



The History of Tasmania's West Coast Airstrips

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In the days of our early settlers, the opening of the West Coast proved a logistical nightmare. Thick bush, torrential rain and that friendly wind all the way from South America presented problems just surviving, but transportation was another thing. Roads were non-existent. However, as the various settlements were established and expanding, so too was the new mode of transport, "the aeroplane". As early as 1930, discussions were taking place to build an airstrip at Queenstown and so commenced the era of aviation that ultimately led to airstrips being constructed at Queenstown and Strahan. Today only the Strahan strip is still fully operational, but the two strips share an interesting history regarding the introduction of aviation to Tasmania's West Coast.

QUEENSTOWN

Whilst discussions relating to an airstrip at Queenstown commenced in the early 1930's, development of the airstrip was not a unanimous decision amongst the township's leaders, particularly when an estimated cost of 2,400 pounds (or approximately \$87,000 in today's terms) was announced. As such, development and construction occurred at a snail's pace, however assisted by Commonwealth grants, a single strip was completed in 1937 on an area known as Howards Plains.



TAHS File photo Queenstown Tasmania.

Problems immediately became apparent, none the least being Queenstown's frequently changing weather conditions that made landings somewhat of a challenge.

This was further highlighted on the 17th February, when a flight conducted by the DH 83 aircraft "Miss Currie", departed Smithton carrying an inspector from the Department of Civil Aviation. The aircraft became bogged after veering off the runway on landing in high winds,



THE HISTORY OF TASMANIA'S WEST COAST AIRSTRIPS

breaking a blade off the propellor. It became apparent further runways needed to be constructed to ensure safe take-offs and landings regardless of the wind direction.¹

On Saturday 04 June, commercial aviation arrived at Queenstown when Mr R Godsall, of Australian National Airways, flew his de Havilland Puss Moth from Cambridge. Several flights over the town were conducted on Saturday and more flights, including several landings at Howards Plains. were conducted on Sunday.²

In response to recommendations following the incident, additional grant funds were secured in 1938 for the provision of two additional runways, ensuring safe landings regardless of the direction of the wind.³

By 1939 the two runways had been completed and following the outbreak of World War 2, further works to the value of 1350 pounds were announced to extend both runways that would allow larger aircraft to operate, so as to maintain the area's role in the provision of materials in support of the war effort.⁴



An aerial view of Queenstown's airstrip in the 1970's. (Wikipedia)

Following the end of World War 2, the Tasmanian Government proposed a programme of intra-state aerial services and identified Queenstown as one of the destinations.⁵

A few limited services had commenced with an engineer named Mr Trevor Warner, claiming the right of being the first commercial passenger to alight at Queenstown on a flight from Smithton.⁶

In 1949 further proposals to introduce cargo and passenger flights to Launceston and Hobart from the mainland were contemplated. The aircraft to be used were war surplus Avro Ansons, but again concerns relating to safety were raised.



THE HISTORY OF TASMANIA'S WEST COAST AIRSTRIPS

Despite ongoing wartime upgrades, the ongoing question of safety of Queenstown's airport as a commercial operation was constantly raised. Serious doubts about Queenstown's unreliable weather, high probability of fog and the surrounding high terrain saw the suggestion that Strahan may well be an alternative airport to service the West Coast.

Queenstown's Municipal Council was split over the decision as to whether to use Strahan as their airport or conduct significant upgrades to the existing Howards Plain airfield. Further discussions resulted in deferring the decision, in 1950, to the commonwealth authorities.⁷

Ultimately the Department of Civil Aviation declined to grant a commercial license citing weather and terrain difficulties. In 1953 the Council sought a conditional license that would allow the airport to be used for emergency medical flights.⁸

By 1963 the Queenstown Municipal Council had taken over full ownership of the airfield and redevelopment work was underway on the runways and buildings under the Aerodrome Local Ownership Plan.⁹

From 1970, both Queenstown and Strahan were used for regular public transport flights, with Strahan being the alternate should Queenstown's weather conditions be unfavourable. Until around 1993 Airlines of Tasmania ran a service in and out of Queenstown to Essendon via Smithton and direct flights to Hobart.

Currently the airfield is still owned and operated by the Council although prior approval from the Council is required. The airfield may be used only in daylight hours at the pilot's own risk and by aircraft weighing less than 5,700kgs maximum take-off weight. As late as 2015, the airfield was used as an event site for motorsport activities.¹⁰

STRAHAN

In the early part of the 20th century Strahan was the second busiest port in Tasmania, used primarily to transport products mined at Queenstown and Zeehan. Little thought to the development of an airstrip was given until around 1937 when, as discussed in the history of Queenstown's airstrip, lengthy Council deliberations as to the need to upgrade the existing airfield at Queenstown or build a new complex at Strahan were undertaken.

At a Strahan council meeting, conducted in March 1937, Mr E C Butterfield of Australian National Airways, intimated that after conducting a flight over Strahan, the building of an airfield would not be difficult. Its position, unlike Queenstown, would be free from high terrain, fog and unfavourable weather.¹¹

In early 1950, Senator R Murray advised that the area west of Strahan could be developed into a first-class airfield. Preliminary surveys and meteorological observations showed that



THE HISTORY OF TASMANIA'S WEST COAST AIRSTRIPS

Strahan was the only suitable place for the establishment of an all-weather airstrip on the West Coast of Tasmania.¹²

During December 1950 the Minister for Air (Mr White) promised the Government would provide beacons and navigational aids for the aerodrome at Strahan if local authorities undertook the preliminary construction work.¹³

Around the same time a new player in Strahan's aviation history emerged. It was announced that on December 06 and 07 the Short Hythe flying boat of Trans Oceanic Airways would fly from Hobart, circle over Queenstown, then head to Strahan, where it would land on Macquarie harbour.¹⁴



File photo of a Short Hythe the civil version of the Sunderland aircraft used in World War 2.

Significant interest was shown in this project, given the estimate to construct a single runway was approximately 150,000 pounds or about \$3 million in today's value.

Whilst aircraft still operate from Macquarie Harbour conducting scenic flights, flying boat operations at Strahan did not eventuate and the aerodrome was the preferred option. With the days of flying boats becoming limited and more reliable navigational aids being developed, the Strahan airport became a reality.

The early predictions that an airport at Strahan was the suitable place that could solve the west coasts transportation difficulties, were to prove correct.



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THE HISTORY OF TASMANIA'S WEST COAST AIRSTRIPS



File photo: On short final runway 36 Strahan.

The Strahan airport, located a mere 3.5kms from the Strahan village, now consists of a sealed all-weather runway of 1,220 metres in length running north - south.

Pilot activated runway lighting (PAL), an approved instrument approach (RNAV) and full radio coverage with Melbourne's air traffic control, ensures safe operations can be conducted thus eliminating Queenstown's unpredictable weather and high terrain problems.



File photo of Strahan's Airport facilities facing southeast.

The airport, now owned and operated by the West Coast Council, has provided a facility which allows support for the West Coast.



Royal Flying Doctor Service aircraft regularly operate medical flights and helicopters operate scenic flights over the West Coast wilderness. From 2019 Par Avion commenced a thrice weekly return service from Hobart.¹⁵



File photo of Par Avion aircraft at Strahan Airport

The position and weather patterns precluded Queenstown's longevity as a commercial airport. A smaller airstrip at Zeehan closed some years ago. These sites attempted to provide facilities that could at least allow aircraft to fly medical evacuations, but failed to fulfill the role that Strahan now plays.

Aviation has played a large part in opening up Tasmania's West Coast wilderness.

¹ Advocate 18 February 1937

² Advocate 15 June 1937

³ Examiner 06 August 1938

⁴ Examiner 20 November 1939

⁵ Examiner 01 August 1946

⁶ Advocate 25 March 1946

⁷ Mercury 14 April 1950

⁸ Mercury 28 March 1953

⁹ National Library 28 August 1963

¹⁰ West Coast Council 27 February 2015

¹¹ Advocate 22 March 1937

¹² Examiner 17 Jan 1950

¹³ Trove 02 December 1950

¹⁴ Trove 29 November 1950

¹⁵ Advocate 26 March 2019