

Blackpool, Parachutes and Finding Kirkby

I took us out of the Liverpool zone via Seaforth, pointing out some of Liverpool's landmarks. My young passenger, Andrew, on only his second flight, seemed relaxed, sitting quietly taking it all in. Nobody answered my radio calls to Woodvale, so I passed through their overhead, climbing to 3000ft and called Blackpool as we approached the south bank of the River Ribble estuary. They gave me permission to transit through their overhead at 3000ft. I asked ATC if I could fly up the coast on the seaward side - the "wrong side" of the tide line, if one were obeying the left hand rule. They gave me permission with "nothing known to affect" my route. I pointed out Blackpool Pleasure Beach, the North and South Piers and the Tower to my passenger, and he remembered a caravan holiday there, he said.

As we approached Fleetwood, Andrew asked if I was going to let him "drive". I had forgotten about that in making sure I kept Blackpool ATC happy. We were not in anyone's way, so I let him have a go, getting him to make gentle turns left and right. I let him take us all the way to Cark, then to my surprise, he didn't want to "drive" anymore. It was quite a stretch for him to reach the yoke, and he couldn't see out of the front because of the high coaming, so I suppose it wasn't wholly unexpected.

I flew right round Cark anticlockwise, looking for the parachutists who so often floated down from 10,000 feet to land at Cark. Andrew was rather more concerned about a bank of cloud ahead of us and below. "What happens if we fly into that cloud?" he asked. "We won't," I answered, "We will turn before we reach it". We didn't see any parachutists, and the airfield below seemed deserted. I took a couple of photos of the airfield through the open window, warning Andrew first. It didn't bother him.

We then headed back south to Liverpool, routing round the Morecambe Bay coast and east of Heysham Nuclear Power Station. Blackpool asked me to route to their eastern boundary and report abeam the field. As I came abeam Blackpool's main runway 28/10, I estimated that I had taken us just across the eastern tangent of the Blackpool ATZ, a thought verified a few minutes later by crossing the Ribble Estuary west abeam Warton's runway 26/08.

Kirkby VRP

I had always largely avoided entering and leaving the Liverpool zone from the north over the years, because, with the exception of Seaforth, the official zone entry and exit points - Burtonwood, Aintree Racecourse and Kirkby, always looked on the chart as if they would be hard to find. I had used some of them though, in the past. I had once left the zone at Aintree Racecourse, and on another occasion come back in at Burtonwood. In recent years both these VRPs had been removed from the VFR entry and exit routes, and Kirkby, (the second k was silent), a small conurbation on the northern outskirts of the city, was now the only published entry point for traffic from the north inbound to runway 27. On a couple of occasions, rather than risk not finding Kirkby, I had requested "non-standard entry" into the zone at Seaforth, and, with no other aircraft about, had been given permission to fly down the Mersey against the published traffic direction. Liverpool wasn't so busy then as now, and the

chance of that happening these days was slim. So on this occasion, I was determined to bite the bullet and come into the zone at Kirkby.

I had prepared for this carefully in my Plog and knew the heading to steer from Fleetwood. The only problem was that Blackpool had cleared me south on a slightly different track - east of their ATZ and almost overhead Warton. From Warton the track to Kirkby looked on the chart to be about 178°. (179° actually, as calculated later), so allowing for a slight westerly wind and magnetic variation, I estimated my required heading as 185°. This part of Lancashire, known as the Fylde, was flat, almost fenland country and just as featureless as the East Anglian variety. The only thing to do here was to fly the heading accurately and hope that Kirkby would become obvious when we got to it.

There was one good landmark between Warton and Kirkby, - Burscough disused aerodrome. I had flown over this a couple of times in the past and knew that it wasn't actually very obvious because it had largely been ploughed up. The triangular form of the surrounding hedgerows and a couple of strips of tangled undergrowth marking the position of former runways was about all there was to see, so you needed to be fairly close to it to clearly identify it. Fortunately my track took me almost directly overhead so I made a determined effort to identify it, just south west of the village of the same name, and about 4 miles north east of Ormskirk. In the featureless Fylde, these were the only two settlements of any size so I ought to be able to spot those at any rate.

My luck was in, or my planning accurate, because as I started looking out for it, based on the ETA I had scribbled on my Plog, I saw it just ahead and to my left. At about the same time, I became aware that there was a tall plume of white smoke almost dead ahead. "That's useful," I thought, "It looks as if might be at Kirkby." The other clue to finding Kirkby was that it was a couple of miles south of the east-west M58 which I would cross and immediately east of the M57 which came in from the north west to meet my track.

I crossed the M58, the plume of smoke now obviously from a significant factory and still straight ahead. Now I could see the M57 coming in from my right. I reckoned the smoke was at Kirkby and made my zone entry call as I reached the chimney. ATC acknowledged with "Report field in sight", so I was obviously close if not bang on target. I followed the M57 keeping it on my right in accordance with the official route instructions, and it wasn't long before I could see the outline of the new and very tall Control Tower against the shimmering waters of the Mersey. ATC were busy and I couldn't get my next call in when I wanted to. So I routed more towards the Runcorn Bridge to give me a bit more time. When I did eventually manage to get a word in edgeways, I was given "Clear to land No. 1."