The return of a Pioneer

History

Antwerp's Deurne Airport was revolutionary when it opened in 90 years ago. It has struggled to maintain traffic levels in recent years, but as Luigi Vallerio discovered, its prospects are now brighter. hosted the 'First Flying Week of Antwerp', on the military exercise field of the Krus Hook, later known as the Witteke Plain. In 1921 the Belgian Minister of National Defence, then in charge of aviation, started a project to purchase 198 acres (80ha) of farmland in the municipality of Deurne on the south-eastern outskirts of Antwerp with a view to building an airport and establishing a flying school. Completed facilities opened on May 26, 1923, titled Antwerpen Deurne Airport. A wooden chalet replaced the wagon, emblazoned with 'AÉROGARE' (air terminal) on its roof, became the first terminal building and was used from 1924 by Sabena (Societé Anonyme Belge d'Exploitation de la Navigation Aérienne) passengers travelling on the airline's Rotterdam-Antwerp-Brussels-Strasbourg-Basel route. A wooden chalet replaced the wagon in 1926. A contract for the design and construction of a new passenger building and installations was awarded to architect Stanislas Jasinski in 1929. It was a modernist design featuring an L-shaped terminal in the south-western corner of the airfield. The concept focused on the basic principles of speed, efficiency and rationality, providing for easy control of the passengers and freight flows through the building. Modular construction was adopted to allow for any further expansion and included a small seven-room hotel aimed at hosting 'stranded' passengers. A large hangar was annexed to the terminal, connected by a covered passageway. The streamlined looking facility was built from reinforced concrete and had strip windows and canopies in translucent concrete, mouldings in terracotta, steel window profiles and terrace roofs. It was completed in around nine months and was inaugurated on September 10, 1930, and remains in use – albeit after several renovations. (Wikimedia Commons/Ad Meskens)

1930s

The airport’s background is closely linked to that of early aviation developments in Belgium, dating back to 1909, when the Belgian city of Antwerp (Antwerpen in Dutch and Anvers in French) and is 31 miles (50km) north of Brussels. The town has a population of 512,000 and is the largest municipality in both Flanders and Belgium; the metropolitan population is around 1.2 million. Antwerp is a major economic and cultural centre and sits on the eastern bank of the River Scheldt, linked to the North Sea by the Westerschelde estuary, along which the city has built one of the largest seaports in Europe. Famed since ancient times for its diamond-cutting industry, Antwerp is increasingly positioning itself as a major fashion centre and thanks to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, it has one of Europe’s most important fashion academies.

The airport’s terminal, designed by architect Stanislas Jasinski, opened on September 10, 1930, and remains in use – albeit after several renovations. (Wikimedia Commons/Ad Meskens)

The airport’s short runway has proved a hindrance to jet operations; however, as Sabena Boeing 737-222C OY-SHE (cn 21139) illustrates in this May 1976 image, some jets visited ANR, although only on short-distance flights. (AirTeamImages.com/Carl Ford)

Luigi Vallerio

THE RETURN OF A PIONEER

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The Dutch flag carrier became a 33.3% stakeholder in DAT, which was soon using DC-3s and DC-6 as well as Convair CV-440s, and for a short period a Boeing 720, on charters for KLM, SABENA, and BIAS. The link to Amsterdam continued until 1997 with up to four daily rotations. In 1986, SABENA acquired a 49% stake in DAT and eventually bought out KLM’s share, thus making DAT a wholly-owned subsidiary. In 1997 DAT’s headquarters moved to Brussels and the carrier was rebranded as DAT Belgian Regional Airline. After the bankruptcy of the Belgian flag carrier in 2001, it was DAT that morphed into the present-day Brussels Airlines.

Since the new jet airliners arriving on the scene during the 1990s could not use it. The resultant decline in traffic was so significant that in 1963 the Ministry of Traffic and Transport considered closing the airport, a thread only averted with the support of the local Chamber of Industry, the Burgomaster and City Sheriff.

Fortunately, the Ford Motor Company, began using Antwerp Airport (ANR) for regular corporate flights to Southend Airport in the UK, close to its Dagenham factory. In 1966 six new companies, including a bank, three shipping agents, a transport company and Delta Air Transport (DAT), began using ANR, which gave new vitality to the business. Specialising in air taxi and charter services, DAT initially used Beechcraft Queen Airs to Amsterdam, a scheduled feeder service with two one 210 and a 206), before launching a fleet of three Cessnas (one Skymaster, taxi and charter services, DAT initially used vitality to the business. Specialising in air taxi and charter services, DAT initially used Beechcraft Queen Airs to Amsterdam, a scheduled feeder service with two one 210 and a 206), before launching a fleet of three Cessnas (one Skymaster, taxi and charter services, DAT initially used...
A parallel taxiway is to be constructed, which will improve the efficiency of aircraft movements, while the ILS will be moved to a new location. These changes will free-up valuable space for future development, which includes a new General Aviation terminal for private charters and business aviation activities together with conference rooms. Airport resident, the FLYINGGROUP provides a range of executive jets for hire, maintenance and ground handling services and recently opened a new hangar while rival private jet company, Abelag, has its own facilities nearby. Meanwhile, CityJet continues to use the former VLM hangar and the carrier’s Fokker 50s regularly come to ANR for maintenance checks.

Antwerp Airport, Katleen Pittevils, told Airports of the World: “We are actively promoting the airport’s passenger-friendly facilities and proposing incentive plans to airlines willing to re-establish business routes from Antwerp.”

Since the record year of 2001, passenger numbers have dropped. In 2010 the figure was 162,840 passengers (102,472 on scheduled flights), a decrease of almost 4% compared with the previous year. The figure increased to 166,078 in 2011, but was down again in 2012, closing at 140,139 with 46,962 movements. Looking at the last 15 years, ANR has seen its network shrink from 11 destinations (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, London City, London/Gatwick, London/Heathrow, Manchester, Hamburg, Munich, Frankfurt, Geneva and Prague) to just two – London City and Manchester. Today, CityJet’s Fokker 50s serve London City only, with five to seven daily flights; bmi regional flies from Manchester twice a day using an Embraer ERJ-135.

With a motivated team at the helm of the historic airport and renewed support from the local government and community, historic Deurne will undoubtedly continue to maintain a role in Belgian aviation, reaffirming itself as the almost forgotten pioneer that still has plenty to offer.

Acknowledgements

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