

Air Pilots Benevolent Fund Scholarship

Henry Bretz

My interest in aviation came from a multitude of sources. Like many other scholars, I was in the air cadets during my time in secondary school. I subsequently followed this up by joining Bristol University Air Squadron when I went to university. It was there that I first got the chance to fly a single propeller aircraft, the mighty Grob Tutor T1. As I slowly worked through the Elementary Flying Training Syllabus on the Grob alongside my aerospace engineering degree, aviation quickly became not only a fun hobby, but also where I saw my long term career taking place. I was keen to see how far I could progress with this newfound passion and was delighted to discover that opportunities such as the Honourable Company of Air Pilots scholarship programme exist.

2026 was my second time applying for the scholarship, after attempting the previous year. After the written application and the video interview, I was invited to Air Pilots House in late April for an in-person interview. This happened to fall right in the middle of various dissertation deadlines and an interview with the RAF, making it a bit of a manic week, despite this I remember turning up to the selection day prepared and ready for what came ahead. The interview went really well, and I left with my fingers crossed, hopeful for a positive response.

Over a week later I had heard nothing, and assumed it was all over. I was a matter of hours away from getting my laptop out and trying to organise some sort of work experience for the summer when I got a call from Lucie, one of my interviewers. I couldn't quite believe that I had managed to get a place!



Taking off from Shobdon in G-OCAC

My flying began at Cotswold Aero Club (CAC) at Gloucester Airport on the 1st June. CAC is an amazing bastion of general aviation in the South West, run by CFI Phil Mathews who is himself a Master Air Pilot. I chose the club as my preferred school due to its previous successes with Air

Pilots Scholars. I phoned them up before the interview and was immediately assured that they were aware of the time draw of taking on a full time scholarship student.

The club run a trio of Robins (2 DR400s and a R2112), nifty little zip-about trainers with dome cockpits – resulting in a lot more visibility than the average Piper but not a lot of protection during a heatwave!

With my previous flying experience, I was very quickly through the first phase of the course and was focusing almost entirely on circuits by the end of the first week. Civilian circuits are square (unlike the oval military circuits I had been taught previously) and require a greater amount of flexibility and adaptability. This was a huge learning point in comparison to my previous flying experience where the entire circuit would be flown using exact power settings and aiming points. Nevertheless, I enjoyed stepping up to the challenge.

I managed to do my first solo on the 10th June, just over a week after starting the course. Circuit slots are difficult to come by at Gloucester so we zipped over to Shobdon instead. The quieter circuit should have allowed for an easy experience, but suddenly the entire population of Herefordshire decided they wanted to join the circuit as well. I had to contend with a fair amount of traffic, along with a go-around on finals due to an aircraft landing in front of me. Once safely back on the ground, it was debrief and then go again for some consolidation.



First Solo at Shobdon Aerodrome

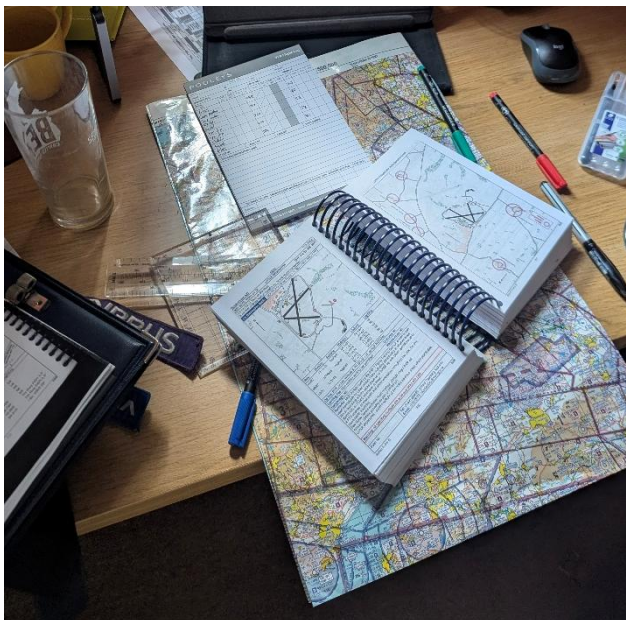


Landaway at Welshpool

Very quickly I moved on to navigation and I discovered the true joy of flying: Landaways! In my first navigation flight I zipped over to Old Warden (Shuttleworth) for a spot of aeroplane shopping, as my instructor was looking to purchase a new tail dragger, before circling back via Wellesbourne Mountford. I couldn't believe how quickly the landscape changed as we passed Silverstone, Cranfield and finally Cardington airship hangars before joining overhead at Old Warden. On the way back, I covered radio nav and located the Daventry VOR/DME, before suffering an alternator overload overhead Wellesbourne, giving me an all too real demonstration of electrical failure drills and flying a diversion to Gloucester.

The next flight was low level nav into Wales – an absolute treat! We flew up to Welshpool, a lovely airfield with a difficult circuit pattern due to terrain and joined overhead before pushing down to Shobdon via Hay-on-Wye, overflying the Talgarth gliding strip on the foot of the Black Mountains in the Brecon Beacons. Seeing the mountains towering above me as I navigated down towards the Wye Valley reminded me of seeing RAF Typhoons whizzing through the mach loop (although it was quite a bit more pedestrian in comparison).

It was at this point where I started to push into some more advanced navigation, alongside a few solo navigation flights in the local area. I completed my QXC on the 23rd June, right in the middle of one of the summer heatwaves. I flew from Gloucester to Oxford, then up to Halfpenny Green (Wolverhampton) and then back to Gloucester via the Shobdon overhead. The flight went off without a hitch, but required some careful navigation to skirt around some NOTAMs near Wellesbourne Mountford and, of course, a watchful eye of the Birmingham QNH and listening frequency when flying over Bromsgrove and Redditch.



A busy evening spent preparing for the QXC



I came back after 2:30hrs in the air in 30 degree heat, very happy with the flight and very happy to get a cold drink! With the QXC out of the way, it was time to finish up the final bits and pieces before the skills test. I went off to do a couple of solo sector nav flights in the training area, one up to Worcester and another down to Abergavenny before refining my circuit techniques.

I completed a practice skills test with Jan Erbil, another instructor at CAC, in the final few hours of the scholarship. My head was absolutely spinning

with the capacity draw of trying to complete all the manoeuvres and navigation points correctly. The route was down past Kemble to Devizes, then along to Abergavenny, with a diversion to Newent. Jan was harsh but fair, and expertly revealed various points to improve on. I established that I needed more work on PFLs and advanced turning, both of which I quickly ticked off in the final sortie before the skills test.

5 weeks after starting the scholarship, the skill test finally rolled around. After a pretty manic planning phase we got airborne. My route was from Gloucester to Ludlow, followed by a diversion to Hay-on-Wye. After a few hours of general handling, circuits and a lot of focus, I was officially a pilot!

I would like to extend my greatest thanks to the Honourable Company of Air Pilots and the Air Pilots Benevolent Fund for their incredible generosity in awarding me the scholarship.

I also wish to thank James Peplow, my flight instructor. His patience, perseverance and diligence is second to none, and I am eternally grateful for the time he has given me this summer supporting me through the scholarship. I must also express my gratitude to Phil Mathews, CFI at CAC. His continued selfless support of general aviation at Gloucester Airfield, and indeed across the whole south west is unbelievable and I would highly recommend prospective scholars reach out in subsequent years.

My main pieces of advice for those looking to apply for the scholarship are:

- Be persistent, the application process is long and requires exceptional attention to detail... much like the process of completing a PPL.
- Control the controllables, go the little extra mile to ensure that your plan to complete the scholarship is water-tight. At the end of the day, you'll have to do it if you are awarded a scholarship.
- Be friendly, personable, passionate and, most importantly, yourself! If you have a passion for aviation, the interviewers will see it.

