

UK NEWS

Michael Donne charts the progress of work at London City Airport Docklands stands by for take-off

TOWARDS THE end of October, ultra-quiet Dash Seven turboprop aircraft will start sweeping over the Thames in the colours of Brymon Airways and Eurocity Express, operators of the first regular services at the London City Airport.

The £30m private venture by John Mowlem, a construction company, is nearing completion on the disused wharf between the Royal Albert and King George V docks about six miles east of the City.

The airport is popularly called the Stolport—the first four letters stand for short take-off and landing—because the runway is only 2,500 ft long, which demands aircraft with exceptional short take-off and landing performance.

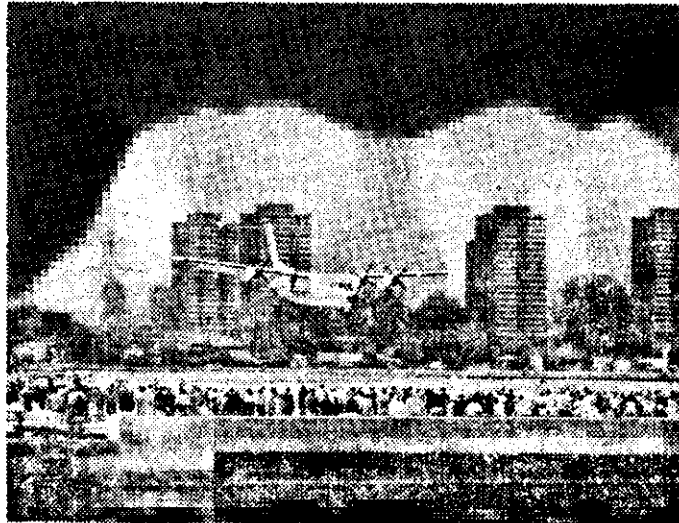
It is only one part of the multi-billion-pound development programme underway throughout Docklands, but it might have far greater significance than even its own planners dreamed, revolutionising air services between the UK and the near Continent.

It is being built with an ultimate capacity of at least 1.2m passengers a year, well below the level of other London airports but enough for the City business travellers it is initially expected to attract.

The runway, built on the central wharf between the two docks, stretches east to west on the north side of the river opposite Greenwich and Woolwich.

Test flights have already taken place using the Dash Seven four-engined, 50-seater airliners built by de Havilland Aircraft of Canada that will operate the scheduled flights. Specialist aircraft from the Civil Aviation Authority have also tested to ensure that the runway meets safety requirements.

The apron where the aircraft



Trevor Humphries

Eurocity Express comes in to land at Docklands

will load and unload is complete, as is the spacious terminal building, with the control tower in one corner. One outstanding job is to erect plenty of road signs showing the way to the airport: it is difficult to find.

Mowlem's workers and other contractors are completing the internal structural work, and the installation of electrical and other systems. They are confident that they will get it all finished in time for the start of passenger flights.

Already the two airlines, Brymon, in which British Airways has a 40 per cent stake, and Eurocity Express, set up by the British Midland group specially to use the Stolport, have moved in and are planning for the start of their services.

Both have been licensed to fly in competition between the Stolport and Amsterdam, Brussels and Paris, with Brymon also licensed for Plymouth and

Newquay, and Eurocity for additional routes to Dusseldorf, Rotterdam, Guernsey, Jersey and Manchester.

It is unlikely that all those services will start at the same time in October: neither airline will have enough aircraft and crews for that, because a strike at de Havilland Canada has delayed Dash Seven deliveries. Paris seems likely to be the first destination served.

Eurocity Express has two Dash Sevens and will eventually have five, while Brymon has two with a third to come. Both airlines will soon announce timetables and start ticket sales campaigns, and Brymon has already started visiting business houses to outline its plans.

There is clearly room for more operators at the Stolport, and some Continental-based airlines may fly there. One, Air Vendee of France, is studying the position, while Eurocity already has an agreement to fly

services on behalf of Sabena of Belgium.

For the present, Dash Sevens are the preferred aircraft: they are quiet, have exceptional short take-off and landing performances, and can use the Stolport without disturbing local communities.

Any other aircraft allowed there will have to demonstrate comparable capabilities.

One that fits the bill is the British Aerospace 146 four-engined jet airliner, which has the appropriate Stol performance and is claimed to be the quietest jet airliner flying. Another is the West German Dornier 228, which Manx Airlines is studying for possible use on domestic routes.

A problem that might affect future types of aircraft using the airport is the long-term plan for a suspension bridge with tall towers for the new East London River Crossing, just downstream from the end of the runway—a potential hazard for aircraft with inadequate Stol performance, although the plans provide for a runway extension to allow clearance.

Eurocity has made alternative proposals either for a bridge without towers, or for a tunnel, which it says could be built for the same money. Those ideas are now being examined as part of the overall public planning inquiry into the crossing, the inspector's report on which is due early next year.

However, by the time any such crossing is approved and constructed, the Stolport will have been in use for several years and have established itself in the overall London area airports pattern. It is set to play a key role in providing the City with fast communications with the Continent.