



BHPA Incident Report: GBR-2019-11434

INCIDENT

Aircraft Type:	Advance Sigma 10 paraglider, size 29. Serial number 7635P75945. Harness, Gin Genie Lite 2, size large. Serial no. 0716-VGL20230L. Harness fitted with High Adventure Beamer 3 parachute. Size 130kg.
Certification:	Advance Sigma 10 is rated EN-C.
Manufacture Date:	May 2018.
Location:	1km northwest of Start Point, South Devon. OS grid SX 822 378.
Date and Time:	Tues 23rd July 2019. 13:40-13:50 (BST).
Type of Flight:	Ridge soaring.
Persons Involved:	Paraglider, Pilot A.
Injuries:	Fatal drowning.
Nature of Damage:	The paraglider was damaged by the rescue services in their efforts to recover Pilot A. Otherwise the paragliding equipment appeared to be in very good condition.
Pilot's Rating/Licence:	Pilot A held a BHPA Club Pilot rating for the hill and tow environments.
Pilot's Age:	56
Pilot's Experience:	Pilot A was awarded his BHPA CP hill and tow ratings in July 2013. His total hours are unknown, however, anecdotal evidence from friends suggests Pilot A flew approximately 30 – 40 hours per year, with the majority of those hours flown on local coastal sites.
Information Sources:	Witness statements, site visit, Met Centre aftercast, tide information obtained from the UK Hydrographic Office, South Devon Hang Gliding and Paragliding Club site guide.

1.0 Synopsis

On Tuesday 23rd of July 2019, at approximately 13:40, Pilot A was seen by witnesses to be flying his Advance Sigma 10 paraglider in a southerly direction along the sea cliffs towards Start Point on the South Devon coast. Pilot A dropped below the height of the cliffs and out of sight of the witnesses who were walking on the coastal path. When he did not reappear, and concerned for his safety, the witnesses contacted the coast guard. At 14:33 the Salcombe inshore lifeboat crew recovered Pilot A from the surf line. A doctor pronounced Pilot A dead at the scene.

2.0 History of the flight

On Monday 22nd of July 2019, Pilot A and Pilot B arranged via text to meet at Beer Head, near Seaton in Devon, to go paragliding. Due to coastal fog they were unable to fly but arranged to meet the following day at Beesands in Devon, where the weather looked favourable for paragliding.

On Tuesday 23rd July, Pilot B arrived at Beesands at approximately 12:20. He informed Pilot A by text that he was at the site and Pilot A responded by saying he was on take-off and that the conditions looked good.

Pilot A took off at approximately 12:37 and proceeded to soar the ridge. Pilot B watched for ten minutes then made his way to the take-off area. While Pilot B was preparing his equipment ready to launch, Pilot A flew over and confirmed verbally that conditions were good.

Pilot B took off and proceeded to soar the ridge with Pilot A. Pilot B stated that according to his GPS vario, the wind was between 8 and 12mph. When it was 12mph he was able to gain height above the ridge, when it was 8mph he would lose height.

After approximately 15 minutes another pilot, Pilot C took off. Pilot B notes that at this point Pilot A had headed off in the direction of Start Point to the south. After a short while Pilot B could no longer see Pilot A as the headland was obstructing his view down the ridge.

Pilot C flew for a short while but considered the lift band to be too narrow in the light wind conditions. He slope landed just below take off and did not fly again.

Pilot B found he was unable to maintain altitude and made a landing below the take off area at approximately 15:00. He sent a text to Pilot A asking his whereabouts and whether he needed a lift but received no reply.

At approximately 13:35, Pilot A was observed by a couple walking on the coastal path, to be flying in the direction of Start Point, at a height approximately level with the path and on the seaward side of the cliffs. They describe how Pilot A was descending and quickly dropped out of sight below the cliff line. When Pilot A did not reappear, and concerned for his safety, one of the couple (Witness A), called 999 and asked for the coast guard. She made the call at 13:43.

At approximately the same time – 13:30 to 13:40, a family who were also walking on the coastal path, described how they saw Pilot A fly past them at what they considered to be a low height. Having continued along the coastal path, a member of the family (Witness B) describes how, when looking down through a dip in the cliff line, she could see the paraglider canopy being washed over by the waves. She immediately called 999.

The Salcombe inshore lifeboat arrived at 14:33 and discovered Pilot A, wrapped up in his paraglider in the surf-line. Pilot A was not breathing when he was recovered by the lifeboat crew. Pilot A was taken ashore at a small beach where CPR was administered. Paramedics were unable to resuscitate Pilot A who was pronounced dead at the scene.

3.0 Focus

Based on the information available, the Investigation considered the weather conditions, the site, Pilot A's experience and Pilot A's equipment.

3.1 Weather conditions

The weather on the day was fine and bright with light easterly winds. A Met Office aftercast was obtained for the purpose of the investigation and a summary of the findings is as follows:

From the evidence gathered, the conditions at Start Point would be similar to those recorded at the nearby stations. At the time of the incident there would have been good visibility, at least 10 Km, with little if any low level cloud with the main base around 15000 Ft. Surface winds would be between East and Southeast, around 10 knots. Over land there would be moderate thermal activity, however this would be capped at around 1500 to 2000 Ft due to the inversion from the high pressure, with virtually no thermal activity over the sea.

The Met Office aftercast was generally in line with the conditions as described by the witnesses. Evidence from Pilot B and Pilot C suggests that the wind direction was north of east, ranging between northeast and east, and at a speed of approximately 8 to 12 mph.

The Investigation considers that fluctuating wind speeds of between 8 and 12mph would be considered as marginal for the purpose of ridge soaring a paraglider. Being able to gain or maintain height would not be guaranteed necessitating an easily accessible landing option at all times.

3.2 Site information

Beesands is a coastal site situated on the South Devon coast. It lies towards the southern end of a 12km long stretch of coastline running approximately north to south, from Dartmouth in the north to Start Point in the south. Sandy beaches run from the north and gradually give way to a rugged, rocky coastline consisting of near vertical cliffs up to 50m high. In the last 1.5km of coastline leading to Start Point, there are no beaches except for small inlets exposed at low tide. These inlets can only be accessed by boat.

Extracts from the South Devon Hang Gliding and Paragliding Club site guide describes Beesands as follows:

Suitability

Paragliding: Club Pilot — +20 hours due to lack of nearby landing options

Hang-gliding: Club Pilot — +20 hours due to lack of nearby landing options

Take Off

Height 280 'asl. top to bottom 270'.

Nice gently-rounded field for launch. Can be covered in bracken & brambles at sometimes of the year, so PG's beware snagging lines and check extra carefully before launch. HG's may need to clear some space for a run.

Top Landing

Not difficult for PG's in moderate winds. In strong winds it can be difficult to lose height on the take-off area because of the compression on the top of the hill. The field immediately behind the barbed wire fence is top landable if not in crop. The trig point field is also landable, but has claimed a few uprights.

Slope Landing

Easy for paragliders and essential if there is no beach and you are getting low.

XC Flying

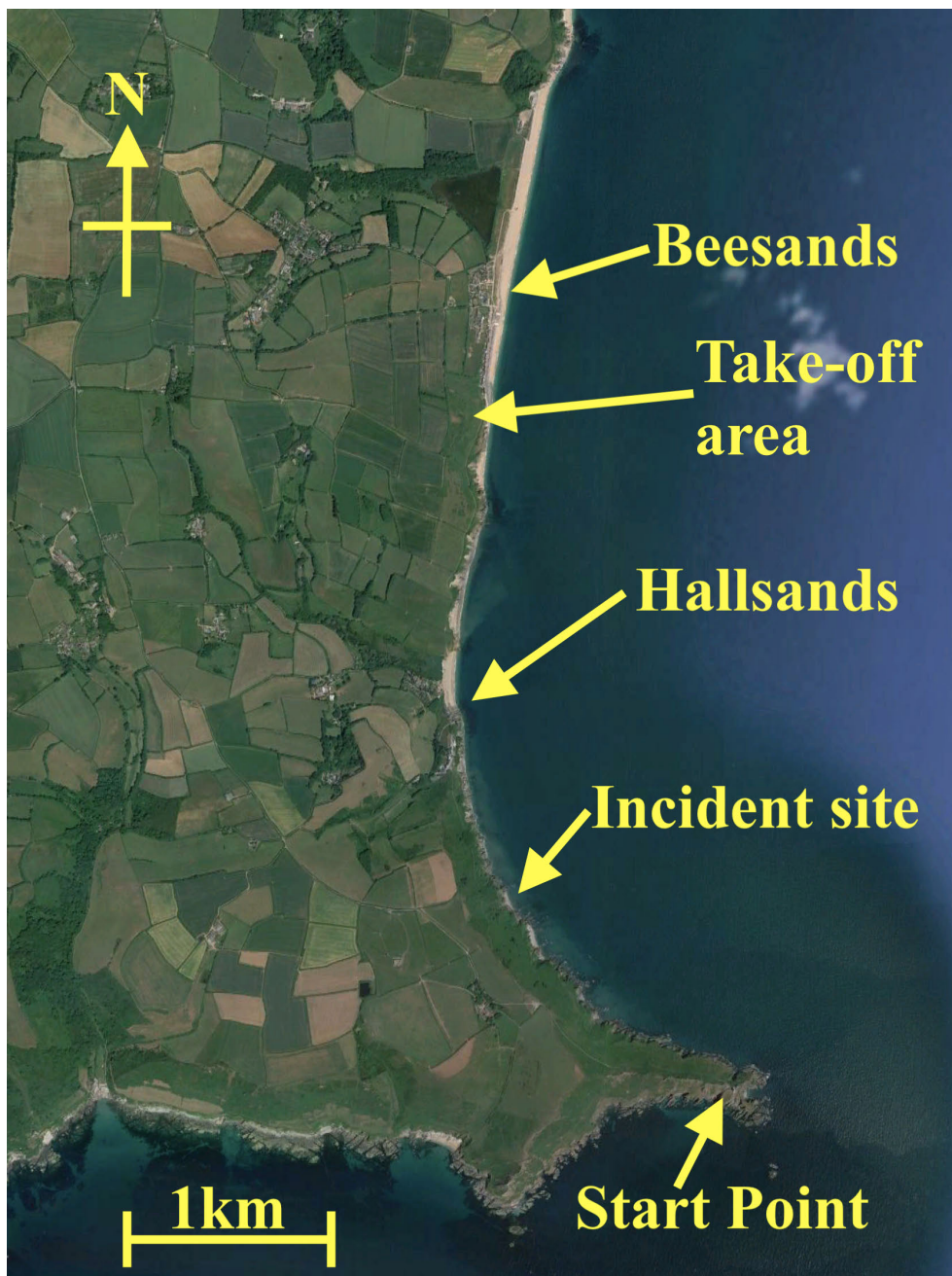
Best direction easterly.

The NE corner of the hill is also flyable, but a short beat. When conditions are suitable, with a true easterly it's possible to fly to Hallsands and back and several pilots have crossed the Hallsands beach and flown the Start Point ridge.

There are very limited bottom landing options along the coast and Start Point ridge is a spine back with the sea beyond and no bottom landing. ENE can help you across, but makes getting back difficult.

It is clear from the club site guide that the lack of safe landing areas when flying in the area of Start Point is well known and documented.

Google Earth image 1 below, shows the main section of coastline from the take-off down towards Start Point:



Google Earth image 2 below, shows the incident site and coastal footpath. Image 2 shows the sea level at approximately 4 to 4.5 hours after high tide.

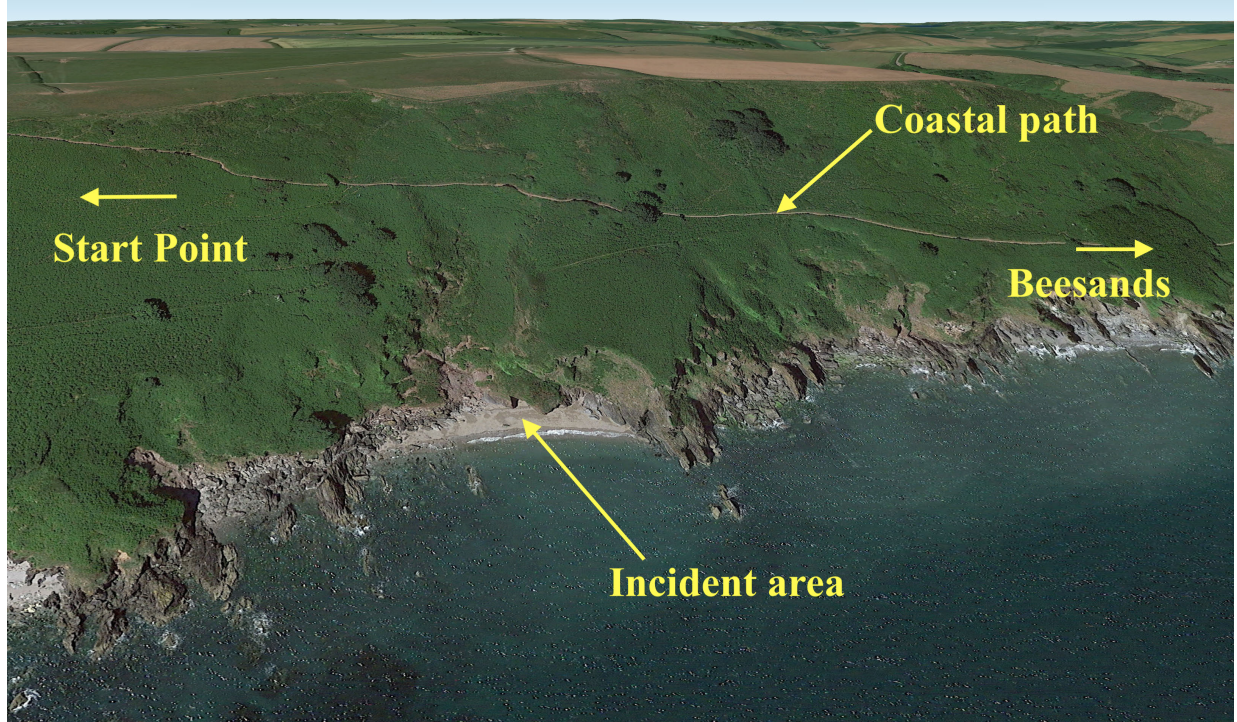


Photo 1 below shows the view along the cliffs looking in a southerly direction from the Lost Village, just south of Hallsands:



At the time of the incident the tide was on its way out. The incident occurred approximately half way between high and low tides. In this area of the coast the tidal range is relatively small, being approximately 2.5m on the day. Any areas of beach associated with the few small inlets in the immediate area would have been extremely small. Making a landing on such a small, enclosed area would be a matter of chance, if possible at all. Given that Pilot A was losing altitude in the light winds, his ability to glide to a suitable landing area would have been severely limited.

3.3 Pilot A's flying experience

Pilot A gained his BHPA Club Pilot rating in July 2013. While his total hours are unknown, evidence suggests that he was a frequent flyer of the coastal sites in the Devon area. Pilot A flew at Beesands regularly when the weather conditions were suitable, and he is known to have made the flight from Beesands to Start Point and back on a number of occasions. Pilot A was familiar with the site and familiar with the weather conditions necessary to facilitate soaring flight at the site.

The Investigation can offer no explanation as to why Pilot A would choose to attempt the flight from Beesands to Start Point, in the light-wind conditions that were apparent on the day. Based on the evidence available it would appear that Pilot A made an error of judgement and by the time he realised he was in trouble there were no landing options available.

3.4 Pilot A's equipment

On inspection, Pilot A's equipment appeared in very good condition. Due to the nature of the damage sustained in the incident, it was not possible to have the paraglider flight tested. The paraglider was of the correct size, as was the harness and emergency parachute. Pilot A was not wearing a buoyancy aid and did not appear to be carrying a hook knife or similar webbing cutting implement.

4.0 Findings

The investigation concluded that the incident occurred as a result of Pilot A flying in an area where bottom landing options were extremely limited when the prevailing conditions were insufficient to sustain lift. The lack of suitable landing area meant that Pilot A had no option but to land in the sea.

5.0 Recommendations

The investigation recommends that the BHPA, through its member's magazine Skywings, reminds pilots of the importance of always having a landing area available, and especially when flying at coastal sites.

The Investigation further recommends that the BHPA reminds pilots of the advice contained in the BHPA Technical Manual, Recommended Practices section, which states the following:

Recommended Practices

RP1. Water landings should be avoided at all costs; experienced pilots anticipating flying over or near to significant areas of water should ensure that a safe dry landing area is always within reach, wear suitable buoyancy aids and carry a suitable webbing cutting implement.