

The City will soon have its own airport. As two rival airlines step up their fight to win the business, CLIVE EDWARDS reports on the controversy in the air – and on the ground

DOG FIGHT OVER DOCKLANDS

IT IS just as well that seven-year-old Matthew Orchard loves planes. By the end of this year they could be taking off and landing dozens of times a day just a few hundred yards from his classroom window.

Matthew's primary school, Drew Road in the Royal Docks, sits alongside the runway of London City Airport, now nearing completion in the heart of the East End. This week his classmates and teachers will get their first taste of the future when a plane swoops past the nearby tower blocks and low over the tarmac.

Two airlines are bidding for the lucrative business of flying City executives from London's newest airport, and they both want the privilege of the first flypast. Brymon Airways intends to fly one of its Dash 7 turbo-prop planes over the airport on Thursday for a naming ceremony with the Lord Mayor of London. But rival Eurocity Express has been secretly working against time to steal the glory. The airline's first Dash 7, painted in its new colours, is being rushed over

from New Zealand and it will be unveiled in a flight somewhere over London tomorrow.

This week's duel over Docklands is only the beginning. On March 10 both airlines will be going to the Civil Aviation Authority to bid for their route licences, and with such potentially profitable destinations as Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam at stake, it promises to develop into a real dogfight.

Concern over safety and tall buildings

The new airport, due to open in October, is already surrounded by controversy, with the suggestion that jets might one day land there. The original planning inquiry restricted operations to the environmentally acceptable Dash 7, a turbo-prop aircraft with Stol (Short Take-off and Landing) capability, and a steep angle of descent that helps reduce noise.

But Michael Bishop, the head of British Midland Airways, which owns Eurocity Express, has angered local

people by pushing hard for the British Aerospace 146 jet to be allowed into the airport in a few years' time. He has told the London Daily News that the runway is already long enough to take a 146 and that he is being encouraged to arrange a trial landing – which is bound to provoke a protest.

The building of the airport has deeply divided the local community. To the aviation world and the London Docklands Development Corporation it is a bold and imaginative venture that will provide City business people with a convenient airway to Europe just six miles from the Bank of England and cut their travelling time to Paris by a third.

But the local authority, Newham council, and many residents are worried about noise, safety and the disruption to the life of the community. How would you feel, they argue, if someone built an airport at the bottom of your garden?

For that is exactly what has happened. Unlike most other airports, where homes have gradually crept up to the perimeter, London City Airport has been carved out in the middle of an established community. The passenger pier and terminal apron where planes will start up and taxi is just over 50 yards from Drew Road school and local homes in Camel Road; the fuel dump is little more than 100 yards from a street of houses.

More noise but a promise of jobs

Protesters are worried at the prospect of planes flying so near to tower blocks, housing estates and heavy industry. There is even a 150 ft flour mill less than a mile from the west end of the runway and, depending on the result of a planning inquiry, there could be the proposed East London River Crossing – a bridge with 420 ft towers – to the east. "We feel there isn't much room between those two obstacles for any plane to come down safely should it get into difficulty," says Mrs Lil Hopes, chairwoman of the Campaign Against the Airport.

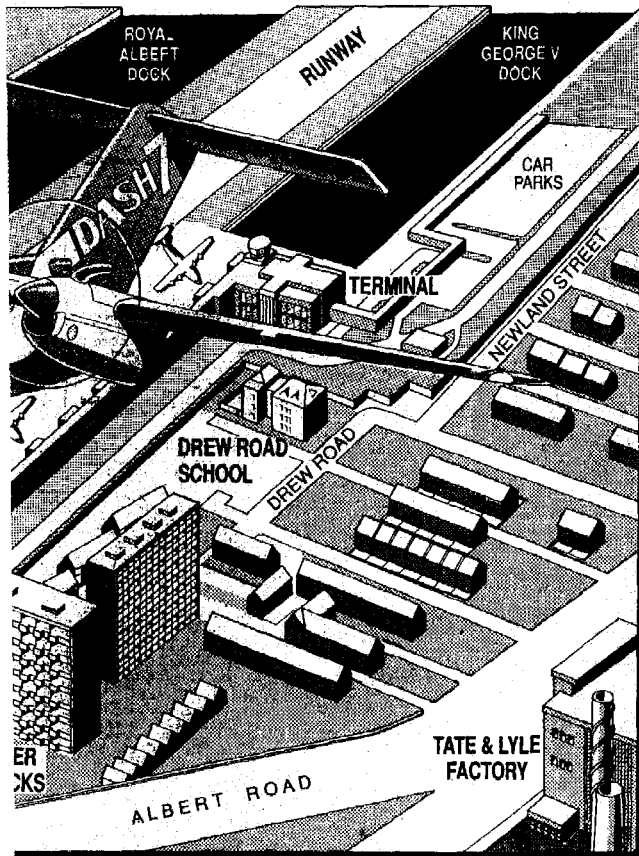
However, the promise of greater employment sways many local people. "If it brings more jobs and trade to Newham, why not?" says 55-year-old James Dooley, who lives in one of the tower blocks just 500 yards from the strip. "I don't mind a bit of noise."

The airport's supporters are already hinting at expansion. At a conference at the London Chamber of Commerce last week, Reg Ward, chairman of the LDDC, conceded that the current limits could eventually be changed. "They will be entirely determined by the local planning authority and local people's reactions," he said.

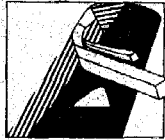
The people of Newham and the East End will then have a booming airport in their midst but, as one of them tartly observed, "Our problem is not cutting half an hour off the journey to Paris. It's waiting half an hour for the bus to go shopping in Canning Town."



A taste of the future: Matthew Orchard, aged seven, at Drew



Nose to nose: the rival airlines



EUROCITY EXPRESS was founded by Michael Bishop, of British Midland Airways, specifically for London City Airport.

ROUTES: It has applied for licences to Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, Rotterdam, Guernsey, Jersey, Düsseldorf and Manchester, and hopes to operate five aircraft.

FARES: Projected fares at the same business class level as Brymon is suggesting.

SERVICE: Eurocity claims its service will be "unobtrusively perfectionist". Free drinks, newspapers, hot meals, the same radio telephone service as Brymon.

THE FUTURE: Michael Bishop believes the best hope for long-term growth at the airport lies in the introduction of the BAe 146 jet. "The difference in noise between the Dash 7 and the 146 is just four decibels," he claims. "That's hardly detectable to the human ear. If it can be shown the noise level is the same, or slightly worse, then there won't be a case to argue."



BRYMON AIRWAYS pioneered the initial idea of a Docklands airport in 1982 and 1983, when it successfully landed a Dash 7 on Heron's Wharf on the Isle of Dogs. It already has considerable experience of the Dash 7 operation into its Plymouth base.

ROUTES: Brymon is applying for licences to Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam and Plymouth/Newquay, and hopes to operate three aircraft.

FARES: The same business class fares as British Airways - £196 return to Paris, £186 return to Brussels and £170 return to Amsterdam.

SERVICE: Brymon plans a "Cityclass" service including: passengers airborne within 20 minutes of arrival, radio telephones in flight, taxi and car hire bookings and "cordon bleu" service.

THE FUTURE: Charles Stuart, chairman of Brymon, is happy to operate with the 44-seat Dash 7 for the foreseeable future, and will not contemplate jets.

On the ground

LONDON City Airport has already made an impact on the lives of the teachers and 165 pupils at Drew Road primary school. Lorry rumble past the windows of headmaster David Donoghue's study, a powerhammer echoes in the background.

"We had to agree with the contractors when they would do the pile-driving," says Donoghue. "We didn't need a bell to tell us when to go home - they would just start up."

Mowlem, the airport developers, have promised sound insulation for the school, but Donoghue says: "I'm worried it won't be ready for October. Without sound insulation it could be impossible to teach."

Jill Watkins, a parent-governor, adds: "The planes are bound to disrupt the children's education at first."

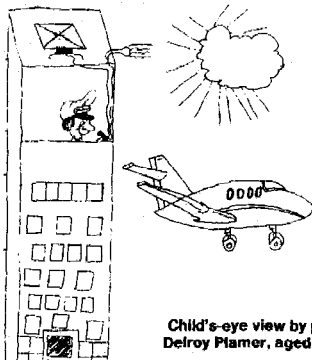
The headmaster accepts the present limit of 120 take-offs and landings on weekdays (40 at weekends) and the decision to allow only one type of plane, the

turbo-prop Dash 7. "But what happens when the Dash 7 is an archaic aircraft? What will replace it?"

There is also anxiety over the double-glazing package for local homes, which only applies to the roads closest to the airport. "I've just been informed that we're not going to get double-glazing," says Mrs Watkins, who lives in Parker Street. "It's ridiculous. We're only 400 yards away."

Mrs Julie Clayton, a neighbour, says: "I'd like to be re-housed. My husband works nights, and if we don't have double-glazing, he won't sleep."

The MP for Newham South, Nigel Spearing, is more forthright: "The aircraft will be parked within 150 ft of people's back doors in Camel Road. It's scandalous. Even with the sound-proofing it's unacceptable and hazardous. No-one in the LDDC would put up with that in their back yards. Why should my constituents?"



Child's-eye view by pupil Delroy Plamer, aged nine

