
KITES ON A LINE

George Webster

Definition. *A kite is a surface or series of surfaces which are provided with a restraining attachment having the nature of a line. This is arranged so that when the kite, restrained by the line, is exposed to the air in motion, the kite can be sustained in a position of equilibrium in midair.*

(adapted from C.F. Marvin, *A Monograph on the Mechanics and Equilibrium of Kites*, 1897)

Introduction

What follows is essentially a paper book made available in the form of a website. The title was chosen

- to help instant recognition that these kites are not birds
- to emphasise an interest in kites ‘doing their stuff’, i.e. flying on a line in the air
- to make clear that my interest is in single line kites and very little attention is paid to two- or multi-line kites.

The origins of the whole thing are articles I wrote on the Invention of the Kite and all I knew about Deltas. Sleds and Soft (or Inflatable) kites were two obvious developments and at that point I decided to try to cover kites which might be seen at a festival in the UK. Lastly I’ve tried to include a worldwide view of kite types. The devolving emphasis is obvious if, for example, you compare the Delta chapter to the Flat Kite chapter. Almost all the chapters were first published as articles in *The Kiteflier* (produced quarterly by the Kite Society of Great Britain). In one or two cases I’ve retained sections which reflect the chapter’s origins. I’ve tried to give helpful references to paper sources; these are by chapter and I’ve not given an overall bibliography.

Looking at the contents list at the end of this Introduction you will see that some chapters are historical (1,2 and 3), some cover recognisable kite types (7,8 and 9), some cover a range of types (4, 5 and 6), and finally there is material on the how and why of kite flying (11,12 and 13) and a tailpiece (14). There are also three articles on kite-related topics that are not primarily about kite history, but are clearly kite-related; these are placed in a set of appendices.

I decided early on not to have an historical section and then consider kites by country or by name but to classify much of the account by the physical description

of the kite. Partly this resulted from the sequence in which articles were originally written, partly from a feeling that it is the nature of the kite and not its nationality that is important for my purposes. And yes, it was written from a Western European standpoint.

My hope is that you will find *Kites on a Line* helpful and informative, perhaps as providing a structure for looking at the amazing amount of information now available on the internet. What I think of as authoritative accounts are difficult to find unless you know where to look.

New information becomes available all the time, and perhaps *Kites on a Line* will give you an interest in what to look for and a modern structure to organise what you find; after all, the ‘great books’ (Pelham, Hart, Brummitt) are 30 years old or more.

Personally my interest has grown in the ‘worldwide’ history of kites, particularly in the many unanswered questions, of which here are three examples in decreasing order of importance.

- Will we ever know more about how kites spread around Asia and would knowledge of the kites of Myanmar help?

- How did the Barn Door become the national kite of the USA in the 19th century? It was unknown in the ‘Old World’.

- When did the term ‘bellyband’ for the bridle used by Paul Garber in the USA and my Lancastrian uncle 30 years ago, drop out of use?

I also like to chronicle changes in single line flying such as ‘No Wind’ kites — see Chapter 15.

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Acknowledgements

I owe a general debt to all those kitefliers over the years who have designed, made and flown the kites which I love.

More particularly, my interest in kites was fanned by my son Oliver with whom I made kites nearly 30 years ago, and who still has some good kites over in North Carolina.

Tony (“T.C.”) and Barbara Cartwright really tied me in to the kiting scene.

Andy King got me in to doing commentaries at kite festivals 20 years ago and this led to my attending more festivals and meeting great fliers.

Kites on a Line started with articles in *The Kiteflier* so I owe a considerable debt to Gill and Jon Bloom — particularly Jon who redrew diagrams and struggled with my handwriting.

Jerry Swift referred to the first two articles as a ‘partwork’ and got me thinking about a book, and Carolyn Swift did a shift on reading my handwriting.

Ernest Barton has been an invaluable source of information with a great ability to dig good stuff out of the internet. He also changed my thinking about how kites fly.

My references to oriental kites should have been even better given that I live within 200 metres of Macolm Goodman’s collection of oriental kites — the best in Europe.

An enormous amount of work done and knowledge applied by John Dobson has vastly improved the presentation of what I have written and has also helped enormously in allowing me to revise the original articles. His time on the project has been second only to mine.

It is, of course, invidious to mention only some of those who have, probably unwittingly, made valuable contributions; but particular mention must be made of Mark Cottrell with his practical help with recent British kites and Peter Lynn, the outstanding kite innovator of the last 30 years.

Errors are, of course, all my own responsibility.

Dedication

To June Webster who sat patiently so often
but who enjoyed flying kites in Malaysia

