



1970 – 2004

*The greater danger for most of us
is not that our aim is too high and we miss it,
but that it is too low and we reach it.*

Right: American tourists arriving on Inishmore during the early 1980s.

Far right: The caravan which served as the first waiting room and office at Killeaney Airstrip on Inishmore, before it vanished during a severe storm.



On a fine June evening in 1969, Colie Hernon composed a letter to the editor of the Irish Times from his home on Inis Mor. Little did he realize that this one letter would ignite the dream that created Aer Arann, the airline that would become the lifeline of over a thousand islanders for generations to come.

The letter was read by some Galway city business people who decided to investigate the challenge to start an airline between Galway and the Aran Islands and, after a number of meetings, Raef Langan, Jim Codd and Jimmy Coen decided to create the reality. The first commercial service by Aer Arann, using a BN2 Islander aircraft, took place on Saturday 15th August 1970.

This was the greatest and possibly the most important event in the lives of the islanders, so, in true Aran tradition, one of the most famous and best parties ever held on the island took place on the night of that inaugural flight. Wisely the Chief Pilot, Bill Wallace, declared the weather too bad to make the return flight that

evening. There is no account available as to when the weather improved sufficiently, which did not appear to cause any customer complaints. The route was officially launched by the Minister for the Gaeltacht, Mr. Kitt, who was accompanied by one of the islands' great supporters, Bobby Molloy TD.

Over the early years Oranmore, Shannon and Carnmore were used to service the islands, and the airline became an integral part of the lives of the islanders. The service was used for both local and tourist traffic, for freight and as an emergency response transport facility for seriously ill people on the island. In 1974 Bill Wallace retired as Chief Pilot and was replaced by Captain Paddy Robinson.

However, servicing the Aran Islands was not sufficient to create a viable stand alone business. As a result Aer Arann offered charter services to Galway based businesses around Ireland and to the UK. In the late 1970's Digital regularly chartered the Islanders to link their Galway and Prestwick operations.

Still the company struggled to survive and in late 1979 the directors approached Aer Lingus requesting them to purchase the airline. Following a number of meetings Aer Lingus declined the offer.

In November 1981 the airline was sold to a successful Irish businessman based in Manchester called Tim Kilroe, who already operated a successful regional and charter airline in the UK called Air Kilroe. This commenced a new era for the airline as the

new owner saw opportunities for the airline to serve the regions of Ireland. Aer Arann commenced a twice daily service between Galway and Dublin in June 1982 at a return fare of IR£75. This service ceased after a few months because Galway airport did not have night landing facilities.

The airline also carried out feasibility studies on potential Ireland–UK routes, and, in April 1983, the Minister for Transport awarded Aer Arann a licence to operate a limited number of cross channel routes. This was regarded as being very significant at the time as it effectively ended the Aer Lingus monopoly on the Ireland–UK routes. Unfortunately, the company did not take advantage of this opportunity as Kilroe decided to focus primarily on the Islands services.



Air-Mail services to the islands were marked by the issue of a special stamp by An Post in 1999, depicting an Aer Arann Islander flying over the islands.

Aer Arann's second Islander, EI-AWM, at Oranmore in 1973.

During this time the airline operated out of Galway Airport, serving the three Aran Islands as well as offering Aer Lingus a passenger handling service.

Due to continued poor relations between the Board and management of Galway Airport and Aer Arann the airline decided to build its own airport and terminal facilities at Caislean in Connemara, approximately 18 miles west of Galway city. This new facility would be the home of the two BN2 Islander aircraft and the new base for the airline and its passengers. This new facility, known as Connemara Regional Airport, was opened on Valentines Day 1992.

Following discussions and negotiations over the winter and spring of 1994, Tim Kilroe sold his

shareholding in the airline to Pdraig O Ceidigh and Eugene O Kelly on the 1st of May '94.

The new owners had no aviation experience whatsoever, but they prepared a simple strategy to strengthen and improve the island service which resulted in a doubling of passenger traffic during the first year. Peter McKenna was appointed as Chief Engineer and the airline obtained JAR 145 approval in 1996. Marie Mulrooney, who was appointed Commercial and Operations Manager, obtained the ISO 9000 Quality Award for the airline, again in 1996. Aer Arann was the first European airline to achieve this accolade.

The new strategy included an ambition to become Ireland's internal regional airline and

Perched on the edge of Galway Bay, 19 miles west of Galway, Aer Arann's base for the island services is only 6 minutes flying time from the Aran Islands.





Aer Arann ATR 72.

the first step in this direction came when the airline was awarded the Dublin – Donegal interim PSO route for a nine month period starting on the 2nd of March 1998. A Jet Stream 31 was wet leased from Air Kilroe for the first couple of months while the management prepared operations in order to dry lease a 36 seater Shorts 360 aircraft from BAC Leasing based in Gatwick. A total of 11,885 passengers were carried that year. The airline was successful in winning the renewal of this PSO contract for a further three years.

The company decided to create a separate commercial and operational base for its growing Dublin business.

On the 10th of December 1999 Aer Arann took over the twice daily PSO service between Sligo and Dublin from Aer Lingus. Further routes were added over the following years. Cross channel services to the Isle of Man and Sheffield were added in November 2000. A total of 65,000 passengers were carried that year.

During the autumn of 2000 the management team successfully tendered for the Galway and Kerry PSO contracts which began in mid January '02. A decision was also made to acquire ATR 42 aircraft to service those new routes. The airline could now call itself Ireland's internal Regional airline.

A number of factors combined which resulted in the airline giving back the PSO contracts it had successfully tendered for to the Department of Transport in November 2001. This was probably the most difficult and testing time during the airline's history. In September 2001 Eugene O Kelly severed his relationship with the airline and sold his shares to Padraig O Ceidigh. The airline successfully tendered for three of the six PSO routes again in July '02. However, another two routes were awarded to the airline when the contract was surrendered by Euroceltic within one year. The airline now operated one aircraft type, ATR 42 and 72, which simplified operations significantly.



Padraig O'Ceidigh, Managing Director, Aer Arann, and Peter McKenna, Chief Operating Officer, Aer Arann, accept the European Regions Airline Association Bronze Award in Vienna (September 2004).

During the summer of 2002 Aer Arann launched its first UK service with the Cork to Birmingham route. This was quickly followed by the introduction of two more services, to Southampton and Bristol, in July of that year. Since then Aer Arann has launched 17 further UK routes, adding services from Waterford, Galway, Kerry, City of Derry, Donegal, Knock and Dublin. The airline reached another milestone this year with the introduction of its first services to mainland Europe, launching two new routes to Lorient in South Brittany from Galway and Waterford.

To cater for this rapid expansion Aer Arann moved offices three times over a four year period. The growth also necessitated the establishment of a call centre at Shannon, crew

and engineering bases at Cork and Galway, and the introduction of a passenger handling division at Dublin Airport in June 2003.

Today, Aer Arann is firmly established as an integral part of the transport infrastructure in modern Ireland operating over 500 flights per week across 25 routes and employing over 350 people. The airline has grown from carrying 12,000 passengers per year in 1999 to just under 1 million passengers in 2004.

As a testament to Aer Arann's achievements Padraig O'Ceidigh was named Ernst and Young Irish Entrepreneur of the Year 2002 and went on to represent Ireland in the Entrepreneur of the Year awards in Monte Carlo in 2003. Other awards include Best Regional Airline as voted by the Irish Travel Agents Association in 2002 and Best Online Services Award 2003 presented by the Air Transport Users Council of the Chambers of Commerce of Ireland, culminating in the ERA Bronze Airline of the Year Award 2004.

Aer Arann has come a long way since Colie Hemon put pen to paper while he looked across Galway Bay and dreamed of the results of his letter to the Irish Times back in 1969. The dream has become reality and everyone has played their part. We now have new responsibilities in protecting the dream and making it greater.

We are all part of creating history; long may we continue.