

In November 2001, APSS purchased a Slingsby T53B/C Phoenix 2-seater glider, works number 1718 and registration DHG. Although we are principally concerned with maintaining the National Collection at the Museum of Flight, it should be remembered that APSS also has some airframes of its own. This acquisition brings the total number of airframes owned by APSS to five. DHG first flew in 1969 and so qualifies for the "Classic" category in gliding terms. We are restoring the airframe to flying condition. It will be based at the Scottish Gliding Centre at Portmoak and will be flown by an APSS syndicate under the leadership of our ex-Chief Engineer Jim O'Donnell, who is a Full Category Instructor with more than a thousand hours on power flying and some six thousand in gliders.

At present, we have amongst our membership three current power pilots (PPLs and all OAPs) and nine qualified and current glider pilots (including 4 admitting to being OAPs) with another one under training. But the Phoenix is for all APSS members and the idea is to provide an opportunity for our members to take to the air and cavort about over the Fife countryside as passengers – provided they are prepared to trust their pilot colleagues! However, power pilots are required to do a conversion course before they are allowed to fly gliders and the glider pilots will have to be cleared to fly passengers.

The history of Slingsby Sailplanes goes back to 1931, when Fred Slingsby started manufacture with the British Falcon (Falke) in his furniture factory in Scarborough. By the 60s, Slingsby's had moved to Kirkbymoorside in the Vale of Pickering and was the prime British sailplane manufacturer with a long list of well known designs to its credit, including the Cadet and Gull variants, the Hengist war-time military glider, and the Skylark series. Their last motorless glider was the Vega in 1975 and by 1982 they had ceased glider manufacture, although they continue today as a light aircraft manufacturer.

In the 60s, the limitation of wooden airframes had become apparent, and designers were looking at metal construction or the new glassfibre technology, which in the early days was dogged by various technical problems. Against this background Slingsby decided in 1966 to change over to metal construction and the T53 series can be seen as an attempt to develop metal construction as the way ahead. The T 53A was designed by John Sellers for the Air Training Corps and first flew in 1967. It was a sturdy machine with spacious tandem seating and an excellent all round view for both crew. The RAF was interested, and a provisional order for 40 aircraft was placed. A second prototype with initial RAF modifications was built as the T53B. This was a relatively high performance machine and was good for training purposes with docile stall characteristics, a glide angle of 29:1 at 48 knots and a sink rate of 2.5fps at 55knots. This machine, painted with RAF roundels and the standard yellow bars on wing and fuselage to indicate a training machine, was despatched to the RAF for trials, eventually at Boscombe Down

All was looking well for Slingsby's and the T53, but sadly, this was not to continue. In November 1968 a disastrous fire destroyed the factory along with several aircraft and all the jigs. Production did resume, but Slingsby's never fully recovered. To demonstrate their determination to recover from the fire, the new T53 models were then given the name Phoenix, which was the legendary Egyptian bird, which rose from the ashes of the fire that consumed it. As a result of RAF evaluation, a new mark, T53C, was designed with reduced forward sweep, changes to the instrument panels, seats, mainspar and centre section. It had servo tabs on the ailerons to reduce stick forces and increased fin and rudder area to improve directional stability and spin recovery.

DHG was completed in 1969 as a T 53B and was finished in a smart colour scheme of white with blue trim. On the 14th August 1969 it had its maiden flight in the capable hands of Slingsby's Chief Test Pilot, Goeffrey Bailey-Woods, at Sutton Bank. The flight went well and as part of the normal checks, he carried out some manoeuvres including loops, chandelles, stall turns and spins. Stall speed was 33knts with warning buffet at 36 knts. At 30 degree bank, the stall occurred at 36 knts with simultaneous nose and wing drop. The machine received the ARB Approval reference number A1/2243/46 on the 14th September 1969.

Because of the disruption caused by the fire, DHG went into storage until July 1972 and at some time was subsequently modified to bring it into line with the T 53 C specification (except for the wing sweep angle), requiring at least six modifications. It is therefore probably unique today in that it complies closely with the final RAF T53C specification. The aircraft was test flown again on the 20th July 1972 and received its C of A on the 21st July 1972. No doubt as a result of the modifications, the stall speed had reduced by 2 knts in level flight with earlier buffet, and by 4 knts at 30 degree bank. Because it was originally intended for the RAF and since it complies closely with the final RAF specification, we will paint the aircraft to resemble the RAF training scheme with the standard orange bars but minus the roundels.

Altogether some 27 T53Bs were produced. Apart from DHG, only one other example is known in the UK and that is being restored by Phil Older, a member of Andreas Gliding Club in the Isle of Man. Six airframes were exported to the USA and one at least appears to be flying at Kutztown Airport P.A.

DHG was bought directly from Slingsby by Kirknewton Gliding Club in 1975. This club was formed by Officers and Civilian Instructors from 661 Volunteer Gliding School with the intention of operating the glider from Portmoak. Over the years DHG gave a significant number of instructors the chance to do all three legs of the silver C. Being designed primarily as a trainer, to be used in the circuit only, this can be seen as no mean achievement. DHG is not the most comfortable of gliders to sit in for 5 hours!

In the early 80's, and after a lay-off period, Plt Off Eoin MacDonald (now an APSS member), took charge of the glider with the task of getting it flying again. It was towed to RAF Leuchers - where the trailer broke its back just before entry into the base - and was then thoroughly overhauled by the RAF. It was then flown at Portmoak by the RAFGS, with a period at Arbroath, until, in 1990, the RAFGSA decided they could no longer operate the aircraft.

Eoin once again rescued DHG and with the help of Bill Simpson, restored it to flying condition. With a new syndicate, it was operated at Portmoak allowing Eoin to gain his silver distance and Ken Moffat (also an APSS member) his silver height and duration. It also had the distinction of achieving the "longest flight in a club two seater" trophy.

And so we come to the present. DHG has had many exciting adventures in its past life, but it will soon be flying again and we can look forward to adding more interesting stories to the already fascinating record 