

# Heliports

The first experimental helicopter landings in London took place in 1947–8. Subsequently the capital fell behind other cities at home and abroad in providing for civil flights by the new medium. Part of the Festival of Britain's South Bank site was temporarily earmarked by the Ministry of Aviation for flights from 1952. But a shortlived British European Airways service between there and Heathrow was poorly patronized and soon dropped. In 1956 only 121 landings took place.<sup>1</sup>

After the South Bank site closed in 1957, the Helicopter Association of Great Britain promoted a report. This set out guidelines for a heliport within fifteen minutes' drive of central London (a platform built out into the Thames, or a landing stage over a railway station or bridge) but recommended no sites. By the time of its publication, rival applications from private firms had reached the planning stage. One was from Westland Aircraft for an 'interim' heliport in York Road, Battersea, discussed below. The other was from Rotorports Ltd, promoting a heliport on a pontoon between Lambeth and Vauxhall Bridges opposite the Tate Gallery. Following separate public enquiries, in 1958 Henry Brooke, Minister for Housing and Local Government, guided by London County Council advice, approved the Westland scheme for a provisional seven years but refused the Rotorports application on advice that their site was unsuitable.<sup>2</sup>

In 1959 Rotorports returned to the charge with an application for a different site, surplus railway land at Brunswick Wharf, Nine Elms, just west of Vauxhall Bridge. This was a worked-up scheme for an elevated deck stretching out into the river from the foreshore, with Modern-Movement-style

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sketches by the architect Donald Myers (Ill. 12.1).<sup>3</sup> At a further public enquiry, the LCC's Town Planning Committee pinpointed three broad areas for one or more sites on the 'perimeter' of central London: north of King's Cross, east of the Tower, and 'south of Victoria station on the opposite side of the Thames', in other words roughly where Rotorports wished to build. But the Committee insisted that all the technical and planning implications of where 'helicopter stations' might be sited and indeed how many there might be had first to be thrashed out. The upshot was that Brooke appointed a government-led technical committee, while Rotorports were again twice refused permission.<sup>4</sup>

Brooke's Joint Interdepartmental London Helicopter Committee had concluded its deliberations by June 1960, though its report was not released immediately. It appraised nine sites, shortlisted three but made no final recommendation. Three of these were in Battersea: Nine Elms A, Nine Elms B and Battersea Wharf. Only Nine Elms B made it on to the shortlist, along with Cannon Street Station and St Katharine Docks, but it was the unofficial favourite. Closer to Vauxhall Bridge than Nine Elms A but not quite so far downstream as the Brunswick Wharf site, it corresponded essentially to the present New Covent Garden Flower Market site, then occupied by Nine Elms Goods Yard North. It was to occupy a platform of 13 acres raised fifty feet over the goods depot, and to span over Nine Elms Lane up to the river. Rotorports, its prospective operators, hoped to draw BEA back into offering a commercial helicopter service.<sup>5</sup>

The Covent Garden Market Authority was also seeking a fresh location for its markets at this time (page xxx). A proposal to share a site and costs with the heliport, either at King's Cross or Nine Elms, was entertained in 1961-2.<sup>6</sup> But the LCC was lukewarm, while Westminster and Lambeth Councils opposed the heliport on grounds of noise and nuisance. In these circumstances and for want of potential traffic, the project of an official

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heliport stalled in about 1963, leaving Nine Elms to the market traders and the York Road heliport in command of the field.

York Road, at first Westland Heliport, today officially the London Heliport, was the brainchild of (Sir) Eric Mensforth, chairman of Westland Aircraft and the man most responsible for the successful production of Sikorsky-type helicopters in Britain. It was originally promoted as an advertisement for Westlands, not hitherto flight operators, under the slogan 'Westland gives London a heliport'; according to the Helicopter Association, 'no profit is to be expected'.<sup>7</sup> The small portion of the Belmont Works site off York Road acquired allowed little room for buildings or operations. The T-shaped concrete slab stretching into the water consisted of a 65ft stem and a crossbar 125ft by 53ft, capable of withstanding both the single-engine helicopters then operating and the heavier double-engine machines projected but not yet in service (Ill. 12.4). On land the space was mostly given over to parking helicopters, but to one side was a single-storey building for passengers and staff, and a store with a timber control centre on top, managed by International Aeradio Ltd. The planning and structure were in the hands of H. J. B. Harding of Lewis & Duvivier, engineers, architectural features being provided by Caroline Oboussier. The heliport was opened on St George's Day 1959 by John Hay of the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation, who arrived in a Port of London Authority launch and departed in a Westland Widgeon.<sup>8</sup>

With other options then pending, Hay was cautious in his predictions for the heliport, too far from the centre of London for regular passenger services. BEA and Sabena, the civil airlines most interested in helicopter operations, pronounced themselves ready to fly there occasionally, but the main users anticipated were hospital patients, businessmen, and 'aircraft carrying news and pictures for London newspapers'.<sup>9</sup> Traffic in the early years was limited to daylight hours, emergencies excepted, with 1,515

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movements recorded in the first year. The numbers did not rise much till 1966, when turbojet helicopters for executives started flying. By then the seven-year option on the site had been extended; this was repeated recurrently until permanent planning permission was granted in 1995. After the number of flight movements climbed, an annual upper limit of 12,000 was fixed in 1977. By the end of 2006 this had been exceeded, against a background of a growing population along the Thames corridor used for the majority of flights and increasing concern over noise levels. By that date the heliport was owned by Weston Aviation.<sup>10</sup> It has been much replanned; none of the original buildings survives.