‘Some very strange blokes’ is how the East Devon Radio Control Club describe themselves in their Company Overview on Facebook. Strange? No, but it is true that there are currently no female pilots flying model aircraft in the sky over the Pebblebed heath. The flyers’ is a hobby that seems to possess a fascinating hold over its participants across the years and it is interesting to explore what is involved and the ensuing relationship with the heathland.

There has been a model airfield on the Pebblebed heaths since before the Second World War. The field moved to the present site after a sighting of a Montagu’s harrier, a protected bird of prey, on Aylesbeare Common before that area was let to the RSPB as a nature reserve. Now the airstrip may be found on Woodbury Common at grid reference SY03858656, some 150 yards from the car park on the B3179, a road that traverses the heathland from east to west and borders the Woodbury and Bicton Commons. There is a slight sheltered slope leading up to a barrier and in fact you are soon confronted with four tracks to choose from. The left leads back to the B3179, the right to the next car park. The other two form a V shape: the left-hand path was originally a firebreak but now with regular use by walkers it has become an unofficial path to Woodbury Castle. The flyers joke about this: ‘It’s an unofficial path; it’s not actually there’, and amid much laughter another responds, ‘That’s right, you can’t see that one’. Upon being asked why Clinton Devon Estates would mind it being used as a path the response is ‘They try to keep people to particular directions’, although it is doubtful that this is the case. The right-hand fork of the V-shaped path leads to a sign that reads: ‘!Warning! Model Aircraft Flying’. You know then
that you have arrived. This is a very open space with views across to Woodbury Castle, the gentle hills towards Honiton and the sea that lies between Budleigh Salterton and Sidmouth. Up ahead, in the distance, is the Royal Marines’ grenade range, but the woods block the view. The strip itself is about 75 × 75 metres square.

**East Devon Radio Control Club (EDRCC)**

There is some debate as to when the club was formed, as the original documentation has been lost, but a former chairman remembers being a founding member: ‘Yes, I would say that the club itself was probably formed in the late ’60s … when there were about four or five of us that got it together, but the flying has taken place on Woodbury Common starting from before the [Second World] war’. The EDRCC is the biggest of its kind in the South-West region and one of the largest in the UK. Behind the club there is something that one flyer describes as ‘a fairly tight organization’. There are over seven hundred clubs belonging to an association named the British Model Flying Association, whose mandate comes from the Royal Aero Club, the Civil Aviation Authority and Sport UK. The club also has links with the Society of Model Aeronautical Engineers and, as will be seen, the construction of the models is of great importance to the club’s members. Membership cards are issued; these display the member’s ‘achievement level’ and also show the member is insured. The ‘A’ level is the standard club level and this allows members to fly at public events.

There are only a few time restrictions and the flying times are 10:00 to dusk from Sunday to Friday and 10:00 to 14:00 on Saturdays and bank holidays, with a session reserved for electric models only from 14:00 to dusk on Saturdays. Most people tend to fly at weekends and those who are available on weekdays tend to fly on Tuesdays and Thursdays. A minimum of two people are required to be at the strip – one to act as a safety marshall, the other a flyer. The club has been given a licence to use the site by Clinton Devon Estate and is charged £1,250 per annum together with a third of the costs of maintaining the car park. It appears that CDE have not yet charged the club for the car park maintenance and the club itself maintains the air strip: ‘We cut it, we roll it, we cut it, we fill in the holes (made by rabbits, moles and the occasional helicopter landing) and so on’ (Felix, model aircraft flyer). On occasions when it is not protected adequately by the barriers, motorbikes and cars go on the strip, which the flyers say ruins it: ‘You end up with skid marks and it’s a couple of
years before it re-grows’ (Model aircraft flyer). Other occasional annoyances include cars being set alight at the entrance of their car park, but a continual nuisance is that of dog pooh: ‘Just to give you an idea of the scale of the problem, G. T. used to pick up the dog mess with a shovel and put it into two whopping big heaps. Occasionally we say to people, “You are going to pick that up, aren’t you?” and you get a mass of abuse’. One flyer emphasizes that he gives ‘a right fight’ on this issue when he’s up on the Common. Some of the flyers appear to resent the charge made by CDE: ‘Oh yes, they charge us to use the site whereas you, say, horse people, dog walkers, just ordinary walkers, they’re all getting it free of charge’.

Tuition is an important feature that the club provides and this usually takes place on Sunday mornings, although other times can be arranged when it is convenient for both trainee and instructor. This is described by one member as a ‘buddy system’:

(There are) two transmitters, one is disabled but linked to another one that is actually flying the plane or in control of the plane and the trainer holds the real transmitter and the trainee holds the dummy. The control can be passed from transmitter to transmitter by the trainer and, just as in full size flying when they are training, you say to them, ‘You have control’ and they’ll say, ‘I have control’, and then you’ll fly a bit and then when the trainee gets into trouble the trainer will flick a switch and take control back.

(Model aircraft flyer)

It is remarked that beginners tend to fly very high because they are afraid of the ground and they also allow the plane to go too far at times and have to be asked to turn round: ‘They may have got to the point where they are no longer in control because they can’t see it properly … it’s very much like learning to drive a car, you do need help’ (Model aircraft flyer).

The question of safety is a top priority and there are a number of facets to this. Besides the efforts of those involved in training new flyers these include awareness of one’s environment when flying as well as the flight-worthiness of the model plane. The airfield marshall is also constantly on the lookout for other users of the Common and dogs. Again, just as in full-size flying, take-offs and landings can be the most dangerous aspect of this pursuit. The presence of dogs is particularly hazardous as they are often attracted to the noise of the moving aeroplane and the motion of its propeller. There are also occasions when the flyer has radio
interference from an unknown source (possibly Royal Marine radio signals) and the aircraft can move in the wrong direction or even drop out of the sky: ‘Planes can be very dangerous things. If you hit somebody you can easily kill or injure them’ (Model aircraft flyer). On one occasion a child was hit by a plane: ‘but that was the worst situation we’ve had’. Injury is also something that can be suffered by the flyers, who frequently injure their hands, fingers and arms: ‘The top of my finger has been re-arranged (laughs)’ (Model aircraft flyer). This type of injury is usually due to touching the propeller: ‘You can cut a finger off with the propeller once the engine’s running’. Actual air collisions are rare as there is a very strict flying area but the aeroplanes often go in the wrong direction: ‘It happens every time we fly, everywhere’ (Model aircraft flyer).

Other groups, particularly people coming from Cornwall and Bristol, also use the airstrip. Every year the latter group holds a ‘free flight championship’ on the Common. Free flight does not involve the use of radio control. As well as the use of the noisy internal combustion motor, motive power can also be accessed by quiet means such as electric, CO2 or the traditional rubber strip motor. The plane’s motors are set going and then it is released. There are set times to let the engine run, then the plane is triggered to circle – ‘flight and duration is what you’re aiming for and it’s very competition-orientated’ (Model aircraft flyer). Some of these craft have transmitters on them but without a ‘bleep’ they require following and tracking down to wherever they have landed.

**The planes**

The flyers bring their models to the strip: the means of locomotion depends on the weight of the model plane and its construction. The big, heavier planes have wheels under their carriages and can be towed. The smaller are held in the arms of the modelers, sometimes fully assembled, sometimes not. The planes then vary greatly in size and weight and the materials of construction also affect this. At this site there is a weight restriction of 10 kilograms; a typical wing span size is between 100 and 150 centimetres, but some models reach 230 centimetres or more. It would appear that a number of the new electric models have tended to be a bit smaller but these models are now increasing in size too. The technology behind these crafts has been changing: ‘The electric models, you wouldn’t have seen them five years ago because the technology wasn’t there’ (Model aircraft flyer). The flyers are aware of the noise that the non-electric aeroplanes make but a former chairman of the club believes
there has only been one formal complaint about this and the flyers are adamant that the noise does not affect the birds or other wildlife. Unlike those powered by petrol or methanol, the electric models are very quiet. One flyer whose plane has a wing span of 230 centimetres describes his plane as being noisy:

but hopefully a lot noisier than it’s going to be this time next year as I’ve got a different silencer to put on it and it will give it more power and it will make it quieter. A tuned spike – it’s something that you get on high-performance cars as well.

(Model aircraft flyer)

His colleague describes this motor as being the sort of size you might find on a garden instrument such as a powerful strimmer. ‘Or a motorbike’, his friend interjects; ‘A little motor bike’ is the rejoinder. Does size matter? No, for all of these planes have character and history as well as differences in colour, size and weight. Performance in the air is largely dependent upon the skill and experience of the flyer although it is felt that the larger models may be easier to fly as they are buffeted about less than smaller models.

The construction or building of the model planes is very much part of the pleasure for the flyers (Figure 11.1), one of whom has erected a display of model aeroplanes that he takes to shows. One flyer who has been involved in this pastime for over seventy years believes that the building of the model is more important to him than flying it: ‘It is for me, yes. I mean during the war (Second World War) we used to build solid models, out of terrible timber’. Nowadays he builds scale models: ‘I like things to look quite real. I build to scale, slowly, and it is very good practice at my age to have this eye–hand co-ordination. I’m not a very good flyer but I’m a keen builder and I get a lot of pleasure building models’. Some of the flyers came to the heathland with their fathers when they were young and flew models using a control-line, using the lines to fly the model in a circle before landing. Others came with chuck gliders – ‘You just chucked it and see where it went … we built them and flew them, lost them and broke them’ (Model aircraft flyer). Many of these fliers have been coming here for between fifty and seventy years to fly models and these occasions are remembered with affection.

One flyer, Brian, has brought two of his scaled model planes to the airstrip. One is a Vickers Wellington, the other a North American P-51 Mustang. Both of the full-size versions of these planes have huge history behind them. The Wellington’s fuselage and wing structures used
Barnes Wallis’s geodesic design, Wallis being the well-known inventor of the famous bouncing bomb (as in the *Dambusters* movie). Some of the older flyers can remember Wellington bombers taking off in the Second World War and Brian remarks that his plane is quieter as it is electric. His Mustang has a pretty design of a black woman sitting on one side of the plane and Brian explains its story. It transpires that during the Second World War African Americans in the American military were racially segregated from white troops, and this included the airmen. Only the Tuskegee 332nd Fighter Group was allowed to take part in overseas operations and this model of Mustang is the plane with which they were most associated. Brian’s Wellington has been constructed from recycled materials such as insulation foam and plastic, which have been carved out. The Wellington’s batteries have a camouflaged recycled pop bottle covering them, for example. His flying colleagues make jokes about him going round bins looking for materials. He says: ‘I’m not quite as bad as that but my wife drags me away from the recycling bins. When I pass a skip she says, “don’t look in that!”’ However, looking at Brian’s scaled aeroplanes it is clear that much skill and time is required to construct his models, the Wellington taking about two months to build.

![Figure 11.1 A model aircraft enthusiast and his plane](image)
As many of the flyers have more than one plane they are asked where the models are stored and one flyer responds: ‘I’ve got aeroplanes in the shed, aeroplanes in the garage, aeroplanes in the cellar and aeroplanes in the house’. ‘My, how many aeroplanes have you got?’ asks a fellow flyer. ‘Too many’, he responds, and everyone laughs.

**Flying**

Apart from the time restrictions, weather is also the main factor affecting when flying can take place. Strong wind, rain and mist all mitigate against the flyers – rain getting into the transmitter can mean losing the link between plane and transmitter, leading the plane to crash. The distance flown is dependent on the ability to see the plane: ‘As long as you can see it, if the radio control is in good order and set up correctly, you can fly as far as you can see it but any further and you will not have control because you can’t see it’.

How often a plane is flown depends of course upon the individual member and this varies a great deal, from a few times a week to the occasional weekend. If a number of people are flying they tend to fly in what is referred to as circuits. Whether it is a left-hand circuit or right-hand circuit depends upon the direction of the wind. Take-offs and landings are at ninety degrees to the wind and constant awareness of the landscape is very necessary: ‘Wind direction, people, air flow, making sure you’re at the right height, right speed, coming in over gorse and so on, not hitting anything. Always, you are aware of your surroundings and you’re aware of the model’ (Model aircraft flyer). Although taking off is relatively easy compared to flying and landing, when in training the beginner only learns how to take off once they have learnt how to fly and land. ‘The theory of that is the pupil isn’t tempted to go and fly by themselves before learning properly because they haven’t learnt to take off’ (Model aircraft flyer).

One flyer, Felix, explains before taking off for a demonstration flight how he holds the controls: ‘There’s two schools of thought. One is thumbs on top, which is what I do, and the other way is using fingers and thumbs and is done with the control hung from a strap around the neck. I get on with thumbs much better’. He then shows us how the ailerons move and what they do. The aileron (French for ‘little wing’) is a small, hinged flight control surface found on each wing; these are used to control the aircraft when performing rolls for example. These ailerons are interconnected so that when one goes up the other goes down;
the downward motion increases the lift on the plane’s wing with the up-going aileron reducing the wing’s lift. The first thing Felix does is to start the propeller manually; he then checks which direction the wind is blowing, determining this by the airstrip’s windsock. He moves in to half-throttle and pauses when people appear on the path. Finally he moves the thrust control, giving his craft momentum and creating lift on the wings. He takes off in the direction of the windsock and commences some aerobatic manoeuvres. Lines and loops, rolls, spins, figures of eight and stall turns are all performed; interestingly these are the same technical terms as for full-sized light aircraft manoeuvres, as are the terms used in describing how the manoeuvres are performed. There is an inside loop where the nose of the plane is pulled up, resulting in positive G-force, and an outside loop where the nose of the plane tilts downwards and a negative G is drawn. One flyer remarks, ‘If you were in a plane and it did that you wouldn’t like it. Doing the loop is uncomfortable’. In fact in full-sized aircraft doing such loops can cause a blackout for the pilot in the case of the positive G and a ‘red-out’ (when excessive blood is pumped into the pilot’s eyes) in the negative G scenario.

When Felix decides what he wants to do he does not look at the controls but at the plane. Brain, eye and hand coordination are seamless. Felix remarks that things are very different when a flyer is inexperienced: ‘You’re thinking about every single move and you’re thinking about what your hands are doing, you’re thinking about everything. Once you’ve become more experienced you just do it and basically your mind goes to the plane rather than down to the controls; your fingers just do it’. The flyers agree that when they are on the airstrip they are in their own world. ‘When you’re actually flying you’re totally focused. Take your eyes off it for a second and you could be in trouble’ (Model aircraft flyer). One flyer has had sitting profile photographs taken of himself in flying gear. These are placed in his model plane’s cockpit and from a distance it really does look as if he is sitting in a plane flying it. (Figure 11.2). There is some discussion as to whether, in their minds, the flyers are in the cockpit when flying, and it is decided that this is not the case: ‘You’ve got to have distance to react to orientation as you see it’ … ‘Yes, you’re with the plane but you’re on the ground, totally concentrating, handling the controls. You see where you are in relation to everywhere else, where the aeroplane is in relation to everything else and where the aeroplane is in relation to the ground’. As far as operating the controls is concerned, when the plane is flying away from the flyer left is left and right is right but when it comes towards the flyer, the opposite is the case. If the flyer wishes to bank towards the right, the left wing has to drop: ‘You’ve got
to think the other way round and that’s one of the fundamental things that every beginner has to get’ (Model aircraft flyer). This is like looking at one’s moving reflection in a mirror and is very different from flying an actual light aircraft. It is remarked that pilots of light aircraft sometimes have difficulty learning to fly model planes because they are used to a joystick and not this mirror effect when using the controls.

Asking why a flyer gets pleasure in participating in this hobby invokes a thoughtful discussion: ‘It’s so hard to describe! Oh gosh! Um, it’s next to the real thing’. It is recognized that some people may regard this as an ‘anorak’ kind of hobby but to flyers, when an aeroplane is actually flying, using the air to fly on, ‘it’s a thing of beauty’. Some flyers have always been interested in aeroplanes:

Boys would come here with their parents and then they would start getting interested in motorbikes and girls and it packed off, dropped off. But late on in life, after you’ve started a family or whatever, you start to come back to it again, ‘Ah yes, I think I’ll have a go at that again’, and back you come, you know the way it works.

(Model aircraft flyer)
Another describes his enthralment: ‘Once you’ve been hooked on aircraft, and I’ve been hooked all my life, it’s the sit of the aeroplane, the aeroplane size, you know, the look of the thing in the air’. Some flyers get particular pleasure in making a scale-model craft fly like a ‘real aeroplane’, making a Wellington fly like a Wellington, for example. There is also a sense of achievement in successfully controlling something they are not in immediate physical contact with. The hand movements on the controls are very delicate and very precise: ‘You can hardly see the hands move and yet the aeroplane will respond’. Some flyers set goals or keep records such as the number of flights flown, total airborne time and public displays attended. Other flyers have enriched their experience by becoming tug pilots – joining up with a fellow flyer and aerotowing gliders. For there is also a sense of a community of flyers and this may be seen on their website, which includes a display of events, photographs of all the club’s model aircraft, and an exchange of ‘stories’. This communal sense sometimes extends outside flying times. The flyers become friends and get together on a social basis as well. People also come to watch the flyers. Some bring chairs so they can sit and watch the flyers perform their circuits. This is particularly true on a summer Sunday morning: one flyer remarks that some people turn up in the early afternoon just as the flyers are leaving and get quite upset that they have missed the display. Performing for other people’s pleasure is part of the excitement.

The environment

The relationship the flyer has with the heathland can be twofold – one is mobile and to do with what he experiences when he comes to the heath to walk, or paint, explore its geology, its history, and study or observe nature, as these are all some of the other pursuits followed by the flyers. The other is when he comes here to fly, and this is quite singular in that it concerns one area, part of it being the airstrip, which is ‘fixed’ and signposted, and actually one of the few written signs in this landscape, the others being the notification signs put up by CDE about the wildlife, South West Lakes Trust about fishing at Squabmoor, and information regarding the Iron Age hill fort, Woodbury Castle. The remainder of the area is that visible to the flyer and this of course depends upon the weather at the time of each visit. A map made by one of our flyers shows the approach road to the airstrip from the west, marking landscaping mounds along it, the path to the flying field, the heath beyond, a typical loop of a plane (arrowed), and Woodbury Castle. Equal importance is
given to a sketch of a plane (Figure 11.3). As has been noted, the club carefully maintains the airstrip and some flyers feel a sense of ownership over this particular area of heathland: ‘I know it doesn’t belong to me, I know I’m only borrowing it for the time that I’m there, but, yes, because we have access, I think, “Yes, that’s our place to be”’ (Model aircraft flyer). Another remarks that he moved to be near to the flying club. In fact, some cyclists have also stated choosing to live close to the heathland in order to take part in activities there.

*Figure 11.3  Model aircraft flyer’s map*
The club is very aware of the danger of heathland fires resulting from their activities and the club rules stipulate this: ‘No fires of any description shall be lit on the flying site at any time’. However, there is also the danger of a fire starting as a result of an accident involving a model aircraft and in 1995 a large fire ensued when a model aeroplane’s fuel ignited after crashing. One flyer speaks of a fire, believed to have been caused by a dropped cigarette, that started on the other side of the hill in the far distance one Sunday morning: ‘We were all here until one o’clock and by that time it had burnt three parts of the way down so we beat a hasty retreat and by four o’clock it was here – it was really devastating’. They comment on the effects of this fire: ‘Within weeks the birds were back, there was grass sprouting up and within eighteen months you wouldn’t have known what had happened. One good thing it did was get rid of the gorse’. The flyers are particularly grateful when the estate cuts down the gorse around the airstrip, as it is painful finding and reclaiming a plane that goes down in this vegetation.

Although it is felt that the heathland is not a natural place in that it has to be maintained in order to keep it as heathland, some flyers do find it to be a wild place: ‘It’s very wild. I can’t quite say it’s original but it seems original and it can be bleak’. So, not only is the heath felt to be wild, so is the airstrip: ‘Our site is very rough and rugged and you have to be quite good to use it … people come from other places and find our site rather difficult because of this but it’s an absolutely gorgeous site to fly from’. This largely is to do with the fact that there are few trees in the area around the airstrip and thus there is much space for the aeroplanes to move around in. There is also much for the human eye to gaze upon: ‘It’s a lovely area … You go up there and you can see for miles, you know, all over the place’. One flyer remarks: ‘I get up on the strip, look across to the sea and think, “Yeah, this is a good place to be”’. Even though it would be helpful to have a place to store their windsock and shovel, the flyers would rather there were no structures put in place there, nor amenities placed elsewhere on this landscape.

Many are aware of the different historical aspects the heath offers, both recent and ancient. Brian says: ‘Links to the past are all around us. There’s burial mounds and the tribe must have been fascinated by the heath. Absolutely amazing. Ritualistic, spectacular things’. Others speak of the Heath’s military history and how it was used during the World Wars. Of course, this is still a landscape that is shared with the military, the Royal Marines. The flyers state that the Marines pay a vast amount of money to use the heathland and remark upon their relationship with the latter: ‘The Marines aren’t allowed on our strip, however, they do go
on the site, deliberately, because it’s a useful little place for them … they landed a helicopter one summer … we liaise with the camp … we have had words backwards and forwards but we have good relations with the camp’. The airstrip is, in fact, essentially in the middle of an area of heathland the Royal Marines use most for training and the latter also feel they have a right to use this area. Thus there is bound to be slight conflict between the two bodies of users from time to time.

The flyers’ relationship with the Pebblebed landscape tends to be static compared to other kinds of heath use. Unlike walkers, the flyers have no anticipation of roaming unknown tracks or of observing changes in nature: the flyer will drive to the car park and take the short walk to the airstrip, a familiar and set place. Unlike the heathland around the airstrip with its tangle of gorse and heather, the strip is flat, with carefully maintained and closely cropped grass. The flyers’ activity has dictated a change to the landscape in this location and it is a maintained change – one that becomes fixed and almost unchanging, physically, in presence and in memory, and so the landscape is probably experienced primarily in this way. Although the character of the views seen from the airstrip may alter according to weather and season these remain the same views and whether they are of significance when the modeler is flying is questionable. It is, then, a form of confined embodiment; the flyer is in an almost fixed landscape, creating a temporary theatre in the sky through delicate movement with a focus on space, air flow and the flying model, rather than the landscape per se. His safety marshall is on the lookout for movement from others (walkers, dogs, birds) within this landscape, either on the ground or in the air.

**Conclusions**

The relationship of the flyers with the heathland is both personal and historical. Many members of the club are local to the area and several have been coming here since their childhood. Sadly, one club member, Dennis Lippet, died on the path to the airstrip and his family placed a birch tree together with an engraved memorial notice. Unfortunately the tree died. It was replaced with another but when it died too, it was not replaced and the notice was returned to the family. Thus the airstrip and the visible area around it is a place wherein lies the fusing of personal memory and historical events, whether such events are military or taking place in nature. In some cases the model aeroplane reflects other interests the flyer may have and it could be said that in
this way the model takes on the personality of its owner, its producer of construction and flight. For example, the flyers’ aeroplanes are sometimes replica scale models of those that once flew through the heathland sky, and these flyers take particular pleasure not only in possessing the history of the original aeroplane but also in making their model planes fly in the same way as those full-size planes of seventy years ago or more. There is embodiment between flyer, the heathland landscape and the physics of flight. Some model aircraft flyers enjoy flying slowly, others prefer speed and their type of aircraft often reflect such preferences, but for all there is an awareness of space and direction whilst being totally absorbed in creating the movement of line, spiral, loop and roll. First there is the plane visibly performing these manoeuvres, then, in the human imagination, there can almost be an invisible line, spiral, loop and roll trailing from behind the plane. For flying the model is a skilled art and the manoeuvres performed leave this faint moving calligraphy in mind and memory long after observing the performance.