Britain's First International Airport

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Do you know where Britain's first major international airport was located?

No, it wasn't Heathrow. I thought that, too.

But this airport was operational a lot earlier than that.

It was actually Croydon Airport. Yes, Croydon.

It actually opened in 1920.

It's an interesting story, which began during World War I – and it all started when two new airfields were established close by, at Beddington in 1915 and Waddon in 1918.

Beddington was originally created as an emergency landing field, but after the Zeppelin air raids caused so much panic, there was public pressure to create some form of a defence capability.

So, in January 1916, the aerodrome was given an important role as part of the Home Defence Group. Soon afterwards, the first two fighter aircraft arrived at the aerodrome.

There were ten small airfields offering protection to London at that time. They were: Hounslow Heath, Hendon, Hainault's Farm, Sutton's Park, Joyce Green, Farningham, Croydon, Biggin Hill, Wimbledon and Northolt.

After Beddinton joined the fold, Waddon opened in 1918 as part of the adjoining National Aircraft Factory No. 1, to handle aircraft test flights.

Beddington quickly became a training aerodrome for the Royal Flying Corps, who, after the end of the war, became The Royal Air Force.

Prince Albert (later to become George VI) got his wings here with No. 29 Training Squadron.

He was the first member of the Royal Family to learn to fly. His elder brother, the Prince of Wales (later to become Edward VIII), also received flying training with the same training squadron.

The greatest Englishman - Winston Churchill - almost lost his life at Croydon in 1919, when he was taking a flying lesson. He stalled his plane in mid-air and it crashed into the ground. Luckily, he escaped with just cuts and bruises.

He cancelled all his future lessons.

After the end of the First World War, civil aviation was banned in the UK for over a year, until 25th August 1919.

It was on this date, that an organisation called Aircraft Transport and Travel Ltd, started to run regular services from Hounslow Heath Aerodrome to Le Bourget.

This was the first regular daily international service in the world.

But it soon became clear that Hounslow Heath struggled to run a commercial service that was becoming increasingly popular.

Plus, the airfield belonged to the Army. And they wanted it back.

After much discussion, the airfield was closed in December 1919 and all the related operations finally came to an end, three months later.

The site was handed back to the Army in March 1920.

The very next day, all the civil operations moved to Croydon - and a new age of air travel in the UK had begun.

Croydon Airport was considerably larger and had much better facilities.

And, it was closer to European destinations such as Paris and Brussels - and its approach path meant that planes didn't need to fly over Central London.

Cross-channel flights rapidly grew in popularity and flights were handled initially by Handley Page and Imperial Airways.

Croydon Airport was buzzing.

It pretty soon became Britain's main airport, handling more cargo, mail, and passengers than any other UK airport at the time.

In the first year of service, the airport saw 6,383 travellers flying to Europe and this increased to 10,730 in 1921.

For those who could afford it, flying from Croydon was a very enjoyable experience. Top business people and the glitterati, enjoyed 5-star all the way.

For example, those flying on Imperial Airways' Silver Wings service to France were looked after like royalty.

A car with a chauffeur, collected passengers from central London. And three-course meals with bespoke cocktails, together with afternoon tea with Parisian pastries, were provided.

Croydon had the first customs facility in the UK (passengers were weighed individually with their baggage and if they were over a certain weight, they were required to pay extra).

The airport also boasted the first departure board - and had the first airport hotel in the world, now the Hallmark Hotel Croydon Aerodrome.

And, of course, as planes flew much lower in those days, passengers enjoyed superb views from their seats, allowing for a bit of sightseeing on the way.

Passenger numbers continued to grow and in 1928, over 26,000 people used the Airport.

Later that year, the new terminal building was opened. Now known as Airport House, it was the first real control tower in the world, replacing the existing wooden huts.

Other significant developments soon followed, as air traffic control was introduced, together with radio position-fixing procedures and speech transmissions used for the first time, to replace Morse Code.

Another interesting advance accredited to Croydon, came in the form of the now universally accepted distress call - *'Mayday, Mayday, Mayday'*.

It was senior radio officer Fred Mockford who came up with the idea.

He thought that because most of the flights were from Croydon to Paris *'Mayday, Mayday, Mayday'* would be understood better by his French counterparts, as it sounded a bit like *'M'aidez',* 'help me'.

By this time, three of the four British airlines were based at Croydon - and in March 1924, they merged to form Imperial Airways, which became Britain's national and sole airline.

Imperial became the British Government's chosen instrument to develop connections with the U.K.'s extensive overseas interests.

On May 1st, 1927, Imperial Airways - the predecessor to British Airways - introduced its first luxury on-board meal service on its London to Paris route.

A male steward dressed in a smart white tunic, served just ten passengers on the flight, which took around two hours.

On board was a small cabinet carrying four gills (servings) of whisky, a dozen bottles of lager beer, two siphons of sparkling water and twelve assorted bottles of mineral water.

The packets of sandwiches and biscuits were also accompanied by one or two thermos flasks of hot water, to enable the steward to make coffee or tea.

As the service developed, offerings became ever more lavish.

And Croydon continued to be the ideal base for Britain to develop its European and long-haul routes to India, Africa, the Middle and Far East, Asia, Africa and Australia.

Between 1926 and 1928, the airport was significantly redeveloped and extended - and construction of new airport buildings took place adjacent to Purley Way, Croydon.

These included the first purpose-designed airport terminal and air traffic control tower, the world's first airport hotel and extensive hangars.

The development cost £267,000, which would be close to £100 million today. The new buildings and layout began operations on 20th January 1928, and were officially opened on 2nd May 1928 by Lady Maud Hoare.

Just 8 weeks later, Croydon Airport became the focal point for a very strange event. Wealthy businessman Alfred Loewenstein left Croydon bound for Brussels, but then, over the channel, he simply stepped out of the plane while it was over the Channel.

As it was highly unlikely that he thought it was the door to the toilet, this was almost certainly the first-ever suicide by plane.

Amy Johnson - the first woman to fly solo from England to Australia - considered the aerodrome to be her spiritual home - as she took off on that epic journey from Croydon in May 1930.

When she returned to England to great acclaim, over 200,000 fans flocked to see her arrive back at Croydon in August.

What's more, over 1 million people lined the 12-mile route from the aerodrome to The Grosvenor House Hotel in Central London, where she was staying.

In the 1930's, air travel was becoming increasingly popular and passenger numbers exploded. In 1935, 120,390 passengers were recorded as having passed through Croydon Airport.

Many celebrities used the airport, including Charlie Chaplin, John F Kennedy, Babe Ruth, Gracie Fields and Rita Hayworth.

In 1935, the airport was host to another significant development.

British Airways Ltd was formed.

Three airlines - Spartan Air Lines Ltd, United Airways Ltd (no relation to the US carrier United Airlines), and Hillman's Airways, were merged to create the iconic brand.

On 6th March in that year, something else happened. It was one of the biggest heists of the 20th century - and it happened at the airport.

It was called the Great Plane Robbery.

Security at the airport had not grown in line with expansion and there was only one security guard on duty. So, five men strolled into the airport and broke into the strongroom of Imperial Airways.

They got away with £21,000 of gold bars, gold sovereigns and gold US dollars.

The haul was the equivalent of £12 million today.

The gold was never found and only one suspect was ever jailed.

Apparently, you can still see the strongroom today - it just protects cleaners' products these days.

In 1938, British Airways moved their operation out of Croydon and into Heston Aerodrome.

In November of that year, the Government merged them with Imperial Airways, to create The British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC).

At the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, Croydon Airport was closed to civil aviation and became a major Battle of Britain airfield with Hurricanes and Spitfires in operation.

The Germans soon identified it as a major target - and on August 15th, 1940, the Luftwaffe attacked it with a large number of planes, causing a great deal of damage.

The armoury was destroyed, the civilian airport terminal building was badly damaged - and a hangar was shot up by cannon fire.

Another larger hangar containing forty training aircraft also went up in flames.

Six airfield personnel died in the raid.

In 1943, Croydon's role changed again, when RAF Transport Command was founded - and the aerodrome was used to transport thousands of troops in and out of the WW2 European battlefield.

After the war, Croydon returned to civil control in February 1946 and it remained the only major UK commercial airport at that time.

But it soon became clear, that post-war airliners and cargo aircraft were getting much larger - and that air traffic would intensify.

The maximum runway length was 1,200m, which was becoming too short for the larger airliners. The airport clearly needed to expand and develop.

But they had a problem.

The urban spread of South London and the growth of the surrounding villages had enclosed Croydon Airport and left it little room for expansion.

London clearly needed a larger airport with more modern equipment and the room to develop, to cater for the massive change in civil aviation that was taking place.

It was decided that a partly-built site at Heathrow would be ideal. The name came from its location, being built in a hamlet named Heath Row.

Heathrow Airport was officially opened for commercial air travel on 31st May 1946 By Lord Winster, The Minister for Aviation.

Initially, it was rather prosaically named London Airport, only officially becoming Heathrow, sometime later.

The passenger terminal was effectively an area of Army tents and duckboarding next to the south side of the Bath Road.

The tents were replaced later by prefabricated buildings. The first control tower was a crude brick building of 3 storeys, plus 2 huts on its flat roof.

In 1952, the news that everyone associated with Croydon airport had been dreading, was finally made public.

It was to be closed.

However, it continued as the UK's number two airport for a number of years, until the redevelopment of Gatwick in 1958.

Croydon eventually closed in 1959.

The last scheduled flight from Croydon departed at 18.15 on 30th September 1959, followed by the last aircraft (a private flight), at 19.45.

The airfield officially closed at 22.20.

Soon, the once-bustling airport became a rather sad place. Buildings started to fall into disrepair and nature started to claim back the land and areas within the perimeters.

Predictably, the property parasites had it on their radar and eventually, most of the legendary site was built over.

Several roads were named after aviators and aircraft, notably, Spitfire, Hurricane and Brabazon.

The control tower, which now houses a visitor's centre - and the terminal building, now called Airport House, still remain - while a De Havilland Heron remains on display outside.

A memorial to those lost in the Battle of Britain is also close by.

I would have given my right arm to be part of that inspirational time, when commercial air travel was starting to develop. And Croydon was a key part of it.

There are a couple of old films about the airport, which you might find interesting after reading this article.

The first one was made by Shell in 1935 and shows a typical day at Croydon.

The second - a shorter film, is called The Last Flight Out - and covers the last flight from Croydon to Rotterdam.

The original stewardess on that flight is the lead presenter.

A Day In The Life   **The Last Flight Out**