

# BALPA Eric Lane-Burslem Scholarship

*Basel Hammond*

*'Think like a bird'*



I have never been able to regard aeroplanes as inanimate objects - they portray character through their controls, and beauty (or ugliness) through their forms. I have also never had a want to do anything other than flying, and to become a professional pilot. This summer was going to be the one where I made this a reality. I had just graduated from university with a BSc in Physics with Astrophysics and was ready to build on my previous 5 and 12 hour scholarships to complete my PPL at my 'home' airfield - Booker. Despite being 19 hours in already, I still acknowledged that I must not get complacent. A challenging summer beckoned. But I kept on reminding myself - the reward was to be enormous!

I had applied for the Honourable Company of Air Pilots Scholarship back in 2022 and was not successful, having reached the interview stages. I reapplied in 2025 having gained valuable aviation experience through my airfield operations job, the University Air Squadron, and won two Air League flying scholarships in that time. The day after the interview I went into uni labs wondering how I'd done this time - and came out a PPL scholarship winner.

I left York early to begin the training in June, virtually as soon as my Relativity/Cosmology exam was done. Although I was on the C152 at the time, my instructor recommended a





switch to the PA-28 for the programme given its positive stability for long cross country legs, more room, and being around 10kts faster than the former. After an hour 'refresher,' which included this Pa-28 conversion, I was off doing my solo local area familiarisation on a completely new type. Things were progressing well for the first week! I aimed to get my first two exams done in time to

ensure I balanced out the flying, and this first week of my programme set the pace and tone I believed was required for achieving my PPL to a high standard. I ensured that my flights were all 'armchair flown'; checks learned and made fluid; radio calls rehearsed. Building on feedback is an important quality to have when undertaking flying training, because it is effectively making you a safer pilot.

The legendary test pilot Eric Winkle Brown said that flying takes your life over - and I got a real taste of that. I felt tremendously privileged to be able to fly with such continuity, helped by the good weather. The former is what you require to make the best forward progress this early in your flying career. But I recall sitting through periods of bad weather



longing to be in the air again - even if it was for just days at a time. I used this extra time to study for the more in-depth subjects (Navigation and Meteorology), aiming to sit an exam every 10 days or so. Having come fresh out of university, I had always intended to maintain that academic momentum and transfer it to the 9 PPL theory exams. I got this 10 day gap down to just a few days during the last week of my training.



With both those exams out of the way, I was then able to begin my first two hour-long solo navigation exercises. These were obviously flown dual first, and my instructor Richard ensured that I was working hard throughout. I took on the responsibility of talking to various ATSUs (Air Traffic Services Unit) and asking for a basic service - which requires near-perfect radio telephony - but with the reward of increased situational awareness. During navigation exercises, there is nothing more rewarding than arriving over your turning point on track and on time! However, things do not always go that way and mistakes do happen - and it was quite exciting trying to rectify these.



Next came radio navigation. Even though VORs and NDBs are being slowly phased out, I am grateful that this is on the syllabus, as they still offer 'redundancies' to your navigation plan if all else fails. The dual qualifying cross-country came next, and once again Richard made sure I was working hard and not just letting the aeroplane fly me. In fact, he was comfortable enough to get his sandwich out and start eating, so that was reassuring! It was my first real taste of long endurance flying. With that complete, I was cleared for the biggest and most exciting flight of the scholarship - the solo qualifying cross country.

The route flown was Booker-Kemble-Wellesbourne Mountford-Booker. After several days of bad weather, and countless unused 'PLOGs' I was rewarded with a cloudless sky. After a quick checkout with Richard, I was off. The views over the west countryside were beautiful, and this was what flying was all about. I found it great fun. Kemble was incredibly busy once



I arrived, but I was delighted to land and inform my family and Richard that I'd made it. I took on what I learned from this leg and flew to Wellesbourne with increased confidence. As I arrived, I sideslipped in with some height to knock off, and the person in the tower was quite impressed. He told me to 'remember this day forever' - and I certainly would. Now, I've been told the big 'C' under the tower indicates where the cake is, so I could not help it on this wonderful

afternoon. I had really flown myself here, on my own and I sat back on my chair, taking it all in, my aeroplane basking out on the lawn in the distance. I set off for a peaceful flight back to a surprisingly quiet Booker. Before I'd even stepped off the wing I was greeted by Richard

and my family. It hadn't sunk in then - but I was almost a pilot. Only the skills test loomed ahead.

With my final exam (aircraft general knowledge) done, it took days before I got a window of good weather. I felt comfortable going into it, despite being on the minimum 45 hours. Part of this is knowing the aircraft and its systems inside out, and also because your confidence naturally builds in the air.

The best compliment I got was 'you actually use the rudder' and 'I'm going to set a challenging diversion as you've earned it.' After a long 2 hours of flying, I brought Booker's flagship, G-SIXT back in. As I backtracked RWY 24, the reassuring words came...

'You've passed'

I was now a pilot - the dreams of that 4 year old looking up at the Spitfires and Mustangs screaming overhead were now a reality. A love affair with flight, as expressed through every brushstroke of my aviation paintings, had been fulfilled.

I am now striving to reach a commercial flying career, and the completion of my PPL through the Honourable Company of Air Pilots has made this a very realistic ambition. It has added serious momentum to that, and undertaking this intensive course taught me that I could rise and meet the challenges of flying. I have tremendous gratitude for them and also to BALPA, who have funded my scholarship in the name of their founder - Eric Lane-Burslem. Eric's story is one that all aspiring pilots can be inspired by; the desire to make flying safer. Finally, to my instructor Richard, who I have built a great relationship with over the scholarship. It was a delight to be able to head to White Waltham after the skills test, have a beer together, and watch the flying display.

Next up, my tailwheel conversion, and hour building up North when I start my new job with BAe Systems in January.

The sky's the limit! So, think like a bird.  
B.H

