

Emma Lees – BALPA BENEVOLENT FUND - The Wigley Scholarship

It's safe to say this summer has been my busiest but by far my best, and it still feels surreal that I now have my PPL. My flying journey started at my local gliding club, Bidford Gliding and Flying Club, in 2017, and from my trial flight, I was hooked. Gaining my PPL has been a dream for me for many years, and being awarded this scholarship has made that dream a reality - I cannot thank the Honourable Company of Air Pilots and the BALPA Benevolent Fund enough!

Having just finished my first year at the University of Bath studying Aerospace Engineering, my summer of flying soon began. My first lesson was an aircraft familiarisation session covering the basics I would need to know, including an overview of the aircraft systems and how to perform the pre-flight checks. Once this ground lesson was completed, it was time to start flying!

I moved through the initial exercises quickly, probably due to my gliding experience, and before I knew it, it was time for my first solo. The weather on the day was less than ideal, with low clouds and frequent rain showers, so I was initially unsure whether the conditions would be good enough for a first solo. However, we went ahead with my solo check of three circuits before my instructor told the tower I would be going by myself, briefed me for every eventuality, told me to have fun and hopped out. This first solo flight filled me with confidence that I could fly the aeroplane and did know what I was doing.



Taxiing back after my first solo



Me (left) and my instructor Lilly Butterworth (right) after my first solo

After a few hours of circuit consolidation, it was time to move on to what became my favourite part of the course: navigation. My first cross country was a relatively short route, Wellesbourne – Worcester – Tewkesbury - Wellesbourne. I thoroughly enjoyed the navigation and liked the feeling of having been somewhere. Around this time I also passed the practical radio exam, meaning I got my radio license, which increased my confidence when I began talking on busier frequencies such as Gloucester. After a few dual and solo nav routes, one of which passed over my village, it was time for my first landaway to Halfpenny Green.



My village from above

I flew the route with my instructor in the morning before being sent solo that afternoon. My solo flight there went well. I was confident with the route and the overhead join, having done the same thing just a few hours earlier, however the flight back wasn't quite so smooth. I took off and set off as planned. However, around halfway back to Wellesbourne, the radio started playing up and shortly stopped working, leaving me unable to hear anything. After trying to resolve the issue whilst still ensuring I was flying at the right height, heading, and keeping a good lookout, I decided I needed to accept it wasn't working, transmit blind and squawk 7600 on the transponder. Once I returned to Wellesbourne and landed, I was informed that the tower could hear me despite my inability to hear them. The radio was also inspected, and it is suspected to have overheated. Whilst this first solo landaway was more stressful than expected, it was a good experience and one of the more memorable flights from my training!

After a much less eventful landaway to Gloucester, which was quieter than expected, it was time for my qualifying cross-country. This was a case of third-time lucky. The first day I intended to complete the QXC it had to be called off the night before due to an aerobatics competition at Peterborough Conington, my first stop. My second attempt was initially looking a lot more promising. After a thorough briefing from my instructor, checking of NOTAMS, mass and balance calculations, weather checks, getting the aeroplane ready and requesting PPR from Peterborough, I set off. I had planned to fly at 3,000ft, although I had agreed with my instructor I could fly as low as 2,000ft if needed. After climbing towards Gaydon and setting off on the first leg the clouds started descending below 2,000ft. The cloud base continued getting lower the further east I went with it thickening and lowering suddenly to 1,700ft after about ten minutes. I knew, despite my disappointment, the best decision was to turn back and try again another day.

It was six days before the weather was good enough for my third attempt, and this time clear blue skies meant cloud base wasn't an issue. The

haze, however, was. After leaving it until midday to wait for conditions to improve, the weather was good enough to go. Despite reduced visibility compared to what I was used to, with no real horizon and an inversion layer, and uncomfortably warm conditions in the plane during the late summer heatwave, this was one of my favourite days of the whole course.

The route was Wellesbourne – Peterborough Conington – Gloucester – Wellesbourne. The flight to Peterborough was straightforward, talking to Coventry and Sywell on the radio. The most challenging part of this leg was finding the airfield, which was much smaller and less distinct than the other airfields I had flown to. I could relax a lot more once the first leg was completed, as Peterborough was the only airfield I was going to I hadn't been to before. The second leg was the longest at about 75 nm. It took me back toward Wellesbourne and then onto Gloucester. This was my third time landing at Gloucester, my second solo, and therefore, I was feeling comfortable with the joining procedures, which helped me relax and enjoy the flight and the feeling of freedom. I stopped for lunch, meeting my mum and dad at the airfield, which was a welcome rest in the shade!



Last leg of my QXC when I could see my gliding club in the distance

After a shorter leg back to Wellesbourne, and just over three hours total flying that day, my QXC was

complete. Now, all that was left to complete my PPL was revision and a mock skills test to bring me up to the 45 hours before the assessed skills test.



Taxiing back at Wellesbourne after my QXC

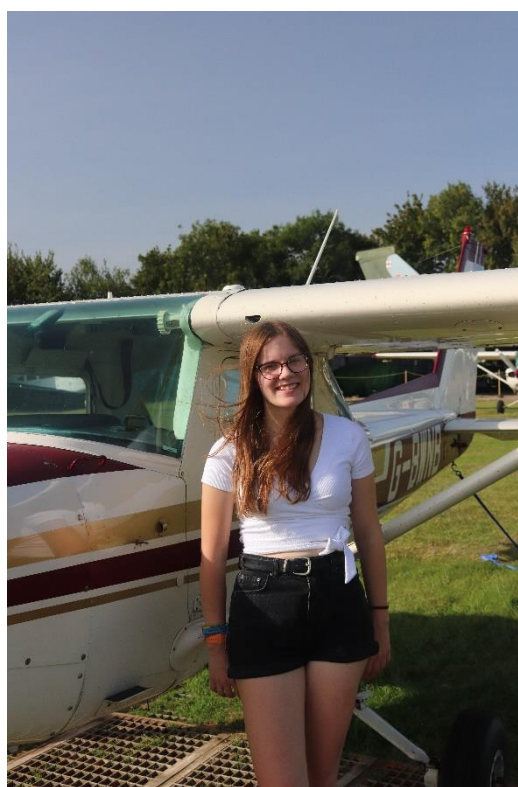
Completing these final flights was bittersweet; I was excited to nearly have completed my PPL but didn't want this fantastic summer of so much flying to end. However, after 45 hours of flying, nine theory exams, one radio exam and lots of route planning, it was the 15th of September and time for my skills test.

It's safe to say I was more nervous for this flight than any other, gliding and powered flights combined; however, I just kept reminding myself I had put the work in and was ready. The route was much more challenging than anticipated, adding to the nerves. I was asked to plan two legs, one from Wellesbourne – Wantage, meaning I had to transit Brize's zone (the first time I had done this), then a second leg from Wantage – Buckingham. A NOTAM on this leg meant I had to climb to 3,300ft due to a parachute drop zone. After 2 hours and 45 minutes of flying and a few questions on SEPs, I completed my skills test and was exhausted. However, when I learnt I had passed and was a PPL holder, I was so happy and relieved!

I now plan to build up a few hours before converting to a taildragger and getting my tug rating so I can tow at my gliding club during my university summers to build hours.

I once again want to thank the Honourable Company of Air Pilots and the BALPA Benevolent Fund for this amazing opportunity that has enabled my dream to become a reality, as well as everyone at South

Warwickshire Flying School. In particular, I wish to thank the principal, Rodney Galiffe, and my flying instructor, Lilly Butterworth, who have both been incredibly supportive throughout. I also can't thank my family and friends enough for being so understanding of the amount of time I have spent flying and studying over the summer, as well as having to change plans at the last minute due to the weather. It has honestly been a summer I will never forget!



Me next to the Cessna 152 G-BWNB which I flew for my QXC and skills test

