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# Southend Airport: 100 years on



How well do you know the history of Southend Airport?

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AN RAF Base, the third busiest runway in the country, a scene in a James Bond film, and a £120million transformation – [Southend Airport](#) has seen it all since 1914.

In 2013, the airport had its busiest ever year for commercial flights, but that would have seemed inconceivable a hundred years – or even a decade – ago.

Before the [Stobart Group](#) purchased the airport in 2008 and threw millions at making it a profitable business, the service had seen its heyday in the Fifties and Sixties, before falling into decline.

Now firmly established as one of the six major London airports with just under a million travellers in 2013, the airport has grown since its humble beginnings in 1914.

Southend historian Arthur Woodward, 72, of Bournemouth Park Road, Southend, said: “In the Fifties it was really busy – one of the biggest airports in the country – because package holidays were so popular then.

“But after a few of the operators went bust, it couldn’t compete with the bigger airports in London and they took over.

“It’s now gone back to being heavily industrialised, but that’s not a good thing.”

The airport was initially created as a flying base, and listed as a landing ground by the War Office in the First World War in 1914.

at Southend Airport was on May 31 in 1915 when Flight Sub Lieutenant A W Robinson took off in a Bleriot aircraft in a failed attempt to intercept a German Zeppelin.

Once the war had concluded, the airport was de-listed and it was dismantled in 1919.

Southend Council saw an opportunity and in 1933 purchased the land. Two years later, it was offering commercial flights to the likes of Norwich and Portsmouth, plus hourly travel to Rochester for the princely sum of 25p.

When the Second World War broke out, the RAF took over the airfield, renaming it [RAF Rochford](#) in 1939. Rochford entered the history books a year later when Sailor Malan, from the 74 Squadron, became the first single-seat pilot to shoot down an enemy aircraft at night.

The airfield saw a lot of action during the war. The area was bombed and a squadron of Spitfires were based there.

In 1947, the airport was returned to Southend Council and it reopened as Southend Municipal Airport, offering flights to Jersey.

But it was in the next two decades the airport really hit the big time, becoming the third biggest airport in the country, behind Heathrow and Manchester.

The likes of Air Charter Limited, run by Sir Freddie Laker, started offering flights around this time, as package holidays boomed in the post-war period.

Mr Laker's firm, among others, offered destinations such as Paris, Calais, Rotterdam, Jersey, and Guernsey, plus regional flights.

And it was in 1967 when the airport saw its highest ever annual numbers of 692,686 – a record unsurpassed until 2013.

With package deals losing their appeal and the rise of rival London airports, Southend declined through the Seventies and Eighties.

It still offered continental flights, but passenger numbers dipped to below 250,000 in 1975.

Despite offering small commuter services well into the nineties, the airport was seemingly in terminal decline and Southend Council sold it to Regional Airports Limited.

The airport still failed to really take off and the firm put it up for sale. The Stobart Group bought it for £21million in 2008, with a view to investing £100million.

After legal wrangling, including a judicial review, the runway was extended, with a new terminal and railway following by 2012, heralding a renaissance for the airport.

EasyJet is now firmly on board, offering flights to the likes of Amsterdam, Ibiza, Barcelona, Dublin, and Venice and Flybe signed on the dotted line in early 2014, offering a host of new routes.

The service has also given the local economy a major shot in the arm, with a £200million business park in the pipeline, and a retail precinct and Holiday Inn hotel directly outside the airport.

**maxell** says...

The service has also given the local economy a major shot in the arm, with a £200million business park in the pipeline, and a retail precinct and Holiday Inn hotel directly outside the airport.

I understand it is on record the airport bosses have said that regional airports cannot survive on passengers alone , hence I suspect that the airport will pocket rents ant rates, and recharge utilities from the airport business parks (aptly named), to prop up deficits, shouldn't money from the business parks go into the local economy and not a private business, making the tax payer pay once again, the only shot in the arm is that the local economy will not benefit from the parks but the airport will, yet the tax payer is likely to fund the 2 mill with zero return. my opinion as always