

Accident

Aircraft Type and Registration:	Beagle B121 Series 2, G-AZDG	
No & Type of Engines:	1 Lycoming O-320-A2B piston engine	
Year of Manufacture:	1970 (Serial no: B121-145)	
Date & Time (UTC):	28 December 2025 at 1402 hrs	
Location:	Hanningfield Reservoir, Essex	
Type of Flight:	Private	
Persons on Board:	Crew - 1	Passengers - None
Injuries:	Crew - 1 (Fatal)	Passengers - N/A
Nature of Damage:	Aircraft destroyed	
Commander's Licence:	Private Pilot's Licence	
Commander's Age:	66 years	
Commander's Flying Experience:	20,000 hours (of which 'unknown' were on type) ¹ Last 90 days – 1.5 hours ² Last 28 days – 0.5 hours	
Information Source:	AAIB Field Investigation	

Synopsis

The pilot took off in G-AZDG from North Weald Airport, Essex for a local flight. About 1 hour and 20 minutes later the aircraft was observed to enter a steep descent before it struck the water in Hanningfield Reservoir, Essex. The pilot did not survive.

The pilot had been experiencing mental health issues and sleep difficulties for a few weeks before the accident. Based on this information, a handwritten card by the pilot, and the aircraft's flight profile, it is likely that the pilot deliberately flew into the reservoir.

History of the flight

Background information

On 24 December 2025, the pilot flew the accident aircraft solo, on a local flight from North Weald Airfield (Figure 1). This flight lasted about 35 minutes, during which the aircraft flew an orbit over, and another near, Hanningfield Reservoir, Essex; the location of the accident. The aircraft subsequently landed at North Weald without event.

Footnote

¹ The pilot's most recent logbook was not recovered. His total flying hours were stated on a pilot's medical application in June 2023.

² The pilot's recent flying hours were taken from the aircraft's logbook.

Accident flight

On 28 December 2025 the pilot notified ATC that he intended to perform a local flight from North Weald Airfield. At the time Runway 02 was in use. Soon after the aircraft commenced taxiing, one of the airfield's operations vehicles noticed a tie-down weight was still attached to the aircraft's right wing and was being dragged along the taxiway. The vehicle driver informed the ATCO, who in turn advised the pilot to stop so the driver could remove it. The driver subsequently spoke to the pilot before he removed the weight and stated that, while their interaction was short and the aircraft's engine was running, he noted that the pilot's demeanour appeared normal. The aircraft then continued to taxi to the runway and, after completing the engine power checks, took off at 1239 hrs without incident and departed to the east.

The aircraft flew towards Hanningfield Reservoir³, 13.5 nm east-south-east of North Weald where it remained in the vicinity for about 70 minutes (Figure 1). During this time the aircraft's flight path involved many turns centred on the reservoir, with some excursions to the south-west and north-east, before returning to the reservoir⁴. It also included, at about 1253 hrs, one descent in excess of 6,000 ft/min, down to about 600 ft above the reservoir, before entering a climb. At 1401 hrs the aircraft turned south-east flying towards the north-east corner of the reservoir, at an altitude of approximately 1,800 ft above the reservoir, with a ground speed averaging about 90 kt. The ground speed started increasing in conjunction with a slight climb. A right turn was initiated just prior to reaching the reservoir, the turn tightened and the aircraft descended rapidly with an increasing groundspeed⁵. The last recorded point, at 1402 hrs, was approximately 500 ft above the reservoir with a descent rate greater than 5,000 ft/min. At this time the aircraft was seen by some eyewitnesses that were about 450 m south-east of the impact point. They stated that they saw the aircraft, in a level attitude, "nose diving" from height at an angle of approximately 60° nose-down, before it struck the water making "a big splash and a loud bang". The aircraft then disappeared under the water. They added that during the descent the engine sounded normal and there was no "spluttering engine" noise. After it had disappeared, they observed oil and small pieces of wreckage on the surface of the water. They immediately called the emergency services, who arrived about 15 minutes later. This subsequently included an air ambulance helicopter and a police helicopter. At the time there was an easterly wind.

Footnote

³ Hanningfield Reservoir is about 177 ft amsl.

⁴ The aircraft's transponder provided the flight path information recorded by aircraft tracking services.

⁵ The accuracy of the onboard GNSS position fixes and the ability for the aircraft tracking networks to receive the transmitted position were likely compromised during the final part of the descent.

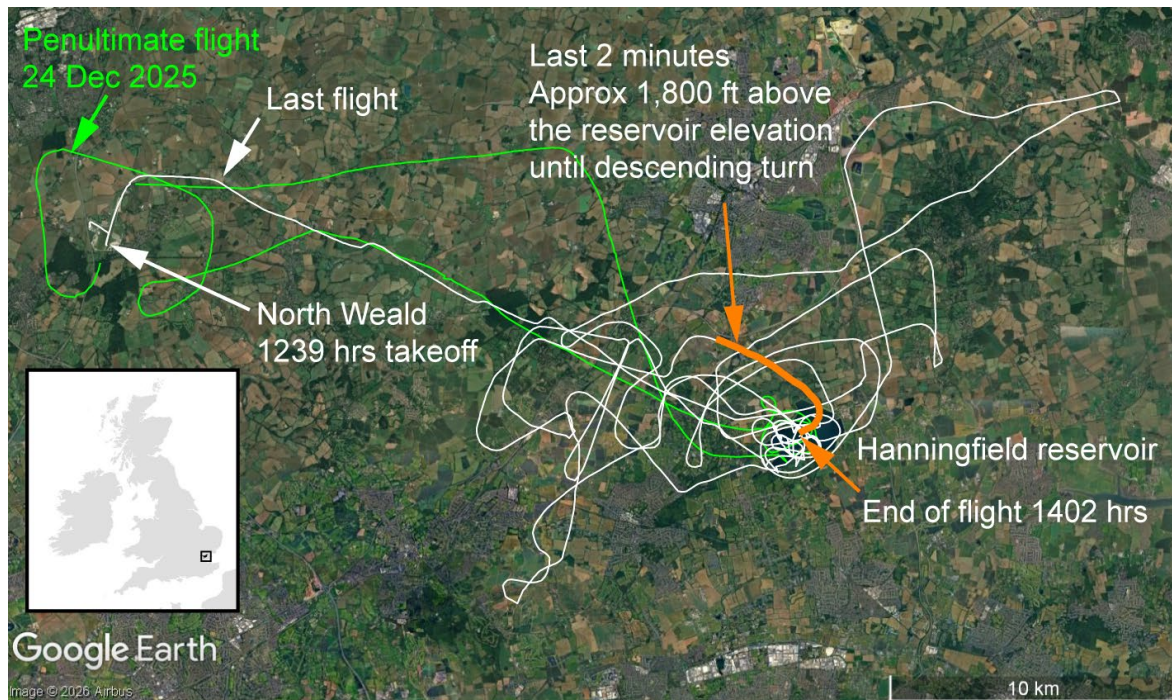


Figure 1

Aircraft's flight path on 24 and 28 December 2025

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Meteorology

During the period of the flight the weather at London Southend Airport, 8.7 nm from the accident site, had a surface wind from between 030° and 050° at 8 to 9 kt, with variations between 010° and 070° and visibility in excess of 10 km. There was broken cloud between 2,300 and 2,400 ft aal (2,350 ft and 2,450 ft amsl), the temperature was 7°C and the QNH was 1031 hPa.

Pilot information

The pilot had owned the aircraft for about nine years. A close friend stated that it was extremely rare for the pilot to fly the aircraft solo. When he did, it would usually be a visual circuit to remain current.

Whilst the pilot flew the aircraft solo on 24 December 2025, when he met his friend on 25 December 2025, he did not mention that he had been flying. At that meeting the pilot seemed quiet, and vacant, which was unlike him. He said he had been “feeling rubbish and unhappy” and that recently prescribed medication was making him feel a bit strange, and not very well mentally.

The day before the accident the friend spoke to the pilot after which the pilot messaged his friend to say he was lonely and unhappy. As such the friend invited the pilot to lunch at around 1200 hrs, which he accepted. At 1300 hrs on the day of the accident the friend tried to contact the pilot several times to no avail. Later that afternoon, he became aware of the accident involving his friend.

After the accident a card addressed to the friend was found at the pilot's house which expressed that his '*desolation and loneliness*' had become too much.

Medical

Medical history

The pilot contacted his doctor on 10 December 2025 as he was having problems with his mental health and difficulties sleeping. He was subsequently referred to a consultant psychiatrist who prescribed him medication, including antidepressants. His last contact with mental health professionals was at his home on 23 December 2025. They noted that the pilot '*engaged well in the review and reported no concerns. He explained that he was quite satisfied with the progress he was making.*'

The pilot held a UK Private Pilot's Licence and was flying on a Pilot Medical Declaration, which is made by pilots on the CAA's website. His last declaration was made on 11 June 2023 and was valid until 10 April 2029. Given his condition and the prescribed medication, he was obliged to withdraw his declaration. He should have also consulted with an Aeromedical Examiner (AME) to discuss his condition, the medicine and his fitness to continue flying. There were no records of any contact with an AME and he had not withdrawn his declaration.

Post-mortem examination

There was no evidence of any underlying pathology that could have led to incapacitation or death prior to impact. The cause of death was given as multiple injuries consistent with a high-speed impact. As such the accident was deemed unsurvivable.

Accident site

The aircraft wreckage was found on 30 December 2025 using side-scan sonar and police divers. It was submerged at a depth of about 6 m near the centre of Hanningfield Reservoir (Figure 2).



Figure 2

Wreckage and eyewitnesses' location with final flight path from recorded tracking services
© Google Earth, Image © Airbus

The pilot's body was found near the wreckage and was recovered on the same day by police divers. The wreckage, which was severely broken up, was recovered on 10 January 2026.

Aircraft information

The Beagle B121 aircraft, known as the Pup, was designed as a single-engined all-metal two-seat aerobatic aircraft and as a four-seat touring aircraft. The first delivery of the Series 1 variant was in 1968. G-AZDG was a Series 2 aircraft with a 150 hp Lycoming O-320-A2B piston engine, and configured with three seats. It was fitted with the optional extended range fuel tanks which provided a total usable fuel capacity of 159 litres.

The aircraft's last annual inspection was completed in February 2025 when the airframe had accumulated 7,978 flight hours. The aircraft had flown about 10 hours between then and the accident. The aircraft's last maintenance was a nosewheel inner tube change on 5 December 2025. The maintenance organisation stated that the parking brake was inoperative and was going to be repaired at the next annual inspection. They were not aware of any other defects.

Aircraft examination

The aircraft wreckage was severely broken up (Figure 3) indicating a high-speed impact. The wreckage was found in a relatively small compact area which was consistent with a steep impact. One of the propeller blades was curled backwards which often occurs in steep impacts and makes it difficult to determine if the propeller was being driven by engine power at the time. The left horizontal tail and left elevator were attached, while the right horizontal tail and right elevator had partially detached in a manner consistent with impact forces. The elevator control cables were attached to the elevator bellcrank, but the cables had failed due to overload consistent with the airframe break-up. The elevator was in a neutral position and could be actuated via the cables. Due to the circumstances leading up to the accident no further wreckage examinations were carried out.



Figure 3
G-AZDG aircraft wreckage

Analysis

On 24 December 2025, the pilot flew solo over Hanningfield Reservoir. This was unusual as a close friend of the pilot stated the pilot rarely flew the aircraft solo and when he did it was usually only for some circuits. While it could not be determined what the pilot's intentions were that day, the flight profile was similar to the accident flight.

During the accident flight, the aircraft flew over, or in the vicinity of, the reservoir for most of the flight prior to the accident. At 1253 hrs there appeared to be a possible attempt to fly into the reservoir before the aircraft was recovered into a climb.

During the final moments of the flight the aircraft was descending at about 5,000 ft/min, in a nose-down attitude of about 60°, before it struck the water. The impact was not survivable.

The aircraft damage was consistent with a steep high-speed impact. There was no evidence of a pre-impact failure of the horizontal tail or elevators which could have caused a steep uncontrolled nosedive. According to eyewitnesses the aircraft hit the reservoir in a wings level attitude indicating that the aircraft was likely under control.

The pilot had been under the medical care of a consultant psychiatrist who had diagnosed mental health issues and sleeping difficulties. However, the pilot had not withdrawn his medical declaration or consulted with an AME.

This evidence, combined with the pilot's medical history and the card found at the pilot's house, indicated that it was likely that the pilot deliberately flew into the reservoir.

Conclusion

The aircraft flew in a steep wings-level dive into the reservoir. There was no evidence of a pre-impact failure of the horizontal tail or elevators which could have caused a steep uncontrolled nosedive. In addition, the pilot's medical history and other evidence indicate that it is likely that the pilot deliberately flew into the reservoir.

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