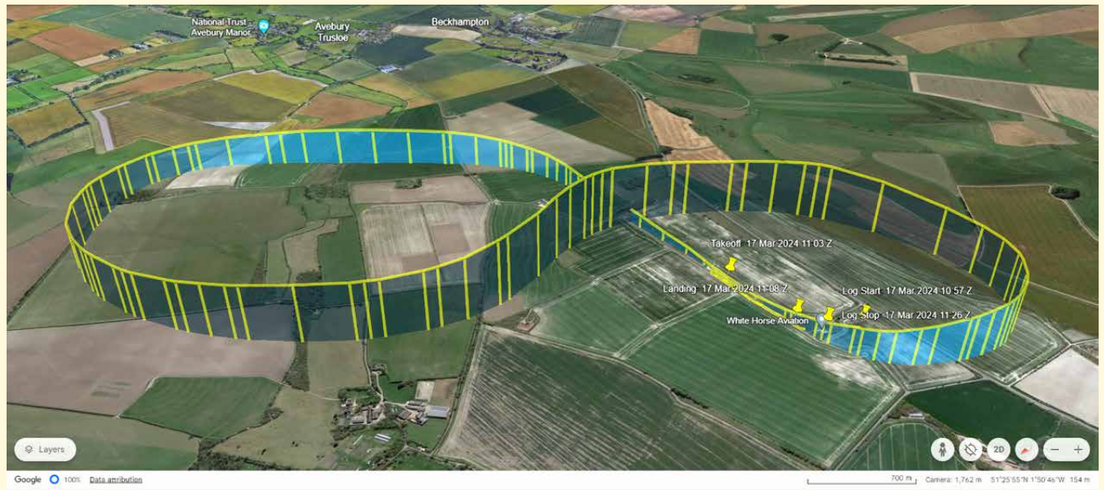
SAFETY

Swallowed whole

Forget Jonah and the whale: **Alex Porter** was engulfed by cloud, kept his head, and lived to tell the tale



Alex's track on SkyDemon

IT was a very unsettling experience, being in a C42 swallowed by cloud that came from nowhere.

To backtrack a little, we live in a beautiful part of the country: rural Wiltshire, home to eight of the country's white horses, stone circles, the longest run of canal locks and some beautiful towns and cities.

My home airfield, Yatesbury, is 525ft above sea level, and in the lee of a ridge that runs parallel to the downwind leg of the circuit to the south of the airfield. All pilots based there are familiar with the effect of that ridge, and know to expect rotor off the top.

Just southwest of the circuit is the Cherhill White Horse and Monument – lofty landmarks visible for miles, and ideal visual reference points.

On the day in question, the weather was improving, with the ceiling lifting from 700ft and clouds becoming broken, 10k visibility to the north and clear to the ridge to the south.

There was a moderate southerly, but well within crosswind limits for 28. Takeoff was fine, and with no passenger, I climbed quickly, turned off first stage of flap at 300ft and continued climbing.

So far, so good – then total whiteout below, above, left and right. Apparently, from the ground the plane also became silent. Swallowed whole.

So what do you do? Well, aviate first. I

> Suddenly and without warning, total whiteout


The White Horse

was taught light touch, reduce your speed, one stage of flap to give more control, keep the plane as stable as possible, let it fly itself and descend slowly.

Except that the last part was impossible: with high ground around, I wanted 800ft to be sure I didn't bump into anything. I knew climbing was going to get me into more trouble, as there would probably be a lot of cloud to get through, so I levelled out at 800ft and started a very gentle left turn to the north.

My logic was that I would have the wind right behind me, so hopefully less effect on the roll, and I also knew that there was excellent visibility to the north.

I was pretty sure there was nothing lower than 1325ft in that general direction. On reflection, it was probably less of a plan, more finding comfort in doing something!

All the information I had been given about disorientation, lack of reference points and vulnerability came into stark focus in the whiteness.

I was a bit taken aback to see I was up to 85kt, so reduced that and trimmed.

Fortunately, there was no turbulence, the rpm was exactly what I would expect, the VSI was showing zero, and the heading was 020, what I reckoned to be the wind direction, but outside – just white.

For what seemed like ages this continued, but I now know that it was just over two minutes before I saw the white thinning, then the ground. It was just a glimpse at first, but I was elated.

I had considered calling the airfield, but I wanted to focus on what I was doing, and I couldn't see any value in getting into a conversation with Julian Midder the CFI or Patrick Tame the FI. I was more resigned than calm; not a good feeling.

As I could see down, at least I could orient myself and navigate. I had thought that if I didn't bump into something, I could head for Draycott Farm airfield, which was easy to find and very forgiving.

I reversed my heading and could see that the cloud had just rolled over the ridge and was sitting on the downwind leg of the circuit.

I called Yatesbury Traffic, reported that I was returning to the airfield and called long final. I knew there was nothing in the circuit, since approaching from the north is not allowed except in an emergency.

The landing was uneventful, in a clear sky with a moderate crosswind.

I shut down, stepped out and then realised I was very shaken. I had a good debrief from Patrick the FI, which made it all a little better, but I do know that I don't want to be in that situation again.

I've had my NPPL for about a year, fly for pleasure and don't feel any pressure to fly in marginal conditions.

I was very lucky that I was in a place I knew well. I had SkyDemon running, but wasn't using it, and I had no artificial horizon, although even if I had, I'm not sure I would know how to use it, and it wouldn't have been a great time to learn.


Avebury, where Alex ended up


Ridgeway


Cherhill White Horse and monument

I know there are apps like fDeck with artificial horizon, but I didn't think it the right moment to start looking for them on my iPad.

At first, the lack of visibility was like driving a car and having a deluge of surface water cover the car, but after that it was not good.

I have worked in zero visibility and have no issue with it, but this was a long way outside my comfort zone.

Using the driving analogy again, it's rather like passing your test and going on to the M25 the day after without any experience. I will look at ways I can be better prepared.

There are plenty of videos on YouTube that tell you how quickly VFR pilots get disoriented in clouds.

My experience may have been very short, but it exceeded their estimate for someone with my low hours, so I feel very fortunate that it ended well. □

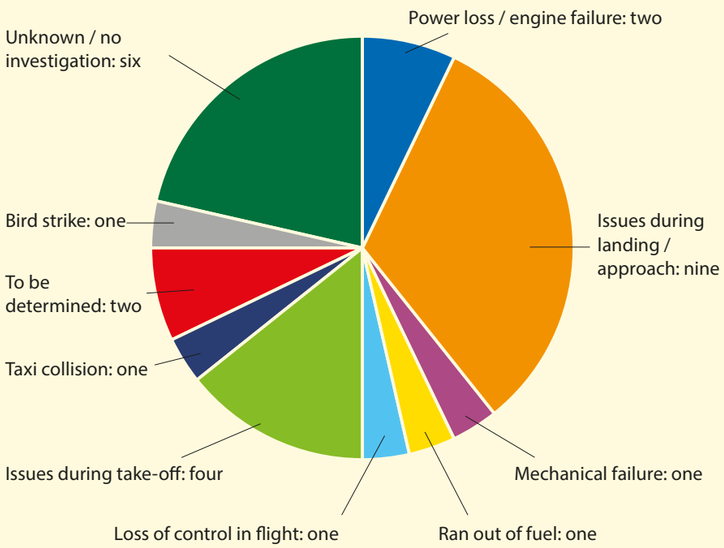
SAFETY

Lies, damned lies and statistics

You have to be careful with them, says **Chloe Eriksen,** who solves the problem by baking a nice pie. Chart, that is

Statistics can be skewed to tell all sorts of half-truths

Number of accidents by category for BMAA-registered aircraft in 2023



YOU have to be careful with statistics. They can be skewed to tell all sorts of half-truths.

But who doesn't love a good pie chart? So I've compiled a few interesting stats on BMAA-registered aircraft accidents for last year to see what lessons we can all take forward for the 2024 flying season. No misleading rates here, I promise.

I've been reading AAIB investigation reports and collating and cross-checking CAA intelligence data in an attempt to get a better understanding of the accident and incident rate for our microlights, and more importantly to establish what we can do about it.

I must highlight here that the categories in the pie chart are my own and not that of ICAO, the CAA or the AAIB. I've examined these accidents and come up with my own categorisation as best I can with the information available to me. And therein lies the issue: we have very little information available to us.

For example, there are six accidents in the unknown/no investigation category, which means that I don't have enough information to establish a root cause. This represents a not insignificant proportion of the 28 accidents we know about for last year, and leaves a big hole in our understanding of microlight accidents.

Furthermore, most of the non-serious accidents end up as record-only reports of under 100 words in the AAIB monthly bulletins. This gives me very little to go on. So although I'm able to categorise the accidents, it does not tell me what I really want to know, which is the "why?"

I believe the best person to analyse and dissect the events of an accident is the pilot. Sadly, this isn't always possible, but I would like to ask you for your help by providing me with a little more detail on the accidents and incidents that occur, so that others can learn from them.

The TBD, or "to be determined" category, refers to investigations which remain open, and it would therefore be unwise for me to make any comment at this stage as to the cause.

We can also see from the pie that most of our accidents and incidents these days occur due to us humans and not due to mechanical or power failure, and that most of those happen during the landing phase.

The most common word in all of the reports in the "landing issues" category was wind, be it crosswind, a gust of wind or a strong wind. Fences and hedges also featured in this category, but essentially more practice is required in this area.

It's not surprising that this is the largest category: as we have touched on before, landing can be the most perilous stage of flight. If you didn't catch my article on landing techniques in February *MF*, please do go back and have a read.

Sadly, our community suffered two fatalities during the year, and loss of control in-flight remains the category with the highest fatal or serious injury rate. Our thoughts are with all those affected.

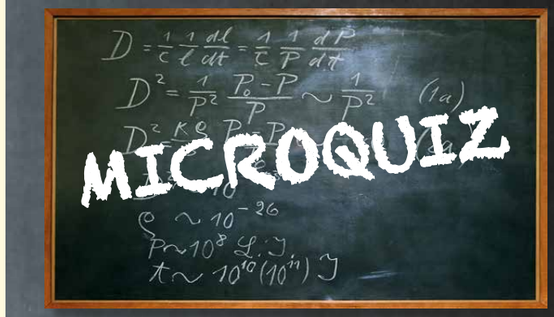
I'm extremely grateful for the comments, anecdotes and stories that I receive here at BMAA HQ, and I keep a record of every one.

This allows me to keep an eye on what topics might be worth exploring or revisiting in *MF*, and which areas of training and education we may need to focus on or even change.

But I couldn't do it without your valuable input. The categorisation of accidents reports is interesting, but it doesn't tell us the full picture. Are we crashing on landing because of lack of wind awareness and/or appreciation, because of incorrect technique or because of lack of recency?

All of these details are crucial to understanding the accident rate and working towards bringing these numbers down.

I thank you all for your open and honest accounts so far, and look forward to more of the same so that these numbers might look a little different next year. □



1 **When operating VFR outside controlled airspace at 5000ft AMSL, what is the minimum required forward visibility?**
   a 1.5km
   b 5km
   c 3km

2 **Which of the following is not a requirement when operating VFR above 3000ft AMSL but below FL100 outside controlled airspace?**
   a Maintain a forward visibility of 5km
   b Maintain 1500m horizontally from cloud
   c Maintain sight of the surface

3 **Which category of airspace is not currently allocated in the UK?**
   a Class A
   b Class B
   c Class C

4 **Which category of airspace always begins at the surface and goes up to a defined altitude or flight level?**
   a Control Area (CTA)
   b Control Zone (CTR)
   c Class A

5 **When a runway exceeds 1850m in length, the ATZ will extend to a height of…**
   a 2nm
   b 2.5nm
   c 2000ft

MF*'s quizmaster Lawrence Bell is the developer of QuizAero, the online groundschool for microlight student pilots, quizaero.co.uk.** ***Answers overleaf

GASCo
General Aviation Safety Council

QuizAero

GASCo, the General Aviation Safety Council, is a charity whose members are aviation organisations. Its aim is to make aviation safer through education. It presents the CAA safety evenings, runs seminars and provides safety information through its magazine and website, gasco.org.uk.

CHIRP

CHIRP, the Confidential Human Incident Reporting Programme, reviews and analyses reports from pilots, then publishes them so others can learn. Get the app at chirp.co.uk.