

The Air Links between Gatwick and Heathrow

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Why have an Air Link been Gatwick and Heathrow?

From its opening as the second main London Airport, Gatwick whilst with an excellent rail link to Central London was cursed by relatively poor transport links between it and Heathrow. From the viewpoint of a passenger transferring between the two Airports this was a major problem and from a commercial viewpoint was very detrimental to the development of Scheduled Services at Gatwick.

Whilst the improvement in the 'A' Road and later Motorway Network were planned, shelved, revived and then shelved again, the building of this infra-structure would, even once finally approved take years to complete and even when in place the actual Journey between the Airports would still be around one hour.

An air link between the two Airports would appear to be an obvious solution and one that could be quickly implemented. Whilst simple in concept the Commercial, Air Traffic, Airport logistics and the inevitable Politics, meant that it was not until the very end of the 1960's did one Airline take-on the challenge.

The Westward Airways Gatwick-Heathrow Shuttle (1969-1970)

Almost forgotten now, this started on the 25th June 1969 using an Islander BN2 G-AXFC in standard Westward Airways livery, but with Gatwick-Heathrow booking Telephone Numbers covering the top of the wing.

The service operated from the General Aviation Terminal (GAT), not from a Gate accessible directly from the Main Terminal. I have yet to discover the Heathrow Terminus, for the service, but one suspects it was similarly less than ideal for passengers.

Westward Airways Islander at the General Aviation Terminal LGW



Photograph by Caz Caswell from the [Caz Caswell Collection](#) © 1970 Used with Permission

With 20/20 Hindsight, both the choice of equipment (although Westward would have had no immediate alternative) and the use of the GAT as a Terminus, meant the service had a 'huge hill' to climb in terms of Passenger acceptance. This coupled with what appears to have been a 'low profile' in marketing terms meant that the chances of long term success were stacked against it.

Westward persevered, but the fates appeared to be both against the company and therefore the service. The first hammer blow was an accident involving one of the company's Islanders at St Mary's on the Scilly Islands on the 23rd February 1970, necessitating the leasing in of replacement aircraft at considerable cost. Despite this Westward continued to use an Islander on the Shuttle until mid-summer 1970, but the service never became a commercial success. During July 1970 Westward withdrew the Islander and sub-chartered a Southend Air Taxis Piper Cherokee to operate the flights, this change of equipment effectively signalled that the end was near and indeed the last operation was on the 22nd August 1970.

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So ended a brave attempt, but one nobody seemed eager to repeat. But like many 'failed first attempt's people in the BAA and Airlines either based at Gatwick, or those at Heathrow with potentially high volumes of Interline traffic between the two Airports filed away the lessons for the future.

Westward Airways After the Shuttle

Westward Airways continued operating on other routes for the remainder of the summer the company's situation was bleak and finally ceased operations on the 16th October 1970.

Westward Airways name was revived when V.H. Bellamy formed Westward Airways (Lands End) Ltd in August 1971.

Although it has never operated as a 'true airline', the company has built replica Aircraft, operates the Lands End Aero Club and since 1992 is the holder of a long term lease on Lands End Aerodrome. Although ownership of the land which the Airport occupies has now passed from the Joint Councils (Penwith District Council, Kerrier District Council and Cornwall County Council) to Ambercroft Properties Ltd, a London based property developer) the tenancy continues

Westward Airways (Lands End) is now a subsidiary of the Isles of Scilly Steamship Company. But for the moment at least the Westward Airways name lives on

Interlude

As Gatwick grew in terms of Schedule Services, Government Policy vacillated. The pressures were many and complex. Firstly were the Gatwick based UK Carriers most notably British Caledonian and Dan Air, plus those US Carriers (for example Delta and Braniff) now operating schedules across the Atlantic under US de-regulation but limited to using Gatwick as their London Terminus. All these carriers wanted fast reliable link to Heathrow to maximise Interline Traffic between the Airports.

The Government also wanted to move flights serving certain parts of Europe from Heathrow to Gatwick to ease congestion, whilst not upsetting the Governments of those countries whose services were being moved. This was a forlorn hope as National Carriers were at the time one of the most visible national symbols and a source of National pride, banishing them from Heathrow would be considered a diplomatic insult of major proportions. To add commercial injury to national insult, because of the less than adequate transport links, the obvious and unanswerable problem was how these displaced carriers retain their important interlining revenue. Because this plan was presented as a 'quick fix' rather than a policy which would be implemented once Gatwick was further enhanced and the required road infrastructure was in place it was doomed to fail.

Also that 'hardy perennial' the Integrated Coherent Transport Policy for Air/Road/Rail within the UK kept popping up on the agenda. Each of these plans tends to be grandiose in concept, but becomes fragmentary as it limps towards any of it being implemented (and NOTHING appears to have changed in 30 Years).

But finally the plans for a Motorway Network that included a link between the two Airports were approved, but moving from conception to a foreseeable inception to completion, was years away!

Whilst Government (in its Civil Service guise) tends to think long term (preferably far enough in the future for those currently involved in any major planning to have retired) and their Political Masters think short term (normally about as far as the next election), reality does sometimes intrude.

Gatwick and Heathrow needed a fast reliable link, it had needed it for a long time, but now the need was overriding. Enter the Joint Venture Airlink.

Gatwick-Heathrow Airlink Joint Venture (1978 – 1986)

The Gatwick-Heathrow Airlink was formed as a Joint Venture between the British Airports Authority (BAA), British Airways Helicopters (BAH) and British Caledonian Airways (BCAL) to provide a fast link between the two Airports ***until the completion of the Motorway Link***. The CAA Licensing Terms reflected the 'temporary' nature of the Service and took into account the fact that the routing would have to pass over large residential areas at relatively low level (some of the affected areas contained a high proportion of rich and influential residents, who were concerned not just by noise, but the invasion of their privacy).

The BAA Owned the Helicopter, British Airways Helicopters (BAH) provided the Flight Crew, Engineering Support and were the source of Back-up Aircraft with British Caledonian providing the Cabin Crew, Passenger Services and other Ground Support. British Airways Helicopters later withdrew from the joint venture and their role was taken over by Flight Crews, Engineers and backup Aircraft from British Caledonian Helicopters

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G-LINK on Stand 1 at Gatwick



Photograph from the [Caz Caswell Collection](#) © 1985 Used with Permission

The first Service was on the 9th June 1978 .The Aircraft was based at Gatwick and overnight was parked at the BAH helicopter base at Gatwick Airport South, with a short positioning 'hop' to Stand 1 at the Main Airport for the first Service of the day. Whilst at Heathrow the Aircraft used stand H34. With dedicated stands and gates, coupled with the ATC at both Airports doing their level best to be Airlink 'friendly', the service achieved good punctuality standards

G-LINK Arriving at Gatwick



Photograph by Douglas Ian Holland © 1979 (From the Author's own collection)

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G-LINK Embarking Passengers and Baggage on Stand H34 at Heathrow (Note Rotors Spun Up)



Picture from the [British Caledonian Airways Tribute Site](#)

British Airways Helicopters S61N G-BCEA Taxying at Heathrow



Photograph Sarah Ward © 1982 Use by Courtesy and Permission of the [Caz Caswell Collection](#)

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Therefore the service quickly became an Operational success (much of the credit for this early success must go to Bill Ashpole, who was effectively Manager Airlink) and was well received by Passengers. But it was well understood even before the service started that there would be both ongoing opposition and noise complaints from the residents living under the flight paths used by the Aircraft.

This opposition proved to be both intense and relentless. Complaints would arrive even when the Airlink wasn't flying. In the minds of many residents all helicopters had to be the Airlink and many complaints were related to other Helicopter Operations, Army, RAF and other Commercial Operations and indeed complaints were received when NO helicopters of any kind were flying in the complainant's area. Even after the Airlink ceased operations (a fact that was well publicised) complaints continued to be received and this says a lot about those who were lodging the complaints!

With the completion of the section of the M25 between Reigate and the A3 in October 1985, the end was nigh. The last flight of the Airlink Service was made on the 6th February 1986 and the licence to operate withdrawn

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British Caledonian Helicopters performing Airlink Support Duties on Stand 1 at Gatwick



Photograph from the [Caz Caswell Collection](#) © 1985 Used with Permission

The Air Links between Gatwick and Heathrow

Airlink S-61N Safety Card – Used on all Aircraft Supporting the Service



From Jean-Marc Camilleri's [Aircraft Safety Card Collection](#)

After the Airlink

The Joint Venture Companies

Of the Joint Venture partners, only the **BAA** remains (albeit now Spanish owned) as for the other members, their fates are summarized below..

BAH (British Airways Helicopters) which was started as the BEA Experimental Helicopter Unit in 1947, becoming BEA Helicopters, before being renamed at the time of the BOAC/BEA integration to form British Airways. BAH was sold off in September 1985, to of all people Robert Maxwell in the guise of the Mirror Group and renamed British International Helicopters (BIH). One of the clauses in the sale

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contract was that British Airways would not own, nor operate Helicopters for a minimum of seven years, was to impact on events at one of the other Joint Venture partners.

As part of the Mirror Group the company and its employees were brought low by the financial manipulation of pension funds and other assets carried out by Robert Maxwell. This led to the company being reformed as a subsidiary of CHC (Canadian Helicopter Corp), incorporated as British International Helicopters (1994). In 1999 CHC decided to merge all its UK Subsidiaries into one operating company Scotia Helicopter Services and for a short time the BIH name disappeared. But due to competition concerns and apparently to reduce debt CHC disposed of the non-offshore operations to British International Limited (2000),

So despite the many trials and tribulations the heir to BAH continues in business today and whilst still best known for the Penzance-St Mary's Helicopter Service which was started by BEA Helicopters back in 1964, has in its latest incarnation expanded into many other areas of operation..

BCHL (British Caledonian Helicopters Limited – Originally Ferranti Helicopters), as British Caledonian's long term future became more uncertain, the company started to dispose of the non-core assets, in which it had invested so much.. In some cases this was to realise much needed cash, in other cases disposal was seen as making the remainder of the company more attractive to potential suitors, as there was acceptance at Board level that BCAL would lose its independence either to a 'White Knight' such as SAS, or be taken over by British Airways.. Disposal of BCHL would not only raise some money, but would also make it easier for British Airways to buy British Caledonian as the contractual clause signed with the Mirror Group would not be contravened. So in autumn of 1987 with British Airways now the front runner to takeover British Caledonian, BCHL was sold to Bristow Helicopters, with the sale being completed in November 1987.

BCAL (British Caledonian Airways Limited). The story of British Caledonian, from its formation as the second force airline on the takeover of BUA by Caledonian Airways, through the trials and tribulations that it faced and overcame including the 1974 Fuel Crisis, the DC10 Grounding, the impact of the Falklands War, the problems of remittances and the importance of the 'Oil Related Routes', have all been well covered over the years and even attempting to summarize here would be churlish.

But these crises were not at the root of the problem, BCAL was throughout its life was a big airline constrained by circumstances, politics, and finance (plus in some cases union intransigence) in a small airline straitjacket. It had National Carrier infrastructure at its Gatwick base, but could never get the routes and therefore the investment to move from a 30+ Fleet to a 60+ Fleet and the diverse network it would need for long term survival.

Like its predecessor BUA it did at strategic level all the things a major airline of the time was supposed to do, but always on too small a scale. In industry forums it 'punched far above its weight' and gave the appearance of a major player but the corporate, commercial and financial base was too small. Therefore like BUA it eventually succumbed, but this time there was no 'White Knight' to come to the rescue (although SAS did think seriously about it). Instead BCAL disappeared into British Airways.

G-LINK

Appeared on the British Register on the 09th March 1978 and was de-registered on the 10th June 1987. The technical details when registered were as follows:

Sikorsky C/N 61806
Engines: 2 x General Electric CT58-110-1 turbo shafts, each rated at 1000kW
Fuselage length: 18.08m
Height: 5.32m
Main Rotor diameter: 18.9m
Maximum Take-off weight: 8618kg
Max Speed at sea level: 241km/h
Ceiling: 3505m
Range with max fuel: 443km

Whilst in BAA ownership and although primarily dedicated to the Airlink Operation, on at least one occasion the aircraft was used by the BAA as a flying crane during work on what is now the South Terminal at Gatwick.

G-LINK although supported by back-up S61N's initially from BAH and latterly from BCHL was the Aircraft that symbolised the Airlink Service, at time of writing it is languishing in weeds somewhere in Brazil. A sad fate for a machine fondly remembered by those involved in the Airlink Operation and those who travelled on her.

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William Ashpole

Prior to his involvement with the Airlink Bill Ashpole worked for BAH. Although during the Airlink period he moved over to British Caledonian (not BCHL)., After the Airlink ceased operations he was next tasked with setting up the BCAL Commuter Handling Operation and later worked for IATA, all the while continuing his vocation as a Mormon Bishop.

The Current Situation and the Future

The Motorway Link on which everyone pinned the future now includes sections which are the most congested in Britain. Although the Gatwick Heathrow route well served by regular Coach Services, whose drivers know every off Motorway congestion avoidance route, the journey times are not predictable especially during peak periods..

What I have never understood and I am sure that there must have been very good reasons other than simple cost why a rail link was not built along side the Motorway to provide a true high speed link between the two airports, but from my obviously naïve viewpoint the idea had its merits.

In fact this may be just the right time to start planning such a link. This could be either a standard twin track railway, or something more innovative such as Mono Rail, or Magnetic Levitation.

As this will take a decade to debate, hold enquires, plan in detail and generally argue about, starting the process now may just possibly mean that it is at least approved before once again the pressures for a fast, reliable link between the two Airports again reach the point where something has to be done

Is there likely to be another Air Link between Gatwick and-Heathrow?

Technically and logistically a lot of challenges, but in simple terms feasible. Politically there would be enormous problems, not least with the opposition from residents (many of whom have financial and political clout), finally in Business Terms, the situation has changed. The overriding necessity that created the Joint Venture doesn't currently seem to be there. So in the foreseeable future the answer is no!

Sources, Acknowledgments and Web Links

The PPRuNe Connection:

The genesis of this article is the result of two discussion threads in PPRuNE:

[Heathrow - Gatwick Helicopter Link thread in the Rotorheads forum](#)

and

[Gatwick - Heathrow Islander and S61 Questions - Aviation History and Nostalgia forum](#)

Although I was peripherally involved in the Airlink Operation and had seen the earlier Shuttle Operation, at close hand, the posts in these threads not only helped to jog my (less than reliable) memory but supplied information that was new to me.

I decided that it would be useful to collate the information into a brief article using the information supplied by the PPRuNers and my failing memory. Any errors and opinions are all mine. But facts are due to the gurus of PPRuNe whose true identities can never be known (as most posters in these forums very sensibly use pseudonyms)!

Extra Special thanks go to:

'**Cyclic Hotline**' and '**Speechless Two**' in the Rotorheads Forum.

'**Heathrow Director**', '**Gonzo**', '**WHBM**', '**Captain Airlues**' and '**primreamer**' in the Aviation History and Nostalgia Forum.

Picture Credits and Links:

[British Caledonian Airways Tribute Site](#)

Caz Caswell's Photographic Site: [Caz Caswell Collection](#)

Sarah Ward

Jean-Marc Camilleri's [Aircraft Safety Card Collection](#)

The Air Links between Gatwick and Heathrow

Other Sources:

[PPRuNe Home](#) – Various (Be **warned** once 'hooked on' **PPRuNe** you may never leave)

[PPRuNe Archives](#) – Various

[CAA GINFO Database](#) – For the Registration and Technical Details on G—LINK

[CHC History](#) – The period of BIH Ownership.

[Hansard](#) – Various re Maxwell and BIH

[Lands End Airport - History](#) – Primarily on Westward Airways (1991)

Mark J in Canada for pointing out that planning a new generation Rail Link now will avoid major problems in a decades time.

Sites of Interest:

[Aquila - British International](#) – These pages from the Aquila Site provide an excellent overview of BIH

[BAA](#) – The Official Site

[BAA Gatwick – Official Site](#)
[BAA Heathrow – Official Site](#)

Gatwick, (nor, more understandably Heathrow) Official Sites in their Timeline History Summaries mention either the Westward Shuttle, nor the Airlink J.V. Whilst the Westward operation is perhaps too fleeting to include in a single Web Page, it is hoped this article may result in at least an acknowledgement that the Airlink J.V was important in the development of Gatwick

On both the Heathrow and Gatwick sites are several interesting Documents in PDF Format on Transport Strategies. None of these consider the possibility of an Air Link between the two Airports!

[Braniff International Tribute Site](#)

[Bristow Group Inc](#) – Heirs and successors to Bristow Helicopters

[Bristow Helicopters 50th Anniversary Site](#)

[British Airways Museum](#)

[British Caledonian Tribute Site – Currently Moribund](#)

Although the **British Caledonian Tribute Site** has been moribund since the death of Ron Thaxter in November 2004, it is hoped by all ex BCAL staff everywhere that one day it will be fully reactivated.

[British International](#) – Official Site

[Delta Air Lines](#)– Official Site

[Delta Air Lines - Wikipedia](#)

[Gatwick Aviation Society](#)

Douglas Holland – August 2006
Website: <http://www.cue-dih.co.uk/>