. Then!

Well, yes, and we weren't in a position to put a deposit on a house, which would be the most sensible thing to do. So we somehow decided, what did we decide? We would buy an aeroplane?

Oh, wow!

Yes. So from that and being involved with the private aviation side, we somehow used to go to Old Warden, and which is a historical aircraft place. And that was how we first saw a balloon, really, I mean, apart from the fact I saw one flying and I thought, Oh, we got to do that. That's the next thing we're going to do.

So we had our little aeroplane, which we loved, and flew around. And then, unfortunately, I was taxi-ing at Cardington, Bedford. Bedford, taxi-ing past a large hangar. And as I got to the hangar, the aircraft was caught, and it went over. So we were upside down.

You were in it what?

I wasn't actually p1 that day, but I was in the aero plane because it had to fly with somebody with us in,

Oh my goodness!

And we got tipped over, upside down and and I sort of semi-wrote it off, which was a great shame.

What about you? Were you all right?

I was all right. I miraculously got through this incredibly small window. We were, we were undamaged, but the aircraft wasn't. So that was sad.

Your little Auster was no longer.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So that was, that was, and it was a bit unfair, because it was a gust of wind that came around from the the end of the hangar. Yeah, was, was quite sensible for flying. But anyway, oh God, that was that was a sort of life changing moment. Yes,

That was your little airplane given- bought with Daddy's money. What did your mother think of you ballooning at every agricultural show going?

She was quite supportive, really. She was jolly good. She'd come and look after the children, or I'd dump them with her in Frinton and you know she, she was all right.

Did you fly her?

Yes, we did, not often, not often, no, she was too busy looking after, yeah – well babysitting

As for Crispin's mother. She didn't really want to go, did she? But we did fly her, yes, she was a little bit more nervous about it, probably more sensible. Yeah.

So are there any things you think you might have liked to have done, like broken records, altitudes or done racing, gone across the Atlantic, flown around the world, anything you think you ..?

I didn't think so. No, I like the way you say should have. No, I had no ambition to fly to fly across the channel was enough, I think, because back then it was really, you know, now, but everybody's doing it all the time, but it was, it was a bit bit strange.

Yes. First time is, yes, following up the ferry. Yes, I remember that and yes. So you and Crispin are now just flying various competitions around the world, or what?

I think we've just stopped competition, haven't we? Yes,

Yes you have run out of mantle pieces.

Run out of mantle pieces. And also, it's lovely when you're doing with paper maps. But now it's all gone electronic, or, yeah, yeah. And really Crispin's a map- man, yeah, that that's, that's where it all comes from, and he's doesn't like electronic maps. They're fine to tell you - you know where you are, but not what you want to do.

If you how to find Marks and Spencers, but not where the next PZ is.

Exactly, yes, yeah.

Now I totally agree with Crispin. I think paper map are magic, you can read into them as well. You look at the the contours, and you can see where the hills are, and you just know where the wind's going to whisk around there, because that was a high bit.

Yes, yes, that's right. Okay, you can get the OS map on your iPad or your whatever, but it still doesn't give you the picture, I don't think.

So what's next to your ballooning calendar? Anything?

Well, there's an instructors meeting on Saturday.

Oh yippee, and you're not going to do it.

I've just decided I'm not going to go, but I'm going to send Crispin, no Crispin is going and I decided that I didn't need to do that.

Well, I think you've had an amazing I mean, it's a totally amazing story.

Is it? It's please,

I think you're an amazing woman. I really do.

Oh, good. I rather think that of you too, actually,

Not me, I am really pleased that I've actually had this time with so many people, we all know that Crispin has won lots of cups because he's donated them to the museum.

Yes, you're never going to let him forget that they're all there, aren't they?

Yes, yeah, but you have been. I wonder how many agricultural shows you actually flew in. You must know

I could try that, try looking it up, but I'd rather not. It might be rather depressing then I don't think about where the next vineyard is.

Did you ever land in a vineyard?

We did once, right on the edge of a champagne yard. Wasn't it champagne? Yeah, I did.

You did?

Yes. We did Yes, yes. And we got some nice free bottles. And funnily enough, Stephanie Bareford, who is, she was flying on the same flight, in her own balloon, and landed fairly close and got all the champagne for her wedding. So this, this place, so clever, so lovely.

Yes, there's one good thing about flying in France, isn't it?

Yes, We do like that.

I think your story is amazing. I know everyone's going to enjoy listening to it. If you have time, maybe you could send me a photograph of yourself to go on it. I don't mind if it's when you were little playing the piano or whether you're being wild in a belle ball gown or whatever.

But if you look when you said ball gown, we had a wonderful ball. Did we fly that day with Princess Anne?

With Princess Anne, an Air Force do, or an army do? Wasn't it an army do? And my sister, who was very grand and had lovely things, lent me a wonderful white ball gown, which I have to say, by the end of the evening, was absolutely covered in mud, wasn't it?

Why?

Well, we've been outside. It was wet. Yes. To fly at dawn. We had to fly at dawn.

Oh, and wear this dress?

Yeah, something like that. Yes, yes. It was all, it was all a bit, was it Germany? Somewhere? We were in Germany, yes. With Chris Davey. Do you remember Christopher, Major, Christopher Davey?,

Oh, as Crispin is prompting me from here, he's saying Chris Davey tells good stories about across the Atlantic and various sorry, when he flew with Don, yeah, yes, yes, he's, he's very entertaining.

I mean, I haven't spoken to him for a while now, and I talked to him, he gave the museum the flying outfit he was wearing for crossing the Atlantic.

Oh, great, good.

That should be up on the website, as well as being a museum thing, yeah, but so you've got to send me a photograph, Sarah, and I am going to say thank you very, very much indeed, and I hope that you enjoy listening to it.

Well. It's been lovely talking to you. It's a great treat.

Thank you. Thank you.