



Captain Gavin Shaw Scholarship

Sophie Wonnacott

2026

Hi, my name is Sophie and achieving my Private Pilot's Licence through the Captain Gavin Shaw PPL Scholarship has been a dream come true. I have had the most amazing and rewarding summer and I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to turn something I once only dreamed about into a reality.



My love and passion for aviation began at a very young age. I remember sitting upstairs in IKEA aged 8 years old watching aircraft take off and land from Belfast City Airport. Although I loved watching the planes, I never imagined that one day I would be the person flying one.

My first ever flight was a 30-minute flight in a C42 microlight at my local flying club in Newtownards, the Ulster Flying Club (UFC) on 31st March 2024. I absolutely loved every minute of it and the experience confirmed becoming a pilot was something that I wanted to pursue. Before investing further in my training, I obtained my Class 1 medical certificate.

Over the following two years, I built up 18 hours of flying experience across the C42, C152, C172 and SportsCruiser aircrafts. I funded this by working two jobs alongside school while completing my A Levels. UFC awarded me with the Caroline Mawhinney Bursary which also helped me fund flying hours. I have received valuable support from the UFC family.



Photo before my first flight in a microlight.

Alongside flying, I began working towards the PPL exams. With the support of the EasyPPL British Women's Pilots Association Scholarship, I passed Air Law, Meteorology and Human Performance and Limitations. I also tried to make the most of every opportunity to become more involved in aviation. I volunteered at UFC Open Days and joined the Health and Safety Committee, as well as attending Elevate(Her) and Air League webinars, which gave me the opportunity to learn from others across the aviation industry. The Honourable Company of Air Pilots invited me to a TUI workshop in 2025 which taught me more about TUI, application processes and I met other people with the same

aspirations as me. I also had the opportunity to have a A320 simulator lesson at AlphaTech with Paul Savage in Newtownards which I absolutely loved.

I initially applied for the PPL Scholarship in 2025 and reached the interview stage, but unfortunately, I was unsuccessful. Although this was disappointing, I was determined to continue working towards my goal. That same year, I was awarded the Honourable Company of Air Pilots' Gliding Scholarship and I did this with the team at Lasham Gliding Society. I learned a huge amount from the experience and little did I know that the skills and confidence I developed through gliding would help prepare me for the following year.

I decided to reapply for the 2026 PPL Scholarship and once again I reached the interview stage. I was driving home from university when I received a phone call from Tilly, one of my interviewers, with the incredible news that I had been awarded the scholarship. I was absolutely amazed!

At the beginning of June, I moved from Northern Ireland to Scotland to complete my PPL at ACS Flight Training at Perth Airport. I loved spending each day at the airport, studying, planning flights and of course flying! I was able to learn quickly and before I knew it, I was flying solo on 14th June.



Photo after my first solo flight at Perth Airport.

I had six exams left to complete which were Navigation, Communications, Principles of Flight, Flight Planning, Aircraft General Knowledge and Operational Procedures. So, I worked my way through them, sitting one each week alongside my flying. I also completed my FROTL exam, which I think I was probably the most nervous about as it is the only one I had to complete in person.

Next came my favourite part of the training: navigation. I found it incredibly satisfying to plan a route, calculate my headings and timings and then arrive at exactly where I intended to be, at the time I planned. Navigation also gave me the opportunity to see some of Scotland's spectacular scenery for the first time and from the air! I progressed onto solo navigation flights and before I knew it, I was completing my qualifying cross-country flight of 150nm, my route was Perth – Cumbernauld – Dundee – Perth. The weather was perfect and it was an incredibly enjoyable flight which taught me a lot including, communicating with different air traffic controls, navigation, time management and preparation.



Photos from my navigation flights.



As part of my navigation training, I also learned how to use radio navigation aids, including VORs (VHF Omnidirectional Range), to establish position fixes and track towards a known VOR. I also learned how to deal with a range of emergencies that could occur. I particularly enjoyed the general handling exercises, including stalls and steep turns. Initially, I found it challenging to maintain altitude during a steep turn to the right, but with practice this became a lot better. I also really enjoyed instrument flying and found these exercises particularly valuable in developing my understanding of the aircraft's instruments and avionics.

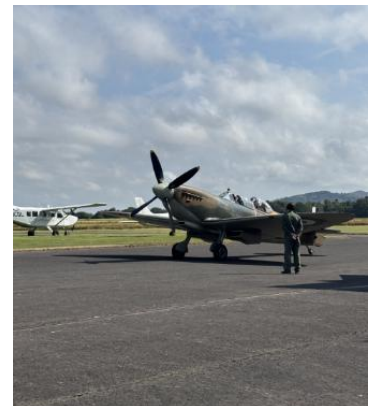
Eventually, it was time for my mock skills test after which I was recommended for my real skills test. My test took place on 15th August. The weather was not ideal for flying in the morning, but thankfully it improved during the afternoon, just in time for the big test. During the test, I completed the navigation exercise, a diversion, radio navigation, stalls, a simulated engine failure and forced landing before returning to Perth Airport. On the way back, I was asked questions about how I would



Photo after my skills test

respond to different emergency situations. Once back at the airfield, I completed a normal circuit, a flapless circuit and a glide approach. After parking the aircraft, my examiner turned to me and told me that I passed. I was absolutely over the moon and incredibly relieved that all the hard work had paid off. After everything that had led up to that moment, finally hearing those words is something I will never forget.

Aswell as achieving the PPL I have had other memorable experiences at Perth Airport. It was inspirational to see (and hear!) the Spitfire aircraft for the first time. The people at the Scottish Aero Club were very welcoming and I was able to get involved with their Open Day, showing children around aircraft and helping with refreshments. I got the opportunity to be a passenger for a flight in both an RV6 and RV9 aircraft which I really loved.



To anyone considering applying for this scholarship, I would wholeheartedly encourage you to apply. Make the most of every opportunity and most importantly, enjoy the journey. There will be challenging days, whether that is studying for exams, dealing with difficult weather or struggling with an exercise. However, every setback is an opportunity to learn, improve and become a better pilot.

I would like to say a massive thank you to everyone at ACS Flight Training for making my time in Scotland so memorable. Everyone was incredibly welcoming and supportive, from the team at Air Traffic Control to ground crew and everyone at the Scottish Aero Club. I am especially grateful to my instructors, Alexandra Talbot, Jamie Flynn, Matthew Hood and the CFI Benjamin Penner for their guidance, patience and encouragement throughout my training. They were always willing to answer my many questions and helped me develop both my flying skills and confidence.

I would like to say a huge thank you to the Honourable Company of Air Pilots for making the application process so supportive and most importantly for giving me this life changing opportunity. I am extremely grateful to Sorcha Didier and Conor Keeling, who mentored me throughout the application and interview process and to my scholarship buddy and mentor, Ciarnán Haverty, who was always there whenever I needed advice, encouragement or support.

Most importantly, I would not have been able to achieve my PPL without the generosity of Captain Gavin Shaw. It has been a privilege to get to know him, his wife Judith and their dog Becka and I am incredibly grateful for their support and belief in me.

Looking back, my PPL journey has taught me so much, not only about flying but also about life skills such as perseverance, resilience, confidence and the importance of making the most of every opportunity. What started with me watching aircraft from upstairs in IKEA has led to me sitting in the cockpit and becoming a qualified pilot. I am very grateful to my family and friends for supporting and believing in me from day one.

Looking ahead, I am excited to build up my hours and take my family for a flight. I will also continue to apply to airline cadetships while studying Geography at Queens University, Belfast and volunteering at UFC. I am incredibly grateful to have met so many amazing and encouraging people along the way, each of whom has helped me get one step closer to my goal of becoming a commercial pilot.



Photos of rainbow and sunset at Perth Airport

Thank you,

Sophie