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Barton: Britain's first municipal airport

Derek Brumhead

Barton aerodrome owes its existence to the City of Manchester's quest in the inter-war years for a municipal airport. On 10th October 1928, a memorandum¹ reported that the town clerk, city surveyor and Mr John Leeming had inspected prospective aerodrome sites and as a result the site at Chat Moss was proposed as the most suitable.² On 19th October it was reported that Sir Sefton Branker, Director of Civil Aviation, had come up from London to inspect the site and had declared it most suitable. The location, Foxhill Farm, was alongside the present A57, and the choice was strongly influenced by the City Cleansing Department's ownership of 2600 acres there. An Airport Special Committee was set up and in November 1928 it attended a meeting at the Air Ministry where it was addressed by a Major Mealing.³ He had inspected the site and found it entirely satisfactory subject to certain depressions being filled in and the ground made level and smooth. He undertook to produce a lay-out plan.

However, the choice proved a mistake in several ways. The boggy surface, the difficulties of which had been faced by George Stephenson when constructing the Liverpool to Manchester Railway over Chat Moss, was ignored, although the City Engineers did recognise that appreciable infill and consolidation work was needed on the moss-land; ashes and cinders were brought in. The site also had a foggy, low-lying situation.

In early January 1929 the City Surveyor submitted plans showing the land proposed to be taken over from the Cleansing Department (124 acres) at an annual rent of £450 to include

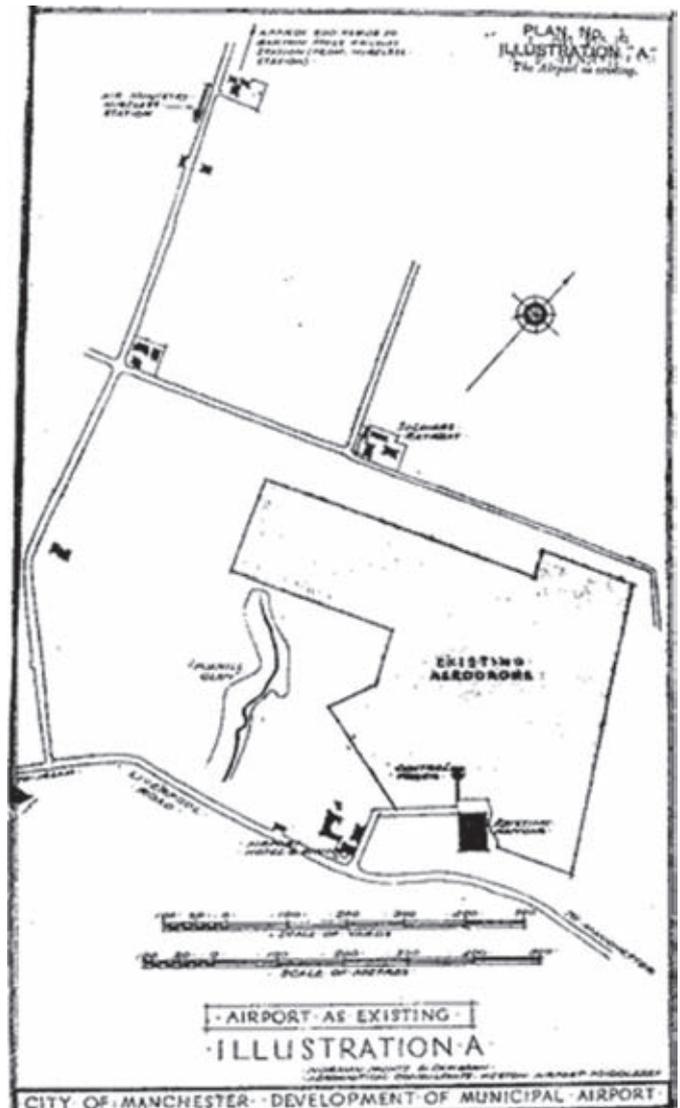


Figure 1: Plan for original airport. Manchester City Council, Appendix to Council Minutes, 1933-34, Vol 2, p. 766. (see Figure 2).

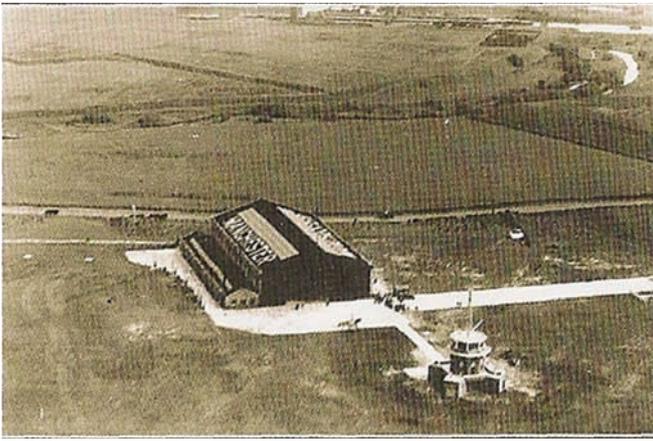


Figure 2: The hangar, control tower and its associated wireless station in 1933.

the existing farmhouse (Foxhill Farm) and two cottages. A letter from Major Mealing outlined the conditions necessary for a licence including filling in all depressions (including Foxhill Glen which is still there), removing railway tracks, providing a 'wind sleeve indicator', buildings to consist of offices, a hangar and fuel tank, runways 100 ft wide with turning places 250 ft in diameter and a surface hard enough to withstand a pressure of one ton per square foot.⁴ There was no shortage of materials because the Moss was used as a tip; plenty of ashes and cinders from Manchester were brought up to the Boysnope Wharf (on the Manchester Ship Canal) and unloaded into little wagons of the light railway that used to run about the Moss. A steam roller was used to obtain a flat surface.⁵ Later in that month it was reported that:

It is estimated that the cost of levelling the site, including the clearing of hedges, trees, etc, the cindering of the site in order to consolidate the ground sufficient to carry a deadweight of one ton per superficial foot, the erection of a hangar, 150ft. x75ft.x30ft., the provision of a workshop, petrol tank and supply pump, offices and entrance road to the aerodrome, including compensation to farmers for vacant possession of the aerodrome site, will amount to approximately £30,000.⁶

Mr Joseph Stott who owned Foxhill Farm was bought out for £5,250. Later, at an auction of his farming stock and implements the Corporation received £1,858 15s 11d.⁷ In June 1929 plans were submitted for alterations to Foxhill Farm which

were to provide offices, waiting room, ticket office, airport manager's office, storerooms and customs inspector's office; in other words a terminal building. In December it was announced that part of the farmhouse was to be enlarged to form hotel premises on the lines of the accommodation at Croydon airport.⁸ Negotiations were underway for leasing it to a local hotel company, the Grand Hotel of Manchester.⁹ In the same month, recognising that a responsible person should always be in attendance, it was agreed that a house should be built on the airfield for the manager or deputy manager.

The Council minutes however envisaged a very low key start:

It is proposed that in the early stages only a small staff, probably two men (a caretaker and labourer) should be appointed. The caretaker would be responsible for the general care of the aerodrome, accounting for any fees received for the use of the aerodrome, sale of petrol, oil, etc, and the other man would be occupied as a general labourer, keeping the runways¹⁰ and surface of the aerodrome in a reasonable state of repair ... With regard to income, it is not practicable at present to estimate this item with any degree of accuracy. Your Committee is negotiating for the partial use of the aerodrome and hangar in order to inaugurate an air service ...¹¹

Manchester's first major airfield at Alexandra Park had been closed on 24th August 1924 when the landowner refused to sell the site for permanent use.¹² Meanwhile owing to delays, to make sure that Manchester was first with a municipal airport, a temporary site was found at Rackhouse Farm, Wythenshawe (a site previously identified by John Leeming) in February. Hedges were removed and a barn became the terminal building and hangar. It was used between April 1929 and the opening of Barton Airport on 1st January 1930.

The initial landing at Wythenshawe was made on 2nd April 1929 by Captain A N Kingwill in a DH Moth G-EBZY. Resident aircraft included those of Northern Air Lines, a company formed along with Northern Air Transport, by John Leeming and a colleague, who managed the airfield, and training flights of the Lancashire Aero Club,¹³ brought in from A V Roe's aerodrome at Woodford.¹⁴

Lancashire Aero Club's request to use Wythen-shawe had been turned down in May 1929, but nevertheless in June an aircraft and instructor landed and proceeded to give instruction, and were charged 2 shillings per landing. In the same month it was agreed to allow the RAF from Sealand, using Avro 504s, to use the airfield free of charge.¹⁵ The same facility was granted at Barton when it opened.

In 1929 Barton aerodrome was officially approved by the Air Ministry and opened on 1st January 1930.¹⁶ Northern Air Lines had been contracted to manage the airport in October 1929 after a letter was received from John Leeming proposing the appointment of William Ledlie as manager (at £500 per year) and requesting the services of office and staff, mechanics, two groundsmen or labourers and a roller, tractor, spades, etc. The first landing was by an Avro Avian of Northern Air Lines (G AADL) piloted by Captain Kingwill, on 4th January.¹⁷ The first large aircraft to call was Imperial Airways' three-engined Argosy from Croydon, on 23rd May

1930, part of an inaugurated service including Birmingham and Liverpool. Thrice-weekly flights commenced on 16th June and continued until 20th September 1930 using Argosy and Handley Page W.8 and W.10 airliners. The number of passengers recorded in that period is given below.¹⁸ The experiment was then discontinued.

SOUTHBOUND		
Departing from	Arriving	Passengers
Liverpool	Manchester	20
Manchester	Birmingham	8
Manchester	London	43
Manchester	Paris	5
Manchester	Zurich	-
NORTHBOUND		
Paris	Manchester	5
London	Manchester	44
Birmingham	Manchester	20
Manchester	Liverpool	60

Month	NAL Tuition, Tests, etc.		NAL Air Taxis		Royal Air Force		Imperial Airways		Resident Aircraft		Visitors	
	L	D	L	D	L	D	L	D	L	D	L	D
January	26	26	2	5	3	3	-	-	6	6	9	9
February	37	37	1	2	2	2	-	-	5	5	3	3
March	60	60	7	8	-	-	6	7	6	6	-	-
April	61	61	11	14	3	3	-	-	12	11	3	3
May	52	52	20	19	7	7	-	-	10	9	6	7
June	17	17	19	19	38	38	13	13	36	37	33	33
July	20	20	8	8	9	9	26	26	34	34	95	95
August	22	22	2	2	23	23	27	27	29	29	16	16
September	13	13	7	9	-	-	12	12	7	7	27	27
October	18	18	21	20	1	1	-	-	8	8	5	5
November	31	31	8	6	9	9	-	-	8	8	4	4
December	16	16	2	2	1	1	-	-	1	1	1	1
Totals	373	373	108	113	96	96	78	78	162	162	208	208

Landing and Departures in the first year of operation at Barton (1930). Source: Minutes of the Airport Special Committee, 19th February 1931.

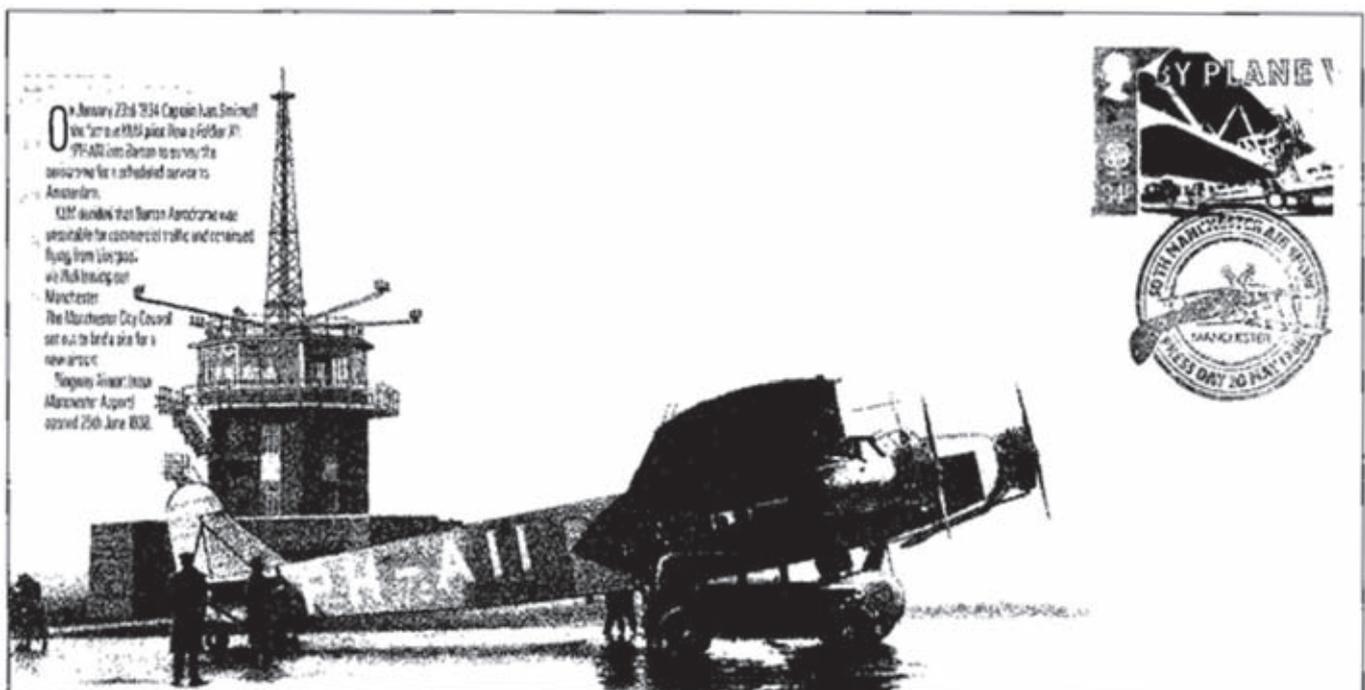
In July 1930, Barton was selected as a control point for the King's Cup Air Race. All machines were required to land at the airport and remain there for 40 minutes before resuming. The race was won by Miss Winifred Brown, a member of Lancashire Aero Club. It was estimated that 30,000 people attended. After the aircraft left, an aerial pageant, organised by Northern Airlines Ltd., was held.¹⁹ In February 1933, Airwork Ltd. was appointed to take over the management of the airport from Northern Airlines which had gone into liquidation owing the Corporation £639 16s 1d, which was not recovered.²⁰

In December 1933, Manchester Corporation asked KLM (Royal Dutch Airlines) if they would use Barton as a terminal. On 23rd January 1934, Captain Ivan Smirnoff flew a Fokker F.XII three-engined airliner via Hull to Barton. His verdict on Barton was damning:

“Even with the maximum extensions this ground will never fulfil the conditions for commercial flying ... Taken from the meteorological standpoint this is the worst flying ground of any known

to me ... The surrounding obstructions such as high tension pylons, high factory chimneys and high radio masts make the approaches to the ground very dangerous ... Our advice to the local authorities is not to spend more on this ground, but to try and find a more open ground in the neighbourhood of Manchester”.²¹

It was clear that Barton was unsuitable as a major commercial airport and KLM chose Liverpool's new airfield as terminal for the service from Amsterdam via Hull. This rejection of Manchester and selection of Liverpool led directly to Ringway Airport being built. The city wasted no time in seeking a site for a new airport and in March 1934 a report from the City Surveyor gave possible sites for an additional airfield which included Ringway. In June the Committee decided to inspect the site at Ringway and reported that “it was not in the best interests to proceed with any large expenditure of money on the extension of the Barton airport and that the suggestion of providing an entirely new airport at Ringway be further investigated”.²² Before that, they had already engaged aeronautical consultants (from Heston Aerodrome,



29. Figure 3: Captain Smirnoff's Fokker F.XII outside the control tower on 23rd January 1934. This is a special cover produced for the 10th Manchester Air Show Press Day at Barton on 20th May 1988 and reproduced in Maher, 1992, p. 79.

Middlesex) to make alternative proposals for the possible upgrading of Barton. The report,²³ illustrated with ten plans, proposed three possible schemes costing the enormous sums of £611,130 £237,084 and £215,180.²⁴ These estimates included the cost of extending the runways for aircraft fog runs, which merely emphasised the poor meteorological conditions expected. It was a pointless and expensive exercise since, at the end of it, the consultants stated that “it would be quite impossible to develop Barton into an airport capable of satisfying the requirements of the major airport for an area as important and as heavily populated as Manchester ... major extensions would only be possible at great cost and then only to give minimum facilities”. The consultants requested an investigation of alternative sites as a necessity. In September 1934, a report by the Airport Special Committee recommended the establishment and construction of an airport at Ringway and an application for borrowing powers for £179,295.²⁵ It was approved by the council but only by one vote, 55 to 54.

Barton, however, if not suitable for the most modern airliners of that period, was able to continue meeting the requirements of several of the modest UK scheduled services until 1939. The aircraft included DH Dragons and Rapides.²⁶ In June 1937, an agreement was reached with the Air Ministry for the training of pilots for the No. 17 Elementary and Reserve Flying Training School of the RAF by Airwork Ltd. with six Gipsy Moths, later increased to eight. When the Civil Air Guard was set up in July 1938 to train men and women at subsidised rates, the Northern Aviation School and Club adopted the scheme.²⁷ In March 1938, an agreement was reached for Airwork Ltd. to terminate their management of the airport; the Corporation proceeded to appoint its own staff. Meanwhile, Fairey Aviation, who had acquired a factory in Heaton Chapel, were dealing with a large order for the Fairey Battle. The first one was flown at Barton on 14th April 1937. 14 twin-engined, soon-to-be-obsolete, Hendon bombers were also taken to Barton for testing.²⁸ With the

approach of war, the firms which had used Barton were required to leave in August 1939. Barton was requisitioned by the Air Ministry in August 1939 for use as a maintenance base by firms contracted to the Ministry of Aircraft Production.²⁹ Although not a big aerodrome, a surprising selection of heavy aircraft visited Barton during the war, including a Lancaster, Wellington, Whitley, Dakota, Mosquito and Ansons which were repaired there.³⁰ After the war, many Swordfish were scrapped there. Various types of fighter aircraft used Barton including a visit by Douglas Bader in his Spitfire.³¹ From 1936 to 1945, F. Hills and Sons of Trafford Park, using a purpose-built hangar, assembled new aircraft brought by road to Barton, including the Hillson Praga, a small inexpensive two-seat aircraft built under licence from Praga of Czechoslovakia. From late 1941, they also assembled over 700 Percival Proctors, a military communications and training aircraft.³² After the war, ownership of the aerodrome reverted back to Manchester Corporation.

Several historic buildings constructed by Manchester Corporation still exist at Barton, and have been listed by English Heritage as Grade II. Other buildings were added during the war years and post-war. The site is described by English Heritage as a unique historical aviation landscape. The following details are taken from their listing notes (see also website), a survey by David Stanley,³³ and recent inspections on site by the author.

Terminal building

The first building on the left as one enters the airfield is the former airport terminal building, a converted and remodelled farm outbuilding (Foxhill Farm). It was listed Grade II in April 2003 (listing number 1096103) as ‘Office at Barton Aerodrome’ although in the description it is given as the former airport terminal. It is a single storey range in red brick, three brick chimneys and a wide shallow pitched roof with Welsh slate covering. The north-east front facing the airfield has a wide off-centre doorway, formerly for the



Figure 4: Terminal building in 2015. On the left is the derelict barn of Foxhill Farm (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: Derelict barn of Foxhill Farm next to the terminal building in 2015.

air passengers, with narrow flanking windows. The interior, which is not accessible, is believed to retain elements of the original terminal which included offices, waiting room, ticket office, airport manager's office, storerooms and customs inspector's office. Plans for its future refurbishment have been announced.

Control tower

Listed Grade II in July 1987 (listing number 1067500), the first free standing flight control tower in Britain³⁴ was opened in 1933³⁵ and has been in constant use ever since. The ground floor, which now houses the flying reception and administration, has four radiating wings,³⁶ while above is a balcony and walkway used for spectators. Above, accessed by a concrete dogleg stair,



Figure 6: The control tower at Barton in 2007 when the Lancashire Aero Club leased the airfield.

is the Air Traffic Control. Considerable alterations were made in June 1937 to provide accommodation for the Air Traffic Control. In 1991, the ground floor was completely upgraded by Lancashire Aero Club. Repair work on the Control Tower was completed in 2006. In 2014 the reception area was again upgraded.

Main hangar and workshops

Listed Grade II in April 2003 (listing number 1096145), this is the earliest civil aviation hangar in England, dating from 1930. It is a steel-framed structure with red brick external walls and sheet roof covering. The exterior has wide gabled end walls, the north gable formed by the main hangar doors occupying the full width of the frontage and set on rails. The south gable incorporates a huge ashlar plaque bearing the City of Manchester Coat of Arms, which is visible from the A57. The interior is an undivided space with side and rear end wall; an exposed steel wall framing carrying 14 braced steel roof trusses spans the full width of the building. The hangar (70m in length, 35m wide and 30.5m high) was designed to house the most advanced passenger aircraft of the day, the Imperial Airways Argosy. 24 windows have been blocked in. On its easterly side a workshop runs down its full length.



Figure 7: Interior of main hangar in 2007.



Figure 8: Plaque of the City of Manchester Arms on the south gable of the main hangar, visible from the A57.



Figure 9: Main hangar and the maintenance hangar with its two semi circular extensions in 2015.



Figure 10: The airfield manager's house built in 1930 and unfortunately demolished in 2014.



Figure 11: The post-1950s Brian Harbit hangar in 2007.

Other non-listed buildings

Adjacent to the hangar on its western side is the interesting maintenance workshop, with its Belfast roof trusses, a First World War hangar brought from somewhere else, possibly Trafford Park. There are two semi circular extensions for offices on each side, in a classic 1930s style. Previously it was the site of the Fairey Hangars. A house for the airfield manager was built in 1930 but unfortunately demolished in 2014 to make room for some offices. This was probably the earliest existing airfield manager's house in the country.

Another loss in 2002 was the sudden overnight demolition of the former Airport Hotel (another building converted from Foxhill Farm by Manchester Corporation), the second airport hotel in the country. One wonders if wind of possible listing may have prompted this most regrettable action. There are other hangars of great interest, two post-1950s, the Brian Harbit Hangar, formerly called LAC 2, and LAC Hangar 3.

Postscript

The Lancashire Aero Club, the oldest aero club in the country (established in 1922), which had set up operations at Barton before the war, recommenced flying in 1946. In 1961 it took on the lease of the aerodrome and its administration



Figure 12: The second post-1950s hangar in 2007.

from Manchester Corporation. The flying side of the Club's activities was installed in the Control Tower. The Club's chief flying instructor became airport manager.³⁷ The Club not only managed the flying school and private aviation, its employees worked as a social club staff and in ground maintenance, fire control, air traffic control and flying school reception. In 2002, in an action which neatly disposed of decades of the Corporation's involvement with Barton, the field was sold to the Manchester Ship Canal Development Co., later changed to City Airport Ltd., a subsidiary of Peel Airports (the Peel Group from 2011), which took over the management of the airport from

the Lancashire Aero Club. However, training continued to be operated by the Lancashire Aero Club (although it was banished from the Control Tower and relocated in a portakabin) until 2007 when the airport was renamed 'City Airport (Manchester)' and its operation was transferred to City Airport Manchester Ltd. The airport has since undergone a phase of steady improvements to the facilities, runways and services offered, including the control tower, original hangar and clubhouse. Adjacent to the car park, a huge block of offices has been built in front of the ruined remains of the Foxhill Farm barn; the former manager's house has been demolished.

After 46 years the Lancashire Aero Club was forced to cease operating and left Barton. Since then it has not found a home although it operates a strip for 28 days a year near Wigan. The Club's aircraft were sold to a flying school with the name, confusingly, LAC, apparently the initials of the new owner. The aerodrome remains a very busy aviation field with flying schools for light aircraft, microlights and helicopters, as well as private and syndicate owners and business and commercial flights, with take-off and landings in the region of 60,000 per year. Featuring four grass runways (08R/26L, 08L/26R, 02/20, 14/32), it operates seven



Figure 13: Notice on the A57.

days a week from 9.00 am until to sunset and is one of the busiest general aviation airports in the UK. Commercial, private, military, police and air ambulance helicopters can operate during the hours of darkness by arrangement, as the airfield can be equipped with portable runway lighting. It is a challenging environment at which to learn to fly and get a licence – on one occasion, on returning from a flight, I found nine in the circuit – but many succeed in doing so within a year or so. There are some superb places within an hour's flying – Snowdonia, Lake District, Yorkshire Dales, Peak District, Welsh Borderland and the east coast.

Notes

1. Appendix to the City of Manchester minutes 1927-28 containing reports etc. brought before the Council, volume 2, p 879.
2. John Leeming, who had written to the *Manchester Guardian* in August 1928 advocating the establishment of an aerodrome in the area, was a founder member of Lancashire Aero Club, famous for landing an Avro Gosport (G-EBPH), along with Bert Hinkler, on Helvellyn on 22 December 1926.
3. City of Manchester, *Minutes of Airport Special Committee Vol.1*, 13 November 1929.
4. *Minutes*, 7 January 1929.
5. J Parker, 'Barton Airport, *Eccles and District Historical Society, Printed Lectures*, 1979-81, pp 611-14.
6. Three months later there was a supplementary increase of £10,800.
7. *Minutes*, 21 February and 25 March 1929.
8. UK's first airport hotel.
9. It was opened in January 1931.
10. According to the English Heritage Listing Report, it was the first airport to have designated runways.
11. Manchester Corporation, *Minutes of Airport Committee (Appendix, p 90)*, 1929.
12. The airfield had opened in 1917. Details about it can be found in Brian R Robinson, *Aviation in Manchester'*, Manchester, 1977.
13. Established in 1922.
14. R A Scholefield, 'Manchester's early airfields: establishment, development and operations', in Derek Brumhead and Terry Wyke, *Moving Manchester*, Manchester 2004, p 222-3. Peter Maher (Compiler), *Three Score Years and Ten: the Lancashire Aero Club*, Bury, 1992, pp 3-4.
15. *Minutes*, 12 June 1929.
16. Some sources give 29 January.
17. Brian Robinson, *Aviation in Manchester*, Manchester 1977, p 63.
18. *Minutes*, 11 November 1930.
19. *Minutes*, 19 February 1931.
20. *Minutes*, 22 February 1933.
21. Correspondence between the representative of KLM and Alderman E P M Sutton, 10 April 1934, quoted by Viv Caruana 2004, pp 233-4.
22. *Minutes*, 15 June 1934.
23. Appendix to the City of Manchester Council Minutes, 1933-34, Volume 2, pp 715-87, 25 July 1934. The consultants' report on Barton was followed by a comprehensive survey and recommendations of the Ringway site. The report also includes a retrospect of Alexandra Park Aerodrome (1914-18) and Barton Aerodrome, the latter also summarising the disadvantages and hazards of operating it.
24. Multiply by c.30 to get the approximate value today.
25. *Minutes*, 21 September 1934. By March 1953, Ringway had cost the Corporation £493,250 on capital account. Viv Caruana 'Manchester Airport: from provincial aerodrome to international gateway:a local authority challenge to central government policy, 1934-1580' in *Moving Manchester*, p 238.
26. The latter type included G-ADAH now on display in the Air and Space Gallery of the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry. Scholefield, 2004, p 226.
27. Maher, 1992, p 6.
28. Robinson, 1977, p 71.
29. Scholefield, 2004, p 227.
30. Scholefield, 2004, p 227 mentions Battles, Hurricanes, Fulmars, Barracudas and Corsairs.
31. Maher, 1992, pp 6-7.
32. Scholefield, 2004, p 227.
33. David Stanley, 2002.
34. Described in the press in 1937 as 'the first air traffic control station', English Heritage Listing Report.
35. English Heritage listing incorrectly gives 'c.1937'.
36. Orientated magnetic North, East, South and West at the time.
37. Maher, 1992, pp 41-42.