

Aran Shinji

Virgin Atlantic Gliding Scholarship 2026

From a young age I've been set on becoming a commercial pilot, and this scholarship from the Honourable Company of Air Pilots, sponsored by Virgin Atlantic, was the next real step towards that goal. I'd actually applied for this scholarship the year before and wasn't successful. Rather than let that put me off, I used it as motivation, reapplied this year with a much clearer idea of what the selectors were looking for, and was thrilled to be offered a week-long residential course at Midland Gliding Club.

The week didn't start smoothly. I ended up at the wrong station, and rather than leave me to sort it out, staff from the club drove thirty minutes to come and collect me before I'd even set foot on the airfield. That kind of care carried through the whole week. I also struggled with motion sickness on my first day flying, which left me visibly behind the rest of the group, the staff drove me to the local pharmacy for tablets, and my instructor Sam was genuinely patient with me while I found my feet. I made a point of pushing through it rather than letting it define my week, and by the middle of the course I'd caught myself back up, flying full sessions alongside everyone else.

Flying itself was everything I'd hoped for and more. Across nine flights from Long Mynd, all in the K21 on winch launch, I worked through the fundamentals fast over the first two days: airspeed, yaw and banking, rudder control, and correcting stalls. My longest flight ran to 1 hour 22 minutes, riding the ridge and thermals at the Mynd, and by the end of the week I was ridge soaring, thermalling up to several thousand feet, and eventually achieved a ghosted solo.



In the cockpit of the K21, climbing above the Long Mynd ridge

On the ground I rotated through launch point operator, wing runner, and aircraft logger, getting a proper feel for how an airfield actually runs, not just what happens in the cockpit. By the end of the week I was doing my own launching and landing.



Evening on the Mynd, with the resident sheep grazing the airfield

Life off the airfield made the week what it was. My fellow scholars were fantastic, every evening we went out on mini hikes together, and even invented our own versions of tennis and catch to fill the time, which turned into some of my favourite memories of the week. Helen the chef cooked whatever we asked for, and pancakes with bacon most mornings set me up perfectly for a day of flying. I also spent time with several club members who took a real interest in my ambitions and were genuinely motivating about my route towards becoming a commercial pilot.

I want to thank the Honourable Company of Air Pilots and Virgin Atlantic for making this opportunity possible, and everyone at Midland Gliding Club, especially Sam, Helen, and every member who went

out of their way to help, teach, and welcome me. Coming back from a rejected application last year, and from a difficult first day this time round, to finish the week flying solo has given me real confidence that I'm on the right track towards the flight deck.

Looking back over the week, the progress from day to day is what stood out to me most. The first couple of days were about getting the basics right, airspeed control, yaw and banking, and rudder work, while I was still finding my feet with the motion sickness. Once that settled, the middle of the week moved quickly into circuit planning and landing practice, and by the last couple of days everything started to click: reading the ridge and thermals properly, holding height for far longer than I expected, and eventually being trusted to fly the whole circuit myself. Seeing that written down in my logbook each night, signed off flight by flight, made the progress feel real in a way that was hard to notice day to day in the moment.

I'd recommend this scholarship to anyone serious about a career in aviation, and I'd especially say to anyone who doesn't get it first time, as I didn't, to apply again. Getting knocked back last year was frustrating at the time, but it gave me a much better sense of what the panel wanted to see, and reapplying with that experience behind me made all the difference. The same goes for the week itself: my first day was genuinely tough, but sticking with it and asking for help when I needed it meant I left the course having achieved more than I thought possible when I arrived. That's the biggest thing I'm taking forward into the rest of my training, that persistence through a rough start is worth far more than getting everything right immediately.