



LATROBE AERODROME 1931 TO 1944

**Latrobe Aerodrome 1931 to 1944**

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In November 1930, the first aerodrome in Tasmania was constructed at Western Junction allowing the Australian Aero Club (Tasmanian Section) to receive its first planes and commence pilot training.

Western Junction was built and owned by the Federal Government. In 1931, the policy of the Federal and State Governments was not to develop regional aerodromes in Tasmania. Thus, it was left to local Municipalities or private citizens to develop landing grounds or aerodromes.

During 1931, the development of five aerodromes commenced, at King Island, Flinders Island, Smithton, Wynyard and Latrobe. The aerodrome at Latrobe was the first to be completed.

At Latrobe, a private Aerodrome Committee was formed by local businessmen, with Harold Lord being the main proponent. They proposed to use the old racecourse reserve, which is located on the western side of the Mersey River, just over the bridge on the road to Devonport, being about a mile to the Post Office.

The reserve had been vested to a group of locals, known as the Racecourse Reserve Trustees, in 1882 by the State Government. They developed a racecourse and conducted meetings until the about 1920. By 1931, the race track was used for training horses only.

The site was flat, but it was covered in trees. The Aerodrome Committee proposed to clear the tress and develop a landing strip adjacent to the racecourse. In June and July 1931, the site was inspected by Captain Huxley and Flying Officer Owen, who were surveying potential landing strips in the state at the time, and then by Huxley and the Civil Aviation Department Superintendent of Aerodromes, Mt A. R. McComb. They all agreed the site would be suitable for an aerodrome.

The Latrobe Municipal Council supported the project, but they would not assist it financially. They did arrange for the Reserve to be vested in the Council and then allow the land to be developed as an aerodrome by the Aerodrome Committee.

In August 1931, the Aerodrome Committee commenced developing the site, with Harold Lord supervised the work. Clearing the land was initially financed by the sale of the firewood that was harvested. (The wood was sold to Mr Lord's Latrobe Hydro-Electric Company, which operated a steam boiler when the water levels were low).

As aviation developed during the 1930s, the requirements of the Civil Aviation Department on the construction of aerodromes also expanded. Aerodromes for commercial or pilot



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training needed to be licenced with the Civil Aviation Department. Their staff were required to inspect and approve the site.

In 1931, the requirements for a First-Class aerodrome for all aircraft to land was an area of 660 yards square, or 440 yards square for a second-class aerodrome, where light aircraft could land.

At Latrobe, the committee started on clearing the land for a second-class aerodrome, which would mean about 32 acres of the 159 acres on the site would need to be cleared.

As well as providing a flat surface for landing and take-off, as the landing grounds were grass, drainage to remove water during the winter months was also required.

The first landing on the aerodrome was on Wednesday 28 October 1931, by Captain Francis in an Aero club moth. This coincided with the annual Latrobe Show:

*Captain J. Francis, the Australian Aero Club Instructor, piloted one of the club's aeroplanes from Western Junction to Latrobe yesterday, and effected a perfect landing on the new aerodrome. During the afternoon Captain Francis conducted a number of passenger flights, and also gave an exhibition of trick flying. The presence of the aeroplane created a lot of interest and was a success as a show attraction.*

The Civil Aviation inspection was performed in early December 1931, with a favourable outcome. This allowed the Aerodrome Committee to finalise planning for an Air Pageant and official opening on 28 December 1931 to coincide with the annual Latrobe sport carnival. The aerodrome was then officially opened by the local member, Joseph Lyons, who has just been elected as Prime Minister at the recent Federal election.

The aerodrome had a restricted licence for light aircraft. It would need to be enlarged and upgraded to the larger planes which were proposed to be used for commercial use in the years to come.

To this point, the development costs had been funded by the Aerodrome Committee, through firewood sales and by the provision of personal loans.

In 1932, commercial aviation within Tasmania commenced with Lawrence Johnson and the Holyman Brothers in their two planes, Miss Flinders and Miss Currie.

The Committee believed that Latrobe could be a successful commercial aerodrome when services between the regional aerodromes began operating. They sought financial help from the Municipal Council to continue developing the site to employ more unemployed men. They asked the Latrobe Municipal Council to apply for a loan of £300 from the State and Federal Government funds assigned to projects which assist the unemployed. As the Council has no direct interest in the Aerodrome, the Committee executive (Harold Lord and David Constable) would act as personal guarantors for the loan. The loan was approved in July 1932, with the



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guarantors required to meet the 10-year repayment schedule of £36 per annum, the income being from landing fees, air pageants and grazing rights over the land.

The Aerodrome Committee continued working on the landing area under the guidance and approval of the Civil Aviation Department. More funds were required to complete the work, which again were provide by Mr Lord as a loan to the Committee.

With the opening of the King Island aerodrome, Victor Holyman flew *Miss Currie* on the inaugural Tasmanian Aerial Services passenger service from Western Junction on 24 December 1932. The Western Junction to King Island service, generally using the DH.83 Fox Moth *Miss Currie*, and would stop at the North West Coast aerodromes if there were passengers to drop off or collect:

*Flying from the Western Junction aerodrome the aviator sets his course for Latrobe. Passengers are picked up and put down at the licensed aerodrome at this town, and then the flight is continued to Wynyard and Smithton. At Latrobe and Wynyard a system has been devised whereby the booking agents place sheets on stretches of green grass outside their premises if it is necessary for the plane to land to pick up passengers. From Smithton the flight to King Island is made via Robins and Hunter Islands. An emergency landing ground being available at Robins Island.*

The aerodrome was mainly used by the Aero Club, as well as planes offering joy flights.

In September 1933, with the arrival of the bigger DH.84 *Miss Launceston*, Tasmanian Aerial Services commenced a service across Bass Strait to Melbourne started. The route alternating between Flinders or along the NW Coast to Wynyard and King Island.

Tasmanian Aerial Services would not use Latrobe as a stopping place as it no longer met the current requirements for commercial planes.

An Air Pageant was held at Latrobe on 28 February 1934, with Aero Club, RAAF and commercial planes attending.

The Commercial aviation changed in 1934 when Holyman's Airways were awarded the air mail tender to operate services across Bass Strait. They ordered bigger planes (DH.86s) and again using Wynyard as the stopping point on the Western Junction to Essendon route via King Island.

The Federal Government gave grants to Wynyard, Smithton and Latrobe in early 1935 for aerodrome development, with Latrobe getting £250.

The money was used to install more drains and extend the runway to attract the smaller commercial planes which could be used on feeder services to Western Junction. The work continued into 1936, but unfortunately, no regular commercial services would use Latrobe.



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The final role for Latrobe Aerodrome was as an emergency landing ground for all aircraft, including RAAF and commercial airlines, e.g. DH86 and DC2s.

In December 1937, Civil Aviation provided a £250 grant to undertake additional runway work. The following year they proposed to take over the aerodrome.

All parties, Civil Aviation, the Aerodrome Committee who still managed the site and had financial liabilities to the Council and its members associated with the earlier loan, and the Latrobe Municipal Council agreed this was the best outcome

The Aerodrome Committee were still responsible for the historic loan to the Council, which was about £150. The Council refused to take over the debt.

The aerodrome was taken over by Civil Aviation in September 1939, after the legalities associated with the land lease were sorted out. Civil aviation maintained the site and the Aerodrome committee were allowed to gain income from the grazing rights.

In March 1944, Civil Aviation advised that it was terminating its control of the aerodrome as it had no longer any use for it. It wasn't considered suitable for an emergency landing ground for the bigger planes of the RAAF and ANA, due to the hills that surrounded the site. The Council were not interested in operating the aerodrome, so it was delicensed in late 1944.

After the War, a new Airport at Devonport was developed. Work commenced in 1948 and the first large plane landed June 1950

There is one more twist in this story.

By 1938, the Aerodrome Committee had spent well over £3000 on the site, of which £1500 was provide by the members, predominantly, Harold Lord. The Municipal Council got this asset without spending any of its own money. In 1941, the Council sued Harold Lord and David Constable for the remaining £54 of the loan they guaranteed. (This is about \$4,500 today). The Council won on a legal technicality, with the judge expressing his dismay that he had to adjudicate in the matter.

When the aerodrome was delicensed, the Council, took over the grazing rights. The income from which paid off the loan in 1943 to end the matter.



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In conclusion, why did Latrobe fail as a viable aerodrome?

The answer is a combination of technology's continual advancement making small aerodromes unattractive to commercial operators. In July 1938, the Latrobe Municipal Council, meeting summed up the issues when discussing the problem:

*They were within 20 minutes flying of Launceston. Much of the advantage of air travel over road travel had disappeared owing to the provision of bitumenised roads and high powered cars. As a result, intra-State services had disappeared. In regard to inter-State services, they were up against Launceston and Hobart*