



Snowdon Aerogamigram



In the spring of 1964 The Cambrian Times contained a short item concerning four students from Bangor University who had decided on a spot of trekking up Snowdon (Yr Wyddfa in Welsh) Wales' highest mountain (and taller than anything England has to offer). They took the easy route to the top from Llanberis, and at the summit showed their appreciation of the view by making paper planes which they launched in the direction of Llyn Llydaw. They made their way down via the Pyg Track to Pen-y-Pass, where a Snowdonia Park Ranger in his Landrover greeted them with a "Oi! You lot! Clear up your litter before you leave." Not only had they been observed launching the planes and their descent monitored, but each and every one of their little models had completed its journey to the base of the mountain and landed within 50 feet of each other near the lay-by where you park up and admire the view down the Pass of Llanberis.

Wind forward twenty years or so and one of the four, Evan Harris, has returned to Snowdon with his son John, and he regales him the story of that day. The two of them fold some more paper planes and watch their flight down the mountain using binoculars. Each one, helped by a gentle breeze from the west, traced the same flight path down to bottom. Launched due east, the little plane would initially dive and then level off as it caught the wind deflected off Crib Goch. A bit more height would be gained as it passed over Llyn Llydaw, and then gradually descend, carried over the last half mile by the breeze, before meeting the ground near the road.

John Harris followed in his father's footsteps to Bangor University in 1987. After experiencing bar work and serving in a fast food outlet to earn some extra cash he decided that was not how he wanted to spend his summer break. He had his brain wave. He, and his mate Gwyn Rees, would operate a Snowdon Aerogamigram service. Hundreds of people make their way up Snowdon most days and what a better way to mark their visit. One of the two lads would ascend Snowdon early in the day with their sales stand. Punters bought a pre-printed model plane; they would write a message, fold the plane, and address it. A Snowdon Aerogamigram stamp on one wing would get franked, authenticating the visit to the summit, and an ordinary first class stamp would be stuck on the other. It would be launched. Down at Pen-y-Pass the other lad would be waiting and would collect the Aerogamigrams and simply pop them in the Royal Mail postbox there to be delivered to the given address.

The service would be at the mercy of the weather, even in the summer months. It would work in the rain, if the wind was whipping up a bit or in the wrong direction, nor if the summit was swathed in cloud. But at £1p per paper plane, including a 50p (later 60p) Aerogamigram stamp, they could earn enough for their rent, food and beer. Evan helped financially them at the outset, but left them to arrange everything - even the stamp designs. He also fancied himself as an artist, and had painted some relevant

scenes while he was at Bangor. The lads were more than happy to use some of these in the stamp designs. They show Llyn Llydaw for 1988, Crib Goch for 1989, and Pen y Pass 1990. Also included is the train approaching the summit stamp.

The service ran for the three summers they were at university. New stamps appeared each year, though the original design for 1990 had to be replaced as it showed one of the Snowdon Mountain Railway trains, and someone tipped them off about a possible copyright violation and the likely costs of royalty payments. So a new stamp was hastily prepared. The actual Aerogram sheets were originally plain with just the fold lines and instructions printed on. Then came a Concorde version. This was followed next year by a Vulcan bomber, and then finally an F16 'Top Gun' aerogram. Customers were advised to follow the launch instructions carefully and were told that there could be no refunds for lost aerograms. Once launched it was at the mercy of the air currents, but they claimed a 95% successful delivery. In fact the Royal Mail may have 'mislaidd' more of the forwarded aerograms than those failing to reach Pen-y-Pass. After the service ended it was stated that over the three years some 10,000 were sold. Of course not all were launched, and mint condition examples can be found in collections.

But end it did. The two were graduating and needed proper employment, and because of the success a couple of local rival teams started similar ventures, undercutting the lads by selling aerograms with 'stamps' pre-printed on the wings. Serious collectors turn their noses up at these. Furthermore someone from the Royal Mail had turned up and quizzed them over their venture, homing in on the no guarantee of delivery aspect, its irregularity, and pointing out that tourists could post and send a postcard from the summit normally. But it was all good fun while it lasted.

These stamps are all that John Harris had left over from the venture, so no-one else will have full sets like these again. He kindly agreed to cancel the stamp on the envelopes with the original cancellation used for the Aerograms. Included is the Top Gun paper plane. Next time you go to the summit of Snowdon take it with you and fly it.

Postscript. In 2007 an almost identical venture involving Ben Nevis never got past the initial selection stage of *Dragons Den*.