

Battersea gets a makeover



The old heliport has become 'London's Vertical Gateway', as **Pat Malone** reports

Here's the good news – the landing fee for a Robinson R22 at Battersea Heliport has been slashed by £200. And here's the bad news. It's now £350, plus £300 an hour to park, and you might not get a slot anyway. Battersea, now more correctly called London Heliport, has undergone a transformation. It's all high-end stuff now, with proper executive facilities and a 70-bedroom five-star hotel on site. The old pier-and-Portakabin days are gone. So, unfortunately, are the days of the owner-pilot popping into town for a meeting, unless his business is doing uncommonly well.

No blame for this situation attaches to the owners PremiAir – indeed we have them to thank for the fact that there's a heliport in London at all. But they are operating under such extraordinary constraints that despite their prices, it's questionable whether there's a free-standing business at 'London Heliport' at all. Only the complex symbiosis of the heliport, the charter business and the hotel (PremiAir is owned by Von Essen Hotels) makes it viable.

PremiAir invited a mob of hacks to see the new London Heliport in the week before the Farnborough Air Show, and very impressive it is, too. In fact, the 'opening' was all a bit previous; they might have hoped to get it up and running for Farnborough, but they were still building the control tower and ATC was housed in a truck sitting on one of the spots. The quadruple-glazed Hotel Verta won't be open until September or October, and if you want to sample it there will be introductory offers of £150 a night... get them while you can. In true Von Essen style, it's absolutely fabulous. Just don't bring your helicopter unless you're feeling flush – pre-booked parking for 24 hours is £680 for a Squirrel. Plus VAT.

Battersea Heliport has been around for 51 years. It was opened in 1959 by Westlands, and older helicopter pilots can attest to the fact that you could land there and park all night, and sometimes they'd forget to send you a bill at all. As recently as 2002 I took a student into Battersea in an R22 for a familiarisation flight and a briefing from ATC, and the landing was free. How times change.

The main problem is that London Heliport operates under a cap of 12,000 movements imposed by Wandsworth Council. That's

6,000 in and 6,000 out, or just 16 landing fees a day on which to survive. There's a small but strong local anti-heliport lobby who believe the only helicopters flying should be those that might benefit them personally; the heliport is allowed unlimited EMS and police flights, most of which are outside the movement cap and are not charged for. The movement cap is so politically sensitive that PremiAir's MD David McRobert declines to discuss it. But the local area has gone from grimy-industrial to top-end riverside residential in the lifetime of the heliport, which does not help the cause.

The heliport might have been turned into housing had PremiAir not bought it in 2007 from Weston Homes – PremiAir was concerned that its loss might kick the knees out from under its charter business and made the purchase as a defensive move. It operates

Above right: Von Essen's five-star Hotel Verta seen from the landing platform
Right: the London Heliport seen from the penthouse balcony of the Hotel Verta

Sikorsky S76s and AS355s and is increasingly moving into the fixed-wing business with a fleet of LearJet 45s; some 40 percent of London heliport users are interlining with bizjets at Farnborough, Oxford, Luton or elsewhere. The observant will note that Battersea is not in The City; PremiAir is looking at a number of ways to streamline ground transport, including investing in fast boats.

The heliport takes the rap for every peep made by every machine on the London Heliroutes, from military Chinooks sightseeing down the Thames to R22s annoying the crowd at the Globe Theatre when they're held by London City. In fact, of the 27,300 helicopter movements over London in 2009, 71 percent had nothing to do with the heliport. One in four movements are police and medical; the most complained-of, those which operate at low level at night and circle over one place for long periods, are all police. In the public mind, they're all laid at the heliport's door. Battersea bumped up against its movement cap in 2006 and 2007, but the recession meant it had some headroom in 2008 and 2009.

Battersea remains the only game in town for helicopter access. There have been many

Left: the riverside homes of noise-sensitive millionaires have replaced the warehouses

alternative proposals – in the 1990s the British Helicopter Association identified eight points along the river that could quickly be turned into useful heliports, from Gallions Point next to London City up to Battersea itself. But politicians react to helicopters like vampires react to sunlight, and there has been no progress on any of them. The most sensible solution, allowing helicopters into London City Airport, has few friends.

Can the 2012 Olympics change things? David McRobert is hopeful but pessimistic. "I'd like to see new heliports because they'd be great for the charter business, but there are so many obstacles to overcome that I'd be pleasantly surprised if anything comes of the current Department for Transport consultation (on possible Olympic helicopter use)," he says. "Helicopter access is essential for



businesses in a city that purports to be a world leader in finance; we do ourselves no favours as a capital and as a country by making it so difficult. Noise issues are at the forefront of our mind; we are involved with manufacturers in creating quieter helicopters, we are part of the BHA's noise action group, and we have stringent noise abatement procedures which we police rigorously. We have made a big investment in the London Heliport, which plays a small but vital role for London and the UK. The greatest challenge is the false perception that helicopters are the toys of the rich rather than the tools of the successful." ■