



Sir Sefton Brancker Scholarship

Final Report – Ava Udwadia

2026

The summer of 2026 has been one of the most intense, incredible, and rewarding experiences of my life. It was a whirlwind of balancing work, study, and flying, which resulted in becoming a qualified powered pilot – a childhood dream come true!

My background

Growing up near Heathrow ignited my 'aviation spark' – aircraft fascinated me, and I wanted to learn more about them, how they work, and (most importantly) how to fly one. At 18, I decided to get a degree before pursuing any kind of flying career, and I started studying Product Design Engineering at Loughborough University.

My flying journey started when I joined my university's gliding club. I completely fell in love with gliding, and have since become a qualified glider pilot, hold 2/3 silver legs, both parts of my 100km diploma, my basic aerobatics endorsement and my standard aerobatics badge. My gliding experience only cemented my desire for a flying career, and I knew that powered flying would be the next step towards this. I was fortunate enough to be awarded a 30-minute trial flight through the Aviatrix Project in 2023, but I still knew that self-funding PPL would be unattainable in my early career stage. It became even more unattainable after I was made redundant from my graduate role, so I paused all pursuit of aviation until I found my current job. Between finding my current role and starting it, a friend took me flying, which pushed me to apply to this year's PPL scholarship with the mindset of 'nothing tried, nothing gained'.



My first gliding solo

After going through the selection process, I was initially told that I was unsuccessful, but would be marked as the 'reserve candidate'. In mid-June I received an email explaining that a successful candidate had dropped out and the scholarship was mine. I jumped to accept it – an opportunity like this was not to be missed!

Training

Although I was informed of my scholarship success in mid-June, I couldn't start the actual flying until 3rd July. I did however, start the process of studying for my theory exams immediately. My academic background certainly helped me with the more technical subjects, however, I didn't anticipate the challenge that was balancing full time work, studying, and flying. I'm fortunate enough that my employer allows flexible and remote working, so I took advantage of this to build a routine. I would work from 8am to around 5pm, have a short break, and then study from 5:30pm to midnight with a dinner break somewhere in that time. It reminded me of my final year at university!



I started training on 3rd July at The Cotswold Aero Club. I arrived excited and a little anxious, but all my nerves were soon put to ease by my instructor. My 'air experience' flight was in one of the DR400s (G-BKDJ), although most of my training occurred in their R2112 (G-OCAC). We completed general handling activities, flew to Shobdon, did a touch-and-go, and then flew back to Gloucester. This would be one of my many trips to Shobdon throughout my training – Gloucester airport can become exceptionally busy, so my club sometimes uses Shobdon for circuit training.



The R2112 – G-OCAC

The 'real' training began shortly after the initial air experience flight. Each flight built on the previous one and I found myself gaining both competence and confidence with each hour. Like most student pilots, the hardest part of my abinitio training was learning to land. I either rounded out too high, or too late, resulting in many firm landings. I grew increasingly frustrated with this, until my CFI pointed out that I may need to sit on foam to help with my view out of the cockpit during flare. I wish I had thought of that earlier – I often use seat backs or Confor/Dynof foam cushions when gliding (I'm of the vertically challenged variety) but didn't think to use a cushion in a powered aircraft. Using the foam seemed to resolve my flaring issue, and my landings soon sorted themselves out.



My instructor (James Peplow) and I at Shobdon



On the ground at Shobdon

My first solo was sprung on me after 8 hours of training. I use the term 'sprung' it was a complete surprise – I had absolutely no inclination that I would be sent solo that day. It was another busy day at Gloucester airport, so we flew to Kemble in the morning for some circuit practice, before returning to Gloucester for more circuits in the afternoon. I was then sent for a single solo circuit, which was witnessed by a visiting BBMF Hurricane crew. They cheered as I taxied past them on my return to the Cotswold apron – I certainly won't ever forget that experience!



My first powered solo (being photobombed by a Hurricane)



A more civilised photo after my first solo

I quite literally 'flew' through the rest of the training course. I was conscious that I had six weeks less than the other scholars and so I arranged to take three weeks of unpaid leave from work to complete the rest of my training. We were exceptionally lucky with the weather this year and only cancelled three days due to extreme heat (but I used those days to complete my theory and FRTOL exams).

My first navigation exercise was a true 'baptism of fire'. I planned three legs: Gloucester – Oxford, Oxford – Halfpenny Green, Halfpenny Green – Overhead Shobdon – Gloucester. The first leg was completely overwhelming, partly due to the high workload, and partly because I needed to organise myself more efficiently. Before my second leg, I prepared a little better and the remaining legs were far smoother. The expression 'prior planning prevents poor performance' rang very true in this case, but I'm glad that I made these mistakes when I had my instructor with me rather than while I was flying solo. I was also given the chance to sit in the backseat during a flight from Gloucester to Headcorn in Kent, which allowed me to observe my instructors in their element. We transited the Brize and Heathrow zones, and it was fantastic to have a 'live demo' on how to request transits through controlled airspace.



Heathrow Zone Transit



Overhead Thorpe Park

Once I proved my navigation competence, I was then sent on a couple of solo navigation exercises to build confidence before the big Qualifying Cross Country (QXC). My first two exercises were around an hour each and allowed me to explore Southwest England and South Wales. As ever, I was nervous



beforehand, but quickly gained confidence once I was in the air. These exercises were followed by my first solo landaway to Shobdon and then my QXC.

While initially daunting, my QXC was by far my favourite experience of the training course. My route was Gloucester– Shobdon – overhead Wellsbourne – overhead Sywell – Turweston – Gloucester. My previous navigation exercises and my planning had prepared me well for the QXC and I truly felt at ease throughout the experience. I seemed to have chosen the perfect day for my QXC - winds were light, the cloud base was high, and unlike previous days, the temperature was solidly in the 20-25°C range (instead of above 30°C). Having a tailwind certainly helped on the long Shobdon-Turweston leg, and I found that there was something exceptionally satisfying in flying over places that I had previously visited by road. I was also fortunate enough to have been ‘papped’ at both Shobdon and Turweston. They’re the perfect memento of the day and I’m very glad that I managed to speak to both photographers!



Smiling at Turweston



Taxying at Shobdon (Photo taken by Simon Wilson)



Taxying at Turweston (Photo taken by Gary Loveday)



Departing Turweston (Photo taken by Gary Loveday)

After my QXC, it was just a matter of completing a few consolidatory flights before sitting a mock test, and my real test. While my performance on my mock test was far from perfect, it put my mind at ease for the real one. Running through the structure of the flying skill test with an unfamiliar instructor was a great experience, and I’d recommend any student pilot to do this before sitting their real skill test. The feedback I received from my mock test was so valuable and I ensured that I learned from my mistakes before the real test. It was reassuring to hear that there was nothing critically wrong with my flying, which again, put my mind at ease for the real test.

I was fortunate to sit my skill test the day after my mock, so the experience and feedback were fresh in my mind. I had planned a route from Gloucester with two turn points – Barford St John, and Bromsgrove. After completing a few circuits at Gloucester, we set off on route. The first leg of the



journey was non-eventful and we arrived at Barford St John right on time – great success! My second leg became *very* interesting as I was then asked to fly ‘under the hood’. I flew straight and level before being asked to complete two 180 degree turns before removing the hood and being asked to locate my position. After that, I was then diverted to Bromyard before we completed some general handling activities (stalls, steep turns, spiral dive recovery) and emergency procedures (a forced landing and an EFATO). My examiner’s calm demeanour kept me at ease throughout the flight even though I was exceptionally nervous, and I would even say that I enjoyed my test! The nerves increased between shutting down the aircraft and my debrief – but huzzah, I had passed!



A big, cheese-y, post skill test grin



A closer look at the post skill test grin

Reflection and next steps

This aviation filled summer has been an unforgettable and incredible experience – it still feels surreal to say that I now hold a PPL! A flying career is now closer and more achievable than ever and I’m excited to gain more experience and start flying new aircraft types. I would eventually like to balance a flying career alongside my engineering role and am exploring my options to do so.

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