

Durham Tees Valley Airport

Durham Tees Valley Airport began life in 1941 as RAF Middleton St George. Following the closure of the RAF base in 1963, the Teesside local authorities bought the airfield and opened Teesside International Airport in 1964, renaming it Durham Tees Valley Airport in 2004.

In February 2012 the airport was in the ownership of Peel Investments (DTVA) Ltd with the Tees Valley Authorities and Durham County Council retaining a small minority shareholding.

With falling passenger numbers, reductions in routes and carriers, mergers in the holiday industry, increases in Heathrow landing charge and the thorny issue of Air Passenger Duty, the financial realities of operating the airport have become a real challenge.



Durham Tees
Valley Airport

Departures

Early Days

In 1938 Goosepool Farm was commandeered by the Government to become one of some two hundred RAF bomber airfields to be constructed during World War II. The airfield began life as RAF Goosepool but in 1941 became RAF Middleton St George, the name change a result of the tradition of adopting the title of the nearest town or village. Initially the airfield was used by 76 Squadron flying Halifaxes, and 78 Squadron flying Whitleys.

In 1943 the airfield was allocated to No 6 Group Royal Canadian Air Force. Squadrons based here included 419 Squadron RCAF and 428 Squadron RCAF which flew Wellingtons, Halifaxes and Lancasters and 420 Squadron RCAF which flew Wellingtons. After the war the aerodrome reverted back to the RAF and served various squadrons and units including No 13 Operational Training Unit, No 2 Air Navigation Unit and No 4 Flight Training School together with squadrons that used Meteors, Hunters, Javelins, and Lightnings. In 1957 various improvement works were carried out to the runway and the airport buildings but shortly after completion, a decision was made to close the RAF Station in 1963.

The Airport Emerges

The Teesside Local Authorities and Durham County Council purchased the airport in 1964 and the first flight took place in the form of a Mercury Airlines flight to Manchester in April 1964, followed by a Heathrow service in November, operated by BKS Air Transport Ltd on a twice daily basis. The single fare was £5 and 15 shillings. In 1965 BKS started flights to Amsterdam, Dusseldorf, Dublin, Jersey, Ostend and Paris. To cater for this need a new passenger terminal was required,

and in 1966 the terminal was opened by Princess Margaretha of Sweden.

Through the 1970s and 1980s passenger numbers grew to almost 400,000 of which about half used the Heathrow flight. The other major destinations were Amsterdam (20,000 passengers /year) and holiday flights to Palma, Tenerife, Malaga, Dubrovnik, Rijeka and Split. Air Shows started in the 1980s and as part of the 1986 show the Airport chartered Concorde for the day. In the same year the Duty Free Shop opened along with the first extension to the baggage hall. In 1987 the airport was rebranded Teesside International Airport and in 1990 the 1 millionth aircraft movement was celebrated.

Going International

The 1990s saw considerable growth. In 1996 a new radar system was installed and in 1997 the new Arrivals area was opened by Prime Minister Tony Blair and the British Midland dedicated lounges opened by European Commissioner Neil Kinnock. The same year saw completion of the International Departures lounge and the final phase of the airport terminal extension programme.

The result was that by 1997 the airport was handling almost 600,000 passengers a year. The Amsterdam traffic had grown to 70,000 passengers a year and whilst the holiday flights to Croatia had stopped due to political changes, new destinations such as Dublin, Faro, Las Palmas, Mahon, Ibiza, Alicante, Rhodes and Izmir were added to the airport's programme.

The next 10 years saw the airport's heyday with the growth of low cost airlines. In recognition of the need to find money for investment in the airport, the local authority owners decided to divest 75% of their shares

to a private sector partner. Following the tender process, in 2003 Peel Airports Ltd became the majority shareholder and announced a £20 million development programme in the airport.

Peel helped to persuade BMI Baby to open a Teesside base. In November 2003 President Bush landed at the airport in Air Force One to visit the Prime Minister in his Sedgefield constituency. In April 2004 the airport celebrated its 40th anniversary with a change of name to Durham Tees Valley Airport.

The change of name was a commercial decision, designed to use the Durham name to attract more overseas visitors to the airport and its flights. Shortly afterwards a new access road, expanded parking, a new terminal front and interior were completed.

In 2006 passenger numbers reached 910,000 per annum. Amsterdam was the most popular destination with over 120,000 passengers followed by Heathrow (110,000), Palma (81,000), Alicante (73,000), Rome (73,000), Malaga (55,000), Paris (45,000), Aberdeen (33,000) and Tenerife (20,000).

Winds of Change

By 2011 the passenger boom was over. Numbers had fallen to about 200,000 per annum in just five years. By the summer of 2012 there are scheduled services to Amsterdam (103,000 passengers/year) and Aberdeen (31,000 passengers/year) and a Saturday service to Jersey. Charters included a twice-weekly service to Palma and once a week to Bourgas.

There are a number of reasons for the decline in traffic. First there was significant competition in the low cost airline market. Whilst Jet2.com and Easyjet grew at Leeds/ Bradford and Newcastle respectively, BMI



Baby proved less successful and closed its operations at Durham Tees Valley. A brief replacement, Globespan, was attracted to the airport, but this proved short-lived.

Ryanair also used the airport as a base for flights to Dublin and Spain but then reduced their operations, reportedly due to the level of airport charges compared to neighbouring competitors. When Peel brought in Vancouver Airports as a partner in 2010 to manage the airport, the imposition of a £6 passenger departure charge to recoup some of the losses proved to be the last straw for Ryanair, who withdrew from the airport. Whilst the charge has not put off passengers from using the airport, there is evidence to suggest it has made it more difficult in attracting new airlines to operate from it.

The second reason for the decline was the restructuring of the holiday market. The growth of the low cost airlines and internet booking resulted in a decline in the traditional charter packaged holiday run by the tour

operators. Consequently they reduced their services and concentrated their charter activity on the bigger airports. There was also a major consolidation of the holiday companies into two main groups; Thomas Cook and TUI. The increase in low cost scheduled flights to the sun resulted in the reduction of charter services so that when the low cost scheduled airlines left, the charters had already gone. Coupled with industry consolidation and recession, it was not easy to attract them back.

The third reason was the introduction of Air Passenger Duty, and changes to the landing charge policy at London Heathrow. The BMI direct flight to Heathrow was withdrawn because the increased landing charges imposed by the British Airports Authority and accepted by the Civil Aviation Authority, made the service uneconomic, despite over 100,000 passengers using the service each year.

More information on the Durham Tees Valley Airport can be found at www.durhamteesvalleyairport.com.

Thanks to John Lowther of Tees Valley Unlimited, for preparing this article.