



The Tasmanian Glider Club 1929-1939

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In 1853, British engineer George Cayley built the world's first real glider. It carried his terrified servant on a short flight across a small valley before crash-landing. Later, in the 1890s, Otto Lilienthal of Germany built a series of small, fragile gliders.

The Wright brothers designed, built and flew a series of three manned gliders in 1900–1902 as they worked towards achieving powered flight. They also made preliminary tests with a kite in 1899. In 1911 Orville conducted tests with a much more sophisticated glider.

Gliders were developed from the 1920s for recreational purposes. As pilots began to understand how to use rising air, gliders were developed with a high lift-to-drag ratio.

The first glider which left the ground in Tasmania was designed and constructed by Messes. W. Wedd and C. Halloran of Hobart. It was tested at Brighton in 1929 with Mr Wedd at the controls. A car was used for towing, and after a few runs the machine rose some feet, but travelled only a few yards, and on landing broke a main spar. The test was then abandoned. Shortly after this the Tasmanian Glider Club successfully flew a primary glider constructed by Mr. Charles Dixon, of Launceston. This machine was well constructed and gave excellent service while in operation.

Mr. Wedd spent the following three months redesigning and constructing his machine and on completion it was taken to Mt. Garret at Sorell for a test flight. After many unsuccessful attempts to make the machine fly, a speed of 40 miles an hour into a 20 miles per hour head wind was attained, and the machine rose into the air, but the pilot, being inexperienced in flying, was unable to control it correctly, and the flight ended in a crash, the machine being wrecked beyond repair.



The Zögling Primary Glider



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A week after this flight, a Zögling primary glider¹ constructed by Mr. C. Cliff in conjunction with Mr. B. Jones, was flown successfully at the Goodwood estate, with Captain F. G. Huxley at the controls. This glider was afterwards sold to the Hobart Gliding Club, and many flights were made in it.²

With the inauguration of the aerial service between Tasmania and the mainland in the near future, a branch of the Glider Club of Australia was recently formed in Launceston, with the laudable object of encouraging aeronautics in Tasmania. Good progress has been made and the first glider to be constructed in Tasmania is now nearing completion in Launceston.

In February 1930 the *Mercury* reported:

A Tasmanian branch of the Glider Club was formed," said Mr. C E. Dixon, the secretary, In an interview with a representative of "The Mercury" yesterday "with the idea of providing a safe means of operating aircraft, to make the youth of Tasmania 'air minded' and to encourage and develop aeronautics In all its branches.

"Within the past few years continued Mr. Dixon, "extensive experiments have been carried out by enthusiasts on the mainland and abroad, with engineless planes of different types, with the result that it is now possible to glide for long distances in comparative safety, as the machines seldom reach a very high altitude.

Good progress has been made in putting the club on a firm-footing, and the construction of the first glider is nearing completion, and. will soon be ready for the air. Valuable assistance has been given to the club by Mr. Norman Molesworth, of the Melbourne branch who has furnished a great deal of information, and the Aero Club has assured the branch of their support.³

The article gave an excellent description of the glider, which was constructed of spruce and oregon pine, and was lined with special aero plywood. It had a wingspan of 32 feet, each wing containing 10 spans constructed of spruce, the whole being covered with fabric. The cockpit was situated in the extreme front of the machine, and sitting in this unprotected position, the student would not be injured by splintering wood, should the glider fail. Also, in this position he could "feel" the wind and judge and regulate the speed of the glider. The controls were similar to those on an engined plane, the rudder being operated by a crossbar.

The executive was anxious to increase membership, and as members were eligible over the ages of 14 years of age it was expected that the hobby, would become very popular.

In October 1930 following the successful flights at Goodwood, Glenorchy, of the glider constructed by Messrs. C. Cliff and Basil Jones, an enthusiastic, meeting at the Royal Autocar Club on the 27 October saw the formation of a gliding, club in Hobart. There were 33 present, Mr. T. Fitzgerald being voted into the chair.

The *Mercury* reported: ⁴

Capt. F. G. Huxley referred to the valuable preliminary work of Messrs. Cliff and Jones and Capt. C. Peters In the construction and testing of a glider which was found equal to anything of its kind in Australia and modelled on the plans of a German machine.



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Mr. Jones said that eight or nine weeks were occupied in the construction of the glider, which was of the same type as that which held the Australian record of 35 minutes. A primary glider was constructed first, and it was hoped to proceed later with a secondary glider and a sailplane. Gliding was the kindergarten of aviation, and the thing now was to get a club going and learn to flying.

Capt. Huxley urged that gliding was a sport as well as skiing and other pastimes, and was interesting as a sport alone, but it also had the advantage of providing valuable preliminary training for airplane work, and not being costly, would put flying within the reach of many to whom airplanes were denied by expense. The Northern Glider Club had carried out 110 flights without damage, and Southerners could do the same. In any case, the risk was not so great as that of falling from a motorcycle.

The cooperation between the North and South in establishing gliding was evidence when a camp meeting at Ross, with North vs. South gliding contests, had been suggested in jest.⁵

Mr. Cliff expressed appreciation of the assistance afforded him and others by the Northern Gliding Club, as representing an example of the good feeling which should exist between North and South. Captain Huxley's assistance had been invaluable in instruction in handling the machine.

Capt. E. R. Cottier offered every assistance. Gliding was excellent training in airmindedness.

Mr. Cliff stated that the machine used at Goodwood cost £121 9s. 10d., including labour, material, and the tension rope used for launching. It was to be disposed of to the club (if formed) for £95, excluding the rope, which was valued at £10. The initial cost of a glider in Melbourne ranged from £80 upwards.

On the motion of Capt. Cottier, it was decided to form a club, and accept this offer. The following first officers were elected: Secretary, Mr. Basil Jones; treasurer, Mr. L. Owen; committee, Messrs. A. Drysdale, C. Clift, E. R. Cottier, C. Wedd, and Capt. C. Peters; hon. instructors, Captains Huxley, Peters Cottier, and Mr. Cooper; hon. auditors Messrs. P. St. Leger and A. Stump.

An entrance fee of 10s. 6d. and annual subscription of £1 1s. was decided for full gliding members, with a subscription only of 10s. 6d. a year for non-gliding members. Provision was also made for junior non-gliding members up to the age of 16 years at annual subscription of 5s., with the privilege of full membership later on full payment

The secretary was instructed to inform the Tasmanian section of the Aero Club of the formation of the club. There were a large number of applications for membership.

By late January, Gliding has come to stay in Tasmania, and it was great to observe the advancement the pupils of the Tasmanian Glider Club had made. This group of enthusiasts could be seen in action during any suitable weekend or holiday at White Hills just a few miles southeast of Launceston.



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The *Advocate* reported:⁶

To date 408 flights have been made, with no accident that has caused any hurt to the 32 pupils who have flown. Flights of 300 yards have become quite normal glides; the record distance, is 620 yards, and the duration is two minutes. This to the uninitiated may sound trivial, but some of the mainland clubs are happy to speak of good flights lasting 23 seconds, and of distances of 250 yards. The Tasmanian Glider Club is anxious to extend the movement in this State.

It was said that the property at White Hills was perhaps the best in the Commonwealth. It lies on portion of the properties of Messrs. Adye and T. Gee at White Hills and gave wonderful training slopes facing any winds. One particular locality has excellent gliding and soaring positions close to each other available for northerly, north-west, westerly, south-west, and southerly winds, so that should the wind gradually swing round there will be no waste of time changing grounds. The only winds which will rendered a change necessary were S.E. and easterly winds, and to cross to these little time was required.

The land had been down with permanent pastures for many years, and free from ploughing furrows and other obstacles. No fences obstructed the use of the best training slopes. Mr. T. Gee allowed the club to clear away several subdivision fences to make a safe "B" certificate course, which includes turns round given points, and where obstacles would cramp the style of trainees. The ground carried natural grass, which stood the wear of running the glider towing car even in wet weather.

The *Mercury* reported:⁷

The site is about one mile N.E. from the Western Junction aerodrome, which is on a flat portion of the same class of soil. It is eight miles from Launceston, and about a mile from Relbia, on the Relbia - Evandale road. Almost every weekend the glider is taken from Launceston, packed carefully on a trailer, and within half an hour is assembled and tested. It is then moved on another light trailer to the selected take-off, the patent tail release is driven into the ground, and flying commences.

In October 1932 the Tasmanian Glider Club took to the air with its new machine the "Drag-an-fly 2." The initial test flights were held at the gliding terrain at White Hills after the machine had been assembled at 33 George Street on Saturday afternoon, and final adjustments made. The next morning the machine was towed to the flying field and re-assembled. Mr. B. F. Wilmot flew the new machine for the first time. It was only through the hard work of the few members who retained interest in the club after the untimely destruction of the machine, with its hangar, at White Hills about 16 months earlier that the club was able to take to the air again.

Of interest was the weight of this machine. The Examiner reported:⁸

The excellent work that Messrs. Dixon and Tyson have made of the Tasmanian Glider Club's new machine, "Drag-an-fly 2," is testified by the weights recorded when the machine was put on the scales for the first time last Saturday. The two wings weighed 91.5lb., the centre section 60.1lb., the rudder and tailplane 29.1lb., and the nacelle 17.7lb. Thus as a primary or Zoegling glider the new machine weighs only 180.6lb., which, despite the fact that the machine has a larger wing span than the "Drag-an-fly 1," compares with 182lb. for the



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original machine. The addition of the nacelle on to the glider converts the primary machine into a secondary or Pruning plane weighing 198.3lb. The extra weight is hoped to give the machine more speed, while it is also hoped that the streamlining effect of the nacelle will result in considerably improved performances. The members of the club are justly proud of their new machine.

In 1937 some five years later and after three years of absence from the air, Drag-an-fly 2, aboard its trailer was towed from the city to Franklin village for flight Interest in gliding in Tasmania has been revived, largely as a result of the formation of a club at Hobart.

The Tasmanian Glider Club has had a chequered career. The members built the club's only craft more than six years ago, and since it has been damaged and rebuilt so often that the metal fittings are about the only parts of which it can be said with certainty that they flew with the original machine. Possibilities for gliding in Tasmania were great.

The *Examiner* reported:⁹

The late Mr. G. K. Rice-Oxley, who held the Australian duration record before his time was beaten by Mr. Pratt, once said that with a primary glider he could have beaten Mr. Pratt's record in Tasmania. At that time Mr. Rice-Oxley was the Civil Aviation Department representative at Western Junction aerodrome. The records of instruments charting the strength and direction of winds at that aerodrome were available to him. On one occasion he pointed out that a north-west wind had not dropped below 30 m.p.h. velocity for three days. He claimed that, theoretically, it would have been possible to keep a primary glider in the air all that time. In practice, of course, the feeding of the pilot and his ability to keep his seat on an open glider throughout a cold night would have to be taken into account. While flying about Tasmania, Mr. Rice-Oxley kept a look-out for hills suitable for gliding. It will be remembered that it was in this way that he noticed the soaring possibilities of Mount Elephant, Victoria, a hill from which he was later launched on a record-breaking flight. He was particularly impressed with a large and, in parts, heavily timbered hill to the west of the main road and a few miles south of Powranna. If he had remained in Tasmania long enough he would have attempted the record from this hill. The revived interest in gliding gives rise to the hope that an Australian duration record will be established in Northern Tasmania, perhaps from this hill selected by one who played a big part in the advancement of the sport in the Commonwealth.

Over the first decade of glider flight crashes and other mishaps, all of them expensive in time, money, and public confidence sharpened the enthusiasm of members, and the annual meeting held in the clubrooms, Melville St., Hobart, marked the beginning of a new era in its affairs.

The difficulty in keeping a flimsy glider in the air and landing it safely is much greater than the flying of a powered machine. In the ordinary light aircraft, almost all dangerous situations can be remedied by increased power from the engine, but the glider pilot has only his wits between himself and disaster. Motorless flight requires a study of meteorology, of the significance of cloud formations and their associated air movements, of the combined effects of the conformation of the ground and the heat of the sun in the creation of thermal and ridge currents, and the manoeuvring of the machine to take the best advantage of these circulations.



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In an article published in July 1939 the broad principles which govern gliding were these:¹⁰

(1) Where the wind blows against the side of a hill or ridge, a deflection up current is formed on the windward side of the hill. The strength of the up current varies according to the contour of the hill. The current bears the machine-like thistle down, and the pilot continues in the air by flying back-wards and forwards in the region of lift.

(2) Thermal currents are convection circulations, caused by' the unequal heating, of the earth's surface. "Thermals," as they are known, are usually narrow draughts, and considerable skill is required for the pilot to circle into the strongest part of the up-current and so not only maintain but gain altitude.

Flights to a height of more than 22,000 ft. above the point of release, and to more than 400 miles from the point of take-off, have been made, and the record duration flight is two days, two hours and 15 minutes.

In some parts of the world gilders are towed by an aeroplane before release, and a "flipper" arrangement with elastic cord is sometimes used, but the method employed by the Tasmanian Club is to tow the machine on a rope behind a motorcar.

A glimpse of the preparation of these gliders in the Gliding and Soaring Club in Hobart was an added description of the dedication of its member ship.¹¹

Interlaced spars, thinner than the finger combine to form wings tail units and ailerons throughout the large, low roofed room, tins and bottles of "dope" and sections of fabric are strewn about in profusion the air is laden with the smell of varnish and dressing preparations, tools, diagrams and instruction books are everywhere. Members have been working for months repairing and strengthening wings, struts and controls and a complete new fuselage has just been completed for the "secondary" (dual-control) ' machine which has a wing-span of 30ft. The new body is a work of art. It is lighter, stronger, and more pleasing to the eye than its predecessor, and its detailed workmanship must be seen to be appreciated.

The Zögling primary single seat machine, with a wing-span of 32ft., has been completely overhauled, and work is in progress on a Northrop primary recently purchased from a defunct body In the North.

"Ordinary" members receive instruction in construction and repairs and elementary ground training. The membership fees 10/- a year and the minimum age 14 years., Flying members over 16 years of age are charged £2 a year. Particulars may be obtained from the secretary, "Mr. H. T. D'Alton, 30 View St., Sandy Bay."

Under its new scheme of operations, the club intends to erect a substantial hangar in Brighton, and to issue "A," "B," and "C" licences for proficiency in gliding and soaring.

The aircraft pilot who has first become a proficient glider pilot is a better man at his job than the pupil who makes his first instructional flight in a powered machine. That opinion is substantiated by experts the world over. The art of gliding and soaring, for it is an art, is receiving increasing



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recognition each year in Europe, Great Britain, and America, and in Australia the Commonwealth Government has shown, its appreciation by subsidies to clubs.

The Gliding and Soaring Club of Tasmania passed through its experimental stages, and learnt rather bitter early lessons, and profited by its mistakes, and was about to launch out on extensive activities, however WW11 changed everything.

In 1950 Mr. C. Dixon, formerly of Launceston, who built the first glider used by the old Tasmanian Gliding Club, was now working on aircraft as big as Skymasters at Essendon. Mr. Dixon, who was secretary of the Gliding Club from 1929 to 1939, when it went out of existence was visiting Launceston in the same week as a correspondent to "The Examiner" urged the formation of a club.

The *Examiner* reported:¹²

Mr. Dixon confirmed the correspondent's view that the country around Launceston is ideally suitable for gliding. The old club however had experienced difficulty in obtaining suitable areas from which to operate, he said. The glider Mr. Dixon built for the club cost about £50 for material today it would probably cost about £100. The glider was sold to the Hobart club but Mr. Dixon has plans of a primary glider he is willing to lend to any enthusiasts willing to undertake the job. Mr. Dixon says he thinks the registration of the old club is still in order, and he would be willing to give advice and assistance to anyone interested in reforming a club. An appointment can be made with Mr. Dixon at Powell's Electric Service, Charles St.

¹ The Zögling is a German high-wing, cable-braced, single seat primary glider that was designed by Alexander Lippisch in 1926 and produced with many variations by a variety of manufacturers. Alexander Lippisch became famous by his design Messerschmitt Me 163 Komet, a rocket drive flying wing. The Zögling was a simple lightweight glider for basic flight instruction. It was designed to start with rubber ropes, a common way to start a glider in the years short after WWI

² *Mercury* (Hobart, Tas. : 1860 - 1954), Thursday 8 July 1937, Page 6

³ *Mercury* (Hobart, Tas. : 1860 - 1954), Saturday 15 February 1930, Page 7

⁴ *Mercury* (Hobart, Tas. : 1860 - 1954), Tuesday 28 October 1930, Page 8

⁵ Ibid

⁶ *Advocate* (Burnie, Tas. : 1890 - 1954), Saturday 31 January 1931, Page. 2

⁷ *Mercury* (Hobart, Tas. : 1860 - 1954), Wednesday 25 February 1931, Page 5

⁸ *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas. : 1900 - 1954), Wednesday 12 October 1932, Page 12

⁹ *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas. : 1900 - 1954), Saturday 11 September 1937, Page 5

¹⁰ *Mercury* (Hobart, Tas. : 1860 - 1954), Thursday 27 July 1939, Page 3

¹¹ Ibid

¹² *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas. : 1900 - 1954), Wednesday 15 February 1950, Page. 9