

The Good Old Days

We (my husband Sam and I) and our friends were among the first hang gliders in Wollongong starting about 1972. We all bought a really simple kite for \$200 and would spend every spare minute learning on the sand dunes at Primble - a Wollongong suburb. If you broke it - you fixed it! And usually we replaced struts every week!

Eventually we moved on up to a narrow outcrop overlooking a beach at Port Kembla and I can remember up to 20 kites lined up the walkway waiting their turn. I can also remember visitors watching and saying really dumb things like "Quick, quick, I think he's landing!" as a flyer would crash into the bushes. Duh!

We were all learning by "Touch" as it were - there were no teachers, no books. It was wonderful! Sam ended up really wacking both knees one time, when he volunteered to be the first one to fly a new site! I remember we all went running as he went down, down, down and one of the guys yelling to me "Stay back, stay back!" I thought I was a widow. LOL

We eventually graduated to Hargraves Lookout up the coast at Helensburgh - the ultimate flying site in NSW! So many guys - no rules - no gradings. Sometimes it was chaos. By then everyone had their own kites and they were getting flasher and flasher. Everyone would be round at our place making their own body harnesses because it was so cold on the hill. I remember once an older fellow setting up to fly tandem - and he obviously didn't know what he was doing, so all the fellows were trying to stop him. Anyway, he took off, straight out to sea, lost lift and went down. The fabric of the kites closed in over them and they drowned. Ratings followed shortly after and Bald Hill - the Lookout - was given the top rating.

I can remember when we first started flying from there, everyone would glide down to the beach - all still learning of course. I would have to drive our car down and sometimes I would bring back 7 - 8 big fellows - with our kids sitting on their knees - the kites bowing down the board racks. We had a lot of fun. Sam sometimes got caught in thermals that would take him so high he would get a bit scared and lose his bearings. I would be on the top of the hill with our kids wondering where on earth he had gone to.

Some of the guys were real mavericks too. One day, a girlfriend and I were going to Sydney, and on the freeway - hitching with his kite - was one of the main mavericks. He had ocki straps wrapped all around his body, the A frame over his shoulder and the kite all bundled up and was hitching! It took us about a hundred yards to pull up we were

laughing so much.. Anyway, he very soberly strapped the whole thing to the board racks, climbed in and we took him to Helensburgh where he no doubt, had a great day, probably wondering why we found it so funny. I have no idea how he got home, but I'm sure he did!

We were dairy farmers near Wollongong in those days, and the family bought a farm near Woodstock and we moved up to run it. There was no one flying out here and we tried to find some good sites, but we were on our own and it was quite dangerous, so eventually we stopped trying. Now, we are ready to move back to the coast - but I think the flying days are over. Sam will go back surfing again I think and perhaps drive up to Byron and have a supervised glide every now and then.

Written by Sue Maynes