

Maria Johnston

RAFCT Gliding Scholarship 2024

I was over the moon when I received the email telling me I had been awarded a Gliding Scholarship at Midland Gliding Club, which is located on the Long Mynd in the beautiful Shropshire countryside. I arrived on the Sunday before the course commenced, to familiarise myself with the site and to get to know the staff and other scholarship winners with whom I would be spending the week. I was quickly greeted by Martin, who took me on a tour of the clubhouse and showed me to my room, where I met my roommate for the week. We then later walked over to the launch point and met the rest of the group, started getting to know each other and observed how the airfield ran. The first thing I noticed was how much of a team effort gliding is, between the main winch and retrieve winch operator, the people connecting the cables and running with the wing, others retrieving the gliders, and how everyone needs to work attentively together to ensure everything runs smoothly; this all made me more excited to get stuck into it!



The next day started with breakfast together with the instructors and some of the club members, followed by unpacking the gliders from the hangars – it was really interesting to see how many gliders they had managed to fit into a relatively small hangar, and how they all slotted precisely together. After this we had a morning briefing, in which one of the instructors, James, introduced us to the weather forecasts he uses and

the NOTAMs to predict gliding conditions and best times for soaring throughout the day. Then, we all went out to the airfield to start the day's gliding. Each day was a similar routine, setting up the launch point at the correct end of the airfield to maximise lift from the wind direction, and getting the gliders lined up for a quick turnaround between launches. From the first day I started learning the process of launching the gliders and the hand signals to use to indicate 'take up slack' and 'all out', noting down all of the flights in the daily log sheet and later I learnt how to operate the retrieve winch, all of which I found really fun. And there was always the task of chasing away the sheep and horses that got too close to the runways!

I was slightly nervous for my first winch launch as I had never flown in a glider prior to this course, but as soon as we got airborne the nerves disappeared and I fell in love with the feeling of gliding through the air, taking in the beautiful scenery. My first instructor Tom taught me the basics of rolling the aircraft to turn, pitching using the elevators and using the rudder pedals to



adjust yaw, and throughout my later flights I improved my ability to use these together as 'coordinated controls' to turn more efficiently. He also demonstrated a 360 degrees loop, which I didn't think was possible in a glider but was really thrilling nonetheless.



Over the next few days, I became more comfortable using the controls to fly different parts of the circuit, and was able to take control from the top of the winch launch to level out the glider and then continue with our route. On Wednesday I got a flight in the motor glider, which allowed me to practice my approaches and turns with the added safety of being able to 'go around' and try again if it didn't go as planned. Later that day attempted my first landing in the K21, which was quite daunting as there are so many things to think about: maintaining the correct approach speed, attitude and direction and holding off as long as possible, then rounding out, braking and ensuring the wings remain level throughout. After a few attempts this became easier for me and by Friday I was really excited and proud to be able to take control of the glider from the top of the launch to the end of the circuit. Throughout the week we also had the chance to practice our newfound skills on the realistic glider simulator in the clubhouse, which was really useful to

get used to the controls and consolidate our learning but also fun to try out crazy aerobatics and spend time together laughing.

The week I spent at the Midland Gliding Club was the most amazing experience; I have met some great people, made friendships that will last for years to come, and got to fly with 4 different instructors and in 3 different gliders during the course. The location and views were stunning and luckily the weather stayed dry and clear for most of the week, with some people getting up to hour-long flights on the first day! Not to mention, the club felt so homely, with shared bedrooms and seating areas and the long tables to eat Helen's lovingly-made meals together with the staff and instructors.

I have made memories to last a lifetime and I am now determined to join a gliding club to gain even more experience and get to solo, before hopefully training to become a gliding instructor in the future. I would like to deeply thank the RAF Charitable Trust for sponsoring me for this unbelievable experience, as well as the Honourable Company of Air Pilots for providing this opportunity!

