

# Sophie Gairdner - The Wigley Scholarship (BALPA Benevolent Fund)

I've had the most amazing opportunity this summer – to gain my Private Pilot's Licence! My aviation journey started later than some when I joined Air Cadets when I was just about to turn 16. Back then I didn't realise how much this decision would impact my future. Air Cadets guided me through my first steps into aviation. With their support I received an



award for a five hour Air League scholarship in 2023 and joined a Volunteer Gliding Squadron as a Flight Staff Cadet. Since then I've dreamed of gaining my PPL – and I couldn't have achieved it without the amazingly generous support of the Honourable Company of Air Pilots. I

couldn't believe it when I received the news that I had been successful with my PPL scholarship application. I knew that my summer was going to be incredible, and it definitely did not disappoint.

A PPL consists of nine theoretical exams, alongside a radio operator's licence, and of course the flying (45 hours including circuit training, navigation and cross country flights), which I was massively looking forward to. I planned out my summer, initially focusing predominantly on the theory side of training, as I was still in school working hard for my

year 12 A-level mocks at the time. My aim was to get through a decent amount of theory before my flying could become more consistent over the school holidays.

As soon as term ended I was at my chosen flying school practically everyday. I trained for my PPL at Booker Aviation in High Wycombe and the support I received from everyone there, particularly my amazing instructors, was superb. The last time I had flown in a

powered aircraft was almost a year prior so we started with revising the basics before getting back into flying circuits. When the weather was good I was flying two to three times a week, and sometimes even four times a week. It was a packed schedule, and all the time I wasn't flying there was always theory revision to be done. Before I knew it my first solo was complete. What a milestone this was for me. It was definitely the most nerve-wracking thing that I had



ever done, and still is to this day! I couldn't believe that I was able to fly an aircraft completely by myself. From there my flying just took off and everything seemed to progress much faster.

With the basics nailed (and my theory coming along nicely) I was able to focus on more advanced skills such as navigating. I was a little daunted by all the immense preparation and knowledge needed to be able to complete cross country flights but was pleasantly surprised by how much I had already picked up along the way. I was able to complete my

first solo local area flight and solo navigation (QXC) exercises in quick succession due to a brief spell of brilliant weather. However, I was not so lucky with the weather for my practice or real solo qualifying cross country, and had weeks of being grounded. The waiting only increased my levels of anticipation. Suddenly the weather changed, it was a perfect day and my solo QXC was by far the best flying day I've ever had. I will always remember the sense of achievement I felt after completing it! I felt everything really coming together as I realised I was actually able to pilot a plane safely by myself.



As I completed my final revision flights and remaining theory test, my skills test loomed ever closer. The weather had turned again and my test was cancelled a number of times. The delays made me nervous – I was so aware how incredibly important this was to me. Finally the

weather cleared. I had gone through every possible scenario that could come up in my mind about a million times, but I still felt unprepared. Reminding myself that I knew I could do this, and had done so multiple times before calmed me down. When I landed back on the runway after the longest flight I had ever done, being told I passed was such a massive relief. The news didn't really sink in. I had passed my skills test and completed everything I needed to obtain my Private Pilot's Licence!

It all still feels a little surreal, but amazing. I cannot thank both my generous sponsors from the BALPA Benevolent fund and everyone at the Honourable Company of Air Pilot's who believed in me enough to award me this scholarship. I am so grateful for what has been a truly life-changing opportunity. I can't wait to see what the future holds.