

United Kingdom Ballooning Report – 2011

A rather gloomy report from the UK.

2011 began with a tragic ballooning accident on New Year's Day when both the pilot and PUT on board were killed whilst attempting a badge flight. A synopsis of the accident is as follows: The pilot was attempting to climb to an altitude of 6,000 m (approximately 19,700 ft). Having reached an altitude of 21,500 ft the balloon descended for about 80 seconds at approximately 1,500 ft/min. It then entered a rapid descent of approximately 5,500 ft/min from which it did not recover. In the latter stages of the descent the envelope was seen in a collapsed, 'streamered' state. There was a post-impact fire, which damaged much of the balloon basket and envelope. The accident was investigated by the Air Accident Investigation Branch of the Department of Transport and the BBAC and a report of the investigation of the accident was published in October 2011. The summary of which stated the following:

"There was no evidence of a technical defect in the balloon or of an in-flight structural failure. It is likely that the accident occurred as a result of some combination of a mishandled parachute valve, inexperience of lock tops, inexperience with a large balloon at high rates of ascent, degraded human performance due to some level of hypoxia and pressure to descend as the approved Flight Level was about to be breached. However, it was not possible to determine which factors were most applicable in this accident."

There were very few other accidents / incidents during the year. This probably as a result of relatively poor flying conditions in the UK during 2011.

European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) legislation continues to create airworthiness and training issues in the UK resulting in a huge increase in paperwork and, of course, expenditure. While the legislation was designed to provide a standard set of rules across Europe it still appears to be causing a lot of confusion among balloon owners and pilots. The next changes from EASA will affect training, licensing and operations and are due to come into force in 2012 (although hopefully with opt-outs until 2015).

2011 saw a considerable reduction in the number of Balloon Ride Operators and private balloon owners in the UK. Factors which have contributed to this downturn must include the economic climate, increasing legislation (and cost) and poor weather.

No UK pilots made a record flight or completed CIA badges during 2011. The national hot air balloon championship was one of the poorest attended championship ever although ambitious directing did result in the highest number of tasks set.

On the positive side, there does appear to be an increase in the number of young pilots coming into ballooning; these are possibly mainly the children of balloonists but they may bring in their friends!