



The Development of Smithton Aerodrome 1931 – 1944

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In January 1931, the first licenced aerodrome in Tasmania at Western Junction Aerodrome at Launceston was in use. The Australian Aero Club (Tasmanian Section) had its two new Gypsy Moths to conduct pilot training and Australian National Airways of Charles Kingsford Smith and Charles Ulm had started passenger services from Essendon in their Avro Ten's.

During 1931, the Australian Aero Club (Tasmanian Section) established an aerodrome at Brighton in Southern Tasmania. Work also commenced to developed aerodromes at Latrobe, Wynyard and Smithton. Latrobe aerodrome was the first one to be finished, as described in our last newsletter. In this newsletter, the development of Smithton aerodrome is described.

An Aerodrome Committee was formed in Smithton in late September 1931 following the visit by Captain George Matthews of Matthews Aviation. He was planning to start his Bass Strait passenger service using his amphibian planes (these were flying boats which also had retractable landing gear). Matthews was impressed by the sheltered nature of the Duck River estuary on which to land his amphibian on water. He was also impressed by an adjacent area of ground:¹

"About a mile out of Smithton," he said, "is an area which, from an operator's point of view, could be converted into one of the best aerodromes in the Commonwealth, provided that the ground was adequately drained and sufficiently grassed. From a practical flying man's point of view the area is ideal, as the approaches are low, and road and rail facilities are in close proximity."

The land was then vested to the Municipal Council from the State Government for a nominal rent.

The site was described as a "ti-tree bog" which required clearing and draining.² Work started quickly on clearing about 35 acres of the site. Locals donated 200 days of labour by sending the unemployed to the site and paying them themselves. An overdraft, which was guaranteed by locals, was also used to fund the clearing work.

By February the following year, sufficient land had been cleared for a R.A.A.F. Wapiti to land on Saturday 27 February 1932. The R.A.A.F. had sent three Wapiti's and three Bulldog's from Point Cook to Tasmania on a training flight, which coincided with the Air Pageants held around the state.

Work continued during 1932 on preparing the aerodrome surface and installing an extensive system of drains.



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THE DEVELOPMENT OF SMITHTON AERODROME 1931 - 1944

Victor Holyman, of the newly formed Tasmanian Aerial Services, visited Smithton on 13 October 1932, and after inspecting the ground, he thought it suitable for use by small planes. He recommended that the Committee immediately apply to the Civil Aviation Branch for an aerodrome licence for which would allow his company to begin a passenger service from Western Junction to Latrobe, Wynyard and Smithton using the *Miss Currie*.³

A provisional licence was granted and he inaugurated the North West coast service on 14 November 1932:⁴

When Capt. V. C. Holyman left the Western Junction aerodrome at 9 o'clock yesterday morning in the D.H. Fox Moth "Miss Currie" for Smithton, a valuable air service from Launceston along the North West-Coast was inaugurated.

The Fox Moth took the air in bad weather conditions, and on account of the poor visibility Captain Holyman was forced to fly the machine down the Tamar Valley, and then to follow the coast at a low altitude to the mouth of the Mersey. Continuing up the Mersey Valley, Captain Holyman effected the first landing of the flight at Latrobe.

Papers were dropped at Ulverstone, Burnie and Stanley. and continuing the- flight along the Coast, the plane was landed at Wynyard, and shortly afterwards took off again for Smithton.

Captain Holyman left Launceston at 9 am. Latrobe at 9.40 a.m., and Wynyard at 10.05 a.m., and arrived at Smithton at 10.30 a.m. The return flight was commenced at 4.10 p.m., Wynyard being reached at 4.45 p.m., and Latrobe at 5.10 p.m., and the machine landed at the Western Junction aerodrome at 6.15 p.m.

The official opening of the Smithton Aerodrome was held on Friday 17 February 1933, with over 3,000 people attended. The opening coincided with various air pageants that were being held in the state, which resulted in a good selection of planes attended.⁵

Civil Aviation granted a licence for all types of aircraft in April 1933.⁶ Matthews Aviation commenced its Bass Strait service in early 1933 and used Smithton aerodrome as its northern base.

During the winter of 1933, the surface proved to be too wet for use by large planes as it had not consolidated enough.⁷ More drainage work was started, and the three runways set out in a triangle were established.

Civil Aviation approved the aerodrome for all types of planes in late 1934, when it was reported:⁸

Up to the present slightly in excess of £1,000 has been spent in the construction of the aerodrome. Up to the present the club has not received any assistance from either the State or Federal Governments; the whole of the amount so far spent either having been contributed voluntarily by the public or raised by means of various efforts.



TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SMITHTON AERODROME 1931 - 1944

Some idea of the magnitude of the work undertaken by the members of the aerodrome committee may be gained from the fact that the drainage system comprises practically seven miles of drains. An open drain five feet deep, five foot wide at the top and two feet wide at the bottom, almost encircles the ground, its length being three and a quarter miles; while an underground drainage system extending almost all over the ground absorbs another three and a half miles of drains.

The east-west runaway is 810 yards in length, and that running north and south 710 yards; while to the north west and south-east there are runways of 700 yards. The predominating characteristic of the ground is the safety factor, the approach from any direction being level for miles round, and the turfy nature of the soil ideal for landing, and fogs are practically unknown.

The process of levelling and draining has been completed, and a new road has been constructed from the Montagu road to the hangar. The ground is ready for the reception of all aircraft, and a bowser, in which there is stored 400 gallons of petrol, provides a convenient service.

In September 1933, Tasmanian Aerial Services introduced the DH.84 *Miss Launceston* and established their Bass Strait Service, flying either by King or Flinders Islands. When flying the western route, it would call at Smithton if there were passengers to embark or collect (and the landing surface was not water-logged).

With the awarding of the airmail contract to Tasmanian Aerial Services in early 1934, Matthews Aviation ceased its Bass Strait services.

In late December 1934, the Commonwealth Government provide funds to Smithton, Wynyard and Latrobe to improve their aerodromes. Smithton received £500, while Latrobe received £250 and Wynyard £850.⁹ This was the first Government funding received by Smithton.

This funding was used to start developing all-weather gravel landing strips. Beginning in March 1935, the work would take 6 years to complete. Initially a bullock drawn plough was used to remove about 300 mm of the surface, to a width of 25 m, which was then filled with in gravel.¹⁰

While the gravelling work was being undertaken, Holyman's Airways (as Tasmanian Aerial Services was now known as), could not use the aerodrome on its Bass Strait service.

Work continued on the first gravel runway, and it was nearing completion at the end of 1935.² This allowed Holyman's Airways, and the later A.N.A., to call at Smithton on their Bass Strait service if there were passengers to embark or collect.

In October 1937, the Commonwealth Government granted Smithton another £750 to continue work on the gravel runways.¹¹ By the end of 1941, gravelling the three runways had



TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SMITHTON AERODROME 1931 - 1944

been completed, with the final work being undertaken by the State Public Works Department.¹²

The Circular Head Municipal Council borrowed funds in 1939 to repay the £520 overdraft held by the Aerodrome Committee in developing the aerodrome. To this time, in total £2,500 had been spent developing the aerodrome, (about \$0.25M today), £1,200 from Government grants, £800 collected locally by Committee, and the £520 overdraft. A small aerodrome rate was then applied to the annual Municipal Council rates over the next 5 years to repay the loan.¹³

The Municipal Council then transferred control of aerodrome to the State Transport Commission in early 1944 after paying off the remaining development loan.¹⁴



The three runways at Smithton Airport today (Google Earth)

Note that in the 1940s, the three runways were of similar length. The extension to the runway in the lower part of the image was built in the mid-1950s.

¹ *Burnie Advocate*, 24 September 1931, Page 2

² *Launceston Examiner*, 18 December 1935, Page 14

³ *Launceston Examiner*, 14 October 1932, Page 9

⁴ *Launceston Examiner*, 15 November 1932, Page 7

⁵ *Burnie Advocate*, 18 February 1933, Page 7

⁶ *Circular Head Chronicle*, 26 April 1933, Page 2

⁷ *Launceston Examiner*, 4 October 1933, Page 6

⁸ *Burnie Advocate*, 26 November 1934, Page 5

⁹ *Burnie Advocate*, 29 December 1934, Page 2



TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SMITHTON AERODROME 1931 - 1944

¹⁰ *Circular Head Chronicle*, 3 April 1935, Page 2

¹¹ *Burnie Advocate*, 20 October 1937, Page 8

¹² *Circular Head Chronicle*, 19 March 1941, Page 1

¹³ *Burnie Advocate*, 14 September 1940, Page 8

¹⁴ *Launceston Examiner*, 12 February 1944, Page 4