

History of Hengrove Park

In 1929, due to the crowded situation at Filton Airfield, Bristol City Council formed an Airport Committee which bought 298 acres of farmland at Whitchurch for £15,500. The Airport was opened by the Duke of Kent in May 1930, and as well as club and private flying, 915 passengers were carried in the first year. It was only the third municipal airport in the country, after Croydon in Surrey and Heston in Middlesex.

By the end of the year, Whitchurch was a Customs airport, Airwork had opened a Service Depot, and seven private aircraft were based there. The buildings were at the south-east corner of the airfield, accessed from Whitchurch Lane, until Airport Road was built and a private access road was built on the east side of the airfield. For the next nine years the airport gradually increased its activities and by 1939 there were about 4000 passengers annually.

When the war started in 1939, Whitchurch Airport was requisitioned by the Air Ministry. Whitchurch became, for a time, Britain's only operational civil airport, receiving VIPs with the highest secrecy and security. Airline services were mainly to Lisbon and Foynes, the Irish seaplane terminal for transatlantic flights. By 1943, North African destinations were added.

Five large hangars were built on the north side of the airport during the war. Paved taxiways and the east-west runway, 3048 feet long, were completed by the end of 1941. This allowed most RAF, and later on USAF, craft to visit, usually staging through on delivery flights.

After the war ended the airport was managed by the new Ministry of Civil Aviation. When BOAC set up an aircraft maintenance operation at Filton in 1949, a branch of its in-house Airways Flying Club was formed at Whitchurch. But passenger flights were few until Cambrian Airways, partly owned by BEA, began services to British and French towns from 1953.

In the 1950s with the growth of housing limiting the opportunity to extend the Whitchurch runway, the city council agitated for a site for a new city controlled airport, and eventually succeeded in buying the former RAF airfield at Lulsgate Bottom in 1955, for £55,000, from the Ministry of Aviation.

Airport buildings were put up and the new airport was opened by the Duchess of Kent (the Duke had been killed while serving in the RAF in the war) in May 1957. The Government had by then finally agreed to de-requisition Whitchurch, which was then gradually developed by the Airport Committee as Hengrove Park, and as a series of trading estates whose rents for many years contributed to the Airport accounts. The runway, which was last used in 1993 when a Cessna light aircraft landed on it in emergency, still exists today.