

Andrew Lloyd Webber: The plane facts about shutting down Heathrow

Huge environmental and economic gains will come from developing a new airport on the Isle of Grain



Full up: Heathrow is the busiest airport in the world but expansion would have a huge effect on Londoners

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There are few things more irritating than receiving an unsolicited letter from a pressure group containing a load of self-serving tosh.

One such arrived at breakfast yesterday. I was in a pretty average mood, having been woken up by a jet screaming as it turned over Victoria at 6am. So it was perhaps unfortunate that this missive emanated from an organisation advertising itself as Back Heathrow.

The main thrust of the unwanted letter was an argument for the massive expansion of Heathrow, because Britain needs a first-class hub airport, a place where international travellers change planes and the airport picks up landing fees and the like. All this is dressed up in jingoistic terms so that one almost feels unpatriotic to challenge the assertion that Heathrow needs a third or maybe a fourth runway. One feels it almost betrays one's duty to the nation to raise the glaring issue of noise pollution, let alone safety, affecting millions of Londoners caused by aircraft of ever-increasing size flying over the centre of our city. I struggle to think of any other city in the world that has a landing path and final approach over its centre. There are times I think only Britain could have contrived such a barmy and hazardous state of affairs.

The plain fact is that it is crazy to be talking about expanding Heathrow. It is time to grasp the nettle that Heathrow should not be there at all.

When, in the late 1930s, a flat piece of market garden land near an aircraft research station was earmarked for development as an airport, nobody had a clue that commercial aviation would develop on the scale we take for granted today. I remember as a boy my parents would take me to Heathrow and a little plane would take you up for a joyride. There was a viewing platform for plane spotters.

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It is blindingly obvious that no one anticipated the Heathrow of today, let alone tomorrow. If they had, it would never have been chosen as a site.

Apart from the noise and safety issues caused by overflying the capital, there is the endless stacking of planes circling round the outer suburbs. Don't believe that a third runway would alleviate this, certainly not for any length of time, as capacity will soon be filled.

There is, of course, another issue that is swept under the carpet. That is the parlous state of the elevated section of the M4. Opened in 1962, it shares in common with the Chiswick and Hammersmith flyovers an ongoing problem with concrete cancer.

Anyone who drives regularly in the evening knows of the constant road closures as attempts are made to shore things up. Sooner or later, Heathrow or no, a major rethink of the M4/A4 will have to happen. Plans have already been mooted to build a tunnel from Chiswick to Earl's Court but I doubt that will happen in a hurry. So what to do?

As the success of the Olympics and the regeneration of the Docklands has shown, we must look eastwards. I would strongly oppose developing Stansted — already too much of the Essex and Suffolk countryside has been adversely affected by overflying.

Similarly, Gatwick blights far too much of the Weald. We have seriously to consider so-called Boris Island, otherwise known as the Isle of Grain.

I think it is known that art and architecture, along with protecting the rural environment, are high on my list of passions. So a short while ago I took a day trip to the Hoo peninsula and the Isle of Grain and was much taken with it. The impressive early Gothic church at Cliffe dates from a time when this was a much wealthier region. I liked the prayer in the guidebook that implies a traveller will not pass this way again. The whole of the Hoo peninsula has an eerie, spooky feeling about it with its distant background of oil refinery chimneys, huge power stations and striding pylons.

But despite its pleasing sense of desolation, it's not exactly Britain's finest landscape. Maybe I won't go so far as a traveller named Hasted who, in 1789, wrote it was "an unfrequented place, the roads of which are deep and miry and it is as unhealthy as it is unpleasant". I like these sort of places. The pubs are a glorious time warp. I never thought I'd see Britvic on a bar shelf again and (I hope I am right) did I even see a bottle of Babycham?

The truth is, if we have to find a place to put a massive hub airport, this is it.

There will be vocal objections from the RSPB, for there are bird-watching sites at every turn. But it is a flat piece of land right by the sea with very little, apart from the fact that you expect to see the occasional marsh ghoul, to recommend it visually. An airport there would create massive local job opportunities and justify major road and rail investment. It would revitalise the

whole corridor between itself and London and, I believe, it would remap the economic geography of the capital for the better in the process, as well as relieving London of the noise and safety issues that are today ever present.

At the same time, the closure of Heathrow would provide a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Currently there are 76,000 people employed there but a detailed study by Jones Lang LaSalle suggests that a sensitive medium-to-high density development — rather like Kensington or Chelsea — would generate 80,000 new homes and 90,000 jobs, as well as creating the potential to use the existing terminals for, say, exhibitions and centres for education and technology. Furthermore, freeing up Heathrow in this way would take the pressure of dormitory development in the South-East.

In short, the environmental and economic gains of shutting Heathrow and building a new airport on the Isle of Grain are so overwhelming that they must outweigh the short-term nature of Heathrow's outmoded vested interests. Heathrow is past its sell-by date. We should follow the example of so many other countries and build an airport for today and tomorrow. With apologies to local resident Jools Holland and his neighbours The Isle of Grain is the right place.
