Learning to Fly: Your First Lesson

A short starter guide for anyone in the UK thinking about a first flying lesson.

This guide is for people who are curious about learning to fly, and for anyone about to book a trial or introductory lesson. It sets out the official first steps towards a UK Private Pilot Licence for aeroplanes (PPL(A)), what to ask a flight school, what to take with you, and a blank table for comparing costs. It does not tell you what training will cost.

When you are ready to look at schools, start with our directory: aviatorfinds.com/flight-schools/.

Please read first

This is an independent Aviatorfinds guide. It is not official UK Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) material and is not endorsed by the CAA. It does not replace the official rules, your instructor, or the advice of a flight school or an authorised medical examiner. Licence and medical requirements were checked against the CAA website on 15 November 2026. Rules can change — confirm on the official CAA pages before you act.

How to use this guide

• Read the official path to a PPL(A) first, so the trial lesson sits in context.

• Use the questions and the blank cost table when you speak to more than one school.

• Do not copy prices from the internet into the table. Use figures the school quotes to you, and official CAA fee pages for CAA charges.

• Other UK aeroplane licences exist, including routes referred to on the CAA PPL page such as the National Private Pilot Licence (NPPL). This guide does not set out those other routes. Ask the school, and read the official CAA pages, if you are considering them.

The official first steps towards a UK PPL(A)

The points in this section are taken from the CAA page “Private pilot licence for aeroplanes”, checked on 15 November 2026: https://www.caa.co.uk/general-aviation/pilot-licences/aeroplanes/private-pilot-licence-for-aeroplanes/.

Minimum age and medical. The minimum age to get a PPL is 17, and you will need to hold a Part-MED Class 2 Medical Certificate.

What the licence allows. A PPL for aeroplanes allows you to act as pilot in command in non-commercial operations on aeroplanes or touring motor gliders (TMGs). The CAA page also sets out a limited exception for PPL(A) holders with instructor or examiner privileges, who can be paid for certain instruction and tests. See the official page for that exception — do not treat a PPL as a commercial licence.

Where you train. You must complete a training course at an Approved Training Organisation (ATO) or a Declared Training Organisation (DTO). You will complete theoretical knowledge training and practical flight instruction.

Theoretical knowledge examinations. As part of the application you will need to take and pass exams in the following subject areas.

Common subjects: Air law; Human performance; Meteorology; Communications; Navigation.

Exams specific to the aircraft category: Principles of flight; Operational procedures; Flight performance and planning; Aircraft general knowledge.

You will need a CAA customer portal account to access the Private Pilot Theoretical Knowledge e-Exams system. If you pass the theoretical exams for the issue of a private pilot’s licence, they are valid for 24 months for you to submit an application for the PPL issue. That period is counted from the date you complete your last theoretical knowledge examination. Within those 24 months you must complete the flight training and pass the skill test, otherwise the exams expire and you have to retake them. The official page points to FCL.025 for more detail. The same page also describes theoretical knowledge credits for some ATPL or CPL exam passes in the same aircraft category (see FCL.035.b on the official page).

Flight instruction — official minimums for a PPL(A)

Again, these figures are the official CAA minimums from the same page, checked on 15 November 2026. Your own course may take longer. Minimums are not a promise of how many hours you will need.

• You will need to complete 40 hours of flight instruction on aeroplanes, 5 hours of which may have been completed in an approved flight simulator (an FSTD — flight simulation training device).

• That must include dual flight instruction as required to pass the licence skill test, and 10 hours of supervised solo flight time, including at least 5 hours of solo cross-country flight time with at least one cross-country flight of at least 270 km (150 NM) that includes full-stop landings at two aerodromes different from the departure aerodrome.

• The 40-hour requirement may be reduced to 35 hours if completed whilst undertaking a course at an ATO approved for that purpose.

• The CAA page also describes credits for some other licence holders and for some previous flying experience (see GM1 FCL.210.A on the official page). Do not assume a credit applies to you until the school and the official text confirm it.

You will also need to pass a skill test and apply to the CAA for the licence. The official page refers to licensing fees and costs in the CAA Scheme of Charges (Personnel Licensing). We have not printed a fee here, because charges change. Look up the current Scheme of Charges on the CAA website.

Words you will hear, in plain language

These terms appear on the official CAA PPL(A) page. The short explanations below are ours, for orientation only. The official page is the authority.

Term	In this guide it refers to
PPL(A)	A UK Private Pilot Licence for aeroplanes.
Part-MED Class 2 Medical Certificate	The medical certificate the official CAA PPL page says you will need to hold to get a PPL.
ATO	An Approved Training Organisation — one of the two types of organisation where the official page says you must complete a PPL(A) training course.
DTO	A Declared Training Organisation — the other type of organisation named on the official page for a PPL(A) training course.
PIC	Pilot in command. The official page says a PPL for aeroplanes allows you to act as PIC in non-commercial operations on aeroplanes or TMGs.
TMG	A touring motor glider, named on the official page alongside aeroplanes.
FSTD	A flight simulation training device. The official page says 5 of the 40 hours of flight instruction may have been completed in an approved FSTD.
Skill test	The test you must pass, with the flight training, within 24 months of your last theoretical knowledge exam, before the exams expire.
e-Exams	The Private Pilot Theoretical Knowledge e-Exams system, which the official page says you access through a CAA customer portal account.
Scheme of Charges	The CAA's official list of licensing fees and costs (Personnel Licensing). Look up the current figures there — they are not printed in this guide.
NPPL	The National Private Pilot Licence, which the official PPL page refers to in several places. This guide does not set out NPPL requirements.

Your first lesson — what typically happens

This section is general practical guidance, not an official CAA procedure. Flight schools usually offer a trial or introductory flight, but the length, the aircraft, the price and how much you may do with the controls all vary. Ask the school to talk you through their own briefing.

• You should expect a ground briefing first: who you will fly with, what you will do, the weather, and any safety points for the airfield and the aircraft.

• The instructor remains responsible for the flight. If you are invited to handle the controls, it will be under their supervision.

• A trial lesson is a useful way to see whether you enjoy flying and whether the school feels like a good fit. It is not, by itself, a training course or a licence.

• Ask, before you book, what is included, how long you will be in the air, what happens if the weather is poor, and whether the flight can be credited towards a course if you continue.

What to bring

Ask the school for their own list. The items below are practical suggestions, not official requirements.

- [ ] Photo ID if the school asks for it, and any booking confirmation.
- [ ] The clothing and shoes the school recommends. Flat, closed shoes and comfortable layers are a usual starting point; ask if they have a rule.
- [ ] Sunglasses and, if you use them, a spare pair of glasses or contact lenses. Ask the school before you assume you may wear tinted lenses in the aircraft.
- [ ] A notebook, and this guide if you want to ask the questions on the next page.
- [ ] Do not assume you already need a medical certificate in your hand for a trial lesson — ask the school what they require, and when a Class 2 medical would be needed if you continue.
- [ ] Leave behind anything the school or airfield says must not go airside, and ask about bags, cameras and mobile phones.

Ten questions to ask a flight school

1. Are you an Approved Training Organisation (ATO) or a Declared Training Organisation (DTO), and which licences and ratings do you train for?

2. Who would I fly with on a trial or introductory lesson, how long is the flight, and what does the price include?

3. If the weather is poor, what happens to my booking and any payment?

4. How is the course structured from first lessons to the skill test, and how do you keep training moving if the weather is poor or an aircraft is being maintained?

5. What aircraft would I train on, and is there another type available if one is out of service?

6. What is included in the hourly rate, and what is charged separately — for example landing fees, ground briefings, membership, headsets or exams?

7. At what point do you need me to hold a Part-MED Class 2 Medical Certificate, and can you point me to the official process?

8. How are theoretical knowledge exams arranged, and how do you support students with the official e-Exams system?

9. If I do a trial lesson first, can that flight be credited if I enrol, and what does a typical student actually take in hours compared with the official minimums?

10. May I meet an instructor, see the aircraft and look around the school before I book a course?

Then compare what you hear with at least one other school. Our directory is at aviatorfinds.com/flight-schools/.

Cost-planning table (for you to fill in)

This table is blank on purpose. Training costs vary by school, aircraft and how long you take, and CAA fees are set out in the official Scheme of Charges. We have not invented or estimated any prices. Fill in the figures each school quotes to you, and check official CAA charges yourself. Add a contingency line for extra hours, because official minimums are only minimums.

Item	School A	School B	Your notes
Trial or introductory flight			
Aircraft hourly rate (dual)			
Aircraft hourly rate (solo)			
Ground briefings			
Membership			
Landing or circuit fees			
Headset or equipment hire			
CAA exam and licence fees (check the official Scheme of Charges)			
Medical examination (ask an authorised examiner)			
Books and materials			
Extra hours / contingency			
Estimated total			

Leave a cell blank if it does not apply. Add a contingency, because official hour minimums are only minimums.

After your first lesson

• If you enjoyed it, book a second lesson only when you are clear on the school's course, medical timing and costs.

• Read the official CAA PPL(A) page again, and follow the medical route the official pages describe.

• Keep using the events calendar and articles on Aviatorfinds if you want a wider picture of flying life: aviatorfinds.com/aviation-news/.

My notes from the first lesson

Use this space after you fly. What did you enjoy? What surprised you? What do you want to ask the school next time?

Sources and checking date

Facts in this download were checked against the official sources below on 15 November 2026. Rules, dates, fees and show arrangements can change. Always confirm on the official page before you rely on a figure or a date.

• UK CAA, Private pilot licence for aeroplanes, checked 15 November 2026: https://www.caa.co.uk/general-aviation/pilot-licences/aeroplanes/private-pilot-licence-for-aeroplanes/. This is the source for age, Class 2 medical, ATO/DTO training, exam subjects, 24-month exam validity, the 40-hour / 35-hour instruction minimums, the solo and cross-country minimums, and the pointer to the Scheme of Charges.

• CAA licensing fees: use the Scheme of Charges (Personnel Licensing) linked from that official page. No fee amounts are printed in this guide.

The “what typically happens on a first lesson”, “what to bring” and “ten questions” sections are original Aviatorfinds practical guidance. They are not copied from the CAA and are not official requirements.

Credits and use

This download uses no photographs. Please link to the Aviatorfinds Free Downloads page rather than copying this file. Edition 1 · 15 November 2026 · The Aviatorfinds Team.

The Aviatorfinds Team