London’s Insufficient Airport Capacity:
Why is it a Recurring Problem?

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1 Introduction

The UK Department of Transport recently announced that London’s major airports will be operating at maximum capacity by 2030. Official estimates for 2030 demand have widely varied from 320 million to 495 million total passengers, but even the lower number suggests that there will be 13 million more passengers than the airports can handle (49). The government is concerned that expanding capacity at one or more of London’s airports is necessary in order to remain competitive with other European cities, maintain the nation’s trading capabilities, and continue to draw in millions of tourists. However, there is no easy or obvious solution. Expanding airports may result in increasing noise and potentially destroying homes to make room for new facilities along with other environmental impacts. This situation has led to an intense and heated political debate.

In an effort to evaluate possible answers to the capacity problem, in September 2012 the government appointed the independent Airports Commission, chaired by Sir Howard Davies. The so-called Davies Commission received dozens of proposals of potential solutions. While the Commission is not slated to make a final recommendation to the government until after the 2015 general election (to prevent it from being a point of contention in the election), Davies recently announced that it was certain the creation of new runways in the London area would be necessary. The submissions that might solve this problem range from a futuristic ‘drive-through’ airport to slightly more realistic options like building new runways at Gatwick, Heathrow, or Stansted. The Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, has championed the creation of a new airport on an island in the Thames Estuary.

What is remarkable is that many of the proposals—including ‘Boris Island’—are not new ideas, but rather variations on solutions to expanding London’s airport capacity that have been languishing for decades. Britain has long struggled with the challenge of increasing capacity to keep pace with demand. As far back as the 1960s, the Interdepartmental Committee on the Third London Airport predicted that London would have insufficient airside capacity by 1972. At that time, Heathrow and Gatwick were considered the two main Lon-
don airports. While Stansted and Luton were both in operation, they lacked the facilities to serve a significant portion of London’s air traffic. Even then, the government acknowledged that massive expansion projects would be necessary in order to be able to maintain London’s international status and competitiveness. However, despite numerous inquiries, proposals, and projects in the following decades, Britain has yet to solve the issue of London’s long-term airport capacity.

In light of this point, this paper examines the question: in the last 50 years, why has Britain been unable to deal with London’s capacity problem effectively? The following sections examine in more detail three major controversial expansion proposals: the early suggestion of a new airport at Maplin Sands, the development of Stansted Airport in the 1980s, and the push for a third runway at Heathrow. With each of these proposals came the opportunity to solve the long-term capacity problem in London, but for various reasons, the projects were limited or halted altogether. After describing the circumstances and outcomes for each of these proposals, I will analyze and discuss the biggest barriers that have prevented a solution from being reached.

2 A New Airport at Maplin Sands?

One of the first major controversies over expanding airside capacity in London was the plan for the building of a new airport in the Southeast. Given the London’s capacity constraints, it was understood that a new facility would need to be developed. Stansted was assumed to be the natural choice, so in 1965, a hearing on its development began. However, the significant expansion or building of an airport is a very controversial topic, and the population was irate that the government had not followed through on a previous promise to hold a public inquiry about the choice of location. As a result, the government backtracked on its previous assumption about Stansted.

In 1967 the Noise Abatement Society proposed as an alternative site the island of Foul-
ness, off the coast of Essex in southeastern England. The society’s goal was to prevent increased noise pollution in the neighborhoods surrounding the existing airports, such as Heathrow and Stansted. Their plan suggested reclaiming of 9,000 acres of land from the Maplin Sands near Foulness. This would allow ample room for a large airport with two pairs of parallel runways. Had it been immediately approved, the *Financial Times* suggested that it would open no later than 1972-73 with room for expansion in the 1980s as necessary. However, the project did not make progress that rapidly. In 1969, when a decision on the project had still not been reached, the Port of London Authority (PLA) officially backed the Maplin Sands idea, expanding the plan to include not only an airport but also an associated deep water sea port and industrial development nearby (see Figure 1). The PLA argued these new facilities could help London compete with places like Rotterdam across the English Channel.

![Figure 1: Europort Proposal](image)

In an effort to evaluate potential sites for a new airport, the government put together the Roskill Commission to analyze the problem. This commission began from anew, assessing
all potential sites, including both Stansted and Foulness. It then drew up a shortlist of 4 finalist locations. While Foulness made the list, along with Cublington, Buckinghamshire; Thurleigh, Essex; and Nuthampstead, Hertfordshire; Stansted did not. The Commission then held sessions in each location to allow locals to share their opinions, which were quite mixed. Though the county councils of Essex and Hertfordshire officially supported Foulness, residents expressed concerns about rising water levels and the impact on coastal defenses, the health of local industries—specifically cockles (small salt-water clams) and whiteweed (a type of sea fern), the demolition of houses, and increased noise pollution. In the end, the Roskill Commission identified Cublington as the ideal site to build London’s new third airport, though Sir Colin Buchanan, a transport planner on the commission, preferred the Maplin Sands site.

However, politics intervened. Prime Minister Edward Heath’s Conservative government chose to back Buchanan’s selection, citing local opposition at Cublington. In March 1973, Norman Payne, the British Airport Authority’s chief executive, announced the official plan. After reclaiming the land at Foulness, an airport would be built starting with a single runway at its opening. By 1986, it would be able to serve 32 million passengers. By the late 1990s, the airport would have four runways and ten terminals and would serve up to 120 million people per year at a cost of approximately £1 billion (see Figure 2).

Before this plan could go ahead, it had to be approved by Parliament, but the battle would be rough. Maplin Sands did offer some clear advantages over other possibilities. First and perhaps more importantly, the site would allow for many more expansion opportunities than the existing airports. In addition, flights would be able to come in over the sea, resulting in less noise pollution for nearby residents and no need for a noise curfew, as existed at Heathrow. The location would also result in limited air traffic control impacts on the other London airports. Though Luton, Stansted, and Southend might see some impacts, the heavy traffic at Heathrow and Gatwick would remain largely unaffected.

Despite these gains, there were some serious problems with the proposal. Maplin Sands
was quite far from London and would require a series of new—and pricey—road and rail connections. In addition, Shoeburyness, a nearby Army firing range, would have to be relocated—likely to Scotland—and the area would need to be carefully cleaned to remove all shells and unexploded charges. Moreover, there was a sizable local population of seabirds. Their roosts would need to be relocated to other places in the Thames Estuary, and while the frequency of bird strikes would likely be similar to that at Heathrow, the larger Brent geese and mule swans would pose a greater danger for airplanes. Furthermore, some opponents, supported by evidence from the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) also thought that the coming increase in jumbo jets would take care of 14-20% of the anticipated increase in demand by 1980, meaning that an extra runway at Gatwick or Heathrow would be able to solve the capacity problem without the Maplin Airport.
Given these concerns and the pressures from constituents, many politicians were reluctant to give Maplin a green light. Just the passing of the Maplin Development Bill, which set up the Maplin Development Authority, became a major political controversy in which the Labour Party members as well as a number of Tory backbenchers sided against the Conservative government. Though the bill eventually passed, opposition continued to mount. With an upcoming general election, the Labour Party published a manifesto condemning the plan on environmental grounds since it would curtail housing options in the area. Despite ongoing work by the Maplin Development Authority, when Labour won the February 1974 election, the outlook for the airport at Maplin Sands was uncertain.

During its first six months in power, Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s new Labour government re-evaluated the Maplin decision, suspending work while they produced yet another ‘consultative document’ on the subject (25). Secretary for the Environment Anthony Crosland had previously spoken out against the project, suggesting that the nation should develop a more modest airport in a different location while investing the additional money into research for quieter engines to allow more night flights into Heathrow. He argued that Maplin would require too large and risky and investment—after all, what if airlines did not shift their operations there? On top of these concerns, the 1973 Yom Kippur War in Israel had led to international oil crisis which made the investment of millions of pounds in an airport even more politically untenable. Unsurprisingly, on July 18, 1974, Labour officially announced the end of the Maplin project. After spending £2.6 million and undertaking years of public debate, the idea was abandoned, the Maplin Development Authority was dissolved, and London’s capacity problem went unsolved.

Despite its failure in the 1970s, the idea of building a new airport in the Thames estuary has reappeared today as airport capacity remains a challenge. In the submissions to the Davies Commission, Boris Johnson suggests that building an artificial island with a four runway airport may be the solution (see Figure 3). Many of the advantages sound familiar: there would be plenty of room to build a large structure without demolishing houses or
significant farmland, and the flight path would allow for 24-hours of take-offs and landings without significant noise pollution. At the same time, many criticisms are recurring: though transportation channels have improved, the site is still relatively far from London, and the price tag would be a steep £47.3 billion. In addition, it would be hard to ensure that airlines would use the airport unless Heathrow were forcibly shut down. As with Maplin Sands, these significant downsides make the outlook for a modern-day Thames Estuary airport bleak. It is likely to be an uphill political battle.
3 Developing Stansted in the 1980s

London’s next major opportunity for increasing capacity came in the 1980s with the revival of the Stansted option. While Stansted had been the assumed favorite site for London’s third airport in the mid-1960s, it was discarded when Foulness was selected. After Maplin Sands was abandoned, Stansted once again gained traction. In 1979, Sir John Nott officially put the airport back on the government’s list of possible sites for expansion. A new public inquiry began in 1981 to assess the options. Again, there were many differing opinions. For example, the British Airports Authority (BAA) supported the Stansted option, asserting that they could have a new terminal in operation by 1988. However, British Airways strongly advocated for focusing work on building Terminal 5 at Heathrow, which would allow them to keep all their facilities in one place.

Lasting roughly three years, the inquiry finally concluded on December 10, 1984 with a report of more than 2,600 pages. Chairman Graham Eyre announced it had found that London would need additional capacity no later than 1990 and that two steps were necessary. First, the facilities at Stansted should be immediately expanded to increase passenger capacity by 1990. However, due to environmental concerns such as noise, a second runway should never be built there, which would limit long term growth opportunities. Second, at some point in the future, a fifth terminal should be added at Heathrow.

The once-again Conservative government, now led by Margaret Thatcher, officially supported the inquiry’s plan to expand capacity at Stansted but put a hold on development at Heathrow. However, even with this limitation, getting support from Parliament was difficult. Immediately after the inquiry results, 225 Members of Parliament came out against the proposal, including 80 Tories. The principle objection was that the estimated £2 billion would send too much money to the already-wealthy southeastern part of England rather than to the poorer industrial regions that needed it more. Labour, for example, argued that regional airports like Manchester should be getting some of this money for development, while Tories representing northern districts worried that the lack of funds for other transit
developments would limit the connections between their constituencies and London. While 16 local authorities (including three London boroughs and 7 county councils) supported the plan, constituents in the affected area particularly feared the impact on farming, as well as the additional aircraft noise. Given the intense political turmoil on the issue, the government also faced a challenge of credibility: were they once again going to spend a great deal of time and money on an inquiry only to ignore the results? The problem was further complicated by the Thatcher government’s 1985 move to privatize the BAA.

Despite these controversies, the government announced that Stansted would be the official third London airport in a June 1985 White Paper. When they were finally complete, the plans called for expansion of the passenger capacity through the building of a new terminal with two satellites— one to open in 1991 and the second to open when needed. A political compromise limited the initial phases of expansion to a capacity of 8 million passengers per year by 1995 (up from 1-2 million), with expansion up to 15 million passengers possible with government approval. Due to environmental protests, the government did not plan to include a second runway to increase airside capacity along with landside capacity. Construction began in April 1986.

While they were able to settle enough to get some expanded facilities at Stansted, there was not enough support for a second runway, so it left the long-term airside capacity problem unsolved. Even as the Stansted terminal was under construction in 1986, the Department for Transport estimated that the projected demand for 2000 would be 80-114 million passengers at the four London airports, while the Stansted project would bring the capacity to only 75 million by 1995. As early as 1986, Sir John Dent, the chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority, acknowledged that the London area still needed more runway capacity. With the lack of development at Stansted and a promise not to develop a second runway at Gatwick until at least 2019, the government was left with few options.

As with the idea of a Thames Estuary airport, the further expansion of Stansted has not been forgotten. The idea recurred in both the early 1990s and 2000s. In the former period,
Transport Secretary John MacGregor considered the option of adding a second runway there; however, staunch public opposition, including BAA and the airlines themselves, kept the idea from gaining enough traction. Then, in 2003, BAA suggested that the government should once again consider adding two runways at Stansted, as well as Gatwick and Heathrow. A White Paper on “The Future of Air Transport” published later that year asserted that Stansted should at least get a second runway (see Figure 4). However, a lengthy judicial review of the the White Paper and takeover of BAA by the Spanish company Ferrovial ensued before BAA could submit an official planning application for the runway. Eventually, amid an ongoing legal battle over whether it would have to sell Stansted, BAA withdrew the proposal.

More recently, it has come up again in in the submissions to the Davies Commission. The Manchester Airports Group, the new owners of Stansted Airport following its forced sale from BAA, offered the potential development of one additional runway to the north west (see Figure 5). A more ambitious Transport for London proposal suggests massively

Figure 4: Suggested Second Runway in the Future of Air Transport White Paper
reconfiguring it into a major hub airport by adding four runways and two terminals with satellites (see Figure 6). The advantage over his other proposals, argues Boris Johnson, would be the limited wildlife impacts compared to building in the Thames Estuary. However, as with the previous iterations of the plan, either of these projects will likely face substantial opposition both from area residents on environmental grounds and from airlines which would prefer to see expansion at the larger airports like Heathrow. For short-sighted government officials, supporting the plan could be politically dangerous. In addition, any project would likely rest on the shoulders of the airport itself which probably could not afford it. Stansted expansion thus remains a very sticky issue.

4 A Third Runway at Heathrow?

The final big idea that might have solved London’s airport capacity problem is the addition of a third runway at Heathrow. This plan also has long-developed roots. The question was raised at least as far back as 1969, according to an *Economist* article at the of the time
Figure 6: Transport for London’s Proposal to Expand Stansted

(see Figure 7). Heathrow was always one of the main London airports and the major hub of British Airways, so thoughts of expansion were a recurring theme. After Graham Eyre’s 1984 inquiry asserted the need for a fifth terminal at the airport, progress on the issue moved slowly, and there was increasing talk of the additional need for a third runway. However, BAA claimed that Terminal 5 would be sufficient to deal with increased capacity; they could not imagine the building of a new runway at Heathrow. Indeed, in 1995 the government announced that there would be no new runways allowed in the London area; in fact, it thought there would be no need for a new London runway until 2015.

Approval for the expansion of Heathrow moved very slowly. An inquiry on the issue finally concluded in the early 2000s. However, around the same time, discussions about another runway resurfaced. British Airways in particular expressed a desire for its development. A 2003 government White Paper on “The Future of Air Transport” suggested that two
additional runways were needed in the London area, the first as soon as possible at Stansted and the second around 2015-2020 at Heathrow if additional pollution regulations were met.

As the plan for Heathrow’s new runway slowly developed, details emerged that fueled the opposition. The third runway would allow for the operation of 500 more flights per day for a total of 700,000 flights per year. As a result, 150,000 more citizens would be exposed to noise, and there could be additional health concerns due to worsened air quality. In addition, at least 260 but up to 700 homes might be destroyed to make enough room for the development. Climate change had also become a major issue. Environmental critics said that carbon emissions would increase by up to 40%. Moreover, though the original White Paper had approved a short 2000 meter runway, in 2007 BAA asked for it to be extended another 500 meters to allow for larger planes. This further angered the nearby population which had been assured that only short-haul and domestic flights would be using the runway due to its length.

Despite these concerns, the Labour government pushed ahead with the plans, beginning a new consultation on the subject in 2007. Key Labour leaders, including then-Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, argued that the runway was vital to Britain’s economic growth and competitiveness as a major financial center. Many businesses also supported the
government’s official position. However, the topic divided Parliament.

Initially, while the Liberal Democrats opposed the third runway on environmental grounds, the Conservatives did not, so long as the stated regulations could be met. Then in 2008, BAA was accused of fixing the airport forecasts and colluding with the government to alter the numbers so that the project would appear to satisfy new environmental regulations. Soon after, the Tories announced a reversal of position. Party leader David Cameron went so far as to accuse the government of “faking the case for Heathrow’s third runway for the sake of political point-scoring” (67). With an election upcoming, Tories pledged not to build a runway if they came to power, a move they hoped would help them gain support in West London.

In 2009, Transport Secretary, Geoff Hoon, announced that the government endorsed the third runway plan. Costing up to £9 billion, it was slated to be complete by 2019-2020. Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown argued that it was a necessity for the nation’s economic future. However, there was an upcoming general election in 2010, and this put the Labour Party in a tough position. While it officially supported the new runway, it needed to win seats in the London area to stay in power. Many people in London, however, were staunchly anti-expansion. As a result, over half of the London-area Labour Members of Parliament (MPs) split from the official party line, speaking out against the third Heathrow runway. Meanwhile, both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats ruled out the plan in their party manifestos. This helped them gain enough votes to take control of the House of Commons after the 2010 election. When the two parties took power in a coalition government, they immediately discarded the third runway option.

Whether they are permanently against the idea remains to be seen. As recently as 2012, high-ranking Tory ministers, including Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, suggested the party’s position on the third runway should be reconsidered. Another Conservative called out Prime Minister David Cameron on the issue, saying he “must ask himself whether he is man or mouse” (95). However, many Tories disagree with this perspective. Op-
ponents included then-Transport Minister Justine Greening, who threatened to resign if the
government revived plans for a third runway. The fact that she was subsequently removed
from her position in a Cabinet reshuffle suggests that perhaps the Prime Minister is coming
around to the Heathrow plan. Despite these signs, Cameron says the government will wait
for the recommendation of the Davies Commission before it makes a decision. And indeed,
the option for a new runway at Heathrow is under consideration. In fact, Heathrow Airport
Limited—the newest iteration of the BAA—has provided three potential new runway sites
in its submission (see Figure 8). Conveniently, the Commission’s results will come only after
the 2015 general election. Once again, short-term politics precludes a decision being reached
on London’s long-term capacity problems.

Figure 8: Heathrow Airport Ltd’s Runway Options Submitted to the Davies Commission

5 Discussion

Despite decades of debate and (in)action regarding London’s airport capacity, the prob-
lem is yet to be solved. An examination of the Maplin Sands airport proposal, the develop-
ment of Stansted in the 1980s, and the ongoing battle for a third runway at Heathrow reveals several common problems that have prevented capacity expansion from being successfully executed. First, the process takes a very long time to move through the government. The involved process of doing a public inquiry or producing a White Paper takes so long that forecasts may change by the time they are complete. Moreover, the forecasts themselves vary so widely that it is easy for people to draw vastly different conclusions based on whether they look at the lower or upper bounds.

The most important issue is that politicians tend to be short-sighted. They want to ‘sweat the equity’ for projects they approve. However, airport extensions are time-consuming projects that have many immediate harms and benefits which are realized years later. Because they are concerned about re-election prospects, politicians are reluctant to take actions that anger their constituents. Intense public opposition on environmental grounds is one of the reasons the Maplin Sands airport and a second runway at Stansted have never been built. It also explains the Labour Party’s split position and the Conservatives’ reversal of opinion on the third runway at Heathrow can also be explained by the fact that politicians were trying to garner votes in the 2010 general election.

Funding is another issue for which politicians do not want to take the blame. All three projects were criticized for the amount of money that they would require. However, though the government might approve expansion projects, it does not actually spend the money. Though supporters of airport expansion argue it is necessary for the nation’s economic health and competitiveness, they refuse actually to fund the projects. The government’s obstinance makes the possibilities for growth much more limited. Individual airport owners are not able to afford a complete redesign, which significantly restricts the potential options. For example, even though the government could approve a four-runway and two terminal solution at Stansted, it is unlikely that Stansted would have the resources to follow through on it. Once again, this is a situation where politicians are unable to look beyond the short-term costs to achieve a long-term solution.
This paper does not attempt to judge how Britain can solve its airport capacity problem; rather it examines why the problem still exists despite the fact that officials realized that capacity was not great enough to handle demand over fifty years ago. The central issue is that no politician wants to take responsibility for the problem. Even after approval—which often itself takes a substantial amount of time—airport expansion projects can take years to complete. Whether it requires angering some constituents over environmental issues or spending billions of dollars of public money, politicians are not likely to come to any conclusion soon since this is an area where they cannot ‘sweat the equity’. Political barriers remain stronger than the economic, engineering, and social issues combined.
6 References


