

Trans-Tasman Air Terminal

Bell Block Airport Obvious Choice For Land Plane Service

New Plymouth has unique advantages in many respects.

WITH its four splendid runways and its capacity for vast expansion, together with its greater proximity to Sydney and the suitability of weather conditions prevailing in the area, the Bell Block airport at New Plymouth possesses unique advantages as a trans-Tasman air terminal for land-based aircraft. Its suitability has been commented on by prominent aviators, who have been quick to appreciate the potentialities of this airport.

If New Plymouth were made the principal New Zealand terminal for an overseas air service operating land planes, the aircraft would land at a point midway between the main centres of the Dominion's population. Passengers would be embarked at an airport providing easy and quick access to the railway and to the business centre of the town.

The route between Sydney and New Plymouth is commercially the best proposition, because it is the shortest of all practical routes between Sydney and New Zealand. In the operation of large aircraft, fuel consumption is extremely heavy and the distance between flying points is a matter of great importance.

Since the war ended, international air services have been in the melting pot and only by protracted negotiations between the respective Governments are the many problems related to flying rights being resolved. It is expected that the next major issue is the selection of terminal airports. At this point, unfortunately, influences are at work that might easily prejudice what is most suitable, most convenient and most economical in the national interest.

Primarily, it is plain that the terminal airport of an international service should be one large enough and most suitable to cope with the prospective traffic, and which is most free from hazards such as hills, fog and mud that would imperil the safety. The choice therefore should surely then be decided by two vital commercial considerations — distance from the next international terminal and relationship to the population within the national boundaries.

Careful Assessment.

On this basis, will the decisions made in New Zealand be the correct ones? It is quite possible that they will not unless an impartial and judicial assessment is insisted upon. Such an assessment would undoubtedly establish Auckland, because of its geographical position and its fine harbour, as the logical location for the terminal of a trans-Pacific service between New Zealand and North America, be it by land plane or by flying-boat.

The same logical reasoning would favour either Auckland or Wellington as the terminal of a trans-Tasman flying-boat service, because of the harbour factor alone, but should discard both of these airports in favour of New Plymouth for a land plane service.

Why did the late Sir Charles Kingsford Smith decide upon New Plymouth as the terminal of his proposed Sydney-New Zealand air service? Why did the late Flight Lieutenant C. P. T. Uim, the late Mr. W. M. O'Hara and Miss Jean Batten make New Plymouth their land-fall when flying to New Zealand from Australia? These are facts that speak louder than the most eloquent advocacy.

Significant Facts.

In support of New Plymouth's claims are certain indisputable facts—New Plymouth is closer to Sydney than any other main airport in New Zealand. It is 23 miles nearer than Auckland, 64 miles nearer than Wellington and 55 miles nearer than Palmerston North.

Weather conditions over the Tasman between Sydney and New Plymouth are more favourable than on any other route between Sydney and New Zealand.

Recent developments have proved that land planes are more suitable and

Airport Board's Booklet

The articles on this page are based on extracts from "New Zealand's Tasman Air Terminal," an informative booklet issued weekly by the New Plymouth Airport Board, and printed by the Taranaki Daily News. In it the Bell Block airport's claims to recognition as a potential main New Zealand air terminal for an overseas air transport service operating land-based aircraft are advanced.

Great Strategic Advantages From Central Position

Only 40 minutes by air from Auckland, 30 minutes from Palmerston North, and one hour from Wellington, New Plymouth occupies a unique strategic position in relation to the main areas of population in New Zealand.

If timetables are properly co-ordinated, New Plymouth has one great advantage over every other city in New Zealand. If a line is drawn across the North Island from New Plymouth it will be found that approximately half of the population of New Zealand is located north of that line, and the other half south of it.

The nearest defined line across the North Island is that formed by the southern boundary lines of the electorates of Egmont, Stratford, Waimarino, Rotarua, Hawkes Bay and Napier. It will be found that of the one and a-half million people in New Zealand, 700,000 live north of the line mentioned and 800,000 live south of it.

If New Plymouth were the New Zealand terminal of the overseas air service then the planes would land at the midway point between the homes of the whole of the population of New Zealand.

Dominion-Wide Service.

The foregoing facts are of extreme importance and demand consideration, because the only reason for the trans-Tasman air service is for service to the people of New Zealand as a whole.

The table below sets out the percentage of the New Zealand population living in areas capable of being reached from Auckland, New Plymouth and Palmerston North within the respective number of minutes therein specified by planes flying at 200 miles an hour.

Radius	Auck.	Percentage	N.P.	P.N.
30 min.	27	11	27	27
40	49	23	42	42
50	55	27	51	51
60	70	35	65	65
70	86	43	77	77
80	95	—	—	—
90	100	—	—	—

Land Communications.

The New Plymouth airport is five and a-half miles from the centre of the business area of the town. There is a wide surface-sealed highway covering the whole distance. Any ordinary motor-car can run from the post office to the airport easily within 10 minutes.

The railway skirts the airport, and there is a passenger station within a few hundred yards from the airport.

The airport is only seven and a-half miles from the port of New Plymouth, to which there is also a surface-sealed road. The New Plymouth harbour is the most up-to-date on the West coast of New Zealand. It is a properly-equipped ocean port capable of berthing the largest vessels trading to New Zealand. Ships and steamers from all over the world call at New Plymouth, including liners direct from English ports and freighters from the Continent, Canada, California, Australia and elsewhere, bringing and taking direct cargo.

The airports also located on the highway from Auckland to Wellington, which is bitumen sealed for most of the distance.

What Experts Say

The Minister of Defence, the Hon. F. Jones, speaking at the official opening of the Bell Block airport on March 21, 1936: "This ground is one of the finest in New Zealand. . . . When the extensions are complete, there will be no ground in Australasia that will be equal to the one in New Plymouth. I hope before the year is out we will have some air service operating between New Zealand and Great Britain. . . . If the types of aircraft used are land planes I cannot see a more ideal landing place than New Plymouth."

Sir Charles Kingsford Smith, speaking at New Plymouth on January 12, 1933, after landing in the Southern Cross direct from Sydney: "I was certainly influenced in my decision to land at New Plymouth by the fact of its geographical relation to Australia, which will ultimately make it the terminus of the trans-Tasman services when that day comes."

Captain P. G. Taylor, O.B.E., writing to the New Plymouth Airport Board in October, 1931, after completing several trans-Tasman flights: "I hope some day we shall see New Plymouth as the New Zealand terminal of a trans-Tasman land plane service."

more economical for the Tasman crossing than flying-boats

New Plymouth airport is or can be made larger in area than any other existing commercial airport in New Zealand.

New Plymouth airport already possesses effective runways in four different directions, varying between 1000 yards and 1400 yards, and these can be further extended to more than a mile in every direction.

New Plymouth airport is splendidly graded and drained, has an all-the-year-round dry and firm surface, and is more free from fog and low cloud than most other airports.

Mount Egmont, a perfect cone rising to a height of 5350 feet, 15 miles from New Plymouth, is of considerable value as a beacon to pilots. As a focal point and distribution centre in New Zealand, New Plymouth can effect a quicker coverage of the other main centres of population than any other airport. As alternative landing grounds for large aircraft, New Plymouth would have major aerodromes with concrete runways on either side—Whenuapai in the north and Ohakea in the south. No other airport has similar diversionary capacity.

Proposals Have Been Made For Large Expansion

Extension of the existing aerodrome at Bell Block has been strongly and consistently urged by both the New Plymouth Borough Council and the New Plymouth Airport Board along a pattern which would give the airport a total area of 615 acres. If the Government were to adopt the New Plymouth airport for a plan for an international air service, with land-based aircraft and implement proposals for expansion, it would possess the type of main air terminal it requires, with provision for accommodating the largest planes likely to be using the route.

The present area is 239 acres. The area of the land to be acquired for the use of the Royal New Zealand Air Force, it seems reasonable to believe that sufficient buildings to operate the trans-Tasman and internal services could, by arrangement with the Government, be retained on the aerodrome.

All the roads in the neighbourhood of 191 acres are surface-sealed and kerbed with concrete. A concrete apron fronts the hangar.

Length of Runways.

At present, the New Plymouth airport has landing strips in every direction of the wind, which aircraft can land and take off at any time and in any direction. The actual length of these varies from 1500 to 1600 yards, but after allowing for the 100 yards of the main landing strip the effective lengths of the main landing strips may be taken to be—

North-South 4300 ft.—1400 yds
N.E.-S.W. 3000 ft.—1000 yds
East-West 3000 ft.—1000 yds
N.W.-S.E. 3000 ft.—1000 yds

Before the war it was expected that the length of these strips would be adequate for the largest type of aircraft likely to be used in the trans-Tasman air service. However, with the advent of the new R.A.F. Lancaster bomber was able to land and take off at the airport in November, 1944, clearly demonstrated this. The fact that the airport was one of the four chosen by the Government at which the Lancaster landed, and that the other three places were defence aerodromes, also clearly demonstrated the very high position occupied by the airport amongst the municipal and commercial airports of the Dominion.

Nevertheless, in 1941, the New Plymouth Borough Council, through Plymouth Airport Board, became convinced that further extensions of the airport and runways would be necessary to meet modern requirements. Although the extension of the strips to 1600 yards than those available on any other municipal aerodrome in New Zealand, it was considered that still longer strips must be provided.

Report Asked For.

The borough engineers was instructed to report upon the possibility of the airport area of the present aerodrome to provide landing strips of up to about 7000 feet.

In May, 1942, he reported that the proposal was feasible, and later submitted a plan which visualised the airport increased in area by a further 309 acres (since increased to 528 acres) and with landing strips of the following lengths—

East to West 7600 ft.—132 miles
N.E. to S.W. 6000 ft.—125 miles
N.W. to S.E. 6000 ft.—125 miles
North to South 1000 ft.—300 miles

On the 326 acres of additional land required, the Government, since 1941, has purchased 122 acres for the purpose of the R.N.Z.A.F. which has been using the airport as a flying station. The council, as early as February, 1942, approached the Government about the proposed extensions, and by negotiation and letters has since been repeating their urgency.

Extension Proposals.

The extensions visualised require a further 326 acres to be added, making a total of 615 acres. Of the 326 acres, 122 have already been purchased by the Government for the R.N.Z.A.F., leaving 204 acres to be purchased.

Of the total of 615 acres which will comprise the airport when extended, 239 acres (the field, 239 acres and administration block, 19 acres) have already been levelled, graded, and laid out. This leaves 376 acres to be levelled. By adopting the Bell Block airport, extended as proposed, for the principal New Zealand terminal for overseas air transport by land planes, the Government would provide an airport of the size and nature required to accommodate the largest planes contemplated for any New Zealand-overseas air transport. By doing so, it would obviate any danger of New Zealand, in the race for post-war commercial aviation, being left-tracked and left in isolation.

No Room For Doubts.

Some may feel that even the 615-acre aerodrome contemplated may not be large enough to provide the longest runways likely to be required by the largest land planes ever likely to be used in a New Zealand-overseas air service. However, if a greater extension of the New Plymouth airport than is at present contemplated should be deemed necessary, it could be made. Suitable good open low-lying country adjoins the present aerodrome, and whatever the length of the runways that may be required, they can be provided.

All this could be effected at a fraction of the cost contemplated in Australia and at a fraction of what the cost would be if the Government decided to erect the main New Zealand overseas terminal in the environs of either Auckland or Wellington.

