

Sir Sefton Brancker Scholarship 2025

Matthew Thomas

What a journey it has been. I often think back to all those moments in my life when I have had to clamber over obstacles that have been thrown at me, wondering whether I would actually fulfill my life ambition of working towards a career as a professional pilot. I think back to all those New Years that I have vowed to myself to make this 'the year'; the one whereby I would actually achieve my target of obtaining a Private Pilot Licence and climb the first rung of the commercial ladder. I think back to all those tough shifts at work wondering as to when I may actually get back behind the flight controls again. I think back to all those setbacks that I have had over the years. I think back to all those times that I have looked up at the skies as a child (and as an adult too!) hoping to one day be the person up above inspiring both those onboard and those watching in awe from down below. I think back to all those moments when I had my doubts as to whether I could make it happen. I think back to all the energy, the effort and support it took to get across the line. And now, thanks to the Sir Sefton Brancker Scholarship of the Honourable Company of Air Pilots, I think and look forward to a future of inspiring others and flying way up above, surfing the skies and the clouds for the years to come.

If there is one key takeaway with regards to this report, it is that I hope it inspires others to take the leap, and more importantly, to never give up!



A bit about me: I grew up in the Sussex countryside surrounded by farmfields and the odd tractor here and there. To my fortune, amongst the haybails and woods, we used to live next to a decommissioned WWII airfield, and with the occasional commemorative airshow, from a young age I was hooked by these strange flying machines rocketing low overhead.

Fast forward ten years, we re-located to a town on the South Coast, and having got my GCSEs out of the way, I joined a local Air Training Corps Squadron whereby I had my first Air Experience Flight at the age of 18. Having secured a place at University studying Modern Languages with Management (not your every day pilot Degree), I was extremely lucky to join the East Midlands Universities Air Squadron. Admittedly I spent more time climbing walls and completing general Adventurous Training expeditions than flying, but I had an incredible time and met a fantastic group of individuals. During my Year Abroad in Mexico City, and spending countless nights with my partner watching the aircraft make their final approaches into the Aeropuerto Internacional de la Ciudad de México (Benito Juárez), I knew that the dream was very much still alive. Back in the UK, and having graduated, it was a privilege to be awarded an Air League 12 hour Flying Scholarship which was a great insight into civil aviation. I had also secured my first full time role as a Police Officer, hoping to fund my flying career on the side. Unsuccessful in my first application with HCAP, and with the pandemic hitting during my first year policing the London streets, amongst other life challenges, I had to keep postponing this ambition for the following three years. Fully aware that commercial aviation had shut its doors temporarily, I briefly averted my attention back to military flying, passing the Army Air Corps (AAC) Flying Grading in 2022. Bar one hour in a PA28 way back when, all my flying thus far has depended on military support or scholarships as I have never had the financial resources to fund my PPL, let alone a career in commercial aviation.

With the pandemic still affecting the commercial industry, I went slightly off piste and began my British Army Officer training at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, hoping to join the AAC (an outstanding regiment consisting of incredible individuals) and with the further long term plan of transferring to commercial aviation down the line. This was short-lived however, as whilst I was on course, I had a developing situation at home which had to take precedence, and I had to take the difficult decision of leaving the commissioning course. I am not one for giving up, and it was very hard to navigate at the time, feeling as though my flying window had finally closed. As a firm believer of everything happens for a reason, I set out to get my foot back into the world of work, trying to make a positive out of a very challenging time; going from cloud nine of passing the grading to cloud zero in the space of a few months and starting back from where I had left off: Not flying. What is more, alongside my work, I continued applying multiple times to an array of Cadetships to no avail.

With the situation at home now stable, and having got my act back together so to say, I could see that the full recovery of commercial aviation was not too far around the corner. Thus, I considered my options and deemed that rejoining the police as a full time Emergency Response Officer in London was the most appropriate for my long term career ambitions. I decided to get back on track with my flying ambition and began to sit my PPL theory exams back in the autumn of 2024, taking matters into my own hands in order to progress. I applied for the 2025 Honourable Company of Air Pilots' PPL scholarship and continued to study and sit my theory exams. Having progressed through the application process, I was fortunate enough to be invited to the interview stage whereby I met multiple HCAP members as well as fellow applicants. I thoroughly enjoyed the day, although it would be a lie to say that I wasn't nervous. I definitely was, as the opportunity meant so much to me. Having applied to many cadetships previously, and getting to multifarious stages of their respective application processes without any success, it had felt as though my journey to the cockpit had been met by a wall up until this point. Despite all my efforts in the cadetships, I had remained in the same place as before. Having sat the interview, I was over the moon and truly honoured to be called a few days later to be informed of the life-changing news. It honestly was one of the most

memorable days of my life. Not only had this given me the confidence to continue my fight to achieve a place in the flight deck one day, but it had also removed a financial barrier to entering commercial aviation, as well as opening up doors to meet aviators from all walks of life who have had their own respective journeys, to learn from them and take on board their advice and tips.

The challenge was now on. I wanted to make: HCAP, my mentor Chris Barrott (who was extremely supportive throughout), as well as my partner and family proud. I studied to and from work, and in any spare moment that I had. Having completed all of the nine theory exams before the scholarship began also lifted a great weight off my shoulders. I began in May at Brighton City Airport (Shoreham) flying with my instructor Mark Osborne from Shoreham Aviation in a Cessna 152. Fitting in my flying around shift patterns as a Police Officer was challenging at times to say the least, and the course became my life for a good few months. Moreover, June proved to be a complete write off due to the coastal weather keeping us firmly on the ground which added a slight time pressure further down the line. That said, I used the down time to study for the FRTOL and perfect what I had learnt thus far by armchair flying at home. As part of the Scholarship, I was also invited to several Young Air Pilots events throughout the summer which were brilliant, and it was awesome to meet fellow scholars as well as YAP members/guests who were at the other end of the journey, operating in a commercial flight deck.



(Taxiing back after a flight early on in the syllabus)



(A land-away at Goodwood in the lead up to the QXC)

With the weather improving in July, I was able to catch up on the lost flying days (June), sometimes flying three sorties in a day. I achieved my first solo in July, shortly followed by my first solo navigation and then passing the FRTOL in August. Completing my QXC also in August, I was now able to prepare for the Skills Test mock. Mother Nature is a beast when it comes to flying, and one of the lessons I learnt above all was that when you least expect to fly, you will; and that when you most expect to fly, you won't! In short, it is extremely important to be flexible and to go with the flow as you never know what is waiting around the corner when it comes to aviation. Similarly, every flight is a new experience, and I am a firm believer that the concept of a 'perfect flight' is some mythical creature that aviators worldwide are still yet to discover, and that every day in aviation, be it: in the pre-flight, when the brakes are off, up in the air, or back on terra firma, one can learn something new to improve one's own abilities. And that's what makes it so awesome in my opinion. Every flight has its own little, or sometimes quite big, challenge!



(Returning on the final leg of the QXC back from Lydd to Shoreham)

Hence, when I reached my sixth attempt to complete the Skills Test mock due to the previous five being cancelled for multifarious reasons ranging from adverse weather to instructor availability, I was very much ready to get it done and give it a good go. Despite three weeks of no flying, it went very well and with six days remaining before the scholarship deadline, I managed to pass my Skills Test first time. It was genuinely the most enjoyable flight of the whole syllabus, and I relished the opportunity to show the examiner everything that I had learnt on the course. The emotions I felt when I got the fantastic news cannot be put into words. I was speechless and so chuffed. Initially, when my family asked, I compared the Skills Test to putting the pieces of a puzzle together. But with the power of time and hindsight, I can firmly agree with one of the instructors that I had during the course who turned to me mid-flight and said that 'flying is not a sport, it is an art'. This stuck with me throughout the PPL and became more prevalent in the final Skills Test, whereby I would take this adage even further (and probably thanks to my time in Mexico eight years

ago where I was exposed to an array of dance styles from Cumbia, Bachata to Salsa; and no, I am still firmly a ‘dad dancer’) by saying that it is comparable to a great dance. You plan a routine, practice the routine, but in the real performance, timings change, and other variables change, and you have to be dynamic and react, gliding across the sky in synchronization with your two winged flying partner.



(Passing my PPL Skills Test)

The present: I have since converted from the Cessna 152 onto the PA28, allowing me to share my love of flying with my partner, family and friends, most of whom have never set foot in a light aircraft, and also pre-empting an upcoming night rating over the next few months followed by hour building. I have also already got my teeth stuck into the ATPL books to hopefully commence those exams in the spring 2026, to keep the momentum going and continue progressing. This scholarship has truly been life-changing, has given me the confidence and drive to make what I thought was unachievable due to the financial implications often associated with commercial aviation, a strong possibility. I cannot express my gratitude enough to the Honourable Company of Air Pilots, and neither to: the interview and selection panel, my mentor Chris Barrott, other HCAP members who have offered their support along the way, my instructor Mark Osborne, the Ops team and other instructors at Shoreham Aviation and the sponsors alike, including Pooleys. I would also like to thank my partner Jenifer and family for all their support too.



(A photo taken by my partner having taken her up for a flight in the PA28 shortly after receiving my licence)

I appreciate that I have been very lucky in my experiences thus far, and more so with this year's PPL scholarship. And I am also fully aware that I am still in the early stages of a long climb up the mountain that is *the modular route*, and that for those who read this, they may have an entirely different journey; but I hope that this serves as an example to someone as not to give up, and to keep that fire and desire to fly burning inside. It doesn't matter who you are, your upbringing, your decisions in life, what stage of life you're at, or where you're from, if you really want to make it happen, go out there and keep fighting until it does.