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Britain Set to Launch Rockets for First Time in Half a Century

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The United Kingdom is preparing for its first vertical rocket launch in more than 50 years, after the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) granted a launch license to UK-based firm Skyrora.

The license allows the company to carry out up to 16 suborbital rocket flights from the SaxaVord spaceport in Shetland, marking a significant milestone for the UK's growing space industry.

The approved license applies to Skyrora's Skylark rocket, a suborbital launcher capable of reaching altitudes of 62 miles. Designed to carry small payloads, it can be used for scientific research, such as studying how cells behave in microgravity. Skyrora also plans to develop a larger vehicle capable of deploying satellites into orbit.

This marks the first vertical rocket launch from British soil since the Black Arrow program of the 1970s, which launched from Woomera in Australia. That effort included the successful deployment of the Prospero satellite, still the only British satellite to be launched on a British rocket.

Mike Kane, Minister for Aviation and Space, praised the move, stating: "I am thrilled we've reached this important milestone in the UK space sector, and I congratulate Skyrora for being the first UK company to receive a rocket launch license. This is the kind of scientific innovation and exploration that will help the UK cement itself as a global player in the space race."

The UK's history with rocketry dates back to the 1950s, when engineers repurposed the Blue Streak missile program for potential space applications. Ambitious plans were even drawn up to send British astronauts to the Moon, though the idea was eventually shelved in favor of using American launch systems due to cost concerns.

The CAA has previously granted launch authorization to Rocket Factory Augsburg (RFA), a German firm, and also licensed Virgin Orbit for horizontal launch operations before the company ceased activity following a failed mission in Cornwall.

Rob Bishton, Chief Executive of the CAA, said: "Granting a home-grown company, Skyrora, its launch license is a major milestone for our space sector and our nation. Our work as the UK's space regulator is enabling the burgeoning launch industry to safely grow, bringing new jobs and investment with it."

Despite this progress, both Skyrora and RFA have faced setbacks. In October 2022, Skyrora's launch attempt in Iceland failed due to a software error, while an RFA rocket exploded during a test at SaxaVord last summer.

The CAA confirmed it will closely monitor Skyrora's operations to ensure compliance with safety and regulatory standards. Conditions of the license include adequate insurance, coordination with airspace authorities, a data-sharing agreement with the UK Government, and agreements with the spaceport operator.

Skyrora Chief Executive Volodymyr Levykin said: "Skyrora is proud to be leading efforts that enable launch activity from the UK and we look forward to achieving a reliable commercial launch program that benefits us all."

Dr. Paul Bate, Chief Executive of the UK Space Agency, added: "Congratulations to Skyrora. This demonstrates the growing strength of our domestic launch capabilities, and the thriving commercial space economy we are building across the country."