

UK NEWS

Steve Fidler takes a trip to Paris from London's Stolport

Chocks away at the City Airport

THE TAXI driver's decisiveness had evaporated quickly. Asked to make his way to the new City Airport, where in one hour I was due to take off for Paris, he headed eastwards with conviction. Two minutes later, he asked me if I knew where it was.

'Is it off the Silvertown Road?' he ventured. I was unable to help, my East End geography being only slightly superior to my knowledge of lunar topography.

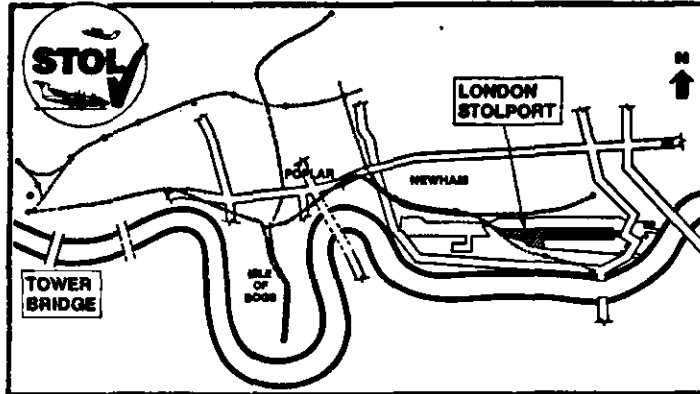
A conference with another cab driver outside the Bank of England established that Silvertown Road was indeed our destination. Even committed East Enders, one imagines, would own that the taxi ride that followed would be no candidate for the Scenic Tour of Britain competition.

Sociologists might disagree. The old East End sits cheek by jowl with the new; decaying Victorian terraces next to the post-modernist homes of the newly rich with the benefit of better views over a muddy river.

The journey takes us past the high-rise blocks of the 1960s, dwarfing a solitary two-storey end-of-terrace house, converted into a pub called The House They Left Behind, then past ranks of disused cranes and the Royal Victoria Docks. A sign declares 'Demolition Works in Advance of Infrastructure Works'. The airport is lit up like a vast sports field.

It took 40 minutes from Cannon Street, in spite of the traffic that clogs the narrow streets at that time of day, and cost £13 including tip.

At the airport, the atmosphere is less frantic. One enters a cavernous building where a score or so of people are wandering around. It presents a stark contrast with Heathrow - if you like your airports frenzied, this is not for you. With or without luggage, passengers can check in 15 minutes before de-



parture for the flights to Paris - there are six every weekday - and, in spite of the uncertain start, I arrived with 20 minutes to spare.

The newest international air service from the UK - it started a week ago - displays an air of an era one imagines existed before airline passengers became a commodity. Perhaps part of that was because everybody was trying harder in Week One, and the airport staff and airline employees had not yet been subjected to the pressures that harden the countenances of many of their counterparts at the other London airports.

Yet, in the modest departure lounge, it was rather pleasant when the loudspeaker system apparently broke down and a young woman, barely audible because of a frog in her throat, announced time for embarkation.

The atmosphere was not broken by walking out on to the asphalt and up the steps of the aircraft. The Canadian-built De Havilland Dash 7 is the only aircraft Brymon Airways is permitted to use from the City Airport because it is so quiet. However, many of the people who live nearby apparently believe it is only a matter of time before noisier jets are allowed.

Presumably flying lower has its disadvantages - being no aviation expert I was unsure whether flying at 13,000 ft meant we were in, under or over the weather. However, paid-up members of the White Knuckle Club will be pleased to hear that in the absence of much weather, the flight was extremely comfortable.

There are drawbacks. One is a phenomenon known as tray creep. This is when the vibrations of the plane result in the gradual movement of food trays towards the edge of the tables and the laps of passengers.

These are of course but trifles. The landing in Paris was uneventful, and we were there in 65 minutes, 15 minutes earlier than scheduled. Through immigration and customs, we were outside the arrival building at Terminal 2 at Charles de Gaulle Airport 70 minutes after take-off. While there is more time in the air than on the competing services from Gatwick and Heathrow, that must be balanced against time savings on the ground. Non-members of the White Knuckle Club may well find there is enough time airborne to get some work done.

The general view of other passengers appeared positive, too. 'Much better than I expected,' said one apparently seasoned traveller to the cabin staff.

Two other passengers - from British Rail's engineering subsidiary - also enjoyed the flight. Loyal clients of their employers, though, they had decided to take the train to Silvertown and were forced to walk over what they described as a building site to get to the airport.

That problem should be cured fairly shortly, although it sounds no journey to make with a heavy suitcase. Eventually, it is hoped that the docklands light railway will be able to deliver passengers to the airport's doorstep.

Four huge propellers are sited on engines that hang beneath the wings. Of the 46 seats, all but 10 are taken, most of them by businessmen who judging by their reading material are British rather than French. The engines strike up one after the other and we are already in motion, after leaving precisely on time, before the third and fourth propellers are spinning.

As we sit on the runway, the propellers spin faster, the plane judders, the brakes are released and it accelerates. After a few moments - this is a short take-off and landing airport - we are airborne, heading east. The aircraft banks right and through the starboard port-hole, in the direction of the setting sun, a lone water skier cuts through the placid waters of a disused dock.

Over the river, it is only minutes before one passes the M25 London ring road, a ribbon of moving lights as far as one can see. In the daytime, presumably most of south-east England is visible.

The aircraft does not fly as high as jets - we were over the English Channel before we reached cruising altitude of 13,000. That means, on a clear day, good views out of all the windows.