

Daring 92-year-old's in high spirits as microlight flight raises £2,780



No fear: Vera Elward

Clemence Michallon / Saturday 21 November 2015 / Witney

A DARING 92-year-old woman who flew in a microlight has raised thousands to save her local church organ. Vera Elward, who was born in Bampton and has lived there her entire life, jumped into the plane for a 30-minute flight in August. Sponsorship for her intrepid flight kept rolling in and a final tally saw the funds reach £2,780.

A retired teacher at Bampton Primary School, Mrs Elward has taught several generations of pupils in the village. And she believed the amount of donations was down to so many villagers knowing her. By the time she hopped off the microlight, Mrs Elward felt exhilarated. She said:

"My feet were cold but apart from that it was wonderful. "They put me in a flying suit and I was very warm except from my feet. The instructions said wear comfortable shoes so I wore sandals. I should have worn boots. It was a beautiful day. I thoroughly enjoyed it. They asked if I was coming again the week after and I said I wished."

Daring OAP will take to the skies

A 92-YEAR-OLD will be flying in a microlight on Sunday in a bid to save a church organ made famous by *Downton Abbey*.

Vera Elward, née Tanner, whose family has lived in Bampton for as long as anyone can remember, will go up for a 30-minute flight at Sywell Aerodrome in Northamptonshire.

Despite having two replacement knees and hips, Mrs Elward wants to raise as much as she can towards the £400,000 needed to fix the pipe organ at St Mary's Church, which is used as a location for the award-winning ITV drama.

It is the church where she was christened, married and where her late husband David is buried.

Mrs Elward said the flight shouldn't be too nerve-wracking despite having to postpone it once earlier this year due to an operation.

She said: "We set about trying to do something to raise the money. I said I wanted to do something

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spectacular before I die.

"I first suggested a parachute jump but my daughter said there was no way she would let me do it.

"Then I suggested a balloon flight but she said I wouldn't be able to do that with all my medical conditions. Then she came back with this.

"They have microlights specially adapted for disabled and blind people. If they can do it, surely I can.

"I'm looking forward to it."

Jill Hall, the church sacristan who is in charge of its contents, said:

"We are absolutely thrilled she has decided to do this.

"There has been lots of sponsorship, people have been really inspired."

She added: "The footfall has increased enormously since *Downton Abbey*. On Monday we had

300 people visit, they come by the coachload."

The church has been used in the filming for the television show's weddings and funerals since the hit period drama was first screened in 2010.

Mrs Elward said: "It means a lot to me, it's where I've always gone.

"I can remember my first Sunday school teacher and teaching in the Sunday school there myself.

Mrs Elward taught at Bampton Primary School for many years, retiring at the age of 59.

She has two daughters, five grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

Long-time friend Anne Harris, who runs the West Oxfordshire Steam & Vintage Fair which is sponsoring Mrs Elward's challenge, said: "She's one of those women who doesn't seem to have a fear of anything."

To donate to Mrs Elward's fundraising flight, see justgiving.com/Vera-Elward.



Vera Elward pictured in front of the church organ that she is hoping to help save by taking a microlight flight this weekend

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Fundraiser's cold feet

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TWO replacement knees and hips could not stop one 92-year-old woman taking on a daring airborne fundraiser.

Vera Elward, who has lived in Bampton all her life, wanted to raise cash to help save the organ at St Mary's Church.

But rather than the traditional cake sale or raffle, Mrs Elward strapped herself in for a 30-minute flight in a microlight plane.

Mrs Elward wanted to raise as much as she could towards the £400,000 needed to fix the pipe organ.

She said: "When I looked at the plane, I thought 'there's no way I'm getting in that', but my granddaughter went to one side and the pilot went the other and they helped me in the back seat.

"They gave me ear muffs and gloves and a microphone on the helmet, but I had to wear my normal sandals because my feet swell up, so when we got up in the air my feet were really cold."

Mrs Elward had wanted to do a parachute jump or a wing walk but was told by doctors that it was too dangerous because of her joint replacements and because she has a pacemaker and asthma.

When she saw pictures of a closed

cockpit plane, Mrs Elward insisted it was not dangerous enough and wanted to go in an open cockpit aircraft.

Retired Bampton Primary School teacher Mrs Elward said: "We took off on the grass and got permission from the tower to do a low fly-past over the hangar where all the people were waiting outside.

"We went up to 3,000ft. It was cold up there. It was a lovely day for it and I could see Billing Aquadrome and Althorp House near Daventry.

"The sun was shining and I was looking down on all that. It was really beautiful."

Mrs Elward's daughter, Janet Newman, said: "It's given her a new lease of life. The staff at the aerodrome were brilliant with her."

Mrs Elward, who has two daughters and five grandchildren, has raised about £2,500 in sponsorship.

The church is the setting for weddings and funerals for the hit period drama *Downton Abbey*.

To donate to Mrs Elward's flight fund see justgiving.com/Vera-Elward



Vera Elward in the microlight; inset, Mrs Elward with the organ