

Southend's



new lease of life

*It calls itself 'London Southend Airport' and it has ambitious plans for the future, as **Pat Malone** reports*

Exciting times at Southend Airport – new owners, new terminal under construction, new railway station next door, planning application lodged for a runway extension that would let some of the big boys in with holiday jets. Usually when this sort of thing happens at an airfield the general aviation operators start to get a little nervous, and with good reason – from Edinburgh to Southampton we've seen GA priced out or kicked off when airports started dreaming of landing some crumbs from Heathrow's table...

But at Southend, the little guys are sanguine; they have a solid relationship with the airport, they have been consulted and facilitated in the expansion planning, and the airport has a long history of peaceful cohabitation between commercial and GA activity. Their worries are the same as

And of course, this recession has reinforced the fact that they can't afford to neglect any revenue stream."

Peter Preston, a director of Southend Flying Club, adds: "As a GA airfield Southend has everything going for it – 24-hour operation, giving pilots great flexibility, particularly for night flying; an ILS approach onto runway 24, NDB approaches onto both 24 and 06, with both radar and procedural services available, full ATC services provided by effective, friendly controllers, some of whom are experienced flyers. It offers GA flight briefing facilities in the terminal with helpful staff who can assist with flight plans, weather and so forth, and they'll also help you arrange hotels and car hire – and don't forget, there's an excellent coffee shop, too. We've got four flying clubs providing fixed-wing and helicopter training, and GA

maintenance facilities. It's a great place to train, and to visit."

I must say, when I was sitting in North London deciding where to learn to fly back in 1984, Southend never crossed my mind, I don't know why – it was as accessible as any other London-area airfield. I flew there on my qualifying cross country (and to Ipswich, of blessed memory) and Southend has the singular advantage of being dead easy to find. And of course, it is inextricably linked with some of the great aviation names – Freddie Laker was a Southend boy, and Mike Keegan's British Air Ferries operated from here. There's been an airport at Southend since 1914, when the Royal Flying Corps began training at RFC Rochford; the RNAS later flew against Zeppelins from what was known as RNAS Rochford, but it was returned to farmland in 1920. An airfield was re-established at Rochford in 1931 before the current site was chosen for Southend Municipal Aerodrome in 1935, and was appropriated as RAF Rochford during the Second World War. Back in municipal hands in 1946 it became the home base of Freddie Laker's Aviation Traders Ltd, later subsumed into British United Airways. Aviation Traders built the famous Carvair conversion of the DC4 at Southend, which was upgraded with tarmac runways in 1955. The 1950s and 60s might be seen as Southend's heyday, but plans are afoot to recreate similar levels of traffic. The Stobart Group bought the lease on the airfield in 2008 for £21 million, taking over from previous owners who had planning permission for the new terminal and railway station but lacked the financial punch to do more. Work has started on both, and the proposal to extend the runway to 1799 metres is encountering less public resistance than was feared. "A lot of local people say they wish they could fly on holiday from here," says Ian Chandler, "so there's a large sector of the public who welcome the plans." A cap on movements, agreed with the local council, is lower than the number of movements recorded in the early 1960s but much higher than anything currently thought necessary. Peter Preston says: "We have a good line of communication between all airfield residents and airport management and although changes are happening, we are kept informed of all developments and have been assured

Above: Southend Airport – the runway extension is planned for the far end, where a road must be re-routed

Right: Ian Chandler at Seawing Flying Club, which lies next to Southend's new railway station

everyone else's – when is this backbreaking recession going to end, when will the hours start to build, where will the new pilots come from?

Ian Chandler, chairman of Seawing Flying Club and a Southend-based pilot for more than 25 years, says: "The airfield has some of the best facilities in the country, and we're blessed with the driest weather in the UK. The new railway station at the terminal, which we expect will open next year, will bring us to within little more than 40 minutes of London, which greatly expands our catchment area. We have an excellent understanding with the management, who know that even if the runway extension is granted it will allow aircraft of up to 737-800 and A319 size to operate commercially from here, so there are limits on what airline services they can attract.



Right: Aviation Traders built the famous Carvair conversion of the DC4 at Southend

that there will always be a place for GA at Southend."

Southend has suffered from problems at the Ford Motor Company, which has research facilities all over Essex as well as the car plant at Dagenham. As part of the US bailout of the company it was forced to divest itself of its aviation assets, including an Avro 146 that shuttled between Cologne and Southend – it's now mothballed on the airfield and Ford are still paying the lease costs, but they also have to pay for their people to fly scheduled. Ford is a major employer in south east Essex and hard times in the car business translate into less traffic at Southend Airport and tighter margins at the flying clubs.

Southend is a first-choice diversion for London City and often takes Dorniers, F50s, 146s and business jets when the weather turns foul; it is said that Stobart's chief executive Andrew Tinkler discovered Southend when his Falcon 500 was diverted there. While Stobart Group now owns Southend, the other airfield associated with the company,



he's seen a few changes – but times are as challenging now as they have ever been. "We have about 160 members, which is down on our peak, but as a members-only club we have relatively low overheads, with no salaries to find," he says. The club has a pool of about ten part-time instructors and a CFI, Derek Bidwell, who is retired and works on flying hour payment. The fleet includes a Cherokee, a C182, two 152s and a C150 aerobat, and they've been around the circuit a few times – Ian Chandler recalls the day 21 years ago when he went to Stansted to collect one of the 152s after it had been imported from America.

is very popular, and of course Le Touquet and Calais, which is 35 minutes away.

"We do night and IMC ratings, and the occasional twin rating– there are very few UK airlines which don't have pilots trained at Seawing. We have people flying 747s for British Airways, easyJet and Ryanair training captains, and the other day one of our former students brought in a Thomson 737 for maintenance." The club used to train RAF cadets, some of whom are now flying fast jets in Afghanistan.

With 1600 metres of asphalt and all the trimmings, Southend students are spoilt rotten



Carlisle, is actually owned by Stobart Air, which in turn is personally owned by Tinkler and William Stobart, the parent company's chief operating officer. Ian Chandler has spoken to his opposite numbers at Carlisle, and they seem happy with the management of the airport, where major development work is in hand.

Apart from during the war, there has always been a flying club at Southend – indeed, the first was Southend Municipal Flying Club, founded by the local authority in 1935. 27 years ago Ian Chandler first started flying with Seawing Flying Club, then as now a small members-only outfit with five aircraft. Ian had fancied a career as a pilot, but he wore glasses, and in those days that was the end of the matter. So he very sensibly became a chartered accountant and made enough money to get a share in a PA28 and get the CAA IR he needed to use it on business.

Seawing used to be one of the civil service flying clubs – there was another at Biggin Hill – its name is a corruption of C-wing; the civil service effectively withdrew from the club in 1984. Ian has been chairman for 12 years, and was treasurer for 10 years before that, so

Above: Seawing's Cessna 150 aerobat, particularly popular because of its unusual paint scheme
Right: Seawing's Ian Chandler with the Cessna 152 he flew to Southend from Stansted 25 years ago

At Southend they have the advantage, says Ian, of being close enough to controlled airspace to make students fully aware of it, but not to be hedged about with it. "The TMA base is 3,500 feet here, and a few miles south it goes to 5,500. We give our students special briefings to keep them out of Stansted and Gatwick airspace – they don't go west of Earls Colne, which is due north of here, and if they're going south they don't go west of Bewl Water in Kent, which keeps them well clear of Gatwick. We're slightly affected by the new Stansted TMZ – the 152s don't have altitude encoding transponders – but so far, infringements have been very few and haven't been more of an issue here than anywhere else. Our people go mostly to Norwich, although that's getting very difficult and expensive now, to Seething, to Lydd, Headcorn



for landings, but Seawing members organise tours of grass strips around the country so there will be no nasty surprises when they get out on their own. "We've been all over the country," says Ian, "but this year we've gone to Panshanger and Great Oakley, staying closer to home because people aren't flying as much – hours are down about six percent this year, following a four percent drop last year. We've always had fly-outs to Le Touquet at Christmas and New Year, and Calais until they shut the restaurant, but the weakness of the pound has made the booze-run less attractive.

"But we shouldn't sound pessimistic – we're in good shape to weather the recession and we'll be stronger for it when we come out, and the developments at the airport will effectively increase our reach quite substantially. Anyone who lives in London and doesn't give Southend serious thought when deciding where to fly is missing an opportunity. We have a great deal to offer."

To start you off, Southend Airport is offering any visiting aircraft under two tonnes purchasing 50 litres of fuel at Southend during November and December a 50% discount on the normal landing fee. ■