

All Change

Aircraft noise is no longer just a West London Problem

People's own stories of living under the flight path



Photo: Phil Weedon

The picture opposite is of Vauxhall

Up to 40 planes an hour

Vauxhall is typical of the way aircraft noise has spread across London in recent years

A feature of the last few years is the way aircraft noise has become a problem outside the traditional areas of West London. There are two basic reasons for it. One, the steady increase in the number of planes using Heathrow has meant that many of them start to line up to begin their final approach much further from the airport than previously. Two, the increase in the number of jet aircraft, (replacing the smaller and quieter turbo-props), using London City Airport has required new and extended flight paths to allow the jets to land and take off safely. Certain areas of London have been particularly hard hit: those places which get both City and Heathrow aircraft; and the places where there has been an excessive concentration of aircraft. Here residents in South London, who never dreamed they would have a problem with aircraft noise, tell their stories.

G.S. Vauxhall

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We moved to Vauxhall in Central London 24 years ago. At that time there was an occasional airplane flying overhead – most notably Concorde, which was rather exciting. Now it is as if we live in a permanent air raid. When the wind is westerly (80% of the time) we have a Heathrow arrivals airplane flying over our house every 90 seconds. When the winds are easterly we get arrivals for City Airport. There are periods when we get the arrivals for both Heathrow and City airports flying over our house, crossing each other. As well as suffering from the appalling noise from the airplanes, we also have our sleep disturbed. The first Heathrow arrivals wake us at 4.30am, after which it is difficult to go back to sleep. There is no respite from the noise or from being woken up. The noisiest and largest piece of infrastructure in the country has been put over our heads without consultation or compensation. The quality of our lives has been diminished and therefore our human rights violated. Our property rights have also been eroded (who wants to buy a house in this situation?) and neither Heathrow nor the Government has made any restitution to date. We do not live in the vicinity of Heathrow, and this unwelcome noise from airplanes has been brought to us, regardless of the consequences or how we might feel about it.

Resident, Clapham Common

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I live near the North Side of Clapham Common and get woken many times by planes passing over before 5am! I am a doctor of medicine and strongly believe that peoples' mental health is damaged by interrupted and insufficient sleep. To be woken regularly as I am by the planned passage of planes at night is a breach of human rights. I look forward to the wind direction changing when there are no planes at all. Some days we have a plane every 90 seconds passing overhead---even my small grandchildren soon tire of the noise and complain of it whilst we are out on the Common. We need to change this!

J.M. Loughborough Junction

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We have lived in SE5 since 1980 having chosen a quiet cul-de-sac to move to as the tranquility of this part of London was particularly valued. With the local park and gardens the wildlife was abundant. We used to sit out in the sun and almost believe we were in deep countryside. Alas no longer! Aircraft noise has steadily increased since those days, and now at times verges on the intolerable. Flights regularly commence at 4.30am leaving us constantly short of sleep. Planes to Heathrow and London City Airport fly directly overhead at a rate up to one every 90 seconds. Add to this police helicopters and Virgin air ambulances and the sky over this once peaceful corner of Lambeth is now rarely free from aircraft noise. This is an untenable situation from the public health, environmental and ethical points of view and solutions to the problem need to be addressed urgently.

The residents' experiences are backed up by solid research – see page 6

David, Denmark Hill

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On warm or hot nights we can't open the windows because of the night flights noise. That's a real penance. And of course when it's warm enough to open sitting-room or French windows or sit out in the garden the noise is intrusive and when planes are coming in non-stop we end up by being driven indoors if we're out or closing the windows or doors. Another penance.

Graham, Herne Hill

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Summer relaxation in the garden is almost a thing of the past with dozens of aircraft passing overhead, seemingly busiest when one wants most to relax! Unwanted, intrusive and disruptive to a peaceful life. Early morning flights from 4 a.m. are the most intrusive sound in the surrounding silence and, once awoken, it is difficult to return to slumber.

Linda, Clapham Common

One plane every 90 seconds is physical and mental torture. I would like to work at home occasionally, but I'm actually thankful that I can escape Clapham and go to my office in South Kensington.

It is impossible to get a full night's sleep with large, loud, low-flying hulks passing overhead in the early hours. Although there are fewer night flights than in the day, at certain times of year they are sufficiently frequent to disrupt sleep. Insufficient sleep means that my performance in the day is affected. How can I be a productive member of the nation's workforce when lack of sleep slows down the brain and makes one a cross instead of an encouraging colleague? During the day one plane every 90 seconds is physical and mental torture. You cannot sit out of doors to read the paper or have a cup of coffee with a friend without planes disrupting concentration or drowning out conversation. Why should I be forced to sit indoors? I would like to work at home occasionally, but I'm actually thankful that I can escape Clapham and go to my office in South Kensington.

Jamie, Waterloo

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Aircraft noise, here in Waterloo, massively lowers my quality of life. Being woken up at 4.45 in the morning by the first plane, and then waiting in dreaded anticipation for the next one to fly over, can cause me a huge amount of stress. I hate to think what it's doing to my health - it can certainly make me less productive during the day. That my right (and that of 100s of thousands of others) to a good night's sleep is trumped by the right of a few hundred businessmen to fly in to London at a time of their suiting, is simply unjust.

You can track the flights on BAA's <http://webtrak.bksv.com/lhr> or at <http://www.fliht radar24.com/> or check out the map on page 7

Nick, Stockwell

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I work at home, and during the days of heavy flight activity it is impossible to either concentrate or be on the phone with the windows or doors open. Clients hear the repeated noise and ask what is going on and enquire where I am calling from. They are amazed to understand that I am 20 miles from Heathrow and have to put up with such levels of noise. When the wind is coming from a westerly direction, the aircraft fly directly over Vauxhall and Stockwell. There is little variation in flight path and we can have what seems like one aircraft a minute. What I do know is that you can still hear the aircraft that has just passed at the same time as hearing the next one approaching. There is therefore not a single second of respite or calm in the day from the continual whine of approaching and departing aircraft.

Penny, Blackheath

I have lived in this area for over 50 years and it is much worse now than it used to be.

For many years I have woken just before the first plane comes over at 4.28 am. They get really bad around 6am - sometimes it reminds me of lying in bed hearing the planes come over in WW2! In summer with the windows open it is worse, while when outside in the garden on a fine day there are times when one plane after another comes over, sometimes very low. Not only am I in line with the Heathrow flight path, but I am under the Biggin Hill stack. I have lived in this area for over 50 years and it is much worse now than it used to be. In the 1970s it got pretty bad but then seemed to improve slightly, but over the last ten or fifteen years it has become really awful. I cannot understand why planes have to fly over such a heavily populated area. In many other countries they do not fly over the capital city.

Daphne and Owen, Clapham South

We often go for walks on Clapham Common which is directly in the path of planes beginning their descent to land at Heathrow. We think that it is a shame that planes destroy the atmosphere of that important green lung for South London.

We live in Clapham South and are regularly affected by aircraft flying above our house and garden. Very often we are woken up very early in the morning (before 5 am) by the whining sound of jet engines. It is very difficult to get back to sleep after that. So we often miss out on a full night's sleep. We are also affected by planes throughout the day which is particularly irksome during weekends and evenings in summertime when it would be lovely to be out in the garden. With planes flying over continuously it is not always easy to relax when we come home after a long day's work. We often go for walks on Clapham Common which is directly in the path of planes beginning their descent to land at Heathrow. We think that it is a shame that planes destroy the atmosphere of that important green lung for South London. We have also noticed that we increasingly get air traffic for London City airport..

Carola, Camberwell

I am a great listener to the BBC World service in the night and am frequently aware of the aeroplanes starting up on the dot of 4.30, knowing that I have to turn the radio up when each one passes over in order to hear it.

Joachim, Clapham Common

This account from a German couple who moved to London last year graphically illustrates what it is like to discover you are living under the flight path to Heathrow.

We moved to London at the end of August 2010, coming from Berlin (I am working for the German foreign service). When looking for houses in June 2010, we had chosen Clapham for its vicinity to the Embassy (20 min's by bike), the liveliness of Clapham and the congenial neighbourhood. Colleagues had warned me to watch out for air traffic noise in the Kingston/Richmond area (where there is a large German community due to the German School which is located in that part of town). Judging by the map I assumed that Clapham, at a distance of almost 20 km from LHR, would be a safe bet, as far as air traffic was concerned. Miraculously, on the day when we toured Clapham on our house-hunt, there was no noticeable air noise (or we were too distracted when looking at the interior of the houses...).

Colleagues had warned me to watch out for air traffic noise in the Kingston/Richmond area

All the more were we shocked when moving into Liston Road on 25 August 2010 and wondering whether the air traffic would stop at all during the night. Eventually, the traffic subsided at shortly past 11pm (in the meantime we experienced that there are occasional latecomers as late as 12.30am), only to resume around 4.30am when a series of heavy, particularly noisy freighter planes rumble directly over our heads, after which we can only doze but certainly not sleep properly any longer. Apart from the occasional few days when the wind changes to easterlies, the plane noise has been a constant feature of our lives. Our area can be a place of glorious peace when the wind is right - but this unfortunately is a very rare occurrence.

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What does the noise do to us? Working on an executive/managerial job which is very demanding (particularly during a period where I have to train myself in an entirely new type of work), comprising 11 hours on "normal" days and up to 15 hours on days including evening functions (a standard feature in diplomatic life), I cannot perform properly without sufficient sleep. Perhaps I am not old enough yet ("only" 57) to get by on little sleep, but without at least 7 hours uninterrupted sleep I start suffering from a chronic sleep deficit after a while. In the meantime, unfortunately, this has become a standard situation for me. As a consequence I am suffering from memory loss, lack of concentration, nervousness and irritability. My wife who works from home is in an even worse situation in so far as she is exposed to the noise throughout the day. And even though she does not have as many out of home responsibilities as I do, the permanent noise level has no less negative effects on her than it does on me. Needless to say that even on weekends we aren't able to get proper rest as the plane traffic continues unabatedly. Strange as it sounds, but we are dreading the idea of living with open windows when summer approaches - and our nice little garden may only be enjoyed virtually from inside throughout the seasons.

The plane traffic continues unabatedly. Strange as it sounds, but we are dreading the idea of living with open windows when summer approaches.

Is this the price we have to pay for "modern" life? What do health statistics say about the effects of the constant exposure to air noise pollution and sleep deprivation? We are not oblivious to the necessity of air traffic, profiting from it ourselves every now and then. But has the right balance been struck between the pros and cons of the present flight patterns, considering the potential health costs and loss in productivity among the affected population? Are the present flight patterns the only ones technically feasible, and have alternatives been examined.

Relief is possible for residents – see next page

The residents' experiences are backed up by solid research

In 2007 HACAN commissioned the respected consultants, Bureau Veritas, to undertake a study into the state of play in areas of the capital outside West London.

Key findings of the study

- Aircraft noise has become a **London-wide problem**.
- In places **20 kilometres from Heathrow** “aircraft noise dominated the local environment.” For example, there was “an almost constant background of aircraft noise” in Kennington Park, close to the Oval Cricket Ground, well over 15 kilometres from the airport.
- In some areas of **East London** flown over by both Heathrow planes *and* City Airport planes noise levels were comparable to those in parts of West London.
- “The relatively high levels of aircraft noise that do occur at some distance from the airport are certainly enough to be noticed by those living in those areas and in certain circumstances to **cause some disturbance and intrusion**.”
- In **Ruskin Park** in Camberwell, 20 kilometres from the airport, aircraft noise dominates the local environment. During busy hours a plane flies over almost every 90 seconds, usually louder than 60 decibels.
- In **Kennington Park**, just slightly closer to the airport, planes are coming over every 97 seconds, almost all over 60 decibels and the vast majority heading for Heathrow.
- At **Clapham Common**, well outside the area where noise is officially recognised as a problem, aircraft fly over at the rate of one a minute, the vast majority of them registering over 60 decibels.

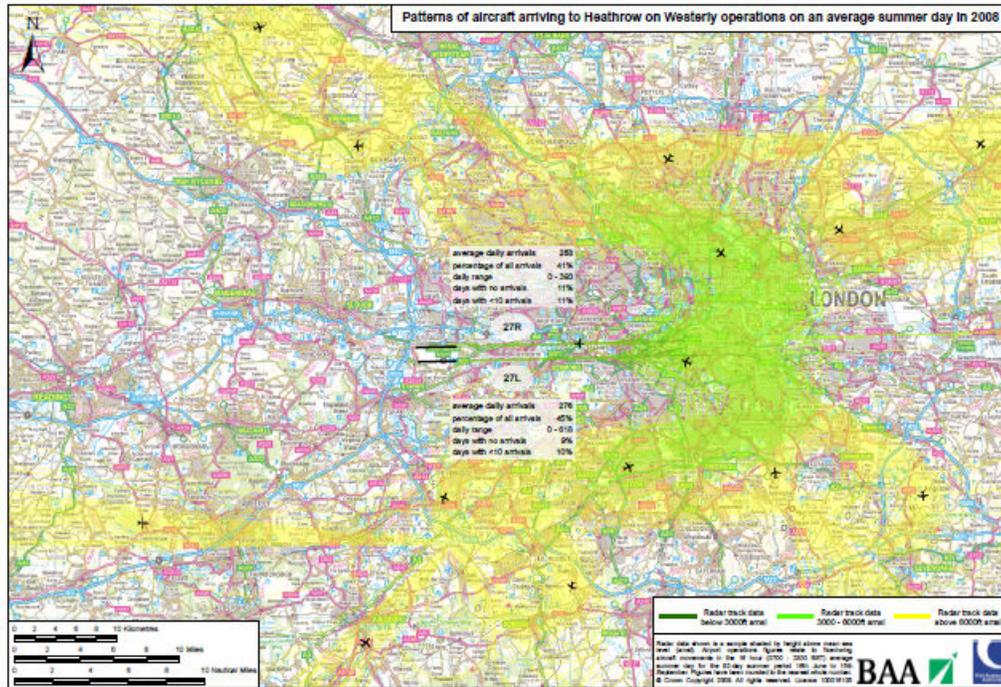
Relief for Residents

Relief for residents is possible

Residents are calling for **guaranteed periods of peace and quiet** as happens in West London where planes switch runways at 3pm to give people a half day's break from the noise. With about three or four flight paths in regular use over South London, as distinct from two in West London, a slightly different scheme would need to be devised. We are in discussion with BAA and the Civil Aviation Authority about switching planes between the different flights paths in South London. It could be done, for example, by switching the planes so that each area is guaranteed at least two days a week free of aircraft.

Flights arriving at Heathrow

The map – from BAA’s website shows the pattern of flights arriving at Heathrow on the days when a west wind is blowing (about 75 – 80% of the year).



The map below zooms in to show how planes are lining up many miles from Heathrow.



This booklet has been compiled by HACAN which represents residents under the Heathrow flight paths: 13 Stockwell Rd, London SW9 9AU; 020 7737 6641; info@hacan.org.uk; www.hacan.org.uk March 2011