

Mark Westwood Transcript

Mark Westwood, I'm delighted that actually found you, because I've been looking for you for years. And my name is Jennifer d'Alton, director of the British Balloon Museum, and hopefully I can hear a bit of your story, of your history of your ballooning .

Mark, thank you very much for agreeing to do this and how. When did you first see a balloon? For a start, I mean that must have been back in the 60s,

It would have been in 1966 . There was the Piccard balloon called the Red Dragon. Yes, that was owned by Leslie Goldsmith. And we, we all got a flight in that we were just the the original group that started the hot air were, we were members of Bristol Gliding Club. And one, I think it was a lunchtime sometime in 1966 where we were at the bar because the weather wasn't fit to fly gliders. And one, and Bill Malpas had been in the States and seen a hot air balloon there, and he was telling us about it. And we, there and then, decided we'd try and build one in this this country.

And then we found out about the Red Dragon, which was a Piccard American balloon and so we went to see that, and I, Well, several of us got a flight in that.

So that was the first time that we'd seen a balloon. So that would be sometime mid, mid 66 I think. And we continued in 66 planning, and I remembered we built a couple of small, not man carrying balloons to just test it. And I remember we went down to, I think Don Cameron and I went down to the mud flats by on the Severn estuary near Aust to to experiment with it, with this balloon. And I've recently found a photograph of one of those balloons.

I need it,

yeah, and so that was 66 and as we moved into 67 we formed the group. We got seven people, which included Malcolm Brighton, who offered to build the balloon, and was already quite experienced in various lighter than the air projects.

That was first half of 1967 and I'm just trying to think of the date it would be towards the I've got my log book. My memory for detail is not good. I think it was August 67 where we finally had the balloon, and we took it to Weston on the Green, where Gerry Turnbull was, because he was, at that time, he was CO of the RAF parachute training school, and one of only two licensed balloon pilots and the Board of Trade, or Air Board, whatever it was called, then had given him dispensation to fly hot air balloons, even though his licence was technically for gas balloons.

And so we inflated the balloon, and to our horror, it split. It's split at the top.

Oh

We then realized that Malcolm didn't possibly know everything there was to know about building balloons. It was only it was just a trial inflation. So there was no danger involved. There would have been if we'd taken off, and Don Cameron and I then got down to learning a bit more about the the mechanics of balloons.

I was, as well as being the mathematician, I was a qualified aeronautical engineer, and Don had a technical background as well. And although with the conventional pear shaped balloon, if it's completely static, there is no load at the crown, just it's a natural shape, and it doesn't give rise to any load at the crown, but as soon as you get any distortion, then it will introduce a load. And I think Malcolm probably thought you didn't need any tapes across the crown because there was no load there, but we then got loads of tapes across the crown, and then got back to Weston on the Green, which is when we started actually flying it for real.

So you had your rip panel. Then would be the Dutch lacing. Was it that panel?

Yes, it was. It was Dutch. Yes, that was before we used velcro. It was lacing we had on the first one.

I used to hate doing that up. We said to crew, do the lacing. Yeah, yeah. So that was Bristol Belle. Then your first one.

That was Bristol Belle, and we started off by just doing hops across the airfield at Weston on the Green, and then I , on the 15th of August, we did the first cross country flight in a British hot air modern British hot air balloon. We went for about four Miles and landed Bicester airfield. And that was Gerry, Don Cameron and myself.

That's exciting, isn't it? I mean, when you landed, what was your landing like? What were you expecting?

I don't, I can't remember. I don't remember many individual landings. I say my memory for detail isn't that good, and I had to jog my memory on several of these things by looking through my log book.

I just wondered being the first one, whether you can remember thinking,

No, I don't. I don't. I don't remember it now.

So after that, what happened then?

Well, we continued flying it, mostly from Weston but we also took it back to Nymphsfield, on the edge of the Cotswolds, which is the Bristol Gliding Club site, because we were still members there. And I think it was in November that Don Cameron and I had our checkout flights from there to qualify for a licence. And then next year, which would have been 68 I did my solo in February, flying from Aldershot and landing on the Hogs Back,

Really, yes, but there was just one balloon between you?

Oh, yes, we still only had the one balloon, so it really together. Gave everybody a fair whack. It was in it was in use just about every day that the weather was fit. And there's getting to be a lot of interest in it, and we were starting to get invitations to appear with the balloon. We've got to remember, in those days, most people had never seen a balloon in the sky, and most places where we went, it was the first time people had ever seen a balloon. Yeah,

You were stars. Who? What are the names in the Hot Air Group? There was yourself, Don Cameron,

Tom Sage, Bill Malpas, Charles Meisl, oh, Giles Bulmer and Malcolm Brighton. That was the original seven. And later on, after Malcolm had been killed, you know, he was killed, trying to cross the Atlantic, Terry Adams joined the Hot Air Group. So we were seven originally, and a total of eight people were members of it. And we started, we started to get to, I remember that in I think it was about April that I did a film for BBC Tom-Tom, which was a children's programme based in Bristol, and that was the first of quite a few engagements for for for the press or for television and things like that.

Did you not think about maybe making another balloon or two?

Well, we were planning to, but we had to get the experience under our belts first. And we formed Omega Aerostatics, which was Gerry Turnbull, Don Cameron and myself to manufacture balloons. And really, I don't know how I did my job at that time, because I was spending most of my time ballooning. And I remember that year, we had the first of the Nimble balloons, which, is, course, one of the most successful advertising campaigns using balloons, yeah, even if it was set to to advertise a pretty useless product.

And the first film was with a hydrogen balloon, and it was took place in Segovia, Spain. Gerry Turnbull flew it, and I was a member of the crew, and it was a

wonderful experience. We spent about 10 days out in Segovia filming this, one of the other members of the crew was David Archer

This is David Archer, the Ambridge farmer

No!

Yes. Timothy Bentinck, who plays David Archer? He still does. I think he's now Count Tim Bentinck, because his father was Count Henry Bentinck, and he was the producer for J Walter Thompson, and he was on the crew as well.

Did he end up with a balloon? Pardon, did he end up buying a balloon from you?

No, no, I don't I don't know what he did after that. I lost touch with it with him after that, but I noticed he'd gone on for it to a career in acting and become David Archer.

Good heavens. So you've got this balloon that you made, the Nimble balloon.

This was, I say, Omega started building balloons. I can't remember a rough, rough list of them. The early ones were, a lot of them went abroad, because they soon started to be interest from overseas, because they saw in their press about it. And we built one that went to Denmark, very early on, and another one that went to France. And and then there were others. The London Balloon Club was quite early on in having one. So we really started manufacturing quite, quite steadily then. And

Where did you manufacture them?

Well, the the actual envelopes were made at GQ parachutes, which Gerry Turnbull had been a director of, and they had long experience of manufacturing, manufacturing parachutes, and, of course, manufacturing the envelopes. But the other parts we got made in different places.

For instance, the baskets we got made by the Blind Workshop in Bristol. So really, we got the different parts made and just put them together.

I think when we were clearing out one of Pete Bish, he got a very early burner. And you look at the burners that you guys were creating then, and the burners nowadays, it's completely different,

yes, but the initial design we made did last for quite a time, or all the early balloons had a very similar, similar one. Yeah.

okay, that's amazing. So you have, you've got Cameron balloons and Western balloons. So when did you go off on your different journeys?

Well, when we Omega balloons had manufactured about, I think about 12 or 13 balloons. And you know, it was occupying quite a lot of my time, even though the job I had then I was lecturing at Bristol University, so it did give you quite a bit of spare time to fit things in, and we were busy building balloons, and then we suddenly found that there was another balloon being built that we didn't know about.

This was Gerry and myself, and it turned out that Don Cameron has started even though he was still in the partnership of Omega without telling us Yeah, had built and sold a balloon, which wasn't very honourable. Oh. I mean, if he wanted to split the partnership, he could have done so, obviously, but, but he went behind our backs and and sold a balloon on on his own, for his own purpose, yes, and that was the split,

Right? So you became Western balloons.

So we became Western balloons, and Giles Bulmer joined Gerry and myself in Western balloons. And then we carried on manufacturing balloons. We probably manufactured about 20 to 25 over the next few years.

Wow, and these were all made in GQ parachutes,

yes, yes. They still made all the envelopes. Yes.

Brilliant. What was the biggest one? Can you remember the biggest one you did?

Because most of them those days were, well, the size the initial balloon, the Bristol Belle, was 65,000 cubic feet. Yeah, and when we, when we designed the first Omega balloon, Don Cameron drew up the plans for it, and of course, the shape was slightly different. The Bristol Belle had been quite a smooth shape, yeah. Well, the first Omega balloons had the sectors bulbous, and that makes it more difficult to calculate the volume. Yeah,

Don thought that he was doing the 65,000 but when I checked out the plans, I found it was 84,000 the one that we had, we designed. So that's where the 84,000 came from. And then after that, we tended to do either 56, 65 or 84, so 84 was the largest for quite some time. I know larger balloons were made later, but yes, the very first one that I'm just looking at the list, the first one that Omega did, which is the one that went to Denmark, and that was 84 so it was quite a large one. But after that, we tended to go for 56s mainly.

Do you know if any of them have survived? Have the museum got many?

I don't, yes, I don't know.

We've got Bristol Belle, yes, and I think we've got a couple of Nimbles, Jester,

oh, I think you might have, you might have Patrick Furlongs, or any just cut Artesia. That was one of our early ones. I think if you've probably got that. But so many of our early ones went abroad and they got re registered abroad. I mean, one of the earliest.

We built this balloon, really, for stock, and Don Cameron and I went to France. We were invited to the Paris Air Show, and I flew them. And we were approached by this crazy Frenchman who offered us large wad of money to buy the balloon. And we explained to him that we had to take it back to England because we had a carnet on it. Yeah, you remember Carnets. They were a way of temporarily exporting where you stamped it going out and stamped it coming coming back. I don't know if they still exist now.

Yes, I remember,

anyway, he offered us even more money if we left it there and then. So I think probably time's gone long have enough vi for me to be able to admit this now, we managed to, I managed to smuggle the balloon into France. Well, what we did was we, we left him all the hardware, the basket, the burner and the cylinders, yeah, and I put the envelope on the trailer, and then went to to we'd crossed by Dover, I think, and I went back via Caen, which was a different port, and I arrived for a sailing just after midnight, presented the carnet and got the got it stamped,

yeah,

and then came on back to England. So that meant I got all the hardware to France, and then I put the envelope into the boot of my car and drove back to France with it.

What was the name of your crazy Frenchman?

Oh, I could let you know I've got a, I've got, I've got a press cutting of him, but I've forgotten his name. Now I can picture him, and that was re registered in France,

yes, How wonderful.

It's amazing. The things I've forgotten about taking balloons in and out of France. Yeah, very different

So, you did that. You obviously, your life is ballooning. MS, obviously with the university. What did your mother think about you doing all this ballooning stuff?

Oh, she was fine. She encouraged me to to do what I wanted. She always, always had done.

So did you fly? Your parents at all?

No, they didn't want to fly. They came and saw me fly, but they didn't actually want one to themselves.

Can you remember, were you always a manufacturer, or did you go and take people for rides, not as a commercial business,

but, oh yeah, yes, because you're all you know, when you built a new balloon, you to get on trial, and people came to crew for you. So if they, if they came to crew for you, you tried to get them a ride. So that worked quite, quite well, and you gave rides to friends and that sort of thing. Yes.

Can you remember any really wonderful flights, like flying across the channel, or flying and landing in someone's garden who offered you a Rolls Royce or something?

Well, I was the most exciting was when I flew the channel.

Yeah,

Which was, I think it was only the second time it had been done in a hot air balloon. Wow. I was approached by an American called Link Barb, who got some funding from the Rolling Stones, who were friends of his, and we planned to fly to France, and eventually took off from St Margaret's Bay, which is just north of Dover.

I filed an international flight plan, which I'd left with RAF Manston, which was, was still an active RAF Air Base at that time, on the understanding they'd only, only file it as a if I radioed them that we were on our way. So we climbed up and we were on our way. The weather been right, and it was pretty uneventful, until three quarters of the way across, we saw a very large thunderstorm brewing back over the English coast. Oh, and we started slow down because it was pulling us back towards the thunderstorm

Pressed on for a bit, but it was getting slower and slower, and it was obviously that if we continued as we were going, we weren't going to make it. We're going to get sucked back under the thunder cloud in the middle of the channel. So luckily, I had a little bit of meteorological knowledge, and largely because of been involved in gliding, where Meteorology is pretty important. And so I dropped down to sea level, hoping to find a sea breeze. And there was, and a sea breeze took us in, and we landed on Calais beach.

No, on the beach,

On the beach, yes, well, we came in very low level. I mean, we were about 100 feet to get the sea breeze. It was only way we could get to land.

And then it rained?

Well, later on it took, it took some time to get, to get there. But of course, the large thunder cloud has an influence over a 10- 20, mile radius, a really large one. And we got arrested by the Air Police, yeah, and luckily, the Calais fire brigade arrived as well, and they looked after the balloon while we were taken off to the police station.

I didn't realize until recently, I think I was, think it was Richard Turnbull I was talking to that they still have the police that a balloon is an object of war left over from the siege of Paris.

Oh, they have all sorts of strange things to do. Do it. There's some other regulation that you mustn't have -or there was. I don't know if they've changed it, that you mustn't have a naked flame when you land. And that was because, in the early days, after all, the first the first hot air balloon, the Montgolfier brothers, was in France, people flying balloons were landing and setting fire to crops.

So and in France, they have this. I don't know if they still have now, but then they had these, this separate air police, rather like we have a railway police. They've got air police, which is a sort of separate branch control everything to do with aviation. But everything was all right, because, you know, we had a certificate of airworthiness, I had a balloon pilot's licence, so, so there wasn't any problem in the long term, and the Calais fire brigade kindly took it back to the ferry for us so we could take it home because we didn't have a trailer, of course.

Yeah, retrieves are not like they used to be,

No but things were great fun then, because we felt we could do almost what we wanted. It was a wonderful time. There were lots of other very good flights as well.

I had a couple of gas balloon flights, and I remember in 68 I flew in Jambo, which was with Charles Dolfus piloting it. And one of the passengers was a certain Anne Lewis Smith, which I think your mother. I've forgotten that until I saw in my log book, because I got a list of the passengers. So we flew together with Charles Dolfus,

Another very interesting series of flights was a commercial for American commercial that I did in France Valley, flying over the Chateaux like Chambord and Chenonceau, And that was nearly two weeks of flying in France, and that was great

fun. And in the middle of that, I went north and carried out the first hot air balloon, modern hot air balloon flight in Belgium, really, yes. And there's a if you ever go to, I think it's Zaventem, the Belgian airport. There's a plaque there commemorating it with my name,

Your name on it. Blimey, we've flown in St Niklaas, quite a lot, but,

Oh yes, yeah,

We'll have to do that again. Look for a Mark Westwood plaque. It's amazing. What else do you remember? What else do you remember about ballooning? You've had - how many children have you got? Have you flown them?

I've just got the one daughter, which is Rosanna that you've been in touch with, who was the daughter of Christine Turnbull and myself. So she's flown many times, of course, and her uncle, Richard Turnbull, of course, still flies regularly.

Yes, and, and you've got grandchildren, I wonder if they've flown yet.

No, I don't think they have. I'm sure, I'm sure Rosanna will arrange that for them.

A very efficient young lady. Yeah. So you've got, so how long did Westwood Western balloons last?

I can't remember the exact date I started to lose interest a bit. I wanted to do other things. And in fact, in in 73 I made the decision to give up academic life, which, although it was it was secure and well paid, I didn't feel I wanted to do that the rest of my life. I thought there was more interesting things to do. And I decided to move, move to the country, which is when I first moved, near to Hay on Wye where I still am now. And so it faded out. Then we had built a total of about 20 to 25 balloons.

Wow, that's very good. So you said other interests were, I know that you're a book man. Sounds awful, but a book collector.

I've been a books collector since, since I was a child. Really, I bought my first antiquarian book when, when I was a teenager. I still have it now, really, yeah, and I'd always been interested. And when I moved to Hay, I bought a disused, wrecked water mill, and I spent seven years rebuilding it myself.

Wow,

When I say rebuilding it, I did everything from putting the roof on to to digging the drains and that that that really took seven years of my life, which I enjoyed very much doing. But it didn't leave much time for anything like ballooning, so that faded

out. I didn't regret it. I felt I'd had the best, the most interesting time in ballooning, and there were plenty of other things to do. And also, I found that the place that I bought was just outside Hay on Wye, and I found it because we were doing, we would, we did a series of Nimble films after the first one that we spoke about before in in Spain.

Then there was a sequence using both the single person balloon, which the same one as Christine Turnbull had her accident with awful that was terrible. I always remember when I was at university, my secretary came in and told me because she knew I ballooned and knew the Turnbells and told me the news. And it's funny, lots of things I don't remember, but I remember that very clearly. And then then we did quite a lot of Nimble films, with a 56, which was showed Emily, who was the model, who appeared on the theme, and some of those were with me crouching down in the basket, because I think they thought a glimpse of me wouldn't help the sale of bread. And on one occasion, for the long shots I was I had a wig on and and a white dress, and I landed in a school playing field,

No!

which caused quite a stir.

That's different. Mark Westwood in a white frock and a trans balloon pilot!

Yeah, it was one of the first that's great headline news,

yeah. Anyway, we were on of these ballooning films. We were based in Brecon. We were doing it round and over the black mountains. When I we were there that I saw adverts for property auctions, and saw this disused water mill for sale, and that's when I decided and went for it.

And so ended up, ended up around here. And so my interest in ballooning, sorry, in books then was because I was near Hay on Wye? Yeah, that gradually grew and became a business as well. And I've been an antiquarian bookseller now for, well, since, since about 1975 or 76.

Wow, that's 50 years.

Yeah, half I did other things. I spent quite a lot of time writing computer software at one time. Yeah, again. So I've done a variety of different things,

But doing up places you had that very impressive shop in Hay on Wye, which was not a water mill was it?

No. That was that was late, later. Yes. And then when we went up to Sedburgh,

You got an old cinema?

Yes, it did. Well, it had been a public hall and then a cinema. Yes, we moved up there. There, that was my present wife, Evelyn, and me. We were up there for 15 years and ran what would anywhere except for Hay on Wye be termed a very large bookshop. I mean, we had about 70 or 80,000 books there.

We enjoyed that very much. And say, last night lasted for 15 years, and we sold it as a going concern, just as covid was hitting and came back to Hay on Wye, which we always intended to

So when you came back to Hay on Wye, you weren't living in your water mill.

No, no, that after I split up with Christine Turnbull, she continued to live there, and eventually it was sold. So we came back and to another house in Hay on Wye we actually live in in Hay on Wye itself. Now,

right? And do you? Did you specialize in light of the air books at all?

Yes, because I'd assemble quite a collection of ballooning books. And so when I decided to move into book selling, I found it was a bit of a dilemma. It's quite difficult being a collector and a dealer in the same area I find so actually, I decided to sell my ballooning collection, and I did a catalogue of it and sold it,

No, I've learned lots from you, Mr. Westwood. Thank you very much. So is there anything else that sprung to mind in your ballooning career, going back now that you think you ought to. You and Giles ending up in a pub and not getting home and forgetting the balloon, or Charles,

I think I've covered most of the more interesting things, and so I don't remember the details like you say about the asking me about the landing. I think about the only landing I remember was when I broke my wrist trying to stop the burner, descending onto my passenger. It was at one of the Nottingham meets. Oh, yes. Did several at Nottingham, yes.

Oh, the other thing, because I looked through the people who'd done the oral histories with you, of course, most of them came into ballooning after me, but one that did stir a memory for me was Kevin.

Kevin, Kevin Meehan?

Meehan, that's right, yeah, because I think he was the I think he was the first, they might have been the second person that I checked out for their licence, because I was appointed the second examiner for the balloon licenses after Jerry,

And so those last years of ballooning, I was doing quite a lot of that, because I'd be so I flew quite a lot of different balloons, because people would ring up because they wanted to be checked out and and I think Kevin was probably the first one that I did

Tell him that he's coming down to the we have an annual luncheon, yeah, at the end of every October.

Remember me to him,

I will Yes,

Because he was in the Navy. He was a friend of Terry Adams they ballooned together.

Have a listen to that. That's quite an interesting talk I have with him, if you've got time to turn it on. So, yeah, okay, well, Mark, I can't thank you enough. You've covered some incredible ground. You say you can't remember much. I think you can.

Thank you so much for spending so much time with me.

Oh, that's fine. Great.

Absolutely fascinating. Thank you. Well, I will say, Mark, thank you so much. I'm really grateful for all the time you've given me this morning.

Well, it's been good. It's been good for me digging the stuff out and remembering things. So it's been a good experience for me as well.

Excellent. Well, remember us to Evelyn

Yes, will do all right, take care.