

Honourable Company of Air Pilots Gliding Scholarship

Sophie Smallwood - West Midland Gliding Club

My love of flying started when I was little on family holidays when the journey to the destination was almost as much fun as the holiday itself. At the age of 13, I joined the Air Cadets so I could learn more about aviation and pursue my growing interest in flying.

On turning 15, I was thrilled to undertake my first flight with the Air Cadets, at RAF Little Rissington and I discovered a passion for gliding, I was lucky to then also complete some powered flights later that year.

As the opportunities for flying and gliding are very popular and places are limited, I started researching other flying opportunities and this was when I discovered the scholarship offered by the Honourable Company of Air Pilots. The programme immediately stood out as an ideal opportunity. I completed the application and was delighted if a little nervous to be invited to attend an interview in London, at Air Pilots House.

I did a lot of research before the interview learning about the “Air Pilots” and the scholarship itself, and this really helped as I found the interview interesting and a great opportunity to talk about my aspirations for a career in aviation. The interviewers were really friendly, and this helped settle my nerves.

I was absolutely delighted to get the e mail letting me know I had been successful and subsequently to be offered a 5-day course at West Midlands Gliding club.

I arrived at the club on a sunny Sunday and was greeted by my instructor Sam as well as some of the team at West Midland who were very welcoming and showed me my accommodation and gave me a tour of the club. They helped me settle in as they could see I was a little apprehensive about being away from home.

By then end of the first day any homesickness had disappeared, and my passion for gliding was firmly established!



From start to finish, the course offered a truly hands on experience: I helped move gliders around the airfield, learned to handle their aero lung while the aircraft was in motion, and operated the winch-launch system to safely launch gliders via cable.

I also learnt about the daily inspections and safety procedures and always felt confident that the gliding was as safe as it was exciting.

Most importantly, I was awarded exceptional flight hours, during which I mastered take-offs and landings, and performed manoeuvres including loops, thermal soaring, and both negative and positive G-force pulls.

Over the course of the week the instructors gave me more opportunities to take control as well as more challenging flights and new skills such as recovering from stalling. I learnt about how the weather conditions effect flying or other environmental factors, for example we flew over an area of forest fires, and we had to adapt our course due to the smoke in the air.

Overall, the course was a fantastic way to learn about gliding and the skills you need as a pilot.

On top of the flying, I was lucky to be at the club during the solar eclipse and meteor shower, I am not sure anywhere in England could have given a better view of these amazing events!

To anyone who is considering applying for a Scholarship I would say go for it! It is hard work and the course pushed me out of my comfort zone in many ways, but it was also one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had. I am immensely grateful to have been given such a fantastic opportunity.

I would like to thank everyone at West Midlands Gliding Club, the Honourable Company of Air Pilots and my sponsor, the Red Arrows, for their support and for making this experience possible.

