

Everything You Always Wanted To Know About City Airport

by Alexander Baron

Recently, *Travel Days* visited London's newest airport, *City Airport*, which serves the City of London and European business communities. We were met at reception by Bill Martin, the Airport's Information Officer. Bill, who admits to being seventy this year but doesn't look a day over fifty-five, gave us a guided tour of the airport which has not only the shortest runway in Britain, but has had to overcome countless obstacles in order simply to survive. The past two years have been difficult for *City Airport*, which has been particularly hard hit by the recession, but it hopes to break even in 1994 if not sooner, when it clocks up half a million passengers a year (its break even point). In the meantime, things are looking up, as we found out for ourselves. Here then is everything you ever wanted to know about *City Airport* and a few things you never dreamed of.

On Arrival

The area of *City Airport* is a mere 91 acres or 42 hectares (compare this to Heathrow which is 1500 acres or two and a half square miles). The airport has no prospect of expansion (ground area wise) but this is something its operators are perfectly happy with. We arrived by train, but eighty percent of the airport's passengers come by road and ninety percent are business people. To cater for their needs, there is a computer-linked cab office which at seven o'clock in the morning provides about seventy cabs. During the day, the airport is dead, but before nine in the morning and during the evening peak it gets very busy. The car hire firms, who operate out of *City Airport*, are linked with the Airport's destinations in Europe so that a passenger at Charles de Gaulle Airport can book a car on arrival, and vice versa. There is also a portable telephone hire available, in fact, there are telephones all over the place, British Telecom only. Then there is, of course, a hotel reservations desk, and the airlines' check-in desks. Upstairs, *City Airport* has a brasserie which consists of a bar, coffee bar and "a very well-liked restaurant."

World Leader

City Airport was the first airport to build a business and conference centre; this takes up the whole of the Western Wing and consists of a series of meeting rooms ranging from fifteen small cubicles to a conference room that seats fifty. All the rooms are "electronically plumbed" and can be equipped with telephones, computers, modems and even video and overhead projection facilities. There is also an executive suite, and showers. The conference centre is not for the exclusive use of passengers, and local firms have not been slow to utilise this excellent and innovative service.

Airside

After passing through security, Bill showed us around the international departure lounge which contains the duty free and tax free shops. Bill explained that with a mere ten minute check-in time, passengers can be literally in and out. "It's all part of the philosophy: get people through in a hurry." Downstairs, he showed us the panorama: looking due north is East Ham Town Hall, West Ham football ground, following round to the west is Canning Town. Then there is the apron of the airfield with ten "boxrooms."

Where are all the passengers?

We arrived at 10.30am when there was one plane on the runway and hardly a passenger to be seen, but, Bill explained, business people don't travel during the day, "...the service is almost tidal." There are no domestic departures yet, but this will be coming (hopefully very shortly).

Out on the Runway

With this, Bill led us out onto the runway, "Step over there, you are now treading on thirty-three feet of water," he told us. Previously this was a very large dry dock but it has now been capped with two feet of concrete. Two feet doesn't sound very much, but it felt robust enough. The plane on the runway was an Air France Dash 7, which was designed and built by the de Havilland Company of Canada.

"It's not very big," we said.

"It's a forty-six seater," said Bill, "We've the shortest runway in Europe...the most cluttered approach end in Europe. That's pretty good!"

"How long is the runway?" we asked.

"It is now 1199 metres long and 30 metres wide; last September it was extended by 169 metres."

We went aboard the plane *City Class Service* which flies with two pilots and two stewardesses. "Whatever time of the day it is, there's a full meal served." This particular aircraft would

be flying to Charles de Gaulle Airport. With a flight time of around an hour and ten minutes we were curious that meals should be served, "Can't they wait an hour?" That's all part of the service, said Bill, "Business people are notorious for grabbing a glass of something here and a sandwich there. When we've got them here we've got them captive for an hour. They are properly fed and watered!"

History

London *City Airport* is located in a complex of Docklands known as the Royals, adjacent to the Victoria Dock, the biggest dock ever built. Opened in 1855 by Queen Victoria herself, it is so long that many people mistake it for the Thames. (We were no exception!) Then there is Royal Albert Dock and King George V Dock, the smallest of the three. Unfortunately, the docks were a victim of their own success, as they became more efficient, the demand for manpower waned; it was containerisation which finally killed them off. Containerisation resulted in larger ships, which could not navigate this far up the Thames; the last ship sailed from here in 1981, which is when *City Airport* was conceived.

City Airport is a mere six miles from the City of London, (the Post Office Tower is visible on a clear day). Over 70% of all Greater London's finance houses (including some 500 foreign banks) are located in the Square Mile. A third of their executives regularly travel to Europe by air, which, since they had to fly from Heathrow, Stansted or Luton, would mean most of their working day would be spent travelling. This is where *City Airport* comes in.

"We offer to the business people going into the business centres of Europe a quick launch, and an even quicker reception coming back." This is no exaggeration: clearing customs can take as little as three minutes through the green channel or seven minutes with something to declare. Contrast this with the hour plus which is typical of Heathrow; business travellers don't need this sort of hassle. And they don't get it here.

Red Tape and more Red Tape

The reason *City Airport* does not run a domestic service (yet) is because when Mowlem Group announced that they intended to build the airport, a flood of objections followed. Most of these seem to have been, if not frivolous, then ill-founded. The airport currently employs 470 people, most of



them local, and the overwhelming majority of people living in the area did not take unkindly to the idea of an airport being built on their doorstep. This is a working class area of London which has a traditionally high rate of unemployment. The big worry about airports is of course noise, but as there is a school literally right next to *City Airport* (and houses), that can't be much of a worry for local residents. This is due to the "sound baffle" which runs the length of the nearside perimeter.

It wasn't until 1983 that the first public enquiry, which lasted 21 weeks, was held. Everyone, from 34 local councils to the Noise Abatement Society was represented. The result of the Public Enquiry was that *City Airport* was given the go ahead with the following provisos: no helicopters, no piston-engined aircraft no executive aircraft no flights before 7am no flights after 9pm a maximum of 60 flights a day on weekdays a maximum of 20 flights Saturdays and Sundays. There were also restrictions on flight slopes! All this made London City the most restricted airport in the UK if not the entire world. These restrictions meant there were very few planes that could serve the airport. Outline planning permission followed only in 1985; detailed planning permission came the following April. The company applied for permission to fly to thirteen major airports in the UK and Europe. The two founding airlines were Brymons and Eurocity Airways (later London City Airways). The opening date was scheduled for October

1987. On 31st May 1987, the first aircraft landed; the airport actually opened for business on schedule on 26th October 1987 with three Dash 7 aircraft. When one considers all the obstacles it was faced with, this represents a considerable achievement. For the first six months they flew only to Paris and Brussels. A second public enquiry followed in 1990, the result of which only came last year. The favourable outcome resulted in the lengthening of the runway and the introduction of five new types of aircraft.

Who runs London City Airport?

London *City Airport* is a subsidiary of John Mowlem Ltd and was funded entirely out of private funds. Not one penny has come from the public purse: 90% came directly from the John Mowlem Group, the rest from its backers. "We are the only truly, private airport you have ever been on." Next, we visited the flight briefing room, which in any other airport would be large and crowded. This flight briefing room is unmanned: when the pilots want information they come in and log onto one of the computers. They can get information on the weather from London Air Traffic Control or from anywhere in Europe. Then we went up through immigration control; passengers' luggage comes up through the floor on a carousel so with the rapid customs clearance, the business traveller can be on his way home in a matter of minutes.

City Airport Today

The airlines currently using *City Airport* are Air France, Brymons and Flexair (which has four flights a day). From the end of March, Air France will be increasing their flights; Crossair will also be flying in from Lugano and Zurich; a newly formed Scandinavian airline will also be flying in twice a day. And there are more to come!

An Airport for the Future

When *City Airport* was built, in spite of being a mere 6 miles from the City of London, it was not an easy place to get to. That problem has been solved to some extent by the Docklands Light Railway and by the river bus which runs to the Isle of Dogs. The airport also runs a courtesy bus service every fourteen minutes throughout the day. But the John Mowlem Group is not content with this, extensions to the DLR are underway and a new station (Connaught and London *City Airport*) is planned. London Transport is also extending the Jubilee Line to Canning Town. We are still very much in recession, but when the recession lifts (and it can't go on forever), and now that we are in Europe, the future for *City Airport* looks bright indeed.