

Position Paper on Manston Airport



Image Courtesy of John Mallet

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Credit is also made to Janice Atkinson and Tony Brown of the UKIP research department, and to Dr. Beau Webber and Peter Scott for their invaluable contribution.

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1. Executive Summary

Manston Airport is a former WWII and Cold War airbase with a generous 8000 foot paved runwayⁱ and a shorter grass strip at 45 degrees to the main runway.

In the past it has variously been used with mixed success for commercial flights and freight, but has been hampered by accessibility to both main roads, and since it is becoming the preferred mode of arrival for passenger transport, rail transport. See Figure 1: Manston Location

The freight handling area of the runway is at the western end of the site and is mostly accessible via dual carriageway, although this should be upgraded if it is to better serve freight movement.

The airport itself has a direct catchment of around 750,000 people and a further 750,000 within the areas of Kent, South Essex and East London that have more or less equivalent access to Gatwick or London City. The comparison with access to London City has to be muted due to both uncertainty about its long term future, and in that it serves predominantly business users in London. (see xiv)

A better comparison is to Southend, with a lower catchment, similar location, serving around 1-2 million passengers per year (see xv) and clearly profitable for Stobart Groupⁱⁱ. It is entirely conceivable that Manston could achieve similar passenger figures.

The airport is hampered by the passenger terminal being located on the opposite side of the runway to the main roads, a new dual carriageway having been built to the south, further isolating it from access. The nearest rail station to the field is Minster, with Ramsgate being the nearest to the current passenger terminal. Access to both is via busy roads and intersectionsⁱⁱⁱ, themselves very congested at peak times. Regional rail services do not currently stop at Manston.

The airport also enjoys substantial local support, something usually unheard of in such matters. 15000 people have signed a positive petition.

It is also unusual with easy access to a deep water port, capable of handling medium sized cruise vessels and container ships. A new tunnel and approach road was built around 15 years ago.

With a relatively small investment, it would be possible to build a new terminal at the Kent Business Park end of the site, regenerating the business park as a transportation hub, and providing access for passengers coming directly from the dual carriageway.

An additional investment to link the terminal to Minster station by light rail would provide access to the national rail network and the high speed rail service to London St Pancras and London Stratford International.

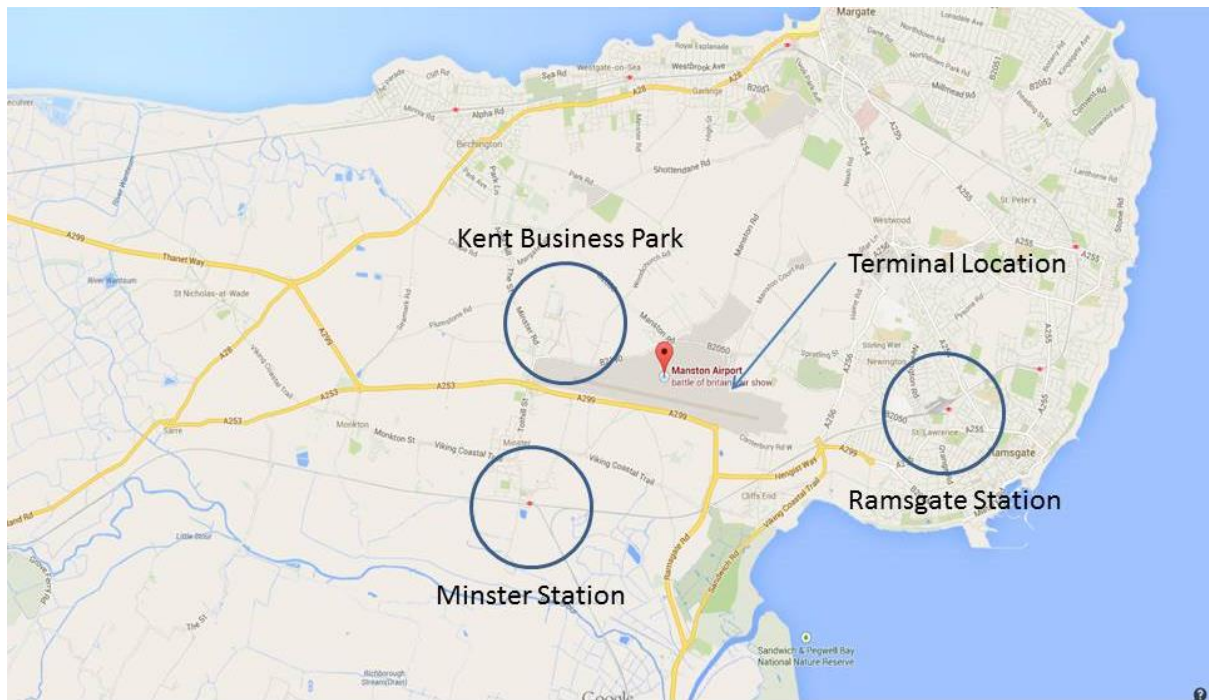


Figure 1: Manston Location^{iv}

2. The Current Situation

From anecdotal evidence, KLM was starting to build a successful service prior to the decision to open the discussion of closing the airport by the current owner. With the uncertainty they diverted passengers to existing services at Heathrow, which by anecdotal evidence increases journey time by 3.5 hours. In point of fact, it is similar to flying into Brussels and driving to Thanet.

2.1. Accessibility

2.1.1. Road

The current access to the airport is via a narrow winding road through the village of Manston from the one side, and along a similar road from the dual carriageway with an uncontrolled junction with the road to Birchington. Such a road would normally be considered to have a peak capacity of around 800 vehicles per hour (Department of Transport RUDI model^v). A further calculation can be derived from the “Indevelopment” Study by John van Rijn^{vi} which shows the impact of the traffic calming and junctions in the area. It is fairly clear that this is a major obstruction to development in the area.

The A299 “Thanet Way” dual carriage way has been extended along the south side of the airfield and has a run off to the freight handling area and Kent Business Park.

2.1.2. Rail

There is currently no direct rail access to the airport. The two nearest stations are Ramsgate and Minster, with Margate and Birchington on the slower local service rail line to London. The train line from Ramsgate to Canterbury has speed restrictions due to delayed engineering works, and from Canterbury to Ashford is using old Victoria rail footings which again restrict the speed. Once at Ashford the service to London and Paris is on high speed rail. The high speed rolling stock serves Ramsgate and Margate stations, as well as the lower speed stopping service serving the other stations. The High Speed Rail can operate at up to 320kmh^{vii}.

An upgrade of the line from St Pancras to Ramsgate is in progress that will cut the journey time by around 10 minutes, and there is a proposal to further upgrade the line to handle the higher speeds of the Hitachi rolling stock to be used on the HS1 lines.

2.2. Capacity

The lack of direct public transport to the airport severely limits the expansion of operations from Manston. Bearing in mind its proximity to the country’s only high speed rail line and a recently built dual carriageway extension, it is very disappointing the benefits of these have not yet been utilised. The present public transport services and airport terminal building and parking facilities can only handle a few hundred passengers per day.

2.3. Freight Handling

The freight terminal does link into the dual carriageway network, linking to Dover, Ramsgate Harbour (currently unused) and to the rest of the UK. At one time it handled around 7% of UK air freight before predatory fees undercut the service making it cheaper to fly air freight to Schipol and bring it across the channel by HGV.

3. Options for Manston as an Operating Airport

3.1. Option 1: Minimal Public and Private Investment

3.1.1. Viability

Increasing the accessibility of the airport to passengers would serve to increase the potential passenger numbers to 3 million per year based on the catchment area it serves (see 6.3). Since this would represent an average of 8000 people per day, it is clear that a restricted road is unsuitable for such access, but were the investment to be made to link the passenger terminal to National Rail and the road network, this figure could easily be supported. It would be assumed that more passengers would arrive by rail than road, if 6000 people were to use rail rather than road, then the existing Thanet Way dual carriageway could easily handle the additional traffic. A light rail link to one or other of the national rail terminals could handle around 10 times the volume of passengers than shuttle buses, at a considerably less environmental cost.

A brief study into the transit times from Central London shows that travel from Manston can easily be compared to London's current airports (see 6.4). Indeed in the case of Gatwick and Heathrow it is conceivable that with the avoidance of the London Stack and the long queues at check in, door to seat transit could be far shorter. The train line is in the process of having upgrades made to it which will further reduce the transit time.

Improvements to road access with an extension of the M2 to Thanet would further improve access for freight handling, and make Manston a serious contender in the cargo sector.

3.1.2. Economic Impact

Aside from the interim job creation in the construction industry, such a project would serve to create around 3000 jobs at the airport, as well as knock on employment of around a further 9000 (see 6.6) (based on the 3:1 major employer impact rule). It would also act as a hub for local businesses, allowing accessibility for the major employers who have moved from the area. If the plan were to include the use of development zones and investment zones, it would provide a seed to alleviate the economic deprivation in the area.

3.1.3. Costs

Below is a table outlining the rough estimates for the construction of a passenger terminal adjacent to the Kent Business park, and a link to an uplifted station at Minster. Minster was selected against a proposed "Thanet Parkway" station since it is an existing station with adequate space to handle a light rail platform, and would be far cheaper, and the technical considerations for build a station in a deep cutting, surrounded by arterial roads has not been clearly understood. Clearly, any investment in rail assets would have to be met by the operating companies, but the light rail element could be funded by an airport development project.

Rough Outline Costs

Cost of Building Second Terminal: ^{viii}

75

Cost of Minster Station Upgrade	30
Light Rail Connection to new Terminal	40
Light Rail Connection to Old Terminal and Business Park ^{ix}	40

Note on the “Thanet Parkway Station”

With the building of the new dual carriageway, there is some question over the location of the proposed new station. Since it is already a point in the local road network where there is considerable congestion, it may be better to offer a commuter parking service at Margate and or adjacent to Ramsgate.

3.2. Option 2: Do Nothing

3.2.1. Viability

As it stands, it would probably not be easily viable to continue to operate the airport. It may be possible to arrange a link bus service to ferry passengers too and from Ramsgate station, but this would require cooperation from the local council to improve accessibility along the road, currently restricted by road calming measures, and crossing two awkward road interchanges.

For freight it may be possible to continue to operate FMCG services to Manston, an investigation should be made into why it appears to be economically beneficial to drive goods the additional 200km to Schiphol rather than using a local airport. It is not inconceivable that the airport could function as a freight only terminal, but the success of an airport is highly dependent on passenger footfall. It is also worth mentioning that as an modal interchange it is worth exploring options, however to supply the UK market, the road connections around London have to be taken into consideration.

It is worth exploring the option for use as an air service centre, however this has to be considered against the substantial investments already made at Heathrow and major investments by Lufthansa in Munich and Frankfurt.

3.2.2. Economic Impact

Thanet has one of the highest levels of unemployment in the country. Destroying 150 of the remaining jobs in the area further blights it, as well as removing an important access point to the historical and leisure opportunities that the place enjoys. It should be remembered that not only was this the launching point for the Dunkirk rescue, and a place with a long history of smuggling, defence, and of trade, but Thanet has 25km of some of the best beaches in the UK, and a micro climate that rivals the South of France. Having a functional local airport not only provides jobs, but also accessibility to tourists.

3.2.3. Costs

There would of course be no direct costs in this choice, but the cost to the local economy would be devastating. Reuse as an additional golf course (The Thanet area has already a high number) would likely face stiff opposition from other providers in the area, and reuse for light industry would fail, since all the other sites have failed. Reuse as housing would exacerbate the already dire economy,

likely being used as another dumping ground for unruly tenants from social housing projects elsewhere in the country.

4. Manston as a training Center

Manston has also been used as a training center for airlines using long haul aeroplanes. With the lack of air space in South East England, this is also a useful service that should continue to be investigated.

5. Manston v other Local Choices

5.1. Lydd

The argument against Manston is usually that Lydd is better as a strategic local airport. This is at a time when the discussion over expansion/replacement/ support of the Heathrow and central London airspace is under discussion.

Lydd faces substantial local opposition ^xto any expansion since its place adjacent to the Romney Marshes would completely compromise them as both as a preserved wild life space and an area of outstanding beauty^{xi}.

Lydd also has a much shorter runway, which makes it difficult for longer distance planes to use, with the size of local opposition to its current use it is unlikely to be able to extend it.

There is also a national security argument against Lydd, in that it is around 60 seconds flight time from Dungeness Nuclear power station making it a serious terrorist threat to the country. Flight access is compromised by this.

Finally, it is poorly served by national infrastructure, whereas Manston is close by to the high speed rail service, and has a dual carriageway already built directly to it, and also has a deep water port within 2 miles of the runway, Lydd is in the middle of a marsh.^{xii}.

This renders the project wholly unsuitable for use as a strategic airport.

5.2. Grain

The isle of Grain has also been mooted as a location for a major airport, a nature reserve in North Kent. Again this has become mired in local opposition, not to mention having some serious questions needing to be answered about the technical safety of locating a major airport next to a wreck containing 1400 tonnes of high explosive, and the proximity of a major gas terminal.

An air crash into either site would cause a major disaster, and endanger the entire population of East London and West Kent. Indeed the then head of Air Traffic services cited it as being “The worst possible place to put an airport”^{xiii}

It would further disrupt airspace in and around London, affecting access to Southend, Stansted and the City Airports

5.3. Thames Island Hub

It is rarely that this author can describe a project as a complete flight of fancy, but the concept of building an airport in the middle of the Thames requires some serious debate. The technical objections include the over flying of two oil terminals and a gas terminal (see above), the questions over what the sub surface conditions are in order to make a stable artificial island, and what the result of such a development would be on the densely populated coastal towns in the Thames Estuary, not to mention East London.

The airspace disruption would probably force the closure of Southend and City airports, as well as disrupting airspace access into Stansted and Gatwick

This before the cost. Yes it is true that such developments have been made in the Far East (Hong Kong for example) but this has been at considerable cost to the tax payer, something that needs to be thought hard about at a time of a rising national deficit. As of this time it should be discounted for the uncertain and substantial costs, and the technical questions over feasibility.

5.4. Conclusion

Manston is almost “ready to go” as a secondary strategic airport, able to take a substantial load off of the congested airspace of London, and, for the minor investments needed in rail and road access, within 1 hour of the center of London.

With a comparatively small investment it could be upgraded to serve as such an airport, both alleviating the congested London airspace, as well as providing a valuable boost to a deprived local economy

The alternatives all have major flaws that require significant investigation before consideration. The author is inclined to suspect that they may be put up in order to ensure that Manston is removed beyond consideration, in order to leave a Hobsons choice for an otherwise unsuitable solution.

6. Demographics and Data

6.1. Air Travel Statistics

In a recent report^{xiv} the CAA reported that the total passenger numbers had hit 213 million in UK airports, representing 2.5 journeys per year for each of the 62.3 million population of the UK, bearing in mind 72% of the passengers are of UK origin (see report as cited above). Clearly this is skewed by business travellers, but for the purpose of calculating the potential of travel in a catchment area this is a useful figure. This is split between around 60% travelling on low cost carriers (LCC), 30% on full service and 10% on charter in the London area, rising to around 90% on LCC at the low cost hubs of Stansted and Luton.

With the exception of London City, the flight purpose is fairly consistently 15% business, 30% UK holiday, 22% UK visiting friends and relatives (VFR), the remainder being split business, holiday, VFR, 11%, 10%, 12% for foreign visitors.

The report also cites accessibility as being within 1 hour and 2 hour's drive from a major airport, and this is used in this position paper.

The totals for each airport are published on page 58 of the UK governments aviation forecast^{xv}

6.2. Air Cargo Statistics

The same report from CAA has some statistics for freight; the vast majority is through Heathrow at 1400 thousand tonnes, the other major London airports taking around 200 thousand tonnes each. It is worth mentioning that 10 years ago Manston carried around 7% of the UK's freight, before undercutting by Schipol and Rotterdam made it commercially more viable to land freight in Holland and bring it across the channel by truck.

6.3. Population and Potential Passengers

The overall population of Kent is 1.4 million, and East Sussex, 515,000. However this is not a useful statistic due to the geographical shape. It is further skewed by the tendency for roads and rail to lead into London and not in a circular route around. Journeys on the M25 are generally around 45 minutes, but this rises to 2 hours or more during the peak periods which are extensive.

<1 Hour to Manston, (LCC Stats where possible)	Equivalent to Gatwick in Ideal Conditions xxi	Quicker to LCY or Gatwick in ideal conditions	Population/1000
Thanet ^{xvi}			134
Canterbury ^{xvii}			149
Dover ^{xviii}			112
Swale ^{xix}			130
Ashford ^{xx}			115
Shepway ^{xxi}			108

	Medway		264
	Tonbridge and Malling		121
	Thurrock ^{xxii}		158
	Dartford ^{xxiii}		86
	Gravesham ^{xxiv}		102
		Tonbridge Wells	115
		Sevenoaks	115

Total with closer access to Manston: 748

Total with equivalent access to Gatwick or London City: 961

Total catchment: 1709

Based on the above data,

Direct within 45 minutes of the field $2.5 \times 748 = 1870$

Additional shared access demographic $1.25 \times 961 = 1201$

Total potential passenger movements: 3000k

6.4. London to Manston Comparable Travel Times^{xxv}

London Airport comparisons	Heathrow	Gatwick	Stansted	Manston
Train time from St. Pancras	58 min.	58 min	1 hr 1 min	1 hr 17 min
plus	walk ?	Bus 5 min	walk ?	Taxi 8 min
Check in time (long haul)	3 hour	2 hour	3 hour	0.5 hour
Total Time	3 hour 58 min	3 hour 2 min	4 hour 1 min	1 hour 55 min
Walking distance St. Pancras to Plane	> 1.14 mile	> 1.62 mile	> 0.98 mile	~ 0.06 mile

6.5. Air Pricing Data

For this I have relied extensively on the data provided by Stansted^{xxvi}

	#Peak (GBP)				Off Peak (GBP)			
Helicopters	110.82				110.46			
Fixed wing aircraft not exceeding 16 metric tonnes	133.80				120.26			
	*Ch 2 & Non cert	@Ch 3 High	*Ch 3 Base	*Ch 4 & Ch 3 Minus	*Ch 2 & Non cert	@Ch 3 High	*Ch 3 Base	*Ch 4 & Ch 3 Minus
Fixed wing aircraft over 16 Metric tonnes not exceeding 55 metric tonnes	599.49	299.74	199.83	179.85	444.92	222.46	148.31	133.48
Fixed wing aircraft over 55 metric tonnes not exceeding 250 metric tonnes	980.41	490.20	326.80	294.12	551.72	275.86	183.91	165.52
Fixed wing aircraft over 250 metric tonnes	1,689.16	844.58	563.05	506.75	955.63	477.81	318.54	286.69

	(GBP)
Departing Passenger Charge	10.50
Remote Stand Rebate	2.37

6.6. Employment and Manston

According to their achievement report Southend airport is set to employ 2500 people by 2020 and a further 500 people indirectly^{xxvii}. With the usual spin off of jobs created by major accessibility, this could reasonably create around 9000 further jobs in the community. Air accessibility would also encourage industry to return to the area, It is worth remembering that as a comparator, Basel has a convenient airport, similar population and is headquarters for some of the largest chemical companies in the world. Pfizer had made representations about accessibility to their Sandwich site before closing it. They employed 14,000 at their peak, with a considerable spin off of employment in Dover, Folkstone, Canterbury and Thanet.

7. Endnotes and Citations

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- i http://airportguide.com/airport/United_Kingdom/England/Manston-EGMH-MSE/runways.php
- ii <http://www.southendairport.com/stobart-group/>
- iii The B2050/ 2090 junction has poor visibility, and will not take volume traffic (over 500vph). B2090/ A256 junction prioritises the A256, rendering the road subject to long tailbacks in peak periods. The B2050/ B2014/ A255 is also prone to tailbacks in peak periods
- iv <http://www.google.com/permissions/geoguidelines.html>
- v <http://www.rudi.net/files/FORGE.pdf>
- vi <http://www.indevelopment.nl/PDFfiles/CapacityOfRoads.pdf>
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- xxi http://www.kent.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/12479/2011-Census-population-age-and-gender-profile.pdf

^{xxii} <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/our-publications/facts-about-thurrock>

^{xxiii} <http://openlylocal.com/councils/54-Dartford-Borough-Council>

^{xxiv} <http://www.gravesham.gov.uk/services/council-and-democracy/statistics-and-census-information/census-information>

^{xxv} Assembled via <http://www.transportdirect.info/> and <http://www.nationalrail.co.uk/> courtesy of Dr Webber

^{xxvi} http://www.stanstedairport.com/media/563055/stal_conditions_of_use_2013_14.pdf

^{xxvii} http://ripassetseu.s3.amazonaws.com/www.southendairport.com/files/documents/feb_12/SOUTHEND_13_28091215_LSA_ASAS_-_December2011.pdf