

# Dr Michael J Gay

A young pioneer at HDL in the 1960's

*Outline of the youngest pilot for Hovercraft Development Ltd HD-1*



Michael Gay was born and raised in Southampton, Hampshire, UK. Mr. Gay graduated from King Edward VI Grammar School. After graduating, in the early 1960's, Mr. Gay chose to take what would today be called a “gap year”, instead of going directly to university. At the time Mike was contemplating two diversely different career paths: medicine (neurological surgery) and physics.



On graduation at school, he was employed as a trials engineer at Hovercraft Development Ltd., in Hythe, working with, among others, Christopher Cockerell (who in 1969 was Knighted for his services to engineering). Mike was training to be a hovercraft pilot, while completing his Higher National Certificate in physics at Southampton Technical College. He was trained by Terry Melhuish.

Mike was featured in a 1965 issue of *The Echo* (a local Hampshire newspaper), in a regular feature, “Along the Waterside”, under the heading “20-year-old Hovercraft Pilot Is the Youngest.” The opening paragraph noted: “Britain's youngest hovercraft pilot is probably 20-year-old Mr. Michael Gay, of Hovercraft Development Ltd., Hythe.” Always a modest man, the article concluded with [Mike's] comment on piloting a hovercraft: “I like it very much.”

In addition to his work at Hovercraft Development and his ongoing studies, Mike was also a member of a folk group, *The Solent Folkmen*, performing locally at *The Concorde Club* in Southampton, among other venues. Mike was self-taught on the guitar and had an excellent voice, inherited from his father.

He remained with Hovercraft Development until 1967 when, having decided to pursue physics, he was accepted into the atmospheric science program at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST), under the leadership of John Latham, PhD, whose lifetime interest was in atmospheric electricity, and who was a mentor to Mr. Gay.

From piloting hovercraft to piloting planes. In Mike's first year at UMIST he joined the Manchester University Air Squadron as a Cadet Pilot. On discharge, the Squadron Leader noted that "[Mr. Gay] was a satisfactory member of the Air Squadron and achieved a good standard."

He worked with Dr Latham on, among other atmospheric research, terminal velocities of drops in electric fields (1974). Also, in 1974 he was awarded his degree of Doctor of Philosophy. His doctoral thesis was "The Freezing of Supercooled Water Drops". This research attracted interest from, among others, the Saskatchewan Research Council in Saskatoon.

After receiving his doctorate, Dr M. J. Gay briefly remained at UMIST as a lecturer; however, research remained his passion and he shortly took over UMIST's government grants in Cumbria and continued his research, primarily at two locations there: Great Dun Fell, the second highest mountain in the Pennines, and High Muffles.

The Atmospheric Physics Research Group at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology was engaged in field studies at Great Dun Fell for over a decade. Dr Gay noted this in an article he authored, "Great Dun Fell – A Natural Laboratory", published in the journal *Weather*, November 1986, Vol. 41, No. 11.

To get a sense of Great Dun Fell, the BBC's Alistair Macdonald had, some years before, noted "It's cold, wet and very windy. You wouldn't take a dog out on a day like this. But for UMIST's atmospheric physics research team high up in the Cumbrian Fells, well, it's the sort of weather they dream of ..."

Mike co-authored a paper entitled "A field study of the generation of nitrate in a hill cap cloud", was published in *Environmental Pollution*, 1992, 75, 69-73. It is worth mentioning as this research had a large influence in the study of nitrate products in the atmosphere and was directly referenced by eight other research papers, each of which was in turn referenced by many others. The paper had a major impact on the field of atmospheric physics. Researchers from China were still referencing this work in 2008. To have work cited 16 years later is a most unusual occurrence in the field of science.

Then spending so much time in Cumbria, a part of Britain he loved, Mike bought a small house in the village of Colby, Appleby-in-Westmorland, Cumbria. The appeal of this home was the huge garden that offered great potential. Gardening was another passion, one Mike inherited from his mother. Over the following years Mike completely redesigned the garden to stunning effect. Mike also constructed, by hand, a solarium, accessible via the main house or from the garden. Mike's home and garden were his newest passions.

Mike Gay was a respected research scientist, a musician, a craftsman, a gardener – a multi-talented, inordinately well-read, and well-liked man with a wonderfully dry sense of humour.

Michael J. Gay died of an incurable cancer in 2011, two months after he and his sister celebrated his 66<sup>th</sup> birthday at his home in Colby.

*This material has been provided by Mike's sister Elizabeth Malcolm with additional photos for the THS site. Many thanks to Elizabeth.*

