



In late April of 2023 I travelled up to London, where my interview for a HCAP gliding scholarship was to take place. As I entered the very grand Air Pilots House, I was excited, yet a little nervous as this was an opportunity I was determined to make the most of. I was immediately at ease, however, after meeting my very friendly interviewers, who had both done the scholarship before. They were engaging, interesting and full of advice, so stepping back out into the street afterwards, I felt inspired and confident about the experience.

The fantastic news that I had been offered a scholarship came a week later. I was thrilled!

I arrived at the Derbyshire and Lancashire Gliding club on a blustery afternoon at the end of July. The very first sight I saw as we drove along the small lane towards the airfield was a glider shining in the sun as it made its approach.

After meeting my companions for the week, Adam, David, Kai, Charlie and Antoni, we were shown around the club – a very cosy place with a lot of character. After a few games of pool, we enjoyed an amazing roast dinner provided by John and Sylvia (who throughout the week cooked some of the nicest food I had ever tasted).

On the first morning, the cloud base was so low you could reach up and grab it. So unfortunately flying was off for the day. We needn't have worried, however, as one of the most exciting parts of the course (second to the actual flying) did not rely on good weather – learning to drive the Massey Ferguson tractors! We were given a brief on how to start and operate the brilliant machines by our instructor Pete, who told us of the importance of driving them along the perimeter track when going to retrieve gliders, to avoid getting in the way of others landing.



Later, Pete made the most of the poor weather by doing some theory with us, covering interesting topics such as aerodynamics (including stalls).

On the second day, the weather improved. Not wasting a minute, gliders were being manoeuvred out of the hanger (a delicate jigsaw puzzle which the other club members seemed very well-practised at). Pete demonstrated to our group how to conduct a daily inspection of the Puchacz glider we would be flying, before we towed it up to the south-westerly-facing launch point.

I will never forget my first glider flight.

After completing all the pre-flight checks and brief, our glider was attached to the cable, the winch driver took up the slack, then the call 'all out' was made. The acceleration was even more



exhilarating than I had expected – we were airborne in a matter of seconds. We climbed to 600ft at an impressive rate, then detached from the cable. We spent over an hour hill soaring the ridge lift from the airfield's west side. Pete wasted no time in the air, getting me to practise coordinating turns, controlling speed, using the trim and using thermals to climb – I was pleasantly surprised at how much hands-on flying I got to do during my first flight. After we landed, tractor at the ready, I felt I had just had one of the best experiences of my life.

Though we were unlucky with the weather again the next day, we still learned a lot – theory on navigation and weather were particularly interesting, aided by hot chocolate. We also got to use the club's simulator to learn the layout of the local landmarks, also practising the considerations one must make for an off-field landing.

The remaining two days of the course were uninterrupted by weather, so we were thankfully able to rack up many more flights of varying length (for me, between 4 minutes and 40 minutes). I practised different key skills including launching, use of airbrakes, stalls and recovery attitudes, gaining useful feedback and advice from Pete. On my seventh and final flight, on Friday afternoon, I felt everything I had learned in the air that week came together. We detached from the cable at 1300ft, then found some fairly powerful thermals under some developing clouds, which we used to climb a further 700ft to 2000ft – a brilliant view of the Peak District! I got to fly the whole takeoff and landing also, feeling much more confident with the approach than I did at the beginning of the week.

It was not just the flying which made the week brilliant, but also getting to help run the daily operations of the gliding club. There was rarely a moment on the ground where I wasn't busy driving the retrieval tractors, running with the wing on the launch, or attaching gliders to the winch.

I would like to thank everyone at Derbyshire and Lancashire Gliding Club for making everything run as smoothly as it did. In particular, to my instructor Pete, from who I learned a lot, and also Sylvia and John who were very welcoming and made incredible meals. Most of all, thank you to the Honourable Company of Air Pilots for granting me this amazing experience which has further inspired me to pursue a career as a pilot.

Rafa Oakes



*Photo by David R.*



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