



AIRPROX *Insight*

DIRECTOR UKAB'S MONTHLY UPDATE

January 2025



Photo for illustrative purposes: Shutterstock: Ryan Fletcher

AIRPROX OF THE MONTH

When is an ATZ not an ATZ?

When it's outside its published hours of operation – but do you really know what they are?

I've often stressed the importance of good pre-flight planning because, in addition to other important checks such as airspace and NOTAMs near the route, it can help to avoid getting caught cold when things don't quite go according to plan. Take this example of an Airprox between a Beechcraft Bonanza and an ASK 21 glider in Wattisham's ATZ, for instance (**Airprox 2024158**).

The glider was just over halfway through a winch-launch when a member of launch control spotted the Bonanza approaching the launching glider. They had heard the Bonanza pilot making two blind calls to Wattisham Approach a little earlier, but an unknown pilot had responded to the Bonanza pilot's calls stating that Wattisham was closed at weekends.

Although the Bonanza pilot declined to submit a report, we do know that they contacted Southend Radar about two-and-a-half minutes before the Airprox, so it seems likely their calls would have been made on the Wattisham frequency around three or four minutes prior to the Airprox.

Recorded radar data showed the Bonanza making a 90° left turn in the overhead of the airfield and then a 90° right turn shortly

afterwards, resuming its original track. By combining the radar data with the GPS track log from the glider it seems that the aircraft were about 0.2nm horizontally and 50ft vertically separated at their closest.

From a planning perspective, the ATZ hours of operation for all airfields are contained in the UK AIP. However, for civilian airfields the information can be found in Part 3 (Aerodromes) AD2 whereas for military airfields the section to refer to is Part 2 (En-route) ENR 2.2. Within ENR 2.2 the hours of operation for Wattisham are shown as H24.

Without wishing to reproduce Rule 11 of the Rules of the Air Regulations 2015 here, it's clear in this case that the Bonanza pilot had been obliged to have '...obtain[ed] information [...] to enable the flight to be conducted safely within the aerodrome traffic zone'.

While there had been a transmission from an unidentified source that 'Wattisham is closed at weekends', this was not the case because gliding was active: sadly, nobody on the ground at Wattisham that had heard the transmissions had corrected the statement from the unidentified source.

The lessons here are clear: if intending to route through, over or near an ATZ,

check the UK AIP to establish exactly what the ATZ's hours of operation are, and don't be tempted to take somebody else's word for it – if in doubt, avoid the ATZ laterally or vertically.

It's also worth examining the actions of launch control in this case. The UKAB sees a lot of cases that involve powered aircraft and gliders, and many of these are in the vicinity of glider sites. The BGA encourages pilots passing close to glider sites to make a call on the published frequency (often available on the printed VFR chart) to inform others on the frequency of their intended routeing, but acknowledges that any calls made might not elicit a response. This is noteworthy because the absence of a response might not indicate the absence of gliding activity.

However, there is a lesson here for the gliding community – if you hear information being passed that you know to be incorrect then don't be afraid to get on the radio and pass the correct information.

In this case, there was clearly gliding activity taking place in the ATZ and so a call to the Bonanza pilot, in the interest of flight safety, confirming that activity would probably have prevented this Airprox from happening.

Furthermore, and I think this is really important, the procedure for winch-launching a glider includes a visual check of the surrounding airspace to ensure that it is clear. Most GA aircraft are of a size where they are unlikely to be seen outside a range of about two miles. The time taken for a GA aircraft to cover two miles at about 90kt is 1 minute 20 seconds – approximately the same time as it takes a glider to start the launch procedure and get to the top of the launch.

In this Airprox, launch control had received information that there might be an aircraft heading for the overhead of the airfield. A visual check revealed no aircraft in sight, but it was unlikely that the Bonanza would have been close enough to have been seen at the point the launch was initiated.

Finally, it's worth mentioning that weather on the day might well have played a part in this Airprox; the visibility at Wattisham was recorded as >10km but the cloudbase was recorded as overcast at 1700ft. This almost certainly featured in the Bonanza pilot's decision-making, and this brings me back to my original point – pre-flight preparation.

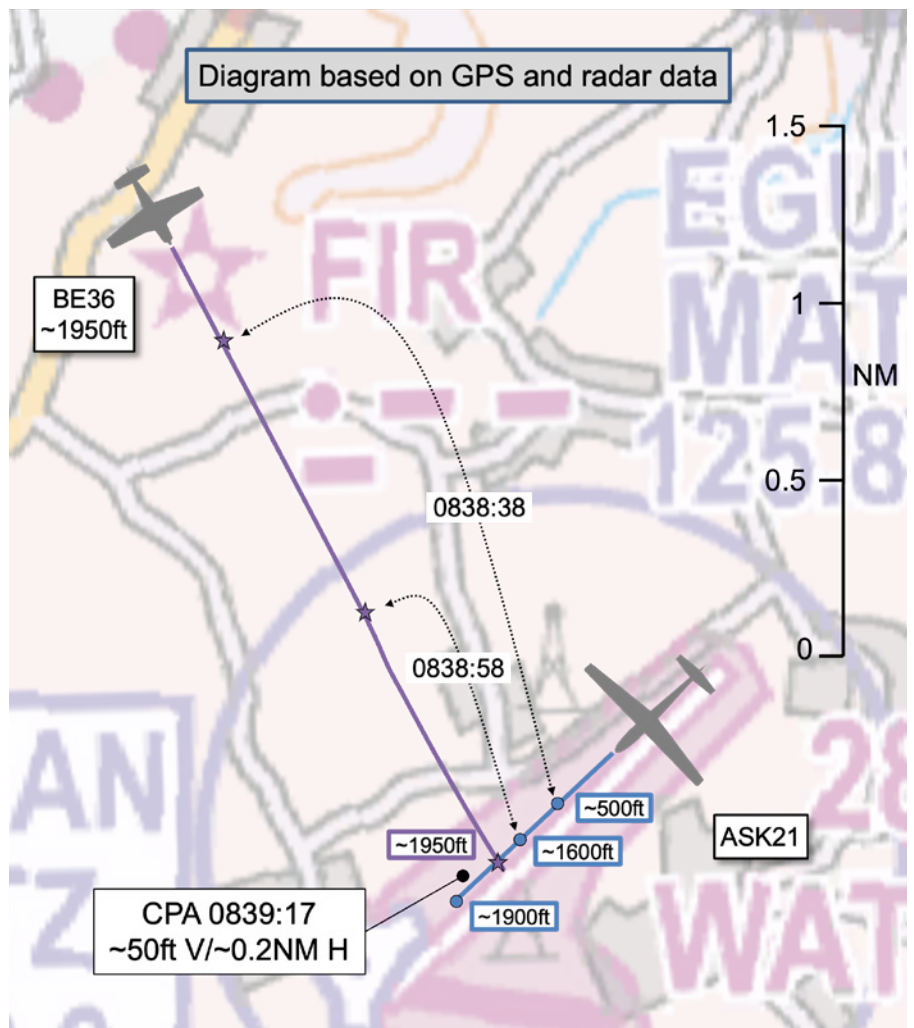
Time spent planning is seldom wasted and should include contingencies. Was the Bonanza pilot caught out by the cloudbase? Had they considered what they would do in the event that they couldn't execute 'Plan A'? We'll never know, but we can learn from this event to always have at least one backup plan during pre-flight planning and have the necessary information to execute that plan.

UKAB MONTHLY ROUND-UP

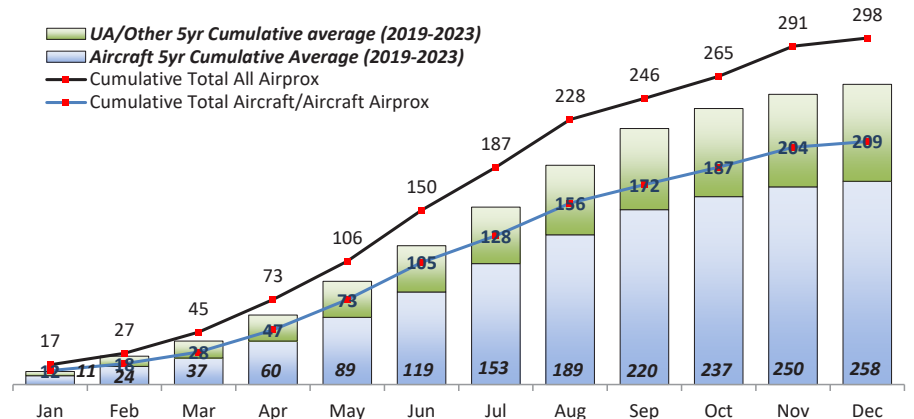
The Board evaluated 29 Airprox this month, including five UA/Other events, all of which were reported by the piloted aircraft. Of the 24 full evaluations, 14 were classified as risk-bearing – one as category A and 13 as category B.

The Board made one Safety Recommendation after a discrepancy between the information contained within the Military and Civilian AIPs regarding gliding activity at military aerodromes was discovered. Although the discrepancy concerned information relating to Wattisham Station, the Board felt that it would be worthwhile if a check was made for all military aerodromes where gliding takes place.

The graphic above right should be the final numbers for 2024 (I say 'should'



2024 Airprox - Cumulative Distribution



because we sometimes have Airprox reported to us a number of weeks after the actual event). As I mentioned in my last Insight article, 2024 has seen the highest number of aircraft-to-aircraft reports (the lower of the two curves) that we have ever had.

Next month we'll be issuing the annual 'Airprox Digest' magazine and so I shall try to provide a bit of background as to what might have changed over the last few years to perhaps have contributed to this continued growth in the number

of Airprox reported annually.

In the meantime, please do visit our website (<https://www.airproxboard.org.uk/home/>) and take a look at what's available and where you can learn from others so that you don't add to this ever-growing statistic.

Download the **new Airprox app**

