



Beautiful canard design fluffs the take-off PHOTO: STEVE ELKINS

How to become a birdman

Steve Elkins has a shot at the £25,000 Bognor prize



A nervous smile from Steve before the off PHOTO: TOM BRADBURY

Ron Freeman has been teaching hang gliding for years and remains as keen as ever. He's now a Japanese TV star, and as far as I know it's all down to his jumping-off-the-pier exploits at Bognor. Ron's first flight there was in 1997, and since then he has pretty much flown the furthest every year.

Ron is often on the phone and occasionally pops in to see us at Avian. You can't talk to him for long before the Birdman subject comes up. "How can I go further, Steve?" I don't think I have helped Ron much but I always been very interested in the problem.

The event, originally run at nearby Selsey, moved to Bognor in 1978. Nevertheless the prize for flying over 100m remains unclaimed. At its inception in 1969 the prize stood at £3,000 and the distance at 50 yards, but was increased to £25,000 and 100m in 1990. The guys who put up the money are very clever and each year take out insurance against a win. The underwriters are doing pretty well at the moment.

To win the jackpot you have to jump off a 10m high pier and fly 100m before landing in the sea. "What's the problem?" I hear you say. "Just saunter off the end of the pier on your Atos VR fly, 100m, turn right and land on the beach?"

It's not so simple. The pier is flat and not very inviting, there is no lift at all (the wind just blows straight through the pier), and landing in the sea is not that fun (don't ever do it without divers - it's pretty much certain death.). A headwind helps you take off but not to get distance; no wind makes take-off very difficult but helps to get distance.

In case you still think it's easy money, here are some other restrictions: maximum wingspan of 30ft, no stored energy (no elastic bands!), and the flight must be measured in a specific direction. Ron had explained these rules to me but remained very optimistic. With six months to go I sent off the cheque.

It seemed like loads of time, but it all came round pretty quickly. Chopping the wing tips off my glider proved more difficult than you might imagine. I had to miss out on the British League to finish the glider but still found myself, with a day to go, running around a field trying to get a bit of practice and seeing if I could work out the trim position.

The sea front at Bognor looks like a lot of sea fronts and the pier is certainly not new. It all seemed a bit of an anticlimax. However I was clearly at the right place. The pier had a very large scaffold ramp built on the end, pointing to the west and parallel with the beach. The wind was howling from the east and a lone hang glider was already set up in the lee of the pier buildings. It turned out to be owned by the Lycra-clad Tony Hughes.

I had that new-boy-at-school feeling, or perhaps more accurately a new-boy-at-a-rather-seedy-loony-bin. Not seriously loony but an eccentric British outpatient type. What was more worrying was that I already knew a lot of them.

Tony Hughes needs no introduction. For years he called himself 'The fastest man in Europe'. Dr Billy Brooks of Scrapheap Challenge was there with quite a bit of scrap (as far as I could tell) bolted to his glider. Andy Bill, a former Avian inmate, was also there with a beautiful home-built aircraft and his family to help him. Andy and a few others who enter the Leonardo da Vinci class deserve a special mention. Cutting down a hang glider is difficult enough, but a complete aircraft is a real challenge and a special effort that requires a lot of admiration.

At the mandatory safety meeting the options for the current weather were discussed. "30mph over the back" seemed to say it all to me. "We think it is too dangerous for the Leonardo class but..." I doubted if we could even stand on the edge pointing downwind in that wind strength. I started to feel that an understanding of flight might not be the organisers' strongest suit.

A compromise was reached - only the Condor class (the serious hangies) were to fly, off the back of the pier through a recently opened gap in the scaffolding. I could still foresee potential problems if someone caught a side wire on the scaffold as they ran through the gap. The spikes to discourage people from climbing off the pier did not look that inviting.

Those with seniority get to choose when they go, and of course it was the new boys first! I was delighted to see Paul Fessie's name before mine, and then very impressed with his bravery. From take-off it looked as if he had descended almost straight down on his Vision, although he did indeed glide forwards.

Then came my go. I was nervous and tried to persuade the cameramen not to get too close. They took no notice and just kept filming. I did not take much of a run but had lots on my mind: I had to get through the gap in the scaffold. I had to work out where trim was on the glider (cutting the tips off really mucks it up), and I had to get cleanly into prone. I then had to skim the waves, trying not to catch one on the speed bar. I was running out of speed. Try and keep the wings level and... push! A lovely soft landing in the water. Within a second everything had gone brown. "I'll just put my head up for a breath behind the wing." Bang! No air - just hang glider. Not very nice! My quick release worked and I went under the rear wires and out. What a relief!

I was picked up by the boat. They started to move my glider, snapping bits off. I managed to rescue one of the tips and was taken to the shore where I was dumped to swim to the beach, winglet in hand. Meanwhile, Paul's glider had sunk.

I thought I had descended almost straight down, but my wife assured me I had gone further. Then I heard "80-something metres!" on the Tannoy. I couldn't believe it.

From the beach (where my glider had been dragged out, upside-down) I watched the other fliers. Billy Brookes was very brave and took off in prone with pedal power. His propeller looked as if it might be helping, but then... splosh!

Later I witnessed Billy's glider being dragged out of the sea. On its A-frame a few feet from the beach, each wave seemed to deliver a terrible blow. The propeller drive snapped off, then the uprights buckled and the glider was crushed flat by the weight of water. I could see the downside of using the VR even if it were allowed. I hadn't realised quite how short the flight would be, or the life expectancy of the glider.

Ron Freeman - last year's winner - was the last to fly. He pulled out an Amour 159 from his quiver. "This glider needs no modification to get within the span limit. It's perfect for strong winds." Ron did a very clean flight but did not seem to go that far.

Beginners luck! I had gone furthest on the first day. It was clear that I had the best glider and I was very pleased. Ron and Tony were less so. However all were cheered when Ron donated various bits of his wrecked glider to Tony and Billy, and a batten to me, to repair the damaged gliders for the next day. The Amour had flown its last flight.

The second day featured the Kingfisher Class and was more interesting for the crowds. Just jumping off the pier in fancy dress is much more colourful for the spectators. The TV crews are out in force, and with large screens on the beach you can really see what is going on. There were some great costumes



Steve Elkins launches PHOTO: TOM BRADBURY



Lycra-clad Tony Hughes heads for the briny PHOTO: TOM BRADBURY



Steve's glider is rescued after its ducking PHOTO: TOM BRADBURY



Below: Leonardo Class winner Andy Bill PHOTO: STEVE ELKINS



...Bognor regular Ron Freeman PHOTO: TOM BRADBURY

"Er, are you sure it's a good idea? Have you flown a hang glider before?" It was a Solar Wings Rumour in quite good condition.

"No, but I've flown a paraglider."

"Well, you put the battens in here!"

After my Saturday flight I get to fly last and watch everybody else. It is frightening. Those who are really trying to win are forced to fly to the west. The wind has come around to south-south-east so it's a cross/tail take-off even if you run diagonally across the ramp.

Paraglider man decides to take off into wind through the gap in the scaffold. We all hold our breath. Weak run, nose up, terrible take-off and a wing caught on the pier. He tumbles into the sea but is fished out to fly another day. Andrew Bill makes a superb flight to the east. Despite having amassed the largest negative score he gets a well-deserved win in the Leonard da Vinci class.

Billy Brookes also takes off to the east but does not fly around the end of the pier. Paul Fessie, who seems to have brought several hang gliders, makes a clever downwind take-off to the west. Brave! One of the home-builders, who had been assembling his beautiful canard all day alongside the pier, does the same. He does a very committed take-off but with the right wing down. There is a splash and his lovely wing breaks up. Very brave indeed!

Ron is third from last to go. He makes a very good take-off and a superb flight of 82m. Tony Hughes goes next and makes the best flight to date of 84m. Finally it's my turn. I have to go for the west take-off as I feel there is a real chance with my wing. I have repaired most of the damage and pulled the VB on full. There's a 7-knot cross tailwind, and I have three minutes in which to fly!

With only a minute to go it drops to 6 and then back to 7 knots. I start to worry that it might get even stronger and off I go, as fast as I can. The left wing drops and I put in a large weight shift, but the wing-tip touches and I'm in the drink going almost towards the pier.

Tony and Ron have already dissected my flight. "Poor take-off, Steve. You should have got the nose down quicker." Andy Bill asked how much damage I'd done the day before? "You had a big weight shift and it didn't do much." Probably too much VB and a poor take-off. Oh, and take off into wind next time! Tony and Ron were now walking around with a real spring in their step. The new boy was in his place.

After much computation Tony and Ron came joint first. I didn't even begin to try and understand the scoring, but everybody seemed fairly happy.

Well, it was frightening and fun. A great atmosphere on the beach. Some money raised for good causes. A great day out. I had not really got the result I wanted. I now understood Andrew Bill better when he said, "I just want to get a perfect flight. Then I don't have to come back again." I didn't get that perfect flight and now I have to go back next year to try again. I may have become a Bognor Birdman. Should you do it? It's well worth a go... and we have some suitable wings too!

In my more optimistic dreams I will join Andy with my own special aircraft but I will need a sponsor. I have had an enquiry from Emailsystems.com who do spam filtering and other great stuff. It may be one of the remaining few ways we can get hang gliding on telly.

You can support Steve's charity fundraising at www.justgiving.com/bognor and www.justgiving.com/bognor1.

- the guy on the pogo stick who covered himself in treacle and feathers deserves a special mention. Most of the Kingfishers did jump but at least one girl wimped out.

We were informed that we would have to take off to the west, although the easterly wind continued to blow. Apparently the local council had been very upset the day before. Flights to the west had not been mentioned in the Health and Safety plan and must therefore be unsafe.

Being a Luddite and not up to speed on Health and Safety, I still tried to argue that taking off into wind would be better. "The council are really angry about this," I was told. "They are threatening to withdraw any support for next year's event. You have to take off to the east." Finally the organisers make a compromise - take off to the east, fly round the end of the pier and glide to the west. Distance flown to the east will be scored negative. All from a 10m take-off height!

As all this was going on there was a whisper in my ear. "Do you know anything about hang gliders."

"Well, er, yes."

"Can you show me how to rig this?"