



Playing with the big boys

'London Southend' airport is aiming high but promises there'll always be a place for GA, as Pat Malone reports

Southend Airport is coming up in the world. In recent times it has mirrored the state of Southend seafront – cracked, rusting and redolent of long-faded glory. Today it's being rebuilt from the ground up. The runway's been extended, there's a new terminal building, railway station, hotel and control tower, and construction continues around the clock. All it's taken is a £100 million cash injection from some smart business chappies who don't spend money without expecting to see a fabulous return – easyJet starts flying from Southend this month and there are Big Plans for the Future.

Where does this leave general aviation? Unlike America, Britain has a bad track record of coexistence between Commercial Air Transport and general aviation; regional airports that get scheduled traffic have generally priced out, or forced out, 'little aeroplanes'. The business model changes – when you can fill your shops with

punters whose pockets are bulging with holiday cash, when you can get a thousand cars in your car park at ten quid a day, when you sell fuel in 20,000-litre loads, a landing fee for a PA-28 is almost too much trouble to take, especially as the pilot wants some services for his money.

Can Southend buck the trend? Can the business imperatives of an owner and operator be reconciled with the realities of general aviation? According to the new people at Southend, there's no reason why not. They talk the talk, but there are GA users who are profoundly worried about the future, and there are GA users who have already upped sticks. Southend could become an exemplar of co-operation across the aviation spectrum, or it could be another lost opportunity.

Southend – 'London Southend' to you – is owned by Stobart Group, a company known to most for its green lorries, but which covers a vast spectrum of activities from rail to ports to civil engineering to

commercial property and renewable energy. Only nine years ago it was a loss-making freight company; a take-over by William Stobart and Andrew Tinkler set the company on the road to extraordinary expansion and fabulous riches. Their eye for a bargain fell on Southend in 2008; they bought it for £21 million and have ploughed almost £80 million more into it. Stobart owns a piece of the Irish airline Aer Arann, which flies from Southend to Waterford, it has a link-up with Aer Lingus which lets you fly to Dublin and on to New York having cleared US immigration in Ireland, which is very attractive if you've ever stood in a New York immigration queue, and easyJet is moving three aircraft from Stansted with the intention of running 70 services a week. With its new airport rail station, Southend is just 40 minutes from the Olympic stadium, it's H24 and it's laying plans for saturation use by business jets during the period of the Games. What's not to like?



Left: new terminal, new prefix – ‘London Southend’ is one hour from Liverpool Street

Above: Southend’s runway extension opens up Europe to commercial flights

Right: coming soon... easyJet promo at London Southend Airport railway station

The flying schools at Southend have been looking askance at this frenetic activity. Two of them, Willow Air and Seawing, were required to move premises to allow for new car parking; Willow Air threw in the towel and quit the business. The airfield closed for three weekends to install lighting, and for four days to get the new ILS right; very bad for business. The landing fee for a 152 went up to £27. Now it turns out that the new aircraft parking for Seawing and Southend Flying Club sits inside the buffer zone for the instrument approach and they'll have to be moved... are these just niggles, or do we see a pattern here?

Jonathan Rayner, Stobart Air’s Head of Business Development at Southend, says not; there’s no reason why general aviation should not continue to thrive at Southend forever, even when the management has achieved its goal of putting two million passengers a year through the airport. We met in company with George Capon, Virgin



pilot, instructor, examiner, member of the AOPA Instructors Committee and Southend aviator for almost 30 years. Coincidentally, both he and Jonny Rayner are gliding instructors at Wethersfield; Rayner is a C category instructor on TMGs and harbours ambitions to own an RV-6. He’s proud of the progress made so far at Southend and has an expansive vision of the near future; that two million number should be up by

2020.

To put it in perspective, Stansted handles almost ten times as many pax (although they’ve lost five million to the recession) and Heathrow does 70 million, so we’re not talking about Southend regaining its status as Britain’s third-busiest airport, which it was in the 1960s and early 1970s. Jonny Rayner says easyJet’s contribution will take annual

movements up to 53,000 but they were already 42,000 in 2008, so it's not a step change in pure numbers. The limiting factor is runway length; Stobart have extended TODA to a declared 1779 metres, which makes it legal to run passenger flights in narrowbodies almost anywhere in Europe, but nothing bigger than a 757 can lift a paying passenger out of Southend. And that, theoretically, leaves plenty of capacity for GA.

"We will always be a Code C aerodrome," says Rayner. (Code C means there are performance limits or other considerations that restrict use.) "We don't pretend we're going to overtake Gatwick, so there'll always be a welcome for GA."

You want to believe him, you really do. But it takes an awful lot of £27 landing fees to pay back the kind of investment we see at Southend, especially when the company plans to move into an operating profit within the first year. Jonathan believes £40 looks like a good number for a landing fee, and he differentiates between flight training, particularly IFR, and plain vanilla VFR traffic of the sort you'd get at Southend in summers gone by. "Training at the clubs here demonstrates a certain level of resilience and is fairly predictable," he says. "VFR leisure flying up the Thames Estuary has



Above: new control tower – built for Stobart Air, project-managed by Stobart Rail
Below: GA meets CAT as George Capon (left) and Jonathan Rayner talk business

fallen away, and we expect that trend to continue."

For the moment the airport is running a charm offensive with general aviation

which includes encouraging its air traffic controllers to be extra-helpful. Although they're not confirming it, they intend to apply for Class D airspace – they've got temporary Class D for the Olympics but it will be removed the day the Games ends. Southend used to have Class D but it was taken away in the early 1980s when traffic volumes fell off a cliff. Now, they want it back. Attitudes to Class D differ; promises that transits would never be refused without good reason have not been kept at places like Southampton and Stansted, where much depends on which side of bed the controller got out of. At Southend, EZ will drop out of the London TMA at 3,500 and make a final approach through 'bandit country', and even though they've got dual channel radar they don't like it. The increase in CAT comings and goings in Class G worries nearby airfields like Stapleford, too. And where EZ are starting with three aircraft at Southend, there's talk of moving up to ten. Is Class D the only solution? Good

for a pub argument, but I'd wager it's a done deal.

Southend's engagement with GA includes setting up a pilots' forum with some high-powered representatives on it; Murray Taylor, an aviation consultant who's been heavily involved from the beginning, and George Hutton, easyJet's base manager, who also happens to be a GA pilot flying from Andrewsfield. The flying clubs have written some SOPs and have submitted them to the airfield, and there's reason to believe they'll be looked upon kindly. There's also a monthly users meeting, a Consultation Committee which involves everyone from the top-end maintenance provider ATC Lasham – Southend's biggest customer – down to the little chaps with little planes and littler margins. Jonny Rayner says: "We intend to show general aviation how flexible and accommodating we can be; there is ample capacity, more than enough aircraft parking, no handling charges and we're open all day and night, every day. There's no reason why GA shouldn't be part of our success."

It's going to be interesting to see how things pan out. Southend airport has its commercial imperatives, but there has to be a realisation that GA is one of the foundation stones on which the whole aviation industry rests, and it can't simply be left to someone else to sustain it. We will follow its progress with keen interest. ■

