



## TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

### SECOND AIRPORT PROPOSED FOR LAUNCESTON

#### Second Airport Proposed for Launceston

*Paul A.C. Richards AM, February 2021*

In 1945, and earlier in 1939, a second airport to Western Junction was proposed for Launceston. At the time, although Western Junction was adequate, it would be necessary in the future to upgrade the runway to make it a first-class interstate airport. The site chosen in the 1930s was a very sound one as it was on top of a major lava flow from an eruption many thousands of years ago from the Cock Hat hill to the north of the present site. The eruption had two lava flows which ran south towards the South Esk river near Evandale. The river was stopped in its tracks and diverted at a right angle flowing overland gushing into a natural fissure known as the cataract gorge today.<sup>1</sup>

In 1945, the *Examiner* reported:

CITY AIRFIELD PROJECT ALTHOUGH the efforts of Launceston public bodies and members of Parliament representing Northern constituencies must for the present be concentrated upon obtaining the improvements to Western Junction necessary to make it a first-class interstate airport, we must not lose sight of the desirability of obtaining later an airfield in or near the city area for intrastate services and private flying. The Tasmanian Aero Club is in process of revival after having been in recess during the war years. One of the functions of the club is to study and advise upon general aviation requirements. It is expected that the club will urge the construction of airfields or strips in the vicinity of all centres of population throughout the state, including quite small townships, so that the whole of Tasmania may have the benefit of intrastate services. Presumably the aim will be to have these airfields as near as possible to the centres they will serve. Then surely it is desirable that Launceston should, if possible, have a subsidiary airfield much nearer than Western Junction.

It is true enough that few if any Australian cities have airfields within their boundaries, but that is because they have no suitable areas available, or because they have not envisaged and prepared for the great strides aviation will make in the next decade. Launceston has the opportunity to give a lead to Australia in providing flying facilities within easy reach of surface transport services, and we suggest that the Aero Club should give early consideration to this aspect of aviation development. The area to be drained by the diversion of the North Esk has already been surveyed with this idea in mind. There is doubt whether that site would be suitable for large machines, but probably it would be quite good for intrastate and private machines. Another area at

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<sup>1</sup> Paul A.C. Richards et al: Health Wealth and Tribulation: Launceston's Cataract Gorge. Myola House of Publishing, 2007



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the top of the hill on the Westbury Rd. overlooking the city has been mentioned as having possibilities. There is no suggestion whatever that Western Junction should not be developed as the principal airport of Tasmania. On the contrary, the extension of that aerodrome and the construction of runways that will render it capable of accommodating the largest airliners must be the prime aim. But there is much support in this community for the long view that, in addition, Launceston should have a secondary airfield nearer the city.<sup>2</sup>

Mr P.E. Pinkard from the Northern Regional Committee at Launceston suggested in 1939 to the Minister for Lands and Works (Mr Brooker), that an airport large enough for any requirements could be constructed at Longford. The area between Turmines Corner, near Perth, and Newry at Longford, and between the western railway and the low hills on the north he considered should be resumed. It was practically, level, and could be drained to the South Esk at Newry if necessary.

In early 1946, there was further discussion that the costs of expansion of Western Junction were too expensive and that a second airport was warranted.

The *Mercury* reported:

The existing road between Turmines Corner and Newry could be incorporated in a runway of nearly 12,000ft. "The low chain of hills in the north-east," added Mr Pinkard, "could be used for underground hangars, stores, and fuel supplies, a most desirable feature for a defence flying field."

The loop of the South Esk provides a natural defence barrier on three sides. The northern edge of the field is practically as close to Launceston as to Western Junction, and a road to connect existing roads would present little difficulties. The larger area available would permit a peacetime airfield being transformed overnight into an extensive defence airfield. Western Junction, he said, could be retained as a flying field for private planes and for training, leaving the more extensive field to handle large planes Mr R. A. Ferrall, supporting the proposal, said the proposal was vital to Northern Tasmania. Ninety percent of travel in the future would be by air. Tourist traffic and everything else would depend on adequate aerodrome facilities. It was decided immediately to approach the Air Ministry with a strong recommendation that the proposal be investigated.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas. : 1900 - 1954), Friday 21 December 1945, page 4

<sup>3</sup> *Mercury* (Hobart, Tas. : 1860 - 1954), Saturday 2 February 1946, p. 6



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It is interesting to note that there was much discussion on the matter with one citizen of Launceston expressing concern of the inadequate knowledge of aviation, topography of the site and surrounding topography of the Western Junction site. He went on to say that

Western Junction was selected as the site for our aerodrome for several reasons. Meteorological: Due to its elevation. 600 feet and the large valley to the east and north, there is seldom any fog, although radar will now provide a pilot with the necessary vision. There is also an absence of severe air pockets. Topographical: Absence of hazards such as high adjacent hills. Accessibility: Only nine miles from Launceston, or 15 minutes' travel-the same distance that Essendon is from Melbourne. Ten years ago aircraft were small in comparison with planes in operation today and required only a short length of runway well drained turf being quite sufficient. Nowadays with planes having an all-up weight of from 15 to 35 tons, hard-surfaced pavements are essential up to 5,000 feet in length, with a turf extension to 7,000 or even 10,000 feet (almost two miles) in three directions. 5,000 feet being required for the initial take-off, and the remainder as an emergency landing surface during the critical period when the machine is just airborne and the engines are on high power.<sup>4</sup>

There was clear evidence that more than one runway of 7,000 feet could be provided at Western Junction. The surrounding country had the distinct possibility for perhaps three runways.

Modern earth-moving equipment was now available and it was considered that there would be no difficulty in undertaking what would be required in the overall scheme of developing Western Junction. It was even suggested that a third runway, probably east-west, would be a similar proposition. However, one of the post war problems was the desperate housing position in Tasmania and in particular Launceston and the limited supply of concrete.

The *Examiner* reported:

The question of building concrete strips of even normal length in the immediate future is tied up with the desperate housing position. A concrete track 5,000 feet long would use enough cement to complete 500 concrete houses. Three runways would be equal to 1,500 houses. If the aerodromes required similar strips, enough concrete for 15,000 houses, sufficient for 45,000 people - a fair-sized city-would be needed.<sup>5</sup>

The impending future of jet assisted take-offs was imminent which would shorten the power run by  $33^{1/3}$  %. The reversible pitch air screw would provide positive air braking, even though a plane has no wheel brake whatever, and the tricycle under cart will

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<sup>4</sup> *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas. : 1900 - 1954), Friday 8 March 1946, p. 6

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*



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permit of manoeuvring across wind. Radar would provide the pilot with eyes for penetrating the densest fog or blackest night

At the time it could not foresee what aviation will be like 20 years hence, but it was evident that, as large aerodromes and runways meant heavy capital cost and maintenance, aircraft engineers would wrestle with and solve the problem of the long take off for a large aircraft in due course. Overall at the time there was an appreciation of the fact that Launceston had an excellent an excellent aerodrome and that, if necessary was capable of great extension.

However in the South of the state the Air Minister Said that it was a necessity that a new airfield site must be found and the Premier, Mr Cosgrove advised because the approaches to Cambridge airport were restrictive to operations, it would be necessary to develop a new site. All was then concentrated on developing the Hobart airport and diversion of the state highway at Cambridge.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, a new proposal for an airport at Prospect just outside of Launceston was being mooted.

In 1946 there was considerable discussion about a second airport for Launceston just 2.5 miles from the city in suburb of Prospect. This site which is 2.1, miles from the city, adjacent to the N.W. Coast road, was put forward when it was suggested that the Western Junction extensions may prove too costly.<sup>7</sup>

In August budgetary provisions were made for Western Junction extensions as the major airport for Launceston.<sup>8</sup> Tenders were called and the work proceeded.<sup>9</sup>

In 1947 the Commonwealth announced a £5.5 million upgrade for Australian airports. The building of paved runways at Western Junction, and the construction of an airport at Devonport were on the agenda.<sup>10</sup> An important aspect of the post-war programme for capital cities was the separation of private and club flying' in light aircraft from regular air transport services.

Over the years Western Junction airport has experienced several closures due to low cloud, fog and mist associated with the winter months. In June 1948 it was closed to low lying cloud.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas. : 1900 - 1954), Saturday 6 July 1946, p. 6

<sup>7</sup> *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas. : 1900 - 1954), Tuesday 16 July 1946, p. 5

<sup>8</sup> *Advocate* (Burnie, Tas. : 1890 - 1954), Thursday 1 August 1946, p. 7

<sup>9</sup> *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas. : 1900 - 1954), Thursday 1 August 1940, p. 4

<sup>10</sup> *Mercury* (Hobart, Tas. : 1860 - 1954), Wednesday 22 January 1947, p. 2

<sup>11</sup> *Mercury* (Hobart, Tas. : 1860 - 1954), Saturday 26 June 1948, p. 5



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In June 1952 it was closed due to drizzling rain and very low cloud.

Two passenger planes were diverted to Cambridge. Nineteen Launceston -bound passengers had to travel to Launceston by car. They arrived, tired and weary, about 1 a.m. today. The planes diverted were the T.A.A. 5.40 plane from Melbourne with 12 passengers, and the A.N.A. 6.00 p.m. from Melbourne with seven passengers. Two freighter planes were also diverted to Cambridge.<sup>12</sup>

Today the airport still experiences closures during the winter months from fog and low lying cloud. Over the years the airport has undergone significant renovations and in more recent times has gone into private ownership.

This year will see the hanging of Miss Flinders in the main terminal on loan from the Tasmanian Aviation Historical Society in partnership with Australian Pacific Airlines Corporation who have held ownership since 1989.<sup>13</sup>



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<sup>12</sup> *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas. : 1900 - 1954), Saturday 28 June 1952, p. 19

<sup>13</sup> <https://tahs.org.au/western-junction-airport/>