

—HCAP - AFG Gliding Scholarship 2026 - Tom Yorke-Dunne—

“Gliding is the purest form of flying”.

You may have heard this phrase being thrown around by people you have talked to about the sport - I, myself, have heard this countless times in the past from almost anyone who has spent more than an hour airborne in a glider.

It wasn't until I was awarded with an Honourable Company of Air Pilots Gliding Scholarship that I realised that these people really meant it! The sheer thrill of soaring at 5,000 feet , the elegance of a soft landing, and the feeling that it is just your instincts (as well as the instructors!) and the environment around you that determines what happens next really makes you feel alive.

My name is Tom, and in 2026 I was lucky enough to be selected by HCAP to attend a week long gliding course, sponsored by the Aviation Focus Group (AFG).

The scholarship's aim was to facilitate the learning of basic handling of a glider, coordinated controls, thermal, wave and ridge soaring, as well as launches, circuits and landings, whilst also getting stuck in with ground operations, for example operating a retrieve winch or attaching the cable for launch, providing unmatched hands on experience in the gliding community.

My luck grew again when I found out that there was availability to do it at Midlands Gliding Club on the Long Mynd!

As a young aviation enthusiast I had watched countless videos of the ridge soaring gliders on the Mynd, being stunned with the courage of the pilots who did bungee launches and were dropped into the picturesque valley, out of sight before soaring high above again.

I was full of anticipation and nervous energy in the build up to my scholarship as I had seen the vast landscapes surrounding the hilltop airfield, and had heard of the challenging conditions that come with such an extreme location for an airfield.



Above: A northern - facing view of the stunning airfield

My arrival + first evening

I arrived early on Sunday, the day before my scholarship started, after a long journey up from Cornwall. It was an adventure to find and drive up the Mynd, I had to go up in second gear the whole way it was such a climb! Once I had got up the hillside track (which had incredible views!) I reached the airfield and was given a warm welcome by the

reception staff, being shown my accommodation and into the cafe.

As soon as I had unloaded my bags I was taken straight onto the airfield and over to the launch point, where I became instantly impressed by the members' efficiency in getting gliders airborne.

Within a few minutes I was introduced to my instructor for the week, Sam, who didn't miss a beat and taught me how to drive the airfield buggies and to tow gliders safely to and from their desired positions.

Almost at once (even though I had never met anyone before) I felt part of the team and felt completely comfortable and trusted with the responsibility of wing running or attaching cables.

Previously, I had only had 5 or 6 launches in a Viking T1 glider from RAF Air Cadets, and have gained experience as a Flight Staff Cadet at 626 VGS with ground operations, but I was curious to see how differently a civilian gliding club operated compared to military-run operations.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that all of the staff and members were incredibly organised, efficient and keen.

Less than an hour after I had arrived, I was given my first flight of the week in a K-13, with a lovely instructor Clive. In the flight he tested my knowledge of the principles of gliding, and refreshed my coordinated control techniques.

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Soon after, I met with the rest of my course and got to know them well extremely quickly, as well as talking to many of the members who shared great advice and their stories of gliding.

In the evening we had a great dinner, provided by Helen, the cafe's cook, and were given our BGA student manuals, which we all frantically tried to read through to get the upper hand!

Given the fact we had amazing weather and were in an incredible location, I, along with the 7 other course students, spent the rest of our evening outside playing football and exploring the Mynd.



What a day on the Mynd looks like:

Fortunately, because we had all got settled in the day before, we hit the ground running on Monday, starting our training early in the morning. In order to get the most out of each day, a schedule was put in place:

Each morning we woke up reasonably early (around 7am) in our comfy rooms, had warm showers and got all of our kit (especially suncream) ready for the day ahead. Here I would get up slightly earlier so I had time to read a few sections of my BGA manual and make notes, which I would highly recommend as it gave me the theory behind the practical skills I would learn later in the day.

At around 8 o'clock Sam and David (our other instructor) would take us out to the hangar to unload the aircraft.

Personally, this is one of the most memorable experiences of the course as it was an art form to be able to get them all out without hitting

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anything! Once you had created a pattern, it was almost like performing a dance! By the end of the week, my fellow students and I were virtually able to unpack and repack the hangar by ourselves, which gave us massive



Once we got the aircraft out onto the apron, the staff would carry out Daily Inspections and positive control checks, which I would help out with.



confidence as a team and individually.



After our morning workout of DI's and hangar help, we would all rush back into the cafe for a hearty breakfast, made brilliantly by Helen.

Almost every morning (once I discovered I could customise my order) I had bacon and maple syrup American style pancakes.

I will never forget the warm and encouraging feeling I felt every morning from the buzz of excited novice pilots chatting to our instructors and talking about what we were going to work on in the air that day, as well ordering lunch and dinner with Helen for the day.

As soon as our morning briefing had been completed (which would outline the day's wind direction - which would determine the runway in use - the weather forecast, circuit direction and any outstanding cautions on the airfield), we would push the gliders out to the launch point to begin flying operations.

The gliders we used throughout the week were K-21 and K-13 gliders, aircraft with incredibly forgiving control surfaces and performance levels

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that provide the stability needed for students to learn the essential skills within gliding.



Throughout the week I would set goals for myself and with Sam for what areas I wanted to improve in. Whether that be primarily trimming for fully controlled straight and level flight, perfecting my coordinated turns, or later on in the week more advanced things like my landing technique and judging overshoot and undershoot in order to counter them with the correct airbrake setting, I always had something to work towards and felt completely supported by Sam to achieve these goals.

For example, after every flight we would go over the top 3 or so areas for improvement to consider for the next flight as well as talking about the inputs needed to stop bad habits.

As I mentioned before, gliding is a team sport, so when we were not in the air, we all had to work in coordination to get the aircraft in the air.

Whether that be learning to operate the retrieve winch, towing gliders with the buggies (which was my favourite), attaching the cable, maneuvering aircraft, running the wing, signalling, log taking or being the launch point supervisor, everyone had a job to do.

This sense of purpose throughout the day definitely contributed to our development as we all understood each role down to a tee and therefore could operate much more safely as a result of knowing what looked out of the ordinary.

After gliding until around 18:30 every evening, we packed up the hangar, had more delicious food together at the large dining table, and filled in our logbooks for the day.

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This was a highlight for me as we could all visibly see our progression by jotting down pros and cons of the day and compared our flight times in order to give everyone a fair chance to fly and launch.

We also used our evenings to make use of the great facilities MGC has to offer, solidifying our skills in the glider simulator and gaining as many bits of advice and opportunities for gliding from the instructors and members present.

My friends and I spent numerous hours with David diving into the advanced aerodynamics of an aerofoil, how G-Forces impact stall speed and symptoms of a stall.

Any spare time we had was spent exploring the wonders of the Mynd, with all 8 of us spending 2 consecutive nights out on the trig point stargazing in meteor showers for hours, building our friendships and allowing us to reflect on the techniques learnt each day.



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Flying operations and results

I was able to rack up 24 launches and around 5 hours of gliding at the club, and each flight could be tailored to our individual needs, for example on one day I was able to get an hour long soaring flight as there was sufficient lift and good conditions, but also 3 other launches to practice my circuit planning and execution.

At some points, the launch practice, circuit positioning and planning as well as landing were the priority, as we were all pushing to a solo standard, and this is the baseline of a solo flight. On the other hand, if the conditions were in our favour, Sam wouldn't hesitate to go searching for thermals and practicing our soaring techniques.

By the end of the week, after just 5 days of flying, I was able to complete a ghosted solo circuit, with my instructor making no input or helping with planning at all, along with almost all of my fellow course students, which was a massive achievement for me.

The course had boosted my passion so much so that I stayed for another two days, eager to progress my circuit planning skills and agility for when runways and circuit directions changed, testing myself whilst the lessons learnt in the week were fresh in my head.

Things I have learnt from the scholarship:

One thing I will remember Sam for was his instinct to detect a strong, building thermal from a mile away! He told me that once he's in the sky, it's like the inner bird in him awakens and the way he can feel each characteristic of a thermal surge or how he feels the way the glider reacts to them really showcased that, and inspired me massively!

He taught me to trust your instincts, believe in what you know, and to never hesitate in your decisions. He also taught me that self-doubt is one of a pilot's biggest enemies to progressing, so never allow it to grow as it hinders confidence in the sky. He taught me all of this in the context of

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flying, but it has no doubt been some of the best life advice I've been given!

Another concept that grew on me here, which I have mentioned briefly, is the power of teamwork. When it comes to gliding (especially after a long day on the airfield and still having to pack the hangar) the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts.

How my scholarship will help me in the future:

As a result of my progression on my HCAP scholarship, I have more experience in the foundational skills of gliding. This has resulted in the possibility of advancing at a faster rate to solo standard, silver wings.

I also now feel much more confident in my aptitude to perform under pressure and therefore ready to apply for the Air Cadet Pilot Scheme in the future, which could kickstart my career aspirations of joining the RAF as aircrew.

Tips for a HCAP Gliding Scholarship

- The first thing I will say is apply. If you are hesitant but keen, apply. If a gliding scholarship is completely out of your comfort zone, apply. Just do it! There is nothing to lose, and a heck of a lot to gain.
- Ask as many questions as you can. Honestly! If something pops into your mind, ask a staff member or instructor. I strongly believe that this was one of the reasons I felt I progressed so much.
- Don't be afraid to ask/push for more. On several occasions in flight when I felt like I was capable of doing a little more than what was expected, I asked Sam, and he always said yes. Whether that be a more advanced maneuver or pushing away from the airfield to search for better thermals, just ask! The worst they can say is no.
- Read up on the BGA student manual in the morning before operations start. This is obviously optional, but it gave me more

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confidence when talking through procedures in the air as I could visualise techniques I had read.

- Order the bacon pancakes! Enough said there!
- Make time to reflect. I felt more aware of my progression in communication, spatial awareness and composure under pressure when I took a minute or two to share it with others or write it down in the evening.
- Always keep yourself busy! You will not gain anything from sitting around while others run the cable or move gliders - get stuck in!
- Fly with different instructors. I was lucky to spend my 2 extra days with 3 different instructors, and it gave me different perspectives on many skills that hadn't crossed my mind!

Conclusion

I would like to finish my report by showing my enormous appreciation to both AFG for benevolently sponsoring my incredible gliding scholarship, and to the Honourable Company of Air Pilots for creating, planning and orchestrating such opportunities for people like me to enjoy. I was kept in the loop throughout the application, interview and selection process by the lovely Angie, who made what could have been quite a stressful and intimidating procedure simple and easy to follow.

I cannot thank everyone within both organisations enough for the work and support put into facilitating such an immersive course that acts as a springboard into the world of aviation and builds skills that extend beyond gliding and flying.

I would also like to thank all of the staff at Midlands Gliding Club for providing the highest level of instruction and subject knowledge I have ever experienced as well as being very warm and accommodating.

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I cannot recommend this scholarship to anyone interested in aviation enough, whether you are a total beginner or someone with experience, this is an unmissable opportunity!



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