



TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

KING ISLAND AIRPORT – A BRIEF EARLY HISTORY

King Island Airport – A Brief Early History

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King Island airport is situated approximately 8kms from the main township, Currie, and is owned and operated by the King Island Council.

Serviced by REX, Sharp Airlines, King Island Airlines and Vortex Aviation, these operators provide regular daily services to Melbourne's Tullamarine, Essendon and Moorabbin airports in addition to Launceston, Hobart and Tasmania's North West Coast. The Launceston based Royal Flying Doctor Service provides medical retrieval flights from the island to mainland Australia and Tasmanian hospitals. Regular freight flights also service the island in addition to charter flights that support the Island's tourist industry.

The airport has two runways, the longest being 28/10 which is sealed and provides instrument approaches, a café, hire car facilities and amenities for passengers.



Short final to King Island's runway 10 as it is today; the terminal and other facilities are located to the right of the picture

Whilst King Island provides excellent facilities for an island whose population does not exceed 1500 it was not always the case. The airport's history can be traced back to 1930 when the island was totally reliant on supplies being transported from the Australian mainland and Tasmania by sea with ships having to negotiate the notorious Bass Strait and its unpredictable weather.



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In 1930 the Council established an “Aerodrome Committee” with the view of establishing an airport on the island. Initially in early 1930, Mathews Aviation paid the occasional visit using the amphibious aircraft “Cutty Sark” using Lake Flannigan, situated in the north of the Island for take offs and landings.

Whilst several site inspections were carried out by the end of May 1932 the problem of finding a suitable area that was not constantly boggy was still apparent. Furthermore, Council noted interest had been received from a “Tasmania Company” (presumably Holyman Brothers) to establish an air service from Tasmania to the Island. By December 1932 Council decided the “Bains” site, the property of Mr J Attrill, was suitable and was subsequently selected and approved by Civil Aviation subject, however, to the satisfactory clearance of the site before a licence would be granted

At the same meeting, Tasmanian Aerial Services correspondence was received stating they wanted to start flying passengers as soon as possible, ideally in the early new year. Civil Aviation provisionally approved the aerodrome (without an inspection) to be used only by pilots with a Commercial licence. Captain Victor Holyman travelled to the Island on the steamer “Kooameela” on 21st December and inspected the site. He was satisfied with the surface as being suitable to use and returned to Launceston to plan the inaugural service on the 24th of December. The outcome of the inspection was communicated to the Civil Aviation Department, who replied by radio that they now required the site to be inspected by a Departmental Officer before the licence would be issued. Notwithstanding the Departments requirements, Captain Holyman decided to fly the inaugural service on the 24th without a licence being granted.

Thus, the first flight landed at King Island on Christmas eve 1932 at 12:30pm with Captain Victor Holyman at the controls of “Miss Currie” with two passengers aboard, Mr Waterworth of Wynyard and Miss K Jackson from Launceston.

The aircraft returned to Launceston the following morning, Christmas Day, and regular trips were then planned for Monday and Thursday arriving at 11am and departing at 2pm.

Mr Augenson, an inspectional officer with Civil Aviation Department arrived on the Island on Monday 9th of January 1933 and carried out his inspection of the site, confirmed that everything was satisfactory for granting of a license for single-engined machines and radioed his recommendation to Melbourne. The licence was issued the following day. The aerodrome would need an additional 15 acres to be cleared and levelled before a multi-engined plane licence could be issued.



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Aerial photo of “Miss Currie” named as much out of sentiment because it was Holyman’s Brothers first aircraft, as it was historically after the town of Currie on King Island

The commencement of the Empire Airmail Service from the United Kingdom to Australia, was to include feeder routes, one of which was Hobart to Melbourne. Government tenders were called in November 1933 for the Bass Strait service, with the route being Melbourne to Hobart by way of King Island, Wynyard, and Launceston, a distance of 487 miles, to be serviced by multi-engined planes and at the time the tender was published, King Island was considered to be the better route. Because of the importance now of the aerodrome, in late November 1933, the aerodrome was “taken over” by the Department of Civil Aviation.

Work on upgrading the aerodrome continued in 1934. The target was to have the aerodrome ready for the new Tasmanian Aerial Services air mail service which commenced on 1st of September 1934. By May, the area has been levelled, and new grass sown. By June, the perimeter drains and fencing was underway. Civil Aviation inspected the aerodrome in early November 1934 and authorised its use for all types of aircraft.

In December 1934, the road to the aerodrome received additional funding from the Department of Interior and work on this road was prioritised over other road projects. In February, it was reported the aerodrome was in good order.

The new Holyman’s Airways airliner “Loina” accomplished a particularly fast trip from King Island on February 8th 1935, reaching Laverton 55 minutes after leaving the island’s aerodrome.

King Island now enjoyed a daily air service, with the exception of Sundays, three days a week to Melbourne and three alternate days to Launceston. The aerodrome is now in good order, and, it is confidently anticipated, will prove an all-weather aerodrome.



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File photo of Holyman's DH.86 aircraft "Loina"

The development of King Island airport continued with the airport achieving some notoriety during World War 2.

In May 1942, with the threat of a Japanese invasion on the horizon, the Australian Air Board was formed who created a plan for the defence of Australia that incorporated various operating aerodromes and the building of new airstrips. One of these airstrips happened to be King Island airport. With the management of the airport by the military, came the inevitable changes, one of which was the placement of explosives beneath the runways so they could be destroyed should the enemy arrive.

This plan actually worked a little too well when in 1942 the ANA DC-2 "Loongana" was being unloaded at King Island. Some enterprising army chap began fiddling with the switches that controlled the explosive charges beneath the runways and set the charge off that all but destroyed the runways and showered the DC-2 with clods of dirt and rocks severely denting both wings and fuselage, although the aircraft was flown back to Melbourne for repairs.



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The unfortunate DC-2 Loongana on her initial test flight from Essendon following her arrival into Australia

For the next 80 plus years the airport grew and evolved with the aviation's industry progression and with the development of industries and tourism on the island and as such became an integral part of the Island's life. More about these times later.

In 2018 the King Island Council, the owners of the airport, commissioned the updated Airport Master Plan to ensure the long-term viability of the airport in support of its strategic objectives. Air travel is the only means of access for people travelling to or from the island. It is also the only means of transport for high-value and/or time-critical freight, both inbound and outbound. King Island Airport is therefore a critical element of King Island's transport infrastructure. The recent rise in passenger numbers and freight movements revealed constraints to some elements of King Island Airport's physical infrastructure. The purpose of the Master Plan is to establish a framework for the future planning and development of King Island Airport to ensure King Island Council achieves its strategic objectives and capitalises on the aeronautical and commercial opportunities provided by the airport.

And it all started with one flight, a bold pilot and two passengers on Christmas Eve 1932.



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