



The Great Prestwick

“Prestwick will be the greatest international airport in the world!”

That’s a big claim to have made, but the two men said to be responsible for making it were no idle dreamers...



Tiger Moths at Prestwick, 1930s. Image courtesy of Mike Charlton @ www.aviatanpostcard.co.uk

by Gordon Craigie

Airport Robbery?

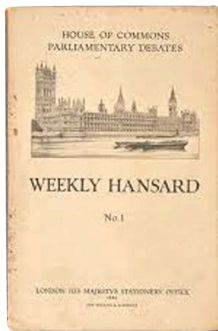
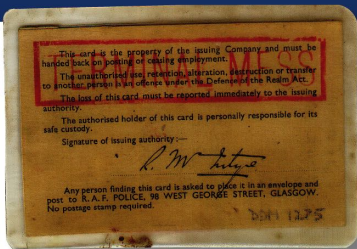
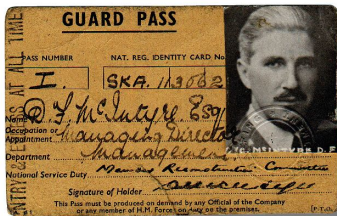


FOR A FEW weeks earlier this summer, *The Great Prestwick Airport Robbery!* created a bit of an internet sensation when it was 'serialised' on Twitter by @TrulyScottishTV. The writer, author and activist Annie Harrower-Gray, "doesn't do Twitter" and was blissfully unaware of the 'Twitterstorm' she had provoked! When *iScot Magazine* intrepidly tracked her down at her home in Anstruther she was only too happy to share her insight into the 'scandal' that has irritated her since she first stumbled across the story while researching for one of her many other projects. In her article she says, "Prestwick Airport offers not only uninterrupted access to the Western hemisphere, it sits where the cold air of the surrounding low-lying hills meets the warmer air of the sea, and the resulting uprising bores a hole through mist and fog. It's Europe's only all-year-round clear weather airport. Heathrow on the other hand, suffers constant delays and cancellations due to bad weather. These facts alone, beg the question – why is

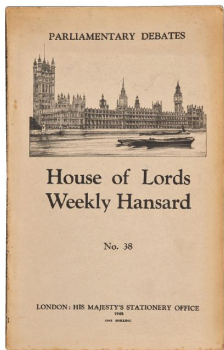
Prestwick not the UK's second major international airport?" Why indeed!

What we now know as Prestwick Airport used to be simply 'The Meadow' in the village of Monkton. In Peter Brown's recently published book, *Prestwick Airport Through Time*, he explains that pioneering Scottish aviators were attracted to the long, flat fields of Monkton in the early 1900s and that the first recorded aircraft activity from there was in 1913, a mere 10 years after the Wright brothers' historic first powered flight. But it would take another 20 years or so for planned development of the site to commence, and this is where Annie takes up the story...

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Hansard is the record of debates in both Houses of Parliament



Prestwick was to be the greatest international airport in the world

"Back in 1933 little was known about the effects of extreme cold or lack of oxygen on planes and pilots. But this was a time of adventurers, particularly privileged ones. Two pilots with Scottish connections ignored the unknown dangers to undertake the first ever flight over Mount Everest - in tiny Westland biplanes, with their wings held together by struts and wire! The men in question were Lieutenant David McIntyre and Sir Douglas Douglas-Hamilton, the then Marquess of Douglas and Clydesdale. A short while later, in 1934, McIntyre began to develop Prestwick Airport and also founded Scottish Aviation Limited, backed by Douglas-Hamilton. Planned by experts, Prestwick was to be the greatest international airport in the world, but little did those pioneers know then how their ambitions and achievements were to be thwarted at every turn and their dream stolen from them."

According to McIntyre's son and biographer, Dougal, their objective was "to create an aviation industry in all its branches at Prestwick, not simply an airport". In 1935 they established a flying school on the site, and successfully bid for government training contracts despite the input of "an MP from Gourock on the selection committee whose view of the West of Scotland weather was that it was eminently unsuited for flying". On the contrary, as Peter Brown's book confirms, Prestwick "was initially the only Scottish airport permitted to operate a transatlantic link, largely due to the very benign weather conditions and a much lower incidence of fog than any other airport in Great Britain thanks to a geological anomaly". Despite that MP's ill-founded reservations, the training school flourished, civil flights started in 1936, and Scottish Aviation integrated maintenance, conversion and repairs into its operations before eventually becoming an aircraft manufacturer in its own right, thus fulfilling McIntyre and Douglas-Hamilton's initial objectives.

But it's this ambitious, expansive activity that caught Annie's eye. "Under McIntyre's management in the mid-late 1930s, Prestwick was designing and building planes intended to become the ordinary person's bus, on which they could travel to the ends of the earth for 3d (threepence!) a mile. Prestwick was using skilled labour at a time when unemployment was high in Scotland. Figures for 1935 showed 49% unemployment in Airdrie, and 42% in Port Glasgow. In comparison, Birmingham had an unemployment rate of only 7%. The high unemployment figure was due to the dependence on heavy industry in these areas and an unbalanced UK economy where most lighter industries were distributed throughout England. The airport's extensive plans included trade booths for Scottish manufacturers. Scotland had become air-minded early on and Prestwick was well on its way to becoming a world centre of air transport. Its accomplishments were far in advance of London Airport



Prestwick during World War 2. Photo courtesy of Dougal McIntyre

where they were still trying to disperse the fog with 'Fido' (Fog Investigation and Dispersal Operation) flame jets. Scots therefore had high hopes that a UK Government White Paper on Civil Aviation, to be published in 1945, would promise a bright future for Prestwick Airport." But, then as now, Scottish representations would be ignored...

"The White Paper provoked a rare parliamentary event in that Scottish politicians from every party joined forces to fight for their country and for Prestwick. In a House of Commons debate on 29th March 1945, Hansard records that the Labour MP for South Ayrshire, Alexander Sloane, opened the debate quite eloquently, though perhaps his speech did not endear the entire House to his cause. For the benefit of those MPs south of the border Sloane explained that Prestwick Airport was situated next to the Barns o' Ayr where William Wallace experimented with the very first incendiary bombs, razing the barns to the ground after tying up the English inside! Less controversially, he stressed the fact that 'Prestwick is the only all-the-year-round clear weather airport in Europe' and 'it is the only civil organisation in Great Britain possessing the necessary leadership, commercial aviation mentality, technical staff, up-to-date experience and practical facilities for the immediate operation of a large-scale airline service'.

"Next up was Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Thomas Moore, a Scottish Unionist representing the Ayr Burghs, and, in contrast to the Scottish Tories of today, he too was supportive of the Scottish case. "We are not greedy in Scotland. We realise that the capital of the United Kingdom must necessarily have the number one terminal airport for world air traffic. All we do insist on, is that Prestwick should be the alternative and secondary trans-oceanic and trans-Atlantic airport." Moore questioned the refusal of the UK Government to approve an airline service in Scotland before going

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on to praise the skills of the Scots: 'We have long been seized of the dramatic, indeed the almost miraculous, potentialities of air transport and in this we are many generations in advance of England. Just as for generations we have built the best and biggest ships in the world, so we are determined to handle this new form of transport in the same way and build the best and biggest aircraft in the world. Why not? We have the best scientific brains, the most expert designers and the most highly skilled craftsmen, except for those who are at present loaned to England. There is one further point which is sometimes ignored, and that is that the Scots have imagination in their

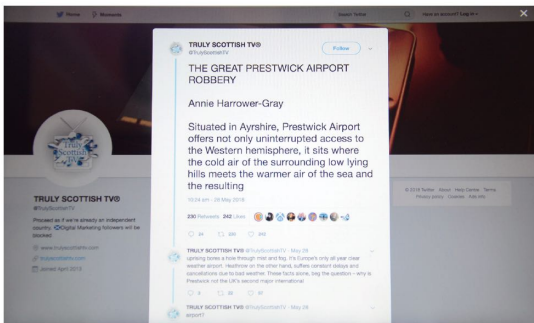




Image courtesy of Dick Flute @ www.ukairfieldguide.net

minds and a spirit of progress in their blood, which are often lacking in those of our compatriots south of the border." Jings! Nowadays it really is hard to believe that a Tory actually recognised all that and said it out loud!

Annie continues, "One by one the Scottish members took the floor, each making a solid case for Prestwick to become the UK's second international airport." George Buchanan (Labour) asked in his speech, "We read of great things being accomplished by Scotsmen. Our people constantly say this – and it is difficult to answer them: Is our greatness always reserved for the battlefield and the glories of war; have we no great capacities for the glory of peace production?" He received his answer later in a familiarly patronising speech from Sir Stafford Cripps, the Minister for Civil Aviation: "I do appreciate very fully the pride of accomplishment that Scottish men and women feel in the aircraft industry and in their own contributions to air services and training. They have played a very distinguished part in the course of the war, and I have taken many opportunities of going to Scotland in order to inform them of the appreciation of the Government and Department in the work they have

The UK Government continued to undermine Prestwick's every effort to realise its potential

done. I believe that this type of what we may justly call local patriotism is of the very greatest importance in the proper development of our nation as a whole..."

In an intervention that would not seem out of place today, Willie Gallacher, the Fife Western Communist MP urged Cripps to "please understand that he is talking about a country and a nation with history and traditions – not something local". Cripps brushed this aside, with the sort of platitudes with which we Scots are wearily accustomed, before waffling on for some considerable time. As Annie summarises, "The underlying message was clear, Prestwick and Scotland, had been allowed, quite graciously, to contribute to the war effort, but that was their lot! Sir Stafford Cripps would not change his mind - Scotland was not going to be allowed to set foot on the great highway of the air. The UK Government would back London Heathrow, which had twice been turned down as unsuitable."

Turning to aircraft production, Cripps observed that "Scotland could quite easily, out of the aircraft business it is carrying on at the present time, make an economic unit for aircraft production". Confirming that the UK Government "will do nothing at Prestwick" Cripps concludes, "I do feel that it must remain for the Scottish people, the industrialists, financiers and others, to organise themselves"! It would appear it was necessary for Scotland to mitigate Westminster policies then as now, though this would surely prove an uphill struggle as the UK Government continued to undermine Prestwick's every effort to realise its potential. It may, or may not, have been significant that Tom Johnstone, the much-vaunted Secretary of State for Scotland, did not contribute to the debate and indeed retired from parliament a couple of months later to run the fledgling Hydro Board. In another observation that would not seem out of place today, Alexander Sloane concluded by warning "that Westminster refusing to give the airport its place in the sun could well mean the partition of the ways for Scotland and England".

Dougal McIntyre has an alternative interpretation on the role of the UK Government in Westminster thwarting development at Prestwick in the post war period. "The most damaging element of this period, as far as my father was concerned, was not the parliament's location in London but rather the nationalisation policies of the Labour Government which denied the private enterprise opportunities that my father planned for the expansion at Prestwick. This effectively broke up the integrated airline, aircraft manufacturing and airport management business which he had started, and

Photo credit - Elite Ayshire Business Circle





Scottish Aviation. Photo credit - BAESystems Regional Aircraft

it was, as he described it, 'the dead hand of government' that stifled Prestwick's potential in that formative period." Dougal's son and David's grandson, Stuart, who is continuing the family tradition in the aviation industry at Prestwick, suggests that "The British Airport Authority's investment in Glasgow and Edinburgh in the 1970s and 80s, followed by the overnight withdrawal of Prestwick's transatlantic gateway status at the end of the 1980s, lies at the heart of today's situation. However, a bright future for the airport as a whole depends on new investment to modernise and optimise its service offerings to best capture new and emerging markets in the aviation, aerospace and space arenas and to capitalise on its substantial infrastructure to underpin the Scottish economy. It's a much more complex picture than can be explained by simply pointing the finger at Westminster."

Yet it's hard not to 'point the finger' at Westminster as successive UK Governments, Labour and Conservative, have continued to deny its expansion whilst endlessly promoting, and supporting, Heathrow, Gatwick and the South East of England generally. Ann Galbraith's book, *The Dream That Wouldn't Die*, informs us that "David McIntyre had applied in May 1944 for the right to operate transatlantic and European

Image courtesy of Mike Chariton @ www.aviationpostcard.co.uk



TERMINAL BUILDING AND CONTROL TOWER, PRESTWICK AIRPORT.

passenger routes from Prestwick and had been granted permission to obtain and convert aircraft for their [Scottish Airlines] own use in late 1945" but that "In August 1946, Scottish Airlines were barred from operating scheduled passenger services, which were by

Early Prestwick. Image courtesy of Mike Chariton @ www.aviationpostcard.co.uk

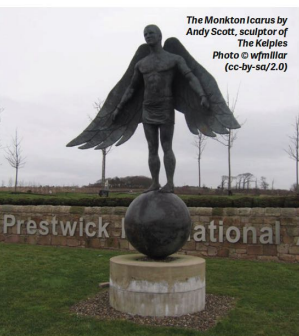




Image courtesy of Mike Charlton
@ www.aviationpostcard.co.uk

AIRPORT HOTEL, PRESTWICK, SCOTLAND.

B. 8304.



The Monckton Icarus by
Andy Scott, sculptor of
The Kelpies
Photo © wfmillar
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this time only legally permitted by the monopoly British European Airways [BEA] and British Overseas Airways Corporation [BOAC]. McIntyre opposed this further government intervention into his business and complained bitterly at BEA stopping their London-Prestwick service'. Hansard records a debate in the House of Lords on 14th February 1946 in which the Earl of Glasgow magnificently represented the injustices of Westminster's treatment of Scotland: "The characteristic feature of the White Papers is that they lay down

This heralded an inevitable period of decline in passenger numbers for Prestwick

implicitly that Scotland is to have no contact with the outside world except through London. This will have much the same effect as the Navigation Laws of the eighteenth century by which English merchants had the monopoly of trading with the Colonies and the Plantations. It was the economic powers to which those laws gave rise which, more than anything else, forced the Act of Union of 1707 on Scotland. It is interesting to note that when the Parliamentary Secretary was explaining with pride the commencement of the new air services, he dealt exclusively with those in or out of London. I believe that by excluding Scottish subjects from full freedom to control their own commerce, the Government is infringing the Act of Union." Clearly getting into his stride, he went on to say, "Scotland has no intention of being dragged down by the bungling of English officials, however well intentioned. They know little of our needs and interests, and if they did know anything about them, they would probably do nothing to safeguard them. Therefore, it may be worthwhile to ask the Minister if he appreciates the possibilities of Scottish opinion, and if he realises that the only industry, apart from shipping, which is big enough to justify a separatist movement is aviation, and that Eire has, in aviation alone, justified her freedom from the ineptitudes of British air policy." Interesting that in both Houses this debate has recognised that the issue of Scottish control of Prestwick Airport could, if denied, increase demands for Scotland regaining its independence...

Prestwick was eventually designated as an international airport, though not under Scottish control, and remained as Scotland's only transatlantic hub until the early 1990s when the UK Government's 'Open Skies' policy opened up the transatlantic routes to other Scottish airports, particularly Glasgow and Edinburgh. This heralded an inevitable period of decline in passenger numbers for Prestwick, and uncertainty as the airport passed through a series of private owners.

Despite what appears to be Prestwick's perpetual struggles against bureaucratic interference and UK Government discrimination, Annie Harrower-Gray sees some hope for the future. "In 2013, the Scottish Government bought Prestwick for just one pound after it had been on the market for



Prestwick Past... Image courtesy of Mike Charlton @ www.aviationpostcard.co.uk



Prestwick Future?

eighteen months. Only a small part of aviation is devolved to Holyrood, mainly development and planning of airports. The regulation of aviation is reserved to Westminster, which also decides which operators receive long-haul licences. If the restrictions imposed by London were removed, Prestwick Airport as an all-weather airport could be enjoying its fair share of the near £3,000 million that flies in through Heathrow and into the Westminster treasury every year. Now that the airport is in public ownership, and with plans recently revealed for a multimillion-pound manufacturing site near the airport, we may yet see the dreams of its founders realised in an independent Scotland.* Additional investment is anticipated should Prestwick's ambitious aerospace plans come to fruition and, ironically, from the proposed development of Prestwick Airport as a logistics hub for... Heathrow! While the major aviation policies are still reserved to Westminster, or for as long as Scotland continues to be under Westminster control, the principle beneficiary of this investment will remain, ultimately, the UK Treasury.

There's no doubt, reading the 1945 and 1946 Hansard debates, that Prestwick and Scotland were badly treated by the UK Government at that time and at various times since. The united front of the Scottish MPs and Lords from all parties in arguing the case for Prestwick in 1945/46 is indeed impressive and certainly puts the narrow-mindedly divisive political tribalism that we've sadly become all too familiar with today to shame. Equally, the arrogant and patronising dismissiveness of the UK Government of the time shows that, in that respect at least, nothing has changed over the years. Prestwick has so many natural advantages as an airport location that it does seem criminal not to use it to its full potential, supplementing the other thriving Scottish airports. The tired 'too wee, too poor, too stupid' mantra of those who would continue to 'keep Scotland in its box' is shown up yet

The Palace of Engineering from the 1938 Empire Exhibition was dismantled and reconstructed at Prestwick for Scottish Aviation in 1941. Image courtesy of Mitchell Library



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again for the nonsense that it is when we consider the possibilities that still lie ahead for Prestwick. The aerospace developments to come are exciting but it shouldn't be forgotten that, despite being 'robbed' back in the 1940s, Prestwick could yet have an important role to play in Scotland's future transatlantic connectivity, finally fully realising the dreams of those pioneers from the 1930s.

Photo credit - Neil Macdonald

Glasgow Prestwick Airport