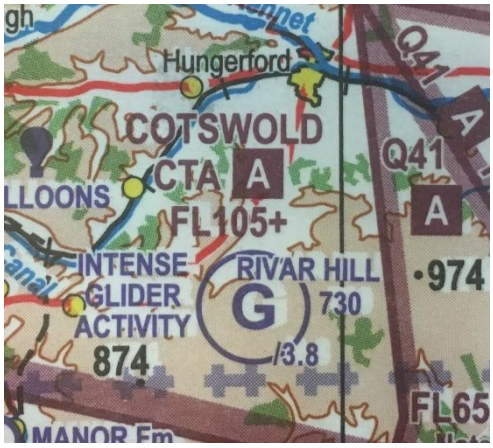
PLEASE FLY CLEAR OF GLIDING SITES

A significant number of gliding sites winch launch gliders to 2000 feet or more using cables. Maximum launch altitudes are indicated on the ½ mil VFR chart with a forward slash and height. For example, Rivar Hill has a maximum winch-launch altitude of 3800ft, as shown on the graphic as /3.8. There is further detail about winch launch sites in the UK AIP.

Pilots should not rely on seeing the winch launch happening. A glider will go from ground to 1,000-1,500ft in about 20 seconds, so spotting it in the climb is too late to do anything about the conflict. The hazard continues for at least another 20 seconds as the cable descends under a small parachute. The higher the launch, the longer the descent.

Many of the moving map databases and published approach plates commonly used by some private and most commercial pilots do not depict winch launch sites.



Ed Downham, who, as well as being a UK Airprox Board gliding member, is a Boeing 777 captain said, “So far, we haven’t seen an actual mid-air collision with a winch cable. But it could soon be a matter for the AAIB rather than UKAB. Be under no illusion, such an encounter is highly likely to be fatal for those involved.”

Chris Fox, another UKAB gliding member and an R44 pilot, said: “A recurring theme in these reports is that the powered aircraft pilot assumed that the gliding site would not be active – perhaps because the weather was less than perfect, or it was late in the day. Gliders can, and do, winch-launch in strong winds and any cloud base that permits the launch to be completed safely – often in conditions that would deter many other GA pilots.”

The UKAB advise that pilots should always avoid glider sites. Only overfly them if you have timely, positive confirmation from the site itself that they are inactive. When avoiding glider sites, beware of simply skirting the ground location by a narrow margin because there are likely to be gliders operating close to the site as they soar within gliding range. Even if a site has finished winch-launching for the day, it may have gliders returning from cross country flights, or motor gliders self-launching into the local area. CAA AIC Y083/2011 refers.

Many gliders fly with a system called FLARM, a long-established electronic conspicuity aid. FLARM is relatively cheap, easy to fit in any aircraft, and provides potentially life-saving audio and visual cues.