

CROYDON AIRPORT 1928-1939

DOUGLAS CLUETT JOANNA NASH BOB LEARMONTH

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Errata: Volume One

Illustration acknowledgments (ii) for Mr. Paul Capon read Mr. P. C. (Pete) Capon Preface (v) as above; and for Mr. Stanley Childs read Mr. Stanley Child Caption to illus. 4, opp. p. 1 for 1921 read about 1924

- P. 9. lines 19/20 for then an orchard belonging to Alderman Mellows read Stafford Road Recreation Ground, later renamed to commemorate Councillor F. le M. Mellows, who obtained it for the public.
 - P. 10, line 30 for two M.C.s and bar read M.C. and two bars

GRAPHICS AND DESIGN - SHIRLEY EDWARDS

First Published 1980

 1980, London Borough of Sutton Libraries and Arts Services
Central Library, St. Nicholas Way Sutton Surrey. Tel. 01-661 5050

ISBN 0950322482

Printed by John Bentley (Printers) Ltd, Todmorden A member of the Dunn & Wilson Group

FOREWORD

By Sir Peter Masefield

CROYDON AIRPORT—"The Official Air Terminus for London"—will always be remembered in the annals of aviation as one of the original centres of international air transport in its pioneering days, the main base of Imperial Airways Ltd. and the place from which so many great flights began and ended.

For almost 40 years – between 29th March, 1920, and 30th September, 1959, with a five-year break "on military service" during the War – Croydon Airport was active in British civil aviation. Its finest times were, undoubtedly, the eleven years between 1928 and 1939, when it enjoyed an atmosphere all its own around the first "custom-built" airport terminal in the world, which, fortunately, remains as a monument to "the great days that were".

For all these reasons, and because of my own association with the airport, it is a special pleasure to me to have been invited to write a brief Foreword to this record of historic facts and memories about Croydon Airport during those halcyon days, painstakingly researched by Douglas Cluett, Joanna Nash and Bob Learmonth.

Croydon's influence on the development of international scheduled air services, at first to Europe and then to India and Africa, was certainly profound. From 1928 onwards, it provided for the first time, and in one neat, compact, terminal, all the features which were to be repeated in varied forms throughout the world in all the major airports which were to follow.

Croydon's entrance hall, surrounded by its airline check-in counters, was the pattern for the vastly larger departure buildings of later years. Croydon's "walk-through" immigration and customs benches, beyond the barrier from the entrance hall, were unfussy models of their future counterparts. The 20-yard walk to the aircraft on the apron outside would be the envy of all passenger-handling services at major airports to-day.

Surmounting the terminal, Croydon's distinctive Control Tower was a commodious prototype which combined an extensive view of the airport, radio communciations, meteorological services and map room; all grouped to offer, together, the best amenities of the day.

Outside, on the concrete apron, extended year by year, all the leading transport aircraft of the 1920s and 1930s were to be seen and admired. The general public was made welcome on the flat roof of the terminal, below the control tower, where the whole panoply of arrivals and departures were to be

seen at close range from a commanding position. No security checks were needed in those, more civilised, days.

And the aircraft themselves – romantic, airborne challengers of the great ocean liners of their day, which their successors were almost wholly to surplant – took off and landed on Croydon's undulating grass surface without the thought of the need for a runway. In 1928, the angular, 18-passenger, three-motor, Armstrong Whitworth Argosys of Imperial Airways, their narrow cabins lined with two rows of single wicker chairs, were superseding the veteran 10-passenger, twin-engine, Handley Page W.8s. At the time, these sturdy biplanes seemed to be more in the mainstream of aircraft development than were the smaller, Fokker high-wing monoplanes of K.L.M. – a view reinforced when, in 1931, the first of the great four-engine, 38-passenger, "wide-body" Handley Page H.P.42 biplanes appeared in Croydon's skies.

Hannibal, Hadrian, Hanno, Hengist, Horsa, Heracles, Horatius and Helena, became synonymous with Croydon and a fond memory of its greatest years, plying safely and sedately, if somewhat slowly at 95 m.p.h., year in, year out, from Croydon to Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam and beyond.

Later, a new shape was seen in Croydon's skies, the sleek and shining form of K.L.M's first Douglas DC-2 – the precursor of a new age in which fast, metal, monoplanes of steadily larger size, would eventually demand long, concrete, runways, to spell the end of Croydon's reign; surrounded, as it had become, with suburban development.

But, before that time would come, Croydon was to glimpse the new monoplane era, with DC-3s, A. W. Ensigns, de Havilland Frobishers, Junkers Ju-52s, Bloch 220s and even – after the War – the brief appearances there of DC-4s

Aircraft, buildings and people combined to make the atmosphere of Croydon what it was; active, calm, confident, unhurried and business-like, advancing into a new form of transport as the natural order of things, but imaginative and romantic with it all. And, of course, the Croydon personalities were those who shaped and formed the special character of the place.

In the 1920s, the character of Croydon was well typified by the "presson" enthusiasm and cheerful dedication of the Director of Civil Aviation, Sir Sefton Brancker, and of his chief of 1924 and 1929, the Secretary of State for Air, Lord Thomson of Cardington; both tragically killed in the great airship, R.101, in October, 1930. Together, they had presided over the plans for Croydon's development from the early, Plough Lane site to the new terminal, hangars and hotel alongside Purley Way.

Both were present at the opening of the Passenger Terminal by Lady Maud Hoare — wife of Lord Thomson's "alternative Air Minister" in the Conservative Government, — Sir Samuel Hoare, later Lord Templewood — on 2nd May, 1928; the date from which this book begins.

At Imperial Airways, the Managing Director George Woods Humphery, and his Air Superintendent, George Brackley, characters themselves, led a team of outstanding personalities from the Chief Engineer, dour and careful H. L. Hall, through Master Pilots such as O. P. Jones, Gordon P. Olley, A. S. Wilcockson and Walter Rogers, to the traffic staff led by Denis Handover,

with a succession of brilliant trainees who were to make their mark in years to come. To the world at large, Imperial's Robert Brenard was an early master of the art of passenger and public relations.

Imperial Airways dominated Croydon. But, alongside, were the leading foreign airlines – most prominently, perhaps, the Royal Netherlands Airline, K.L.M., elegantly headed at Croydon by Henry Spry Leverton – "Spry" – whose debonair appearance concealed remarkable business acumen, a flair for public relations and a pungent wit, enjoyed each week in "The Aeroplane", under the heading "Many Inventions"; together with that paper's "Croydon Reports", for many years signed "G.D." – for Geoffrey Dorman.

For Air France at Croydon, Emile Bouderie radiated Gallic charm, while Gustav Smitt-Rex of D.L.H. took a serious view of life and of Germany's future.

Above the bustling scene, the one and only Jimmy Jeffs, in the control tower, presided over aircraft arrivals and departures, with unruffled bonhomie.

But Croydon was not all air transport. On the North side of the airport, the long line of workshop hangars, put up for the National Aircraft Factory during the First World War, housed, successively, the Aircraft Disposal Company, Desoutter Aircraft Ltd., Redwing Aircraft Ltd., General Aircraft Ltd. and Rollason Aircraft Services, each with its own Aviation characters; among them, Frederick Handley Page, Jack Stewart and Rex Stocken of A.D.C., Marcel Desoutter, inventer of the articulated leg and of the Koolhoven-licensed Desoutter monoplane; John Kenworthy of Redwing, Swiss-born John Stieger of G.A.L.; with, stocky, ex-Schneider pilot, Harry Schofield, and Frederick Crocombe, later to design the G.A.L./Blackburn Beverley. Beside the Northern gate, off Purley Way, Fred Holmes and Sid Oldfield of Surrey Aviation invited all and sundry to taste the joy of a "baptême de l'air" in venerable Avro 504s, while Wally Hope, three times winner of the King's Cup, ran a more-or-less flourishing Air Taxi business with a D.H.50 and, later, a Puss Moth.

However diverse their activities, Croydon's working population had one thing in common; a dedication to Aviation and a belief in its future which endeared them to everyone they served.

In all its 33 years of active life in air transport and other civil aviation activities, Croydon handled a total of some 1,900,000 passengers, flying on rather more than 650,000 aircraft movements. Of these, between 1920 and the outbreak of war in 1939, Croydon's passengers numbered 1,365,000 and the aircraft movements 160,000, at an average of about eight passengers on each flight. Thus, the bulk of the passengers were carried before the War, but most of the aircraft movements were flown into and out of Croydon between 1946 and 1959, when the airport had turned from scheduled services primarily to flying instruction, air charters and General Aviation. With more official foresight, that service could have continued from the excellent amenities at Britain's most historic airport.

For nearly 30 years, Croydon Airport was a continued part of my aeronautical life – from the day in 1930, when I first landed there in an

Imperial Airways Argosy, until the 29th September, 1959, when I flew my commuter Chipmunk out of Croydon, to Filton, for the last time.

In between, I worked, for two Long-Vacation Courses (in 1933 and 1934) in the Imperial Airways' engineering workshop/hangars beside the terminal and on the manufacture and flying of G.A.L. Monospar ST-6 monoplanes on the North Side; I flew with Wrightways on their regular early morning newspaper deliveries to Le Bourget and, thereafter, flew in and out of Croydon by Imperial Airways, K.L.M., Sabena and D.L.H. and during 30 years of personal flying at the controls of a variety of aircraft – which ranged from D.H. Moths, Chipmunks, Dragons, Doves and Herons, Miles Hawks, M.28s and Geminis, Percival Vega Gulls and Proctors, and a variety of Austers, to a Hawker Hurricane and B.E.A. Pionair DC-3s. All were welcomed at Croydon – that most hospitable of airports.

Croydon Airport shares, with Le Bourget in France and Schiphol at Amsterdam, the distinction of having been one of the cradles of the great air transport industry of the world to-day — at a time before scheduled air services had emerged in the United States. But Croydon was much more besides. It nurtured a camaraderie, a pioneering spirit, a determination to give a lead into the future and an ideal of service to passengers which we increasingly need to emulate to-day.

I commend this little book of Croydon's historic past and, with it, the work of the Croydon Airport Society, which is recording and preserving memories and evidence of a place and people who laid the foundations of the tremendous future for transport and travel in the air.

February, 1980

Peter Masefield (President, Croydon Airport Society)

AUTHORS' PREFACE

This book is the second in a projected three-volume history of Croydon Airport. The success of the first volume, and the interest it created, surpassed our expectations; and was partly responsible for the formation of the Croydon Airport Society which had its inaugural meeting at the Aerodrome Hotel in November 1978. The research for this second volume has been in progress since the conclusion of work on the first – and indeed before – but most of our writing was done in the winter of 1979/80 to meet a deadline of publication in the spring of 1980 to coincide with the celebrations for the 50th Anniversary, on May 5th, of Amy Johnson's solo flight to Australia.

We must first thank Sir Peter Masefield, President of the Croydon Airport Society, for his interest, support and help, and for his excellent Foreword which goes some way towards filling the inevitable gaps in our own narrative.

Thanks are due to the following for major contributions to the book, or for reading and commenting on drafts of the various chapters: Captain Cecil Bebb, Mr. Sidney Cook, Mr. Peter Cooksley, Mr. E. J. H. Crawforth, Mr. Brian Haimes, Mrs. Molly Jones and Mr. Jack Fuller, Mr. John King and Mr. John Parke, Mr. Charles V. Lane, M.B.E., Mr. G. D. H. Linton, Miss R. Prest, Professor A. L. F. Rivet, Mr. Ewart Sanders, Mr. Ian Scott-Hill, O.B.E., Mr. Martin Smith, Group Captain Patrick Tweedie, C.B.E., and Mr. Hugh Yea.

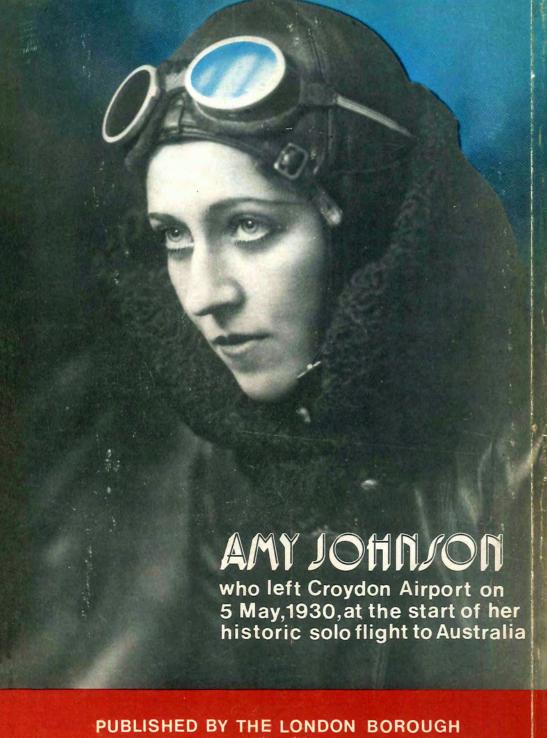
Warm thanks for information and help of various kinds must also go to Mr. Peter Barnard and Mrs. Pat Rowe-Williamson; Miss Mary Batchelor; Miss June Broughton; Mr. Frank Burgess; Mr. R. N. Calcraft; Mr. P. T. Capon; Mr. Derek Card; Mr. Jack Crowson; Mr. Stanley Child; Group Captain P. S. Foss, O.B.E.; Mrs. Muriel Hughes; Mr. A. J. Jackson; Group Captain James Jeffs, C.V.O., O.B.E.; Mr. George Jenkinson; Captain O. P. Jones, C.V.O., O.B.E.: Mr. Alec Lumsden; Mr. Bernard Pettman; Mr. Stephen Piercy; Mr. Graham Prothero; Mr. V. J. Richards; Mr. Richard Riding of Aeroplane Monthly; Mr. George Robinson; Mr. R. S. Shelley; Mr. John Stroud; Mr. Leslie A. Tomlinson; and others, including many members of the Croydon Airport Society not mentioned above.

Particular thanks are also due to British Airways, Flight International, and the Science Museum who gave us so much help in obtaining illustrations, and the London Borough of Sutton for its firm support of the venture from start to finish. This book could not have been published without the help and enthusiasm of Mr. Roy Smith, the Borough Librarian; and finally we must thank Miss Valary Murphy who typed successive drafts of the text and made a number of useful suggestions along the way.

We hope that this book reflects in a small way the extraordinary pride that was felt by so many of those who were associated with Croydon in its greatest years, and by local residents young and old in the present day.

Sutton Central Library February, 1980

Douglas Cluett Joanna Nash



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