

The Future of Woodford Aerodrome – Thoughts and Reflections, leading to some Important Questions

Background

I work independently as a consultant for a company called Glenfern Associates Ltd that operates from a place near to the site of the BAE Systems Factory and Aerodrome in Woodford, formerly known as Avros.

Historically, this dates back to the 1920's. During the Second World War, Avros made an outstanding contribution to Britain's war effort by producing the Lancaster bomber. In the early days of the Cold War, the Vulcan bomber formed the backbone of Britain's V-bomber nuclear deterrent until it was superseded by the Royal Navy's fleet of Polaris nuclear submarines. Then, effort shifted to produce early versions of the Nimrod aircraft for maritime reconnaissance and electronic intelligence gathering; they served with the RAF from 1969 onwards until 2010. In later years a number of small civil aircraft were built.

The government conducted a UK Strategic Defence and Security Review in 2010 and decided to cancel the Nimrod MRA4 programme before any aircraft went into service. Regrettably, this decision led to the closure of Woodford Aerodrome early in 2011, since it had no future role to play in BAE Systems.

Consequently, the aerodrome is earmarked for redevelopment and regeneration, unless it can be sold as it stands.

The land owner, BAE Systems, is collaborating with local councils (Stockport Metropolitan Borough and Cheshire East) and other agencies to explore how the site might be redeveloped or regenerated.

Workshops

Following a number of local exhibitions in May 2011, a number of workshops have been held at Woodford Community Centre to involve members of the local community and other interested parties to explore what options are available and to seek imaginative solutions. The workshops were spread over 5 days, and began on Monday 13 June 2011.

More information can be found from the official blog¹.

Thoughts and Reflections about the Workshops - my personal view

I have some thoughts and reflections about the events of the past few days; they lead to some important questions.

- I cannot speak for anyone else, but I have slept poorly since the workshops began, wrestling with issues and churning them over and over again in my mind until the small hours. I have not felt like this since my parents died.
- I should explain that I have lived in Woodford for all 62 years of my life. I love it here, and have no desire to live anywhere else. Though it may seem incredible, the closure of Avros feels like the death of a member of the family.
- To me, this forms the basis of a fitting allegory; for as we know, after death comes a funeral which, in organised households, is followed by the reading of the will and the distribution of the inheritance.

¹ URL: <http://woodfordaerodromedesignworkshop.wordpress.com/>

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- In rich families where the estate is large, there are often bitter disputes among surviving siblings, some of whom had little involvement with the deceased while alive, but expect their share nonetheless; sometimes, bastard sons appear to muddy the waters, along with other hangers-on who think they have a claim. Each comes with his own agenda. Here, human nature never ceases to amaze me!
- This week, I have listened to the views of a panel of experts, officials and consultants. I have participated in the groups, listened to other people with similar and different views, and engaged in polite discourse and debate. Some solutions have been investigated and explored. This is good.
- At this point I must nail my colours firmly to the mast. Here, I am following the advice of the Prime Minister concerning local involvement.

I care only about Woodford.

Sorry, but if you live elsewhere, you are not part of the family. Other bequests are discretionary!

No one should think they can foist a solution upon us that does not benefit Woodford first and last.

Any solution that changes the fundamental character of the place is unacceptable too.

There is so much history here to cast aside glibly. Residents like me will have to live with the consequences.

That is how it is, I am afraid; you like it, or you lump it.

- I was not the only one with a Nimby attitude. Residents and representatives from Poynton seemed equally determined to procure a route for their new bypass by crossing the runway. This was made clearer as we progressed through the workshops and tried to formulate plans for the development of the aerodrome - plans which would largely lead to the destruction and obliteration of its principal components and therefore its identity.
- Realistically, we know that all projects have substantial costs and no-one should underestimate the amount of money involved. Woodford Aerodrome is a large site. Developers, councils and other bodies are not going to be altruistic. Stockport MBC will be looking to derive a tidy income stream through Council Tax from the development over an indefinite period. Careers are at stake as well as reputations, as local government kowtows to the dictates of the political masters in Westminster to deliver the latest fashionable policies, and so gain esteem and higher status.

This brings me to the questions, since everyone attending the party comes with his own agenda. We need to quantify what is happening if we can, so that we can scrutinise any proposals.

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Questions Arising

1. What is the value of the aerodrome as it stands now? My guess would be £90 million approximately.
2. What is the scale of any development? e.g. How many dwellings, what types, plus details of any commercial/industrial properties.
3. How much development is sufficient to regenerate the site?
4. How much will it cost to remediate the site and provide essential services? e.g. Gas and electricity might be easy to supply since the site housed an aircraft factory, but what about the water and sewage needs for possibly hundreds of homes? Is there adequate capacity locally?
5. Are there features on the site that relate to its earlier use as a military airfield that will be very costly to eradicate? If so, at what cost?
6. How much development is too much? i.e. affecting the current village detrimentally.
7. Does the existing community want such a development?
8. What will be the value of the site after remediation and redevelopment? Are we talking of £250 million, £500 million, or even more?
9. How much will Stockport MBC and to a lesser extent, Cheshire East, derive from this development, firstly by way of one-off payments and then per annum?

A significant proportion of the difference must be spent here, rather than in the Stockport Borough as a whole. I am certainly not prepared to accept “crumbs from the top table”, nor should anyone else!

Since Woodford was subsumed into Stockport Metropolitan Borough in 1974, the village has been subjected to 36 years of indifference and neglect by local government. It is hard to think of, or name any municipal footprint. If any member of Stockport Council or its officials imagines that a bit of tasteful landscaping will be sufficient, they should return to the Town Hall and think again, and not show their faces until they have a solution that fits.

In one of the workshops, the groups were encouraged to consider aesthetics by referring to a number of classical paintings with architectural and civic themes. I am thinking particularly of the painting in which a beautiful young woman was depicted sitting on a bed, looking out of a window. The lesson here is that we should be very careful when we get into bed with other parties, lest we exchange a mutually satisfying experience for a dose of gonorrhoea, or worse still, AIDS. Alternatively, will we be left holding the baby?

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Concluding Thoughts

- Having sat through 4 workshops, the participants took a one-day break. I had time to reflect. All in all, it was a very sobering experience, and I am conscious that the decisions that will be made very soon will affect the area for many years to come - even after my death. We had better get this right!
- The workshops began with a conducted tour of the aerodrome on board a coach. The tour included a brief inspection of the main hangar/assembly shed adjacent to the main entrances on Chester Road. i.e. in MEDS area A on the Stockport development plan.
- The vast scale of the aerodrome became apparent immediately, and there were some stunning views of open countryside, along the axis of the main runway and in other directions too - a green panorama. Though old, the buildings had been maintained to a very high standard, inside and out, along with the runway and grounds - a testament to the care and diligence of the landowner, BAE Systems.
- Accordingly, it seems almost sacrilegious to demolish factory accommodation that is in such a good condition.
- I wish that some alternative use for aviation could be found, like a factory or a freight terminal. Several years ago, there was talk of a tie-up between BAE and a Chinese civil aviation company. It fell through. Has there been any interest whatsoever expressed by other plane makers in recent times? If so, I hope that this will be followed up. It has been said that an operational Woodford airfield would pose problems for Manchester Airport and vice versa, but I wonder how many of these problems are political rather than technical. Over all, I think this warrants further detailed investigation.
- The assembly shed would make an excellent distribution centre or more imaginatively, a film/TV studio. Woodford residents are used to commercial activity on this site, so I would not expect this to pose any insurmountable problems. It is true that road links are not ideal, but ingress and egress could be channelled ultimately through a roundabout on the Poynton bypass, if the route adopted is one that bisects the runway. However, this would seal the fate of renewed aerial activity.
- The landmark buildings would be retained if there were a change of use, but heritage would be maintained. It will still look very similar. The remainder of the site could be landscaped for community use.
- There is a danger of creating two separate communities if we are not careful with most of the plans that have been proposed.

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Other Matters

Gathering together data from several sources, I have built a simple Excel spreadsheet that will enable us to estimate the likely annual income of Stockport MBC based upon Council Tax receipts. It can be used to demonstrate how income can be affected by mixing and matching different types of property. You are welcome to download it² and experiment yourselves. Please bear in mind that it has been put together hurriedly, and be sure to let me know if you spot any glaring errors; they can soon be remedied.

Please note that it has the following limitations.

- The distribution of dwellings among Council Tax bands relates to 2008. It does not take into account properties that have been built or demolished since then. You can substitute the existing values with more up to date data if you have some.
- I have separated the current number of dwellings in Woodford from the totals for the borough as a whole.
- The amount obtained from Council Tax is calculated for each band.
- Totals and percentages are calculated for Stockport as a whole, Woodford before regeneration, and after.
- **Disclaimer:** Naturally, you will understand that this spreadsheet gives indications, rather than absolute, definitive or legally binding answers. Please do not misinterpret or misuse what has been given.

We could construct a similar spreadsheet to calculate crudely the market value of any housing development by multiplying together the number of dwellings in each Council Tax band and an average price for each type of property, and then summing the results. This would go some way to gauging the financial viability of any major housing development, based on the assumption that there are no major obstacles to success. I might do that at a later date if there is sufficient interest and if I can obtain some meaningful data.

² URL: <http://www.glenfernassociates.co.uk/aerodrome.html>