

Pete Bish recording in the bar of the Ship Inn in Weybridge 11th May 2026

My name is Jennifer d'Alton, I'm a director of the BBM&L, and I'm really excited that I found Pete Bish in the middle of Weybridge to talk to him. So, thank you, Pete, for driving all this way in rush hour to join up. When did you first see a balloon?

PB I can tell you exactly. It was August bank holiday 1967 and it was the Dunstable Air Show and Balloon Meet, and I'd hitchhiked up there on a Sunday, which is not a good idea, and there was four balloons that I know, five, actually, there was Jambo, Bristol Belle, Gerry Turnbull, with one of his Omega gas balloons, and Don Piccard, and Don Piccard had Golden Bear, obviously a Piccard balloon, and he was hopping all around, and it wasn't just early or late, it was all day, calm conditions, that's only four balloons, maybe there's only four,

JDA So was this the flying club there, the gliding club,

PB It was. Yes, because they were the organizers, in as much as all the people in the first group of balloonists, the London Balloon Club, were all glider pilots and members of the Dunstable Gliding Club. So it was a natural choice of a venue, and that's, I didn't specifically know there was going to be balloons there, but I knew that it was an air show I needed to go to, so there we were, and I've only got a couple of pictures from there, and that was that was the first sighting, and it wasn't until 1970 that I saw another balloon.

JDA So, when did you get that urge that you really wanted to know more about balloons?

PB Well, as I say, 1970 we went to the Easter meet, sponsored by the Observer, and that was again at Dunstable. The headquarters were at Dunstable, although the flying was at Woburn Abbey, and at that stage I think there were five or six balloons there. Louis Aleoni from France was, I think, the only foreign act participant, and then and the little group of us spotters went up there, including Phil Dunnington, and then in 1971 we thought, right, this is obviously an event we need to go to each year, so so Phil and I went back up there on the Good Friday, went to the briefing in the clubhouse at Dunstable and they announced that there was to be no flying because it was too windy, so next briefing tomorrow, so on the Saturday we went up again and they said all if anybody who put their name down yesterday for a possible flight is still here, then come and see us after briefing, and by which time there were 17 balloons in the, in the meet, so it was expanding quite rapidly, and and all the people you would expect from that era, London Balloon Club, and Don Cameron, Mike Moore,

JDA Peter Sadler?

PB Peter Sadler. I don't think I've got a picture of the briefing, and obviously he might be there because a lot of people there, but yeah, I haven't picked him out. Julian Nott, that was there, I can probably think of more names later, but anyway, so at the end of the briefing they said come up if you put your name down, and Phil and I were the only two that did, because all the rest of the press had written the event off, and Phil, which was probably fortuitous, flew with Don Cameron, and I flew with the Edinburgh University group. John Gore was the pilot, and Ian Jacobs was trainee, and he got checked out the very next day with Gerry Turnbull.

JDA Wow, that's amazing,

PB And that was in the balloon Godolphin, which was Edinburgh University's first

balloon.

JDA Tell me, how did you meet Phil Dunnington?

PB I was at school with him.

JDA You were?

PB yeah, yeah.

JDA Where were you at school?

PB Windsor Grammar, Windsor County Boys, I think it was called at the time, and he was a year or two older than me, but we were ardent spotters, and going off around airfield every time we got a chance, and so the stage we, we went to Dunstable. We both left school. Phil, Phil had gone to Bristol University. I'd already joined air traffic, so Phil had an MGB GT at that stage, but I, yeah, 71 Is when I got my first car, which was a Hillman Minx.

JDA you trained at Prestwick, didn't you?

PB Yes, so I started working October 67 as an air traffic control assistant at West Drayton, which is the London Air Traffic Control Centre, so you didn't see airplanes, but you shifted a lot of strip paper strips around the room, right at the beginning of computer use for printing strips, but not much else, and so I did 11 months there, and then I got onto a cadetship, as they called it, where you trained as near traffic control officer, actually talking to aircraft, so that was September 68 you do initial course, initial course learning the assistance duties, which, of course, were part of what I used to do, so that was relatively easy, and then an aerodrome course, aerodrome control, in other words, in the glass house itself, and then you spend a year in each of the three regions of the UK that the air traffic world was divided into.

JDA three regions?

PB three regions which were southern England, northern England and Scotland, and then you spent one year doing each of the different disciplines, so the first year I did aerodrome control and was at Prestwick. Second year I did area control, which was in a radar unit at Manchester Airport, and the third year I did approach control, which was at the Royal Radar Establishment at Pershore, which was a bit of an odd posting and military airfield, but the civil air traffic actually run the run the show for the RAF there, so that was quite exciting, very different.

JDA Did you ever get home?

PB Oh, yes, yes, from Prestwick, only every six or seven weeks, sometimes cadged on airplanes that were heading south. We had a number of visitors, and because we had the inside information, we knew where they were going to, so it was aerial hitchhiking, and other times I flogged it over to Glasgow and caught the -what became the shuttle- back to Heathrow, but they were real aeroplanes in those days, Vanguards, and what have you.

JDA So, Phil was at university, doing what?

PB More geography,

JDA all right,

PB Quite useful when you consider where he's been in the world after Christmas,

JDA So JB (*John Baker*) was he,...?

PB JB was air traffic as well, but he was several years behind where I was. I didn't really meet him. My first remember memory of JB was when we went to what they eventually called the Nationals at Castle Howard the year before the World Championships. I'd met him and seen him around, but that was when I got to know him and gave him his first balloon flight,

JDA Which balloon had you got then?

PB Then, well, it was I had Dante with me. I wasn't in the competition. No, we did don't do competitions, but I threw the hare balloon, and one day we did the Hare and Hounds, and it was quite breezy, and off we went, and we landed down near Goole, which is quite a long way south of Castle Howard, and that was the first time that I've ever had a dog house where the basket turns upside down, you've got no support poles between the basket and the burner, and the thing ends up in a heap with the basket upside down, you're trapped underneath, and hopefully, like us, you're laughing your head on once you've established that nobody's hurt, and strangely enough, the only ever time I've done one after that was on the first flight of Annie Baker, who was John's wife, eventually.

JDA Wow, Yeah, so you started Dante..

PB Well again, if the leading factor in Dante was Phil, and it was when we came back from our first flights that day in 1971 we came back to the clubhouse at Dunstable, and your mother was at the bottom of the stairs, arm twisting people to join the BBAC, to which Phil immediately accepted. I was a little bit more sceptical at the time, because, yeah, Phil was all for buying a balloon and getting going, and I thought, well, it was a bit of a hard landing, and I'm not so sure, but yeah, we soon won me round, so that was it, that was April 71 and we then formed Dante very soon after that, co-opted different members, a total of 11, of which I think I only contributed one from air traffic, John Collier, Phil really introduced everybody else from either BOAC, who was his first employer or from Bristol University, and by December we had not only formed the group, but we ordered a balloon, took delivery. Don Cameron came to Murcott in Oxfordshire, and we flew the balloon from a pub, which was owned by the parents of Dave Munson and one of the founder members.

JDA So, what did your parents think of you dashing off doing airplanes and doing ballooning?

PB I think they were a bit apprehensive, but on the other hand, you know, I've got to give it to them, I probably didn't appreciate it at the time, but they were tremendously trusting in what I did. I think probably one of the reasons was because I was led by people who were a couple of years older, so Phil being the prime example, but there were others. Now it's like when I went off hitchhiking around the UK, it, yeah, they were very trusting, and of course the communication wasn't very good, it was a postcard, which probably arrived after I got back, so now I do appreciate the way they trusted me to look after myself and keep out of trouble.

JDA Alec Jenkinson, he was flying, he flew the Concorde balloon, didn't

PB Yeah, yeah. Well, that was Alec was one of the founder members of Dante, got his licence quite early on. We had a batting order because at that stage, you needed to push one person forward to get his license, of course, that was Phil. And then after that, we had a sort of a draw as to who we should promote next, so they can cram their hours in and get their licence, and then train the rest of us. I was about five or six down the list, but Alec, I think was third after John Emery, Phil,

and John Emery, and he worked for BOAC and then British Airways in computers, and sorry, what was the question?

JDA Just about Alec.

PB Yeah, Alec was a great help to all of us, and trained several people until he got MS and went downhill.

JDA So the icicle meet, which many people listening will know about, that was started by the Dante Group, wasn't it?

PB Yes, yes,

JDA Did you have an organizer amongst you?

PB Well, yes, as always, the leader was Phil. We, it was Alec who discovered if you like, the Marsh Benham launch site. His grandmother knew David Liddiard, and so Alec contacted him and said, "chances of flying the balloon from your farm?", and to which you know David, "Yeah, great idea. Come along", and so it was.

It was Bloody Sunday. So, what was that, 30th of January 72 And Alec had arranged for Peter Langford to fly him, and Celia and I did the retrieve, which was the first time we, Cee, and I've been out together, and yeah, so that was how Marsh Benham site took off. Then Phil was with Dante, and generally made a clubhouse on the first floor of one of the buildings in the farmyard, to which we, for a while, we had beer on tap, and set up loos, and even stayed there on one occasion.

Bu it was too frigidly cold, particularly in the winter, but and so there was a meet that again Phil was the driving force in about a November, I think it was 72 and there was probably about 10 balloons there, and I know Mike Moore was there, and other people of the day, and then immediately after that, Phil suggested, well, we should have a meet at the new year, you know, the first week of the new year. He was very good at giving names to things, and then he said Icicle Meett, so that was January 72.

Sorry, January 73 and probably 10 or 15 balloons turned up, and it was quite successful, and various things come to mind. There was Franco Segre, Italian balloonist with a deaf aid, and an old Citroen who would drive from Milan with a basket on the top of his car. He was there. Also the London Balloon Club, and I remember Roger Barrett was practicing for some championship, whether World Championships in America, and he was flying LP two and got into a steep descent, from which he didn't quite recover properly, and clobbered a tree on landing, but no one was hurt, so yes, there were some events, Bristol Belle, that, that reappeared, which you know hadn't been seen since Dunstable, so it was, it was a good, good meet, and that was how it all started, and Phil at that stage was working for BOAC.

He organized the 1974 meet the second one, and then by 75 he was on an overseas posting with BOAC, and so that's when I took over the main organization doing the briefings, and what have you, for which I started for I don't know how many years, until we persuaded Mike Drye to do something. Yeah, that's how I said we're starting,

JDA The other thing that a lot of people listening will know you for Zebedee. Now, Zebedee were known for mending torn balloons. Icicle were there for ripped balloons. Did you start that?

PB That only happened because at some stage Alec did a training flight with Kevin Meehan, and they managed to put Dante over a barbed wire fence on landing. Nothing very serious in terms of panels damaged, but there were lots of little holes, which appeared for years later, barbed wire is dreadful for that, and so it was Phil's parents' flat, which was on top of a girls' school in Windsor, that we rolled Dante's envelope all the way up four flights of stairs, Phil's then girlfriend and Celia went into town and bought some thread, and we used a domestic machine, and laboriously, over a weekend, sewed all the patches up, so that that's the roots of Zebedee, and then after that we thought, well, we ought to be a bit more professional, we got some better thread and proper fabric, and I remember the first, the first commercial job we got, which wasn't a repair, it was after we, we came up with the name, and started a sort of a part-time business at that stage. Both Celia and myself were in bad traffic at Heathrow, and we thought Zebedee looked like a balloon jumped off the ground like a balloon.

Someone called it Zebedee, but the first job was making a some tank covers and a basket cover for Peter Langford, and then once we'd done that, word got round and people started coming to us for not only accessories, tank covers, and the like, but also repairs,

JDA You also got involved with the British Balloon and Airship Club, the BBAC, didn't you?

PB Yeah, well, I, I joined the BBAC, as I say, a little bit after Phil, but very early on in my ballooning, and, and the probably the thing that endeared me to it was because I, at that stage, was taking black and white pictures, and submitted them to Aerostat, and so it would have been under Roger Barrett's editorship at the time, followed by Anne and so I was sort of drawn in more and more to the BBAC because of photography, which goes back to pre-ballooning.

JDA Yes, yes, for airplanes as well. Did you keep up plane spotting as well as ballooning?

PB oh yeah,

JDA Yes, and the BBM & L, that was a meeting, Gwen Bellews House, was it?

PB That was the first, yes, the first get-together that went, yeah, Gwen Bellew's house, where the idea of the museum, which I think I think it due credit is given to Mike Allen, who probably suggested it in the first place. He was one of these people who have good ideas, but don't necessarily follow it up with the organization. He was, he was good at finding things and promoting the museum, but he, he suggested it in the first place, and whilst we'd all be thinking about it, he was the one who was the driving force at the start,

JDA But also I do remember Mike Allen saying the difficulty was getting the word British in the title.,

PB Yeah, yeah, he had to do quite a lot of research and persuasion to, to get that into the, into the title, but yes, that was that was him, and of course he had office help through his business, but also I do remember Mike Allen saying the difficulty was getting the word British, yeah, yeah, he had to do quite a lot of research and persuasion to, to get that into the, into the title, but yes, that was that was him, and of course he had office help through his business, to write letters and contact people and shake them about.

JDA And then you became chairman of the BBM&L?

PB I did, yeah, I was really in the quieter period of the museum, I would call it. We were all very enthusiastic to start with, and we found lots of balloons and baskets, and what have you, and we had the museum exhibition at Newbury.

JDA Oh, yeah, I remember doing that,

PB yeah, and it was around that sort of time, and at that point the meetings were at a pub that were sort of local to where I was, and but not very well attended. You might get four or five people along, and one of the most regular people was Noel Lewis, because he retired from Air Lingus as a pilot, and so he was able to jump on an airplane and come over, and he used that as a good excuse to get away for a couple of days and drink some other sorts of beer than Guinness.

JDA I can't think why.

PB No, he was, he was keen on Irish whiskey, you. He would always bring a bottle of what did we call it Powers, Powers Whiskey Power, and it used to be so John Powers or something, and Son, and so it became Father and Son, and that was the, that was his contribution to the pub meetings

JDA he had a balloon, didn't he? Do you remember what it was called.

PB Godolphin,

JDA of course, it was.

PB Yes, that was an added attraction, of course, was to know that I'd flown my first flight in Godolphin, and so he then subsequently got another Cameron Viva 77 Godolphin two, so that was his, his balloon and regular appearances at various events, and but Godolphin one was given to the museum, so, and we still have it with its Irish registration.

JDA Oh, well, since then, since then, the Balloon Museum has gone from strength to strength, and you've always been there, and you, you bought a place with the barn that was a mistake wasn't it, which the museum immediately shoved everything in. You bought a forklift truck to lift the stuff up.

PB Yeah, well, this is all really sort of came out of Zebedee, the attraction of the barn was was good for when we moved to Hungerford. It was David again who discovered the house was for sale. He knew that we were interested in a house down in Flying territory, and we'd been to see a couple with him that weren't so good, and then when he phoned up one night and said I've been talking to Gerald Ward, who was the owner of Folly Dogleg, and the subsequent site that we moved to, and this was after David had been ejected from Bradford's farm because Suttons wanted to take it back under their management. David promised to find us a new launch site, and so that's what led him to Gerald Ward. Gerald Ward was very positive and great guy, and he just happened to mention in the conversation that the house that we now live in was for sale at that stage, it was derelict, hadn't been lived in for 17 years, and when David told me about it's got a big shed.

You started Dante. It was said, "Where is it?" and "See, oh, we got the Tally How and turned right, it's up there on the left. I said, "Ah, I know exactly. It's that derelict place. Yeah, I'll be down tomorrow. And we, me and Elaine, went down, and we saw it, and we immediately signed up with Gerald to buy it, and he was very good with us for delayed completion and things, because money was a bit tight on it, but it, it was the best move we ever made, and then once we'd had the house restored, then there was a bit of work to do with the barn, because that was in a bit of a state, and

and then I bought some racking, that probably the mistake, yeah, yeah, and said to the museum, if you want to store some balloons here, then I've got some racking.

JDA , I remember coming to your 50th birthday party, and Elaine presented you with a balloon that she made, how did she manage to make it without you knowing?

PB Well, I was working at the time, so that helped. Yeah, the story with that is that I bought a job lot of fabric from Cameron's when they took over Thunder and Colt. They had a lot of fabric which didn't have paperwork right, and on the shelf, you know.

I went down to Cameron's to see what they got to sell, and amongst the things was this shelf in the building behind Cameron's factory, and which had rows and rolls of fabric, and Jim Howard pointed it out to me, and I said, "Oh, yes. What do you.. what are you going to do with that? And he said, "Well, do you want it? I said, "Well, how much? And we agreed a fairly low price, and it turned out to be two transit vans. And to try to Westphalia trailer to get back to activity and okay, we, we still got quite a big chunk of that, but it has actually none of it was usable for repairs because of no, no paperwork, but it was fine for doing a home built, and so I selected the colours and the roles, took them back to Cameron's, and got them to pay for them to cut the panels out for a Viva 31 with agreement from Don, because he doesn't do that sort of thing on a particularly regular basis, and so thanks to Don , I had the panels, we registered it, and Elaine sewed it together, and it was a sort of a back boiler job, because there was always something else to be done in terms of repairs for other people, but when the 50th birthday was coming up, Elaine decided that it would be a good idea to have it finished, so without my knowledge she kept it in a basket in the barn, had to go back in there after every session of sewing and got it all sewn up, she had a bit of help from Phil with the rigging and again with Cameron's help, and yeah, so I got a tap on the shoulder at the 50th birthday party to say I think you better come outside, there's something you want to see.

JDA I remember that well,

PB I was completely gobsmacked, and got inflated, and got in and flew off and landed at Folly Dog. They cleanly or not,

JDA I didn't know that.

pB Yeah, yeah, got straight into Folly Dog Leg. Colin Butter retrieved me, and the one thing I regret, and because it was all so much of a surprise, I didn't take my camera, not usually anywhere without a camera, but that evening I was, and then we flew it with the British Airways basket, but subsequently I've made it a bit of a mix up, because I've got a Van Wyck basket, an Air Tour burner, a Cameron designed envelope and an exquisitely sewn envelope, so yeah, it's, it's good. Yes, and I, I don't fly that much, because, you know, one man ballooning is a bit antisocial, but for one man meets and the like, and sometimes when I wanted to get a flight but have no crew, then that's the answer,

JDA So you also bought for a Fiver, the registration G BISH. What's that on?

PB That's on my Viva 65 which you know, in my head it was bought with money that I don't have through Zebedee, and whether that's quite true or not, I don't know, but yeah, it was at the time when Viva 65 were popular as private balloons, and there was a little 65 club formed for those of us that had one, and you know that subsequently spread to Mike Drye and to Rog, and they already had one, so yeah, and we had several weeks different places, so I bought mine, and joined the thing, but it's, it's still pristine when you look at it from the outside, but it's got a bit sticky inside, the

fabric wasn't very good in that period, that was in the sort of early 80s until 2000 we had this soft fabric, which goes mouldy, and things you have to be very careful with it. So fabric has improved since then.

JDA You've got 100 different countries under your belt, yeah, in balloons only,

PB No, no, no, only 45 in balloons, right? Okay, and in SP one, but I, being a collector of everything, I've made an effort to travel and to try, and yeah, so around the world, and all the rest of it. We're 195 I think I'm right in saying at the moment, changing countries, and so Rwanda was number 100 last November,

JDA Before we stop, because I know time's running out. What was your worst flight or the scariest?

PB I've been apprehensive a couple of times when fuel's running low and fields are all crop, and but no, the worst one is sadly was in my one man balloon only a couple of years ago up Oswestry way, we launched south of Oswestry with a forecast of two knots a day and once I got to 1000 feet I was doing 18 knots and I misjudged things a bit in that there were some huge power wires, but I could see some a nice field where other balloons had landed just after them, and rather than dump, I know the rules with a small lightweight balloon, I never touch the dump unless you're less than 30 feet, because the parachute is inclined to store loads we've learned in recent years, and so I didn't dump when I should have dumped to get the thing coming down immediately, I passed the wires. I let it do this, and I hit the ground quite hard, quite a high rate of descent. And being in a small basket that's only about that wide, the back of the basket got my back as I went over. Glasses went under the basket, and yeah, I had a few bruises for a couple of weeks, but fortunately no broken bones or anything more serious, but and it was watched by several other pilots that had landed in that field.

JDA All right, that was your worst, but you've been flying balloons for a long time. Was it any flight that you actually can say was absolutely fantastic.

PB Well, lots of very happy flights. A lot depends on who you're with, particularly if you know it's a first-time person and they're enthusiastic. I've only had one person who the moment we got airborne was apprehensive and said I can't stand this, we got to get down, only one in all those years, but no, Actually, it'd be obvious why in 1990 I joined the Cameron expedition to Soviet Union, just which was in St Petersburg with my Viva 65 very early on in its life, and we'd flown from Catherine's Palace, from the square, quite quadrangle, but square in front of it, yeah, yeah, and for the first time we went that way on the on the final flight we went 180 degrees different and as I sort of lifted off and flew a mile or so there was this airfield called Pushkin

JDA No really

PB We flew down the length of the runway at Pushkin, about 15 balloons, all with different heights, some low, some high, and it's the sort of former part of the Soviet Union, so you can understand my excitement, and yeah, we, nobody had talked about Pushkin, we didn't know it was there, you know, it wasn't part of the briefing, and so, you know, some people thought we must climb and get away from this, and other people went low because of the chance to fly down the airport. So yeah, yeah, I enjoyed that,

JDA Pete. I've talked to you, or made you talk, for so long. Thank you very much indeed. And I think actually I might come back and do another one with you, but that was wonderful. Thank you very much indeed.

PB Okay.