

In celebration of London City Airport's 21st anniversary, we asked journalist Malcolm Ginsberg to reflect on the early years of the airport.

March 1982. London was its usual self. Wet, dull and miserable. I was in my then City office.

The phone rang. It was Bill Bryce, owner and managing director of Brymon Airways. At that time Brymon were an up and coming British regional carrier and had just taken delivery of the first UK-registered 50-seat de Havilland Canada Dash 7 short take-off and landing aircraft.

“Be a good fellow and pop down to Heron Quays and see if we can land an aircraft there,” he said in his New Zealand drawl. Herons Quays I thought to myself. That is south of Whitechapel. Docklands. Or dying Docklands by then.

Created by Maggie Thatcher's incoming Conservative government the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) had been tasked with rejuvenating a part of East London that appeared to have no future. Under the energetic leadership of Reg Ward the LDDC took over and an 8.5 square mile area of East London, nominally called “The Docklands” including parts of Newham, Tower Hamlets and Southwark. The task: to turn it into a 21st century mini-city. London City Airport and Canary Wharf are lasting tributes to Reg Ward and his innovative team.

Heron Quays, now the site of Heron Quays DLR station in the Canary Wharf Estate, was about 1000 metres long with the remains of a long disused warehouse still in evidence. Mowlem, the builders and developers of the site, said that it could be cleared and roughly surfaced for a test landing. The Civil Aviation Authority was prepared to offer a special licence, essential for insurance purposes. On 27 June 1982 the late Captain Harry Gee landed a Brymon Dash 7 on the site, filmed for posterity by ITV's then popular News At Ten. The concept of an inner London airport was proven.



The late Captain Harry Gee

Things moved quickly. The nearby King George V Dock was also redundant and planning permission was sought for a STOLport (short take-off and landing airport). A 63-day public enquiry ensued. The inspector, Montague Smith, and his technical expert Air Vice Marshal B. P. Young, requested a demonstration flight and on 30 June 1983 Harry Gee returned with the Dash 7 to Heron Quays. The inspector and his assistant became the first ever passengers in a large transport aircraft out of the London docks in a demonstration flight that also flew over the proposed airport site. Brymon even supplied air hostesses to look after the two passengers.



HRH Prince of Wales laid the foundation stone

In spite of objections by the then leader of the GLC, Ken Livingstone, in February 1986 planning permission was achieved. Things moved forward quickly. Michael Spicer, Transport Minister at the time officially launched construction work and Prince Charles came down to the Silvertown site for the first time to lay the foundation stone. The airport opened and the first commercial flight to Plymouth took off on 26 October 1987. It was officially opened by Queen Elizabeth II on 5 November 1987. After a variety of names were considered it was called London City, not initially due to its proximity to London's business centre but because the wife of Brymon's then chairman, Charles Stuart, was a former pupil of The City of London School for Girls and thought the connection appropriate.

In those early days getting to the airport was not easy. There was no direct surface access from the City and the all important North Circular Road (A406) and North East London, and arrivals by train needed to take the grim North London Line railway to Silvertown and find their way through an intimidating local housing estate. The most popular way was a dedicated catamaran from Charing Cross to the disused Charringtons pier and then by bus to the airport. It was a pleasing, if somewhat slow, route and lost a great deal of money for Mowlem, the main investor into the project.

In 1988, the first full year of operation, the airport handled 133,000 passengers. The main scheduled flights were operated to and from Paris and Amsterdam by Brymon (with British Airways money behind it) and London City Airways, an offspring of bmi.

With a runway of only 762 metres in length, and a glideslope of 7.5 degrees, the airport could only be used by a very limited number of aircraft types, principally the Dash 7 and the smaller Dornier 228. In 1989, the airport submitted a planning application to extend the runway to 1199 metres, allowing the use of a larger number of aircraft types.

In 1990 London City handled 230,000 passengers, but the figures fell drastically after the Gulf War and did not recover until 1993 when 245,000 people departed and arrived. By this time an extended runway had been approved and opened by Princess Diana (on 5 March 1992). At the same time the glideslope was reduced to 5.5 degrees, still steep for international operations, but opening up the airport to a greater range of aircraft to serve the airport, including the BAe 146 regional jet liner and its AVRO development. The Airbus A318 and Embraer 190 series are both expected to provide aircraft capacity in the future, with the AVRO series aircraft no longer in production.

By 1995 passenger numbers reached the half million mark and LCY, the official International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) code for the airport, had a new owner, Irish businessman Dermot Desmond.

Desmond paid £23m. When he sold London City in 2006 the passenger numbers were in the 2.3 million region and the selling price was thought to be around £740 million. We don't know if the deal included free landing for his private jet but one thing is clear, the use of the airport by business aircraft has been a bonus and now makes up 15% of all operational movements.

Who would have guessed in 1982 that just 30 years later there would be a true international airport in the Royal Docks, and that for a short period it will be probably the most important landing strip in the whole world. Roll on the 2012 Olympics. Stratford International is just four miles down the road.

Malcolm Ginsberg was the award winning public relations manager for Brymon Airways during the conception and introduction of London City Airport. After a long career as both publicist and writer regarding air travel, today he is still a very active journalist and consultant on aviation matters.

To discover more about London City Airport's rich history, visit the airport's consultative committee web site at <http://www.lcacc.org>