

THE HISTORY OF THE NEW PLYMOUTH  
AERO CLUB TO 1960.

In presenting this brief history, I am conscious that I am not doing justice to the subject. The problem has been in the deletion of that portion which is of least interest. History, politics and finance were finely laced but due to an obvious need for brevity, it has been necessary to sift through the available material and produce this brief and condensed history of the New Plymouth Aero Club.

On October 2nd 1928, the New Plymouth Tourist and Expansion League called a public meeting to pull together all who were interested in aviation. As a result, the New Plymouth Aero Club was formed. At that meeting a committee was set up to find a suitable site for an aerodrome. After inspecting numerous properties, the Club approached Mr J.S.Connett, owner of land at Bell Block. As a result of advice from Major T.M.Wilkes, then Director of Aerial services, the club entered into negotiations with Mr Connett for the acquisition of necessary rights over the land. Mr Connett granted a lease of sufficient land for the erection of a hangar with flying rights over fourteen acres which at that time was considered sufficient for the purpose of the Club. On the advise of various New Zealand experts from other airfields, this area was extended to cover twenty acres.

In May 1929, the Hon T.M.Wilford, then Minister of Defence inspected the ground and for the first time defined specifications for various grades of aerodrome. By obtaining flying rights over the whole Connett farm, the aerodrome was eligible for an A1 grading. So the Club once again approached Mr Connett and as a result, the Club was offered the whole 170 acres free of charge for a period of five years. This was an exceedingly generous gesture and one that was to ensure

the important role the New Plymouth Aerodrome was to play in New Zealand aviation.

With an airfield and plans for a hangar, it was considered necessary that the Club should become an incorporated society. It was duly incorporated on April 30th 1929.

Initially the members planned to build a hangar large enough to house one Tiger Moth but on reconsideration it was decided to raise additional funds and erect a hangar capable of accommodating one Bristol Fighter or four Tiger Moths. The plans were drawn up and the materials were purchased. The construction of the hangar indicates the great enthusiasm of these founder members. In just one day they constructed the largest and most commodious hangar in the Dominion, paint job and all. Membership increased dramatically. From a mere handful of enthusiast, membership rose to 250 in 1929.

Consequently there was a large labour force available to form and develop the aerodrome. Hedges and fences were removed, gullies filled in, swampy areas were drained and most important of all was the formation of the runway. During the following year, the area of flat land was increased and while the Club did not possess a 'plane of it's own, many visiting aviators made use of the spacious and modern facilities.

During this time, 1928-1930, all available finance, coupled with voluntary labour was channelled into the development of the aerodrome. This meant postponing the purchase of the Club's first 'plane. As the aerodrome continued to absorb energy from the club, the possibility of purchasing a 'plane receded over the horizon. To hasten the development of the Club, a group of Club members formed a company, Taranaki Airways Ltd and subsequently purchased a Tiger Moth. The Company then employed a part time pilot and a ground engineer and offered to lease the Moth with it's personel to the New Plymouth Aero Club. The offer was duly accepted. Before long it became obvious that a full time pilot/instructor was necessary and Ian Keith was employed with Newton Derby as ground engineer.

Similar clubs throughout the Dominion were seeking financial assistance from the Government and in 1930, the Defence Dept

announced that it would recognise only a limited number of aero clubs in New Zealand. As a result of the announcement, the aero clubs at New Plymouth, Hawera, Wanganui, Fielding and Palmerston North formed the Western Federated (Nth Is) Flying Club. On achieving official recognition, the Federation controlled all flying instruction between the Mokau and Manuwatu Rivers and was one of the largest organisations of it's kind in New Zealand. Each constituent club retained it's own identity and saw to the running of their own airfield while the Western Federated (Nth Is) Flying Club maintained and controlled the aeroplanes and standardised tuition and codes of practice. In this way, the five aero clubs were able to take the best with regards to Governmental assistance.

With the formation of the Western Federated (Nth Is) Flying Club, Taranaki Airways Ltd became obsolete. The company sold it's 'plane to the Federate and Ian Keith transferred his employment to the newly formed Club.

Early in 1931, the Aero Club offered the New Plymouth Borough Council the sum of £2,500 towards the cost of purchasing the Connett farm. The Council, however, did not consider an airport of great value to the city and declined the offer. Consequently the Club approached Mr Connett and purchased 60 acres, which included the area on which the hangar stood. The club continued to upgrade facilities. During 1931 a club room, a store room and a doping room were added to the hangar complex. The hangar floor, previously hardpacked earth was given a coating of asphalt. Amusements were added to entertain those waiting for flying tuition. An asphalt tennis court was laid down and there was badminton and ping-pong for those who were inclined. Club members with electrical qualifications installed electricity to the hangar and two petrol companies installed the latest design of vacuum pumps. The club continued to grow and in 1932, a water supply was hooked up and a nine hole golf course was added to the recreational facilities. A small library was also included in the club rooms. The Club's intention was to cater for a wide variety of people and become a social, as well as a technological asset for Taranaki.

In 1933, shortly after Sir Charles Kingsford Smith had made

the first passenger flight across the Tasman, the termination point being New Plymouth, the club once again approached the Borough Council with regards to the purchase of the Connett property. The end of the Clubs 5 year lease was approaching and the loss of that land would have resulted in the airfield losing it's Al grading. The land in question consisted of 117 acres affronting and adjoining the Aero Club's property. The aerodromes importance, both geographically and strategically was pointed out to the Council. Kingsford Smith also took part in the negotiations, giving recommendations for the airfield. On reconsidering the situation, the New Plymouth Borough Council approached the Connett family.

Negotiations between the New Plymouth Borough Council and the New Plymouth Aero Club culminated in a Bill called the New Plymouth Airport Bill which ratified the agreement between the two parties for the handing over of the Club's 60 acres to which the Borough Council would add the 117 acres it was to purchase from the Connett family. The club was handing over it's land but would retain the use and rights over it's buildings and improvements. As compensation the Board granted free perpetual flying rights over the whole area of 178 acres "together with other privileges for the use of certain improvement if and when they were carried out by the Airport Board." (New Plymouth Aero Club Inc: 5th Annual Report: March 1933: New Plymouth Airport Bill 1933)

Up until this time the Club had expended most of it's energy and finance on field maintenance and development. They had changed the rough paddocks lined with gorse hedges and wire fences into an efficient airfield. In 1933, it was rated with the best in the country and was a great asset to the Borough and the Province as a whole. By relinquishing control over the airfield, they could now turn their attention to club activities and follow the main aim of the Club, that of promoting interest in aviation.

In the following years the club continued it's flying and training operations. With the outbreak of the 2nd World War, many trained pilots joined the New Zealand Airforce and served overseas. The Ministry of Defence placed a ban on civil aviation

and requisitioned all planes. This rendered the Western Federate inoperable and by mutual agreement, the Federate was dissolved. At this time the Airport was taken over by the Ministry of Defence and was used as a pilot training station for the New Zealand Airforce. With no 'planes and no airfield, the New Plymouth Aero Club went into recess until the signing of the armistice. It took approximately one year to get fully back into operation again. Slowly those planes requisitioned by the Government were replaced and the Club was soon back in business. With the return of both men and women from serving overseas, there was a revived interest in the Club. Surplus planes became available and within a couple of years the Aero Club was operating 14 Tiger Moths out of New Plymouth.

In the years between 1946 and 1960, the Club continued to operated a fluctuating number of 'planes and provided the opportunity of tuition to interested civilians. In 1952 a disastrous fire destroyed the Clubs hangar. Without the funds to rebuild, the Club was at a severe disadvantage. The type of 'planes used by the Club at that time required housing in order to protect them from the elements. Being made of canvas stretch over a wooden framing, they were extremely vulnerable. The Airport Board approached the Club and offered £9,500 being payment for the Club's share in the airfield, the original 60 acres, and the Club accepted. The construction of the new hangar was soon underway but the cost to the Club was high. With no shares in the airfield, flying rights were no longer guaranteed.

In 1960 the New Plymouth Airport Board was dissolved in favour of a Board representing the whole province rather than only the City of New Plymouth. In the mean time the Club had passed from owning and operating it's own aerodrome to become a tenant. It's original aim was to foster interest in aviation and over the years it had achieved it's objectives and in the years that followed the Club was to continue opening the world of aviation to another generation of pilots.

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