

Airport hits a tall storey

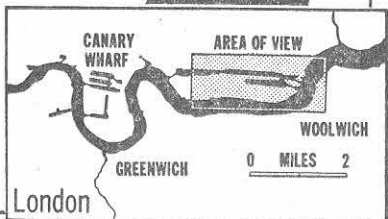
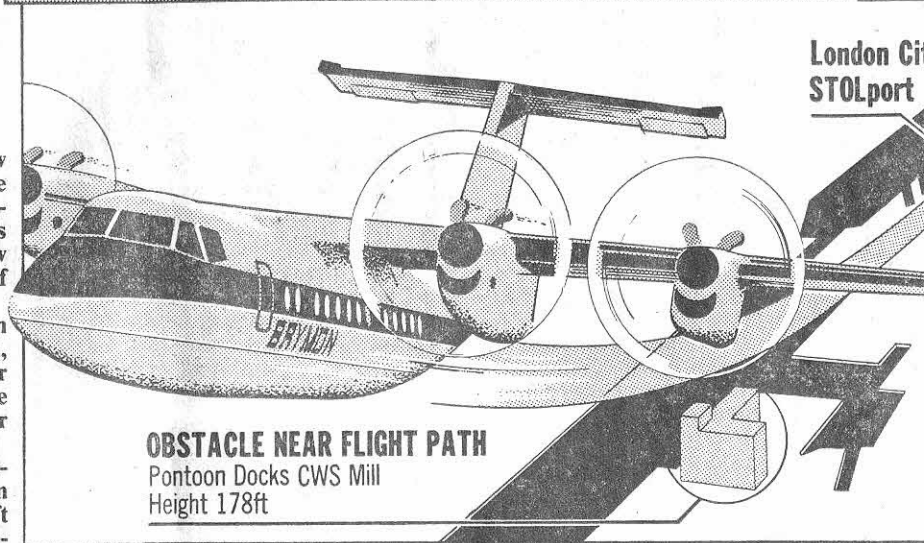
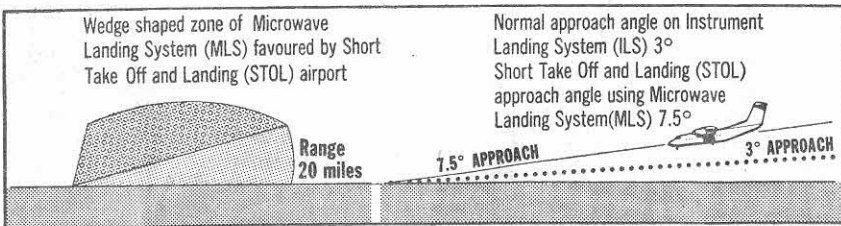
DISAGREEMENT over how incoming aircraft would be guided clear of planned high-rise development in London's docklands has cast new uncertainty over the future of the planned City airport.

With airport construction due to begin later this month, it is still not clear how, or from which direction, the aircraft will be brought in for landings.

Use of a preferred high-technology navigation system which can guide aircraft through steep, curved descents is likely to be abandoned because the system has not been fully tested by the Civil Aviation Authority.

Instead the airport is likely to be fitted with a standard instrument landing system (ILS) of the type in use at most other British airports. But the ILS has not been used to bring in aircraft at the steep angles that will be necessary in the docklands to minimise noise and to steer clear of high buildings.

Aircraft will have to avoid the towers of a new bridge to be built over the Thames; they will rise more than 350 ft at a point barely a half-mile from the east end of the planned runway at the Royal



Docks. Off the west end is a mill building at the Victoria Docks which stands at 178 ft, and beyond that will rise the proposed 870 ft office towers at Canary Wharf on the Isle of Dogs.

The £18m airport (actually a Stolport, for short take-off and landing) was given detailed planning approval in February. It aims to be operational within 18 months, eventually handling a million passengers a year — principally business travellers from the City, just six miles away.

The only craft using the airport initially will be the highly manoeuvrable 50-seat

Dash-7 of Plymouth-based Brymon Airways. The aeroplanes will have to descend at an angle of 7.5 degrees, more than twice as steep as the standard approach of three degrees used at Heathrow and most other airports.

Brymon and Mowlem, the airport contractor, prefer a new microwave landing system (MLS) which uses a fan-shaped signal beam to guide in aircraft on a variety of curving or steep approaches. Says a Mowlem spokesman: "It allows the aircraft greater manoeuvrability. It can make the approach at a later point than with the ILS."

The CAA, however, could

not be persuaded to speed up its approval tests of the MLS, which is expected to become the standard landing aid by the mid-1990s, and Mowlem has refused a request by Brymon to install one anyway, pending its approval.

The developments mean that the City airport will have to rely on the standard ILS, which directs a pencil-like beam at the incoming aircraft and is only able to lock the craft on to a straight approach, not a curving descent. Nor has the ILS been used before in guiding landings at approaches steeper than three degrees.

Mowlem insists that the problem has not cooled its enthusiasm for the project, and says that construction of the terminal building will begin on schedule this month.

The CAA has confirmed, however, that it will not grant an aerodrome licence until it is satisfied that the navigation aids can cope with the buildings in the area.

In addition, air traffic controllers have still not decided where and how the aircraft going in and out of the new airport will fit into London's complicated traffic system.

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