

Cloudhopper News

Issue No. 177

May 2026

Welcome to your May Newsletter

Hello my readers, I hope you are all doing good. Welcome to the May edition of the Newsletter and slightly slim pickings but beggars can't be choosers lol.

There is an irony to this month's newsletter. Having conducted a great piece last month on inflation fans, mine suffered what can only be described as a catastrophic failure when I was looking at its maintenance and luckily, I found it. I am disappointed that Ultramagic no longer seem to support my type of fan with regard to spares (being 16 years old), but where there is a will, there is always a way to fix things. More on this later.

The newsletter is delayed this month as I wanted to include my review of the 8th Midlands Air festival which happened over the weekend of 29-31st May and was lavished with some great weather.

Thanks to those who have supported me through generous donations, but I would encourage all of you to support my efforts if you have enjoyed reading this over a prolonged period. **www.buymeacoffee.com/cloudhoppers** is where you have a chance to donate towards the running costs of the site. Thanks in advance and please don't go ballistic, I wouldn't expect anyone to donate more than £12 a year or theoretically a pound an edition. As I said this is voluntary but financial assistance would lead to more options for the growth of the brand, and I guess after nearly 22 years it is a brand. Therefore, I would ask you to feel generous if you can afford to be and support me, and for those who will, many thanks in advance.

So here is what we have for you in edition number 177 of the Newsletter:

- Ed Speak – Finally (after six months) I return to the air.
- My fan story.
- The 2026 Midlands Air Festival.
- Belgium Delight with an old T&C 21
- Second hand balloons
- Manufacturer News-
- Gallery- More Photos

Articles for inclusion are always welcome Anything for future inclusion to the usual email address please: steve.roake33@gmail.com many thanks in advance. Now please enjoy this edition of the world's only Hopper periodical brought to you with pleasure and kindness with all the most up to date information on our unique form of flying and longing for your support.



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I'm not after your wealth, just a small indication that all of my collective efforts over the years are still appreciated and that you enjoy the regular insights .

1,Ed Speak- Returning to the Air after a long lay off

Hello Peeps, hope you are all well and flying the socks off your hoppers. Having had an extended break from hopping, I was delighted to once again return to the air at the recent Midlands Air Festival. I managed 25% of my last annual flying over the weekend with three flights totalling just under 3 hours of flying. Not much I hear you say. Well having dropped off the hopper for its C of A on returning home, I didn't think 12 hours in a year wasn't too bad.

I'm sure loads of you are saying that's hardly anything, but over here in the UK most private pilot are failing to reach double figures a year.

As ever, when I set up after a prolonged break , I go back to basics with my preparation, set up and inflation, trying to ensure I leave nothing undone or forgotten. But for the second year running at Midlands, I got half way across the launch field and dropped my phone, necessitating in a rather quick landing to retrieve said item and utilised a barrier fence to arrest me (even though the jungle drums thought I'd hit a toilet block – untrue). Reason for the elementary mistake? I was using a sleeved device for holding my phone like those used by runners that was simply too small for the phone(I-phones are now typically 6.8 inches long) and so I've ordered a replacement to ensure that never happens again.

Apart from that , I had a great time. The Saturday morning slot was one of the nicest "Bimbles" I've ever had over the house and estate at Ragley Hall in the West Midlands, with such variation in winds that saw me going in multiple directions for a duration of 1 hour 25 mins landing a mere 50 feet from the gas supply area. The greatest thing about it (with me weighing 117kgs), I still had 25% left in the tank.

A lot of effort went into ensuring the event ran smoothly and it is with thanks I recognise all those who played their parts in achieving the Uk's biggest festival. I'm not going to name names but you all know who you are so many thanks. Bring on the rest of the season I now say. All the best and safe flying to you all.

Steve Roake.

2,Feature Section

Fan Failure

I'm sure that there is a sense of Deja-vous out there, since last month I was singing the praises of the Ultramagic 3hp fan that I own. Fast forward a couple of weeks and I've spotted a failure , and not a little one at that. and thank goodness I found it before the season really kicks in.

I was actually stripping the fan down to reconnect the wire that is the cut-off switch when I spotted it. The fan blade was making weird noises like it was rubbing on the cage, that's when I spotted the culprit.



The Ultramagic fan has a propeller which is encapsulated by two shells either side of the plastic blade assembly. The one on the inside face slides down over the output shaft from the motor and the thing is secured by a bolt, and a woodruff key to ensure the blade doesn't free spin. Mine, as you can see from the photo has split in three places .

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It should look like the section on the right-hand side but either a stone or the centrifugal forces have initiated cracking that has propagated and ran all the way down the assembly. I've never seen a failure like this in my years of ballooning but am glad I found it before my flying season really kicks in. Straight on to Chris Rate from UM UK for a replacement part. Sadly, the news wasn't great. Ultramagic no longer supports this fan with spares, so from their point of view, they could sell me a brand-new wooden propeller and a hub to fit my output spline. This would be an expensive option taking into consideration the price of the bits, the vat and then the delivery charges. I wasn't enamoured with the idea of spending over £480 plus vat plus delivery charge from Spain just to fix an attachment problem and so discussed my options with a friend at my workplace. He has access to both a lathe and a milling machine. In preparation I purchased a big (5inch diameter) piece of 6082 Aluminium stock with which we can manufacture a solution.



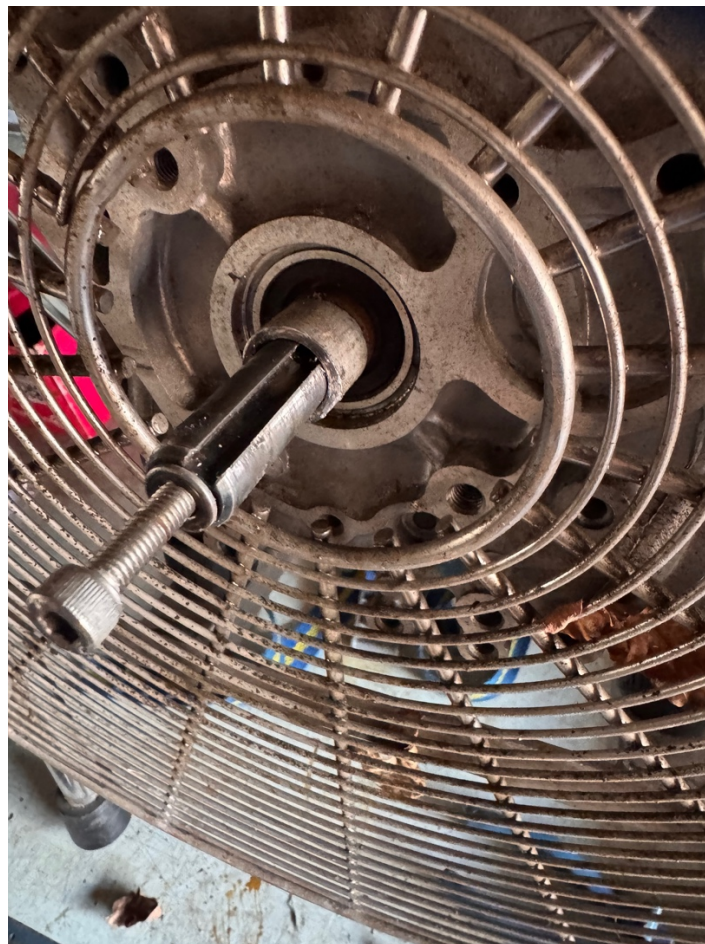
Could this be my salvation?

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Since when has metal been so expensive? £60 for a piece that is 150mm in length and 130mm in width (yes, it is big, but it was the only piece they had). The idea of the solution? We will reduce the diameter to 93 mm which matches the outside casting. Drill a 15 mm hole through the metal (clearance for the spindle), drill location holes for the three bolts that hold the sandwich (i.e. metal / plastic prop / metal), together and tap them the same thread and then use a series of tapped holes with grub screws to locate the new assembly in the slotted channel of the output spindle. (see photo below)



Now I don't expect a manufacturer to support their products for life, but it seems to me a shame that their preferred fix was to try to sell me products which add

up to nearly 35% of the cost of a new inflation fan merely to fix a split in a casting which cant have ever been the only failure of this type. Anyway, in my opinion , our solution will be better and last longer. We shall as they say – see.

3, Feature section

Midlands Air Festival 2026

Eighth running of this very established event saw balloon teams descend in their droves to Ragley Hall near a quaint village called Arrow bang next to Alcester in Warwickshire. It's a lovely part of the English countryside and the key to a great event is how it is run. James McDonald has assembled a fine team around him who just gel and seamlessly get on with the tasks they are given. For me, this marked my first event of 2026, and having not flown since Longleat 2025 , was well aware that I might be a tad's rusty. I was also trying out a new retrieve vehicle which was replacing my trusty Skoda Octavia scout (owned for over 13 years and 153,000 miles), which was a 2016 BMW X3 3.0 diesel. Definitely a slightly smaller boot space . It rides like a magic carpet , wafting you along the road so definitely a nice ride.

Arrived and set up camp early, balloon tank inspection is still a pain we all have to endure due to thieving bastards in previous years who somehow still get an invitation to the event (personally id throw them out). Registering with Teresa was easy-peasy and then off to set up base camp for the weekend. We then took the opportunity to get something nice to eat for Dinner venturing into Alcester and finding what looked like a really run-down pub called the Alcester Arms which actually did great food. Didn't stay out late as the alarm clock was set for 04-45, with briefing due at six the following morning I wanted a good night's kip.


Friday arrived with a simply stunning sunrise. You could tell it was going to be a good day as there was little tell-tale movement in the tops of the trees and after a morning brew we went to briefing. No real surprises there. The weather we had was a lovely high proceeding a front which would arrive at some point during the weekend, but the barometer was on the rise with a QNH of 1021, and prevailing winds being generally from a direction of 250 degrees on the surface , claimed to be around 5 knots but I think less. Upstairs the wind was generally between 270 and 280 degrees at about 11-12 knots so lovely for a flight.

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Some sixty odd balloons took to flight with myself taking an extended time to ensure I was back to basics with my preparation having not flown for six months



INTRODUCING THE NEW SUPERLIGHT
O-38 HOPPER

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- O-26 - 26,000cuft = 26kg
- O-31 - 31,000cuft = 31kg
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prior to the event. All went very well and my crew for the weekend Francis Dickson, who had generously come over from Ballynahinch Northern Ireland, was also slightly rusty too so he also needed some refresher. All was good until I took off and drifted over the launch field, then proceeding to drop my phone (second time in two years). I executed a rapid landing to retrieve said item utilising a metal barrier to stop me short of a marquee, with no harm done. Reason the blooming phone had slipped out of the holder, was because I phone pros are longer than the case (suffice to say a new better case is now enroute). With slight embarrassment, I continued, utilising my time just executing some descents to landing without actually touching down and Bimbling around the estate grounds low level. My flight finished right by the main entrance gate after some 40 mins and we called it a day. Easy flight, easy retrieve, no stress and a semi perfect way to get back into the saddle. I have to also thank Stuart Skinner who had graciously agreed to lend me his fan for the weekend whilst mine is un serviceable awaiting completion of the repairs. The comradery in the ballooning community is great. Returning the whole 2km to the marquee we refuelled ourselves and then filled the tank which quite naturally had barely done half a tank worth of fuel. Straight back to the camping area for a well-earned Shower and a rest.

Before you knew it, it was time for the Friday pm briefing and all who were in attendance, migrated into the pilot's marquee for the updated weather. The day had continued to be warm with soft winds all day with my tan was coming along nicely. I had briefly ventured into Alcester, as the batteries in my GPS were flat and slacker that I was hadn't bought any replacements previously. Now rearmed and ready to perform, we awaited the forecast with baited breath. The News was good. The surface winds were up to 8knots at a direction of 270 degrees for 18-00pm dissipating as the evening continued with upper winds of 280 degrees 11 knots eventually becoming 310 to 340 degrees as the evening progressed but marginally dropping as the evening wore on. QNH had hit a heady 1022hpa and so we were all cleared to fly. Stuart (in G-BYNW) and myself had agreed that we would fly together as best as possible and for a large chunk of the flight this is what we did. The perceived direction for the flight had been given as Bidford on Avon but in fact the winds had backed a bit and the speed was also lesser than expected. The Main pack seemed focussed on a couple of fields that had been cut and bailed just after a forest-line in the Temple Grafton vicinity, but whilst attempting to emulate those who had

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Proceeded me, it was clearly obvious that there was little right available during the flight at lower levels. I decided to pick a nice field just after the popular ones slightly away from the crowd and was soon joined by another five balloons. The farmer, a Mr Trevor Taylor, of Rolls wood farm, was a good sort if slightly deaf, and he was very agreeable to cars entering his field and was soon lavished by the farmers gift we had all received. Francis was close and visual which was good and very soon we had the hopper packed and stacked in his car (which we were using for the retrieve as delivery drivers(Francis job), aren't covered by LV insurance, my agents). I had flown for 50 mins and ventured 3.6nm in total. More importantly , we exited the field turning left, down 100 meters to a cross roads , turned right and within 50 yards was the Blue Boar Inn which we utilised for our evening meal. Returning to the site some time later we were easily refuelled as everyone seemed keen to get to the Nightglow which was imminent. I had no particular desire to watch another Nightglow, finding them all very "samey". We returned to our camping pitch and reflected on a decent day's work before turning in around 10pm, knowing another 04-45 awakening would follow.

Before you could finish counting sheep, Saturday morning appeared, with a simply stunning sunrise. Winds appeared pretty much flat calm as I had my customary brew before briefing. A short walk to the marquee followed, entering with time to spare before the masses descended on the tight space. I sat down and awaited our fate for the morning. It looked superb out but would the forecast confirm what we thought was happening? Short answer was yes . Shiralee Collins had the pleasure of telling us we could all go fly. Surface winds were 300degrees at 2knots at 07-00 rising to 3 knots by 09-00. Upstairs you had to go to 2000 feet to find 5knots at 100 degrees dissipating to 2 knots at 1000ft by 09-00 local time. The collective term for the morning was a "Bimble" around the estate, and I was about to maximise the opportunity to maintain my goal of averaging around an hour a flight in my balloon log book. Having had lesser previous flights , here was my opportunity to indulge and bring the average for the weekend back up to the level I wanted.

Once again, we set up at the far side of the launch arena , using coverage from the trees (which we never needed) and inflated casually. Most of the pack were airborne by the time I was aloft , and I wandered across the launch field

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towards the house utilising a small drainage wind. Having spent time conversing with a sizable public attendance, I then proceeded down the arena staying intentionally below tree top height. After this and realising I wasn't going towards the lake for a splash and dash, I climbed 50 feet turning some 90 degrees and heading over the lavish stately home, level with the top floor where clearly the younger residents were enjoying their breakfast waving to all who passed their windows. Further through some woods until I found the clearing by the main entrance descending towards the grand vista. I briefly thought of the photo opportunity with Francis in attendance, but ultimately the composition just didn't seem right to me. Rising gently back above the tree line the wind that we had, now reversed its direction taking me towards the centre of the vast mansion and I thought probably placing me in line for a chance to do low level flight amongst the public car park behind the vast structure. But No, the wind of change had other ideas. Another reversal of fickle winds saw me returning towards the edge of the launch field and with some balloons finding the light draw wind on the surface I was all set for a complete box into the take off arena. No chance of that ! I was now over the lake heading towards a field just around the edge of the forest and heading as though I would be becalmed over the trees. Time to be patient and trust my instincts. Dropping towards the tree level I picked up the first really significant wind of the morning which had once again reversed and was now 180 degrees reversed and heading back over the small lake once more. I was well aware of my fuel status by this time having flown for at least an hour and a quarter. I decided whilst I was enjoying myself I really should attempt to find a decent arrival point and worked hard to get into a grassy field just adjacent to the refuelling station. Once again with crew in hand I decided it was time to call the flight ending with 1hr 25 mins and a single 1nm flown. It shows how good the product is by Cameron balloons, when you realise that despite my 117kgs , the O-31 performed impeccably and I still managed to finish the flight with 25% left in the fuel tank. Clearly the journey to refuel was onerous (some 40 odd feet away), and quickly despatched. James McDonald (the organiser and a good friend) was actually talking to Steve the gas provider when I had arrived, we joked about how hard the flight had been -not! After refuelling , we went back to the marquee and did some human refuelling. It was arguably one of the best ever slow bimbles I've ever experienced , involving some quite tricky manoeuvring and constant changes in direction and needing vigilance to ensure with 126 other balloons up that

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morning, my awareness of others around me, needed my attention always. In the end it was a flight to savour.

Later on, during the day, I witnessed an attempt to inflate a Harley Davidson motorcycle special shaped balloon which had me grimacing at firstly how it kept getting burnt in the unsatisfactory conditions for the attempt(morning would have been far better), and how I would have hated packing the massive thing away. Hoppers are so much more user friendly lol. Later that afternoon Cameron Balloons presented all pilots with a complimentary commemorative T shirt celebrating 55 years of continuous service to the ballooning community. Many thanks from me, I now have recently four decent T shirts in the last three years from them.

Evening briefing on Saturday night centred around the possibility of unstable air. The front as mentioned in the start of this topic, was fast approaching and for some this would be their final slot of the weekend. Hindsight is a wonderful thing and whilst the briefing spoke of increasing winds and a not so favourable direction, I felt in the end it would have been fine in the hopper. However, no hoppers ventured skywards on this evening and the normal sized balloons were markedly down on participation. The actual met spoke of a surface wind of 280degrees at 6 knots climbing as the evening continued with a forecast of 270 to 300 degrees varying from 11-15 knots with height. Those who actually flew spoke of stand-up landings and if anything, I felt it dropped off as the evening wore on. I couldn't complain with three flights already in the bag and five mins shy of 3 hours in my personal logbook. This would in fact be the last aerial activity for balloons for the event with both Sunday am and pm launches shelved due to inclement weather. I wasn't too bothered as I wanted to be away by lunchtime on the Sunday as I had previously agreed to drop off the hopper with my maintenance provider for its annual C of A on my way home.

Like all good events, the success of the venture is down to the team behind the scenes who worked tirelessly for our pleasure, so thank you to James and his dream team, and also to my crew Francis , for undertaking this not cheap journey to help me out with his abilities. Also ,Stuart Skinner and friends for their company and assistance with inflation fans etc . The eight Midlands Air festival will go done as another classic

Belgium Delight with old timer T&C 21A HB-BDK

Earlier this month (May 23rd), I received from both Kevin Boon and Christoff Dayaert, photographs of an old Thunder and Colt 21A that has been added to the Belgium Balloon Collectors store. HB-BDK is a very old Thunder and Colt 21A dating way back with c/n 1031. This was withdrawn from use in March 2007 and has obviously been stored away. The balloon was inflated over the weekend when Sandy and Martin Mitchell were around. Its good to see that the balloon seems in reasonable shape and Hopefully more people will get to see it again in the future now it has been saved. The balloon came as a full Kit with period bottom end.



HB-BDK T&C 21A photo by Christoff Dayaert.

4, New Balloons.

Surprisingly, at the end of May, there are no known hoppers in production currently so as far as I know there are no new balloons imminently arriving. Perhaps this is a typical example of the state of the economy and shows people are not prepared to spend their savings in the current climate of uncertainty.

5, Second Hand stock

The continued offloading of unused hoppers continues un-abated. I frequently hear of other stock becoming available, but it appears that not much is actually changing hands either due to this economic uncertainty or overpricing in the current marketplace. The thing is, I personally can't see an end to the current situation so owners who no longer use their hoppers have either to hang on to the value they perceive in their kits or reduce to sell .

However, I would highlight one that has caught my eye as a bit of a bargain. Paul Bonner from the Basingstoke area is selling G-BXVP a Sky31-16 complete kit. Not only are you getting a beautiful piece of rarity, you are purchasing a 31 with only 93 hours on the envelope. The bottom end is an older design Cameron Skyhopper with the twist grip (but burner only done around 20 hours), you also get two Worthington tanks (so good duration) and a 3.5hp inflation fan chucked in for the princely sum of only £5500 ono. Now to me that is a cheap way into Hopping and you can have a lot of fun for not a lot of money. Paul is available to discuss further on mobile number 07748-091716 (and please say you saw the advert in the Cloudhoppers Newsletter).

If you look on the next page you will see an old lovely photo of G-BXVP which I think is a really good-looking piece of stock. It's a great way to start , build a few hours (I would suggest 30-40) before you go buy a brand-new forever envelope. However, don't take my word for it , This is a proper piece of ballooning history as Sky had a unique shape and not that many hoppers were manufactured by them in their time.

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Nice piece of history for sale, G-BXVP Sky 31-16.

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6, Gallery

This section is your editors' chance to find interesting photographs either from his own collection or from stuff submitted for the newsletter, or alternatively something that featured on the Cloudhoppers Facebook page during the month. This selection reflects a few that graced the limelight at the recent BBML inflation day and haven't featured previously. This month's selection comes from Colin Wright who seemed to be in the right place at the right time at the recent Midlands Air Festival.



The Servo Connector Shaped Hopper was inflated on Saturday Morning

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Who never loved LBL demo colours? Andy Walker seen flying LBL35A G-CFAW



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Mike Woodcock seen flying G-CIJJ the Cameron O-31



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7, And Finally

Just another plug about **buymeacoffee.com/Cloudhoppers**. Your support will go a long way to supporting ambitions I have for the site and the Newsletter. If in the past I have assisted you with either a valuation or with finding your new envelope, please remember the value I added to your quest to find your forever gem. Any contribution will be gratefully received and trust me, everything received will go back into the site, so please be generous within limits (no more than £12 for a year), or potentially a pound a copy. So, few of you have contributed so far and yet loads of you state how much you enjoy the read.

Here we are at the start of June 2026 with the number of people subscribing still increasing weekly. we find the subscriptions to the Facebook page reaching over 4721 and still growing monthly. This is a great achievement with sustained growth as we navigate our 22nd year of publicity for Cloudhoppers across the worldwide community. All are welcome but, **I would emphasize that content is strictly on hoppers and Duo-chariots and not “general ballooning” and those pesky adverts for constant Tee-Shirts are banned and anyone who “veer’s away” from the few rules we have, will be banned and their account will be deleted .**

Please send all submissions for future editions to Steve.roake33@gmail.com

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