



PILOTS LIKE ME

ENCOURAGING DIVERSITY IN GLIDING

Teamwork at Lincolnshire GC's High Flying Girls events, which saw participation by almost 50 girls, young and old (photos by Agnieszka Zebracka)

Katharine York explains how the Lincolnshire GC High Flying Girls initiative is ticking all the right boxes



The girls wore t-shirts featuring part of an Amelia Earhart quote

ONE of the things I love about gliding is the way in which such a variety of people are united by a common passion and obsession. That doesn't mean there aren't clashes of personalities and the odd spark flying, but I know that being up in the sky, gazing at clouds or spying down on the ground makes something light up inside each of us.

Knowing that, why do I take an involuntary sharp breath when I approach a new launch point, or enter the BGA Club Management Conference? The reason is that

faced with a standard gathering of glider pilots I am instantly and conspicuously an outsider, and it's only once we get talking that I start to feel at home again. Unfortunately, the same must be true for the majority of female, or junior, or non-white visitors to gliding clubs: an immediate unconscious sense of not belonging. A warm welcome helps, but it's often not enough to make someone feel truly invited and included.

Humans are tribal and visual, and it takes time to get past the subconscious signals of exclusion we perceive when being "the only" whatever in a group.

When I realised that most Lincolnshire Gliding Club trial lesson vouchers were

bought by women for men I knew there was a problem. It's not that women don't know about gliding, more that for some reason they see it as being for other people. Even the pages of *S&G* build an impression that women are the supporters of men who fly and not pilots themselves. I set up High Flying Girls to turn the status quo on its head, creating days when women and girls would look around a gliding field and see people like them outnumbering men over 60.

This year I was more ambitious than last, and tried to fill all of the May half-term with girls and women flying. I found ways in to schools and colleges via STEM and Careers Enterprise Coordinators, and mentoring programmes, and promoted the event to adults via several business networks. During that week 25 people took part, and two follow-up events brought the number to nearly 50. For a club with only one two-seater glider and under 30 members, High Flying Girls created a significant impact in terms of workload and revenue.

The fund-raising campaign on Crowdfunder met with some success, gaining support from a few people completely unknown to me, even with our limited presence on social media. The major contributors were companies I had approached directly, where the words "girls", "engineering" and "flying" ticked all the right boxes. There were costs associated with the fund-raising though, and for a while

it looked like we would have been better off relying on direct contacts. The money raised was enough to buy event t-shirts for everyone who took part and to fund many of the girls to fly.

The theme for this year's t-shirts was taken from a quote by Amelia Earhart, which in full is "The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity. The fears are paper tigers. You can do anything you decide to do. You can act to change and control your life; and the procedure, the process is its own reward." Given the nervous faces of so many of the High Flying Girls before taking to the air and the grins after, "fears are paper tigers" seemed entirely fitting.

Real successes include two girls, who live within gliding range of the club, returning on several occasions, now armed with their own log books. The first was one of only two from the whole week who leapt in to the glider clearly looking forward to flying, the other had the more typical expression of near-terror and gritted teeth, turning to an ear-to-ear smile as we rotated into the launch and she looked out at the view.

Another achievement was the school that nearly pulled out over insurance concerns bringing a second (mixed) group back in July. In earlier correspondence, I'd handed over risk assessments and completed a questionnaire about the event, but at the last moment obstacles about insurance were being raised. I sent copies of everything, tried to explain the difference between aviation premises and aviation insurance and reassure them that where it said personal injury, yes they were insured against injuring themselves by falling over on the airfield. Unfortunately, they had a minimum requirement of £5 million cover, and our policies only went to £2 million. These final

stages were being discussed in the week of the event, and it went right up to Thursday evening before we knew everything was in place and the group was definitely going to fly on the Friday. Without the help of our friends Steve and Andy at Hill Aviation Insurance Services pulling out all the stops to get quotes and agree our cover it wouldn't have been possible. The other important factor was that the school agreed to meet the cost of the additional cover as it wouldn't have been economically viable for us to pay it.

For four years of my membership of Lincolnshire Gliding Club I was the only adult female member. Now I am one of three, with three junior or student members coming along regularly. We have reached the point where a visitor from another gliding site commented: "This looks like a women's club!"

My advice to anyone wanting to broaden the base of their membership is that it won't happen by chance. Go out and speak passionately about your sport to your new target audience. It really helps to hear the message from someone committed, excited and looking "like me".

Then it's just a case of creating an environment where people can feel at home, and generating an atmosphere of fun and friendly support to take part on the ground as well as in the air. New members will often hold back from helping in case they do something wrong, cause an accident or just because all the existing members look far too competent to need any help – they need positive, gentle encouragement to get involved.

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Lincolnshire Gliding Club has seen an increase in the number of its female members and students



Trying out a Swallow for size



Trepidation before flying: Derek Woodforth instructing



Girls from the Ormiston Maritime Academy