

Deception from the beginning: how Heathrow got started

From ‘Wings over Westminster’, memoirs of Harold Balfour, Aviation Minister during Second World War.

“Almost the last thing I did at the Air Ministry of any importance was to hi-jack for Civil Aviation the land on which London [Heathrow] Airport stands under the noses of resistant Ministerial colleagues. If high-jack is too strong a term I plead guilty to the lesser crime of deceiving a Cabinet Committee. Within the Department those of us who had studied post-war Civil Aviation needs knew that spreading out from the Fairey Aviation Company’s small grass aerodrome on the Great West Staines Road was land ideal for London’s main airport. We also knew that any thought of trying to get the land for a civil purpose would have to go through the complicated civil procedures and bound to be resisted by Agriculture and Housing and maybe more Ministries. Therefore our only hope lay in taking over the Fairey field and adjacent land under wartime powers and regulations. These powers were drastic and should not be employed for anything but war purposes.”

“By now [1945], with German defeat only a matter of time, Senior Staffs were planning for Phase Two of the war which was to be our effort and contribution for the final consequent conquest of Japan, alongside our American ally. For this Phase Two there would be much long-range air transportation of troops and supplies from the UK to the Far East. ... Arthur Street, my chief fellow conspirator, prepared a powerful paper for the Cabinet saying that by requisitioning under war powers the Fairey field and a large area beyond we could ensure a Service airfield from which all our Phase Two needs could operate. I confess now that in our hearts we knew of several bomber airfields in the Home Counties which could have done the job just as well. ... “

“Rob Hudson, Minister of Agriculture, put in fierce objection on grounds that we were taking acres of the very best market ground. This, I fear, was very true. Ernest Brown, National Liberal Minister in charge of housing, joined Hudson in protest, saying we proposed to take fringe land earmarked for future housing schemes. I advanced as powerfully as I could the case for Phase Two needs. I did not dare breathe the words “Civil Aviation”. I put this right out of my mind so effectively that I really convinced myself of the priority of our case. The Cabinet came down on our side. We took the land. Hiroshima killed Phase Two. London [Heathrow] Airport stands.”