



TO INFINITY AND BEYOND...

Ever marvelled at the power of your bow? *Archery UK* visited Northern Counties Flight Championships in Yorkshire to see just how far arrows can fly

The invitation said to wear bright colours and sturdy shoes. The venue: a windswept Leeds Airport East for the annual Northern Counties Flight Championships on 8 August, with a stoic crowd braving the weather to take part in one of archery's lesser known competitions. Flight, for the uninitiated, involves the simple act of shooting arrows as far as you can – usually less than 1,000 metres unless you're in the big leagues, mentioning no names, Mike Willrich, holder of 26 world records. There are no targets

in sight on this flight range, just a series of markers-boards, every 50m from 150m, leading all the way up to a distant white flag marking the centre line.

All the archers at the event regularly shoot the more popular disciplines but jump at the chance to enter this, one of only a handful of opportunities to shoot flight in the UK each year (two others being the Cumbrian Flight Championships and National Flight Championships, all held in August).

The airfield's windsock was at full stretch as event organiser Tony Bakes, explained: "We have people travelling from all over the country so it would be unfair to cancel

an event due to the conditions. We shoot whatever is thrown at us within safety – fog, torrential rain, high wind, you name it." Weather it seems, just adds to the fun. "Flight is far more radical than clout," Tony added. "Flight is the Formula One of the archery world – you're always pushing the envelope and it's quite normal for people to modify their equipment within the rules of the sport to get the greatest distance out of it."

By 10am, some 30 archers are weighing-in their kit, with Tony and judges Sharon Tideswell and George McMillan managing the registration process. Categories for the event are target recurve, recurve

SHOOTING DISCIPLINES

FUN FLIGHT FACTS

English longbow flight world record: 412.82m



Above: Riverside Archery Club's Ian Norwood

flight, target compound, English longbow, crossbow, American longbow, and a rogue miscellaneous bow category which includes a footbow, brought along by Brian Todd of Whitburn Archers.

Compound flight bows tend to give the longest distance, capable of passing the 1,000 metre flag, but the diverse categories for kit type and weight means those with technical and creative skills can really excel. Tony isn't the only one who enjoys building and refining equipment at home just to try and beat his last longbow score, while others are happy to test the performance of their familiar recurve. "We enjoy beating our own records, so it's not so much about trying to outdo others," said Ann Conife of Riverside Archers in Gateshead, who was accompanied by most of the club for the day that a fellow member described as "a picnic with a bit of shooting".



Above: Guided by helpers, archers aim for the optimum 45-degree angle shot

Below: The Leverett family never miss the chance to shoot flight

"Flight has a classification system that was put in place in the 1940s," explained Tony. "But with technology sending arrows far beyond those original qualifying distances, archers with even standard bows were scoring off the charts. A few years ago we studied all the results of all the tournaments shot in the UK over the past ten years and from those statistics, created the range of distances for each bow type. As a result, we now have a classification system specifically for each bow type in flight."

With a nod to the 'father' of flight archery in the UK, Jack Flinton, who used to yell 'The eagle has landed!' when arrows surpassed expectations on the field, Tony set up the Raptor Flight Award Scheme with Merlin, Kestrel, Osprey, Eagle classifications denoting the lowest to highest classification, complete with badges. This means that there are new challenges to inspire archers of all bow types to keep coming back, now that the Grand Master class is no longer so easily attained.

So what's the secret to hitting a respectable distance? "Lightweight arrows,



Longest flight distance ever recorded: **2,200 yards** shot by Harry Drake of America in 1976

Best bow for distance: Compound flight bow



Flight is a completely different type of dedication to target, clout or field archery. You can spend hours making equipment but you don't have to spend hours practising.

Brian Todd Whitburn Archers

a good technique, and a following wind. You have to get the arrow as far back to the bow as you possibly can," said Tony. "Draw smoothly, and loose as soon as you are at full draw (no holding)." But with limited opportunities to practice, how does anyone without engineering skills improve? "Not everyone is interested in breaking records; it's more about the sheer joy of shooting in this style," said Tony. "I only shoot flight three times a year; far more time is spent in the workshop." Pre-Covid, Tony would also take his flight bows overseas for the flight world championships in Utah to shoot ridiculous

distances alongside some of the world's best at Bonneville Salt Flats. Footbow man Brian Todd of Whitburn Archers, South Shields, added: "Flight is a completely different type of dedication to target, clout or field archery. You can spend hours making equipment but you don't have to spend hours practising. Just finding out what your bow is capable of also helps make you a safer archer."

It also helps that it's such a fun, unpressured event – "chilled out" – as recurve archer Jenny Leverett puts it. There's plenty of time to consider your next shot as you watch your arrow vanish

Below: Judge George McMillan uses an optical square to measure the best arrows





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**Tracey Leverett
Riverside Archers**

into thin air, with 15 minutes allowed for shooting and 45 for retrieval, with or without flask and snack. The lunch break after the second end is often forgotten by some as they continue to hunt down their arrows, and you can understand why when many have been lovingly handcrafted by their owners especially for the occasion.

Riverside Archers has the highest turnout at this particular event, with the Leverett family of four from Gateshead eager to get started. Having discovered the sport at a have-a-go session, they've each been shooting no more than four years – the addiction spreading from one family member to another. "It's a good confidence boost to see just how far you can shoot, especially if you're losing faith in your skills at target archery," said mum Tracey.

It's quite a dramatic scene – the archers lined up taking aim at the heavens with their assorted bows. Stance varies according to what you're using (Brian has to lie down to use his footbow) and archers are allowed assistants: fellow archers generally shouting 'Up, up, up!'



Above: Ian Norwood marks his best arrow

to steer them into aligning their arrows with 45-degree-angled ones set up on tripods just behind the line – the optimum angle for best results. Arrows seem to disappear the moment of release, but it's all too much pressure for one bow which

explodes at the crucial moment, sending the archer back to the car in search of another. Then it's needle in the haystack time as the trudge begins through the wet grass to record the results.

The trick is to try to shoot as close to the centre line as possible as when it comes to measuring distance, judges use an optical square along the length of tape measure between markers which casts views left, right and ahead, gauging the precise distance of the arrows through a technique often used in surveying. A plumb bob is dropped onto the tape measure to give the final score – but the further away arrows are from the line, the harder it is for the optical square to give an accurate reading.

Scouring the turf in the rain for spent arrows feels a bit like one of those eccentric English pastimes you read about but rarely experience. Even the most vibrant fletchings are hard to find, despite arrows having landed almost vertically. "You certainly get your daily 10,000 steps in here," Dave Leverett confirmed. A



Above: Tony Bakes, NCAS Flight Championships organiser. **Below:** Rewards from the trophy table





Left: Measuring involves an optical square, a plumb bob and tape measure.
Below: Mike Willrich takes aim with one of his many bows

New flight archer, Alex Hedley, said: "I'm a dual citizen of the UK and US and moved to Newcastle to study. I used to be a member of Gotham Archery in New York but dropped out of the sport completely when I moved here. Recently I decided to pick it up again, bought a bow and found Riverside Archery Club. Everyone in the club was so excited about this event and said I had to come along. I love it! It's so much fun – it's cool to see how far arrows can go after being used to shooting at such a close range. Just going for sheer power over accuracy is amazing! I've shot 210 metres today and never thought my 22lb bow could do something like this."

Flight archery – coming soon to a club near you!

Tony said: "We want more opportunities to shoot flight in the UK. I'd like to see each region introduce a flight shoot – you don't need a vast area like the airfield for a competition. For example, the Cumbrian Flight Championships [held the week before the NCAS Championships] put on a limited bow event. They use a 750yd playing field so don't accept kit capable of travelling beyond that distance."

With lack of space being the most common reason for the relatively low numbers of clubs promoting flight to members, enthusiasts of the discipline are keen to take action. Tony is working with Riverside's Ann Conifey on a national awareness campaign, set to launch in 2022. She said: "The plan is to send representatives to visit clubs and give two-hour flight tutorials, demonstrating with flu-flu arrows that only go about 50 yards to give people a taste of what flight's about. There are too many people who don't know how much fun flight is, so we have our work cut out!"

And when more people do know about this quirky discipline, the sky's the limit. ➕

Photos by Ed Bagnall, Tracey Leverett and Archery UK

total stranger arriving at that time would probably have some questions at the sight of grown men and women decorating the setting with brightly-coloured pin wheels and floral and glittery markers to identify their six arrows. Archers triumphantly place an official labelled flag next to the one they've shot furthest for the judges to record later, and once all their arrows have been located, archers can remove their jaunty ground markers en-route back to the line, ready for the next end. No one sends an arrow beyond 1,000 metres on this occasion but there are some great results at the end of the day.



You can find out more about flight archery at www.ncas.co.uk and navigating to the 'flight' tab.

Join the British Flight Archery Facebook group for all the latest information, stories and results: www.facebook.com/groups/863638087065097