

# Piedrahita: the first 500 years

Steve Ham outlines the territorial dispute over one of Europe's finest sites

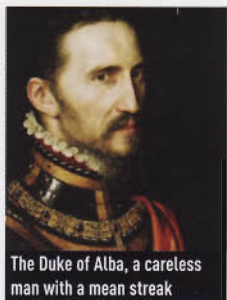


Pilots get going in the 2000 British Nationals PHOTO: CALVO

Visitors to Piedrahita's launch site over the last five years invariably ask, Why is the bar closed? Why the barbed-wire fence? Why not plant some grass? Why is that coarse-looking fellow shaking a stick at me? And so on.

With recent news that will, I hope, bring a happy end to the saga, I'd like to explain a few of the sad and regrettable happenings which all started many centuries ago. A time when a flying would likely lead to a swift *Auto da Fe*; burnt at the stake by Avila's own clerical star of the time, the Great Inquisitor Torquemada.

Into this time, October 1507, was born in Piedrahita Don Fernando Álvarez de Toledo y Pimentel, third Duke of Alba. He is known in Spain as the Gran (great) Duque, though not so in Holland, where his name is still used to frighten children as the bogeyman who governed the Spanish Netherlands with a harshness and cruelty which was outstanding even for those times.



The Duke of Alba, a careless man with a mean streak

Back home in the Ducal estate, the Gran Duque found himself somewhat embarrassed for cash one year as the taxes imposed on his minions were coming in late. Luckily, a wealthy neighbour from Santiago de Collado, just 6km away, offered the Duke some cash to tide him over. The Duke was so pleased at this apparent generosity that he asked how he might repay the favour.

"For me, Sire, I have all I need, yet I do have a goat herd, and the confines of such a small village give little pasture. Might I ask the Duke for a modicum of

land, perhaps that which my goats can graze within one day?"

Naturally the Duke conceded such a modest request, yet Spain's great soldier knew little of goats, it seems. Those goats were driven down the valley and 900m up the mountains and gained for Santiago, one of the smallest villages in Avila, one of the largest municipal boundaries in the land. Most importantly for us, it left Piedrahita impoverished of land, and ourselves five centuries later with some very difficult legal disputes over a small parcel of land which was to become the key stepping-off point to the magnificent soaring of the central mountains and plains.

Resentment and mistrust often exists between neighbouring villages. The historic enmity between Santiago de Collado and Piedrahita had probably been going on before the arrival of the Gran Duque, yet his careless gift of such important reserves can only have intensified the animosity. Where now would the goat and cattle herds of Piedrahita graze? Similarly the Duke awarded the water rights of one village to another over what we can imagine to be a very satisfactory fling with a comely maiden of the benefactors' village. Land and Water. Nothing more important for an agricultural community!

Let's move on to 1994. Over the past few years the villagers of Santiago had been seeing more and more paragliders and hang gliders launching from their land. Their resentment for the villagers of Piedrahita intensified, imagining the rich pickings they were obtaining from these multicoloured visitors. However, over the past winter the local government had been building them a new bar at the take-off, so that they too might benefit from this tourist boom. Also they had had a string of Government-funded building projects, from trails to cattle sheds, rumoured to amount to seventy thousand pounds. Not bad for the loan of a barren patch of mountain.

When I arrived in 1991, we would take off from the road, running through the gorse bushes below. As the dates of the competitions of '94 approached - the British Paragliding Nationals, the PWC and the Hang Gliding League - we were getting near to a fully-functioning site with around a hectare of dedicated launch area above and below the road running through the pass.

There were a few major problems during the preparation. Bulldozers ripped away both the gorse bushes and the top soil, leaving it open to erosion and with a fine brown dust perfect to work into the weave of dacron and ripstop. The west side of the launch was cleared more prudently, first by a digger, then generously by the hands of the hundred or so competitors of the 1994 British Nationals whilst waiting for the wind to come up the front on the first task.

Weeks later, the day before the PWC was due to start, the villagers of Santiago started to put up a barbed-wire fence right across the middle of take-off, saying that we were taking too much. Actually, according to the contract drawn up by the local government, all the land was still theirs but we had legal right of use, and they had the bar to exploit as they wished. It seemed quite bizarre to be arguing over the boundaries on a stretch of land, useless for grazing or any other agricultural use. Yet the positioning of these barbed-wire fences was crucial to a safe take-off and top landing. At the cost of many hours of negotiation and 100,000 pesetas the fence was moved back to its present boundary... still an uncomfortable backstop and preventing hang glider top landings.

The years rolled on, and towards the end of the '90s Piedrahita had become one of the most popular XC and competition sites in the world. We had run four PWCs, The Paragliding Europeans and the Hang Gliding World Series, and had collaborated in





The bar built on the Pena Negra launch in 1994 PHOTO: CALVO

numerous nationals for the UK, Spain, Norway, Sweden, Holland and Denmark. The site also claimed European records for both hang gliding and paragliding, and a crop of official female and national paragliding records.

The resentment of the landowners to Piedrahita taking the lion's share of this golden goose gently simmered in the background, but in 2001 battle lines were drawn once again and the conflict between villagers made national news.

Gamesa, an aerogenerator company (also involved in less green enterprises such as arms production) had put in proposals for a string of wind farms across Avila, most importantly right along take-off. With the prospect of a juicy annual income for land lease, Santiago were quick converts to clean energy. Piedrahita's inhabitants and the flying community joined the crusade to keep the mountain free of windmills.

Piedrahita got the ball rolling with large scale marches through the capital of Avila and sit-down demonstrations on the main highway through Piedrahita. Anti-windmill posters and stickers went up, and a petition signed by thousands, many from the international flying community was presented to the regional government. The riposte was a series of demonstrations by Santiago at take-off, some sporting "Dead or Alive" posters for El Ingles. On one occasion, with the protesters in full cry on top of the hill and myself safely barricaded in my house, the local Civil Guard came to escort me to face my accusers. No thanks! I think their idea of crowd dispersal was to let them tire themselves out after beating me with sticks!

Although there are many reasons against a wind farm in an area of natural beauty and historic, botanical and zoological interest, the reason most aired was the economic importance of flying to the area, and its

incompatibility with windmills. After months of turmoil the aerogenerator project was abandoned for the mountains above Piedrahita, leaving the villagers of Santiago blistering for revenge.

Their first assault was to completely fence off the take-off. In this the Civil Guard took their side, acknowledging their ownership but ignoring our legal right of use. Over a year passed while this went through the courts with Santiago refuting its legality. During this time we furtively used the take-off, playing a cat and mouse game with the Civil Guard.

Finally, our right of use was recognised, though only for the part of the take-off above the road. The lower launch would remain fenced with barbed-wire, not to restrain livestock, but to keep us out, and causing a dangerous obstacle to be cleared on every launch.

Civil disobedience soon brought most of the fence down. Since there is no livestock, there was no real reason to put it up again. However the following season, on the morning of the first task of the 2001 British Paragliding Nationals, the villagers of Santiago made a dawn assault, stringing a taut new barbed-wire fence across the lower launch and waiting, tooled up with the armaments of fence laying. The danger was obvious, but with a field of over 100 pilots ready for the first task there was little to do but hope for a nice bit of wind to easily clear the obstacle. We politely requested the first wave, if finding themselves hung on the wire, to remain there, allowing others to more safely run and fly over their backs.

The fence stayed up for about two years, some safety slots being nibbled away, but the competitions and visiting pilots diminished each year. Santiago were having their revenge, and all the time spending more legal fees on overthrowing our right of use of their land. Piedrahita would be punished. They had a

stranglehold on the Golden Goose of flying, and once killed they imagined that all objections to the wind farms would be swept away.

What did Piedrahita do in the meantime to fight this threat, to what some had called the single most important resource it had? Pretty much nothing really! Just a new political party and a new Mayor, the old lot being voted out in disgust at the lack of solidarity during the windmill crisis. Money flowed towards horse fairs, fiestas and 18th Century Goya weeks. But the take-off slowly eroded and the bar, now closed since 2000, became vandalised and useful only as a windbreak. The glory days of the late 90s, with the main square filled with hundreds of pilots from different nations, were still remembered, yet few of the business which had so flourished with pilot spending were willing to understand that a line of barbed wire in front of a take-off was such an issue to our safety. The mantra "We've got the best site in the world" seemed to make them blind to the fact that there are actually thousands of places for pilots to visit, many without our skies but few with our unenviable mixture of rock, dust and barbed wire.

The latest deal is that Piedrahita will pay for the rebuilding of the bar and reconditioning of the take-off, and, we hope, improving the gradient and applying artificial turf. An end to broken lines and dirty gliders! The additional 3,000 euros per year to Santiago should pacify the stick-wavers. 2007 is the 500th anniversary of the birth of the Duke of Alba. Let us hope that it marks the end of 500 years of hereditary vendettas and the beginning of a bright future for flying in Piedrahita.

Many thanks to all those who contributed with letters and the petition during the windmill crisis, and to those who continued to visit over the last five difficult years.