

Marjo Cunningham
traces the history of
Helsinki/Malmi Airport,
which is under threat
of closure.

malmi under threat

▲ Malmi's historic and distinctive art deco terminal is framed by a seaplane – a type of aircraft popular in the region before the airport was built. (Raine Haikarainen)

Up in the north of Europe, a historic airport is fighting for survival under pressure from surrounding urban development. Malmi Airport in Helsinki, Finland, is a rare example of an architecturally significant airport, best compared to Berlin/Tempelhof in Germany and Shoreham in the UK. Twice listed on the World Monuments Fund Watch site (in 2004 and 2006), it's described as "a uniquely well-preserved 1930s international airport".

History

During the 1920s and 1930s, civil aviation in Finland was mostly provided by seaplanes, very convenient in a country of a thousand lakes and with a capital right on the Baltic

coastline. Soon, however, air traffic became so important that it could not stop when the sea froze over in winter.

In 1933, a two-seater Lockheed Sirius arrived at the Helsinki sea terminal, flown by Charles Lindbergh, who was travelling around Europe mapping out possible flight routes for the American airline Pan Am. At the same time Helsinki was also looking for a land site for an airport, and Lindbergh was invited to inspect a couple of possible locations in the capital area. The City of Helsinki had laid down strict conditions for the airfield: there must be no buildings within a radius of 0.9 miles (1.5km) from the centre of the airfield; there had to be four runways, enabling aircraft to land from each

of the eight main compass points; and all of them must be at least 2,624ft (800m) long.

Airfield

A location was found 6 miles (10km) from the city centre and work began in 1935 by building roads to the area and draining the site in preparation for the runways. The paved concrete runways made the new facility only the second such-equipped airport in Europe at the time. An aircraft hangar was built big enough to hold six Junker 52s, and regular air flights started on December 16, 1936 with the arrival of a Junkers Ju-52/3m named Södermanland of Swedish airline ABA from Stockholm.

The airport was still unfinished when

the first-ever night flight to Malmi was made in May 1937. King George VI of the United Kingdom had just been crowned in London and photographs of the festivities had to make the Helsinki newspapers the next day. Leaving London at 1515, it took three different aircraft and over ten hours to get the photographs to Copenhagen, then Stockholm and then on to Helsinki, the last leg landing at Malmi at 0255. There was a headwind all the way, very poor visibility and thunder disturbing radio communications, so most of the journey was made by compass, below the clouds, at a height of about 656ft (200m). Malmi was still not equipped with runway lights, so storm lanterns were used to help the

special flight come in – and the newspaper got the pictures in time!

Art deco terminal

The terminal building was the final structure to be added. It was designed by Dag Englund and Vera Rosendahl and was in the 'art deco' style – the trend of the day, as seen in other European airport buildings of the time.

From the outset of the design work, the terminal was to be of the highest standard. The main body of the building is in the shape of a cylinder, with an open central hall three floors high. The construction techniques of the day are evident in the use of reinforced-concrete walls, an experiment that made it possible to have an unbroken chain of windows all around the building and an outside terrace supported by delicate iron pillars. Two lower 'wings' are attached to the main body at right angles to each other, and the construction is completed by the air control

tower right at the top.

Inside the terminal was to be a showpiece for the large numbers of tourists expected to attend the 1940 Olympic Games which Finland was to host. The ground floor offices, the first and second class waiting rooms and the first floor restaurant had the best functional furniture of the day – chrome-plated tubing, black leather, wooden blinds and panelling, all the best that modern design could produce. The second floor held the headquarters of the station manager, the radio and weather departments and even accommodation for foreign pilots staying overnight.

To make sure that tourists knew where they were arriving, white stones were used to spell out the name HELSINKI on the grass between the runways. The airport was officially opened in May 1938 once the terminal was finished. Initial regular traffic was by Ju-52 aircraft to Tallinn in Estonia, Stockholm and domestic airports elsewhere in Finland.

▲ Malmi Airport has its own special 'pet' – the only Douglas DC-3 in Finland still flying. With 34,000 hours on the log, OH-LCH spends the summer months at Malmi and takes the members of its fan club out on occasional flights. (Lassi Tolvanen)

▼ An ABA Junkers 52/3m, named the Södermanland, flew the first passenger flight to arrive at Malmi on December 16, 1936. (Aarne Pietinen)





▲ An aerial view of the airport as it is today. (Raine Haikarainen)

Wartime flying

Finland did not, in the end, host the 1940 Olympic Games. Nobody did, as World War Two overtook events, and in Finland this meant two periods of war against the Soviet Union. At Malmi, the runways were painted and camouflaged and the buildings covered with foliage. Civilian aircraft were also camouflaged and dispersed in the fields around the airport for fear of air attacks. Throughout the war, Malmi was used both for civil and military flights and, despite several heavy bombardments of Helsinki, the airport survived the conflict without serious damage.

After the Paris Peace Treaty was signed in 1947, and life returned to normal at Malmi, there were only 21 civilian aircraft left in the whole country. These included five Douglas DC-3s, five Junkers Ju-52s, and the odd Beechcraft, Dragon Rapide, Bücker, Taylor Club and de Havilland Moth.

The national airline, Aero, wasted no time in resuming domestic and European traffic in co-operation with its European partner airlines. There was a connection to a British European Airways (BEA) service flying London-Amsterdam-Copenhagen-Stockholm while American Overseas Airlines opened a route from Helsinki to New York via Stockholm with a Douglas DST-217B. There were problems at the start of this connection as the main Malmi runway could only take aircraft of up to 25 tons (25,400kg). So the passengers had to

transfer to a smaller aircraft in Stockholm. The first flight brought seven passengers and the return fare to New York was \$793.73 – a huge sum in 1947.

Malmi today

After the war, Finland was selected to host the 1952 Olympic Games and a new facility to accommodate bigger aircraft was built 11 miles (18km) outside the capital. With commercial flights out of the way at the new Helsinki/Vantaa Airport, Malmi became the capital's hub for general aviation.

Today, with two runways in use, it's become a centre for business flights, aircraft rentals, aircraft sales, repairs and maintenance, flying training (both state and private), aerial photography and various other niche flying activities.

Airport Manager Ari Sireeni points out that all pilots in Finland start their training in the flying schools here, the activity making up 80% of the traffic. The site is also the base for the Finnish Border Guard and the Helsinki City Rescue Services, which need free and fast access to the sea and the rail network. For them, this location within the city is essential. Malmi has its own customs service, too – which is much appreciated by the 20-odd flying clubs, with 3,000 members between them.

“This is a busy international airport which would be very difficult to replace,” says Mr Sireeni, who lists among other benefits of his airport its convenience for all parts of

the capital, lower landing and parking fees and standard airport facilities all situated in a compact area. In addition to the local private pilots who use Malmi as their base, many occasional visitors find it a convenient location, including flyers from outside Finland who come to enjoy the space and scenery. These come mainly from the

Nordic countries along with Britain, France and Germany; visitors from Eastern Europe are also now arriving in increasing numbers.

While many arrive in their own aircraft, others rent at Malmi. Mark Baker of BF-Lento (www.bflento.fi) runs one of the rental firms and invites visitors to pick up one of his Cessnas. “It's cheaper here,” he says. “€150 an hour for a small Cessna; and that includes the landing fee. One in ten of my rental customers comes from outside Finland, not just from Europe but from the US and Australia, for instance. They might take-off for a few hours or hire a plane for a week and cover the whole of Finland during the time.”

Back in 1987, it was here that German pilot Mathias Rust, aged 19, filed a flight plan to travel to Stockholm, took-off and disappeared from radar and radio contact. When he didn't turn up in Stockholm, the Malmi control tower feared he had crashed into the sea. When oil slicks and air bubbles were spotted in the Baltic, a search was organised but nothing was found. The next day CNN News showed pictures of a small aircraft that had landed in Red Square, Moscow, and Malmi tower recognised Rust's aircraft. Apparently he had managed to fly low enough to avoid detection and had picked a day when Russian border guards were celebrating an anniversary and were perhaps less observant than usual.

Help save our airport

The airfield occupies a site on marshland that was once considered unsuitable for housing. Over the years, however, Helsinki has grown around the airport which is now in the middle of an urban environment. The growth continues and building land is fiercely fought for. Some years ago, city planners suggested that the two runways were just the place for houses for 10,000 people.

The plan sparked-off an immediate response among the flying community and the Friends of Malmi Airport association



was set up. Raine Haikarainen, one of its founding members and currently its chairman, explains: “The City of Helsinki owns the land on which the airport is built, but the state has a contract on the airport itself up to 2034. The City would like to get hold of the land earlier, and the state has agreed to let it go as long as various conditions are met, including a replacement airport somewhere else. All the suggested locations are quite inappropriate, mainly for being too far away. That's when we started the ‘Save Malmi’ campaign. That was ten years ago, and by now over 50,000 people have signed the petition on the internet. There's a special site for people outside Finland to sign – 2,000 have done so up to today.” (<http://www.pelastamalmi.org/en/index.html>)

Malmi Airport celebrated its 70th anniversary in 2008, and an airport history

was published to mark the occasion, with Raine Haikarainen one of the three authors. Another, Seppo Sipilä, says: “Helsinki/Malmi Airport is a world-class historic and cultural treasure. It is a beautifully preserved 1930s international airport, of which very few have survived in their original use. Such a proud, living monument of an independent nation's history deserves the respect of present and future generations. It is all the more important to save the living historic aviation milieu of Helsinki/Malmi airport because it is the backbone of general aviation and pilot training in Finland.”

This year, Helsinki is the World Design Capital, appointed by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design. Surely this, if nothing else, should inspire the city to protect a historic design environment that has survived over 70 years when many others have disappeared. ✕

▼ British pilots Richard Felix and Mark Preston and their 1930s Hornet Moth G-ADNE at Malmi in July 2010. The veteran aircraft first flew here in 1954 and, armed with the authentic documents of that flight, the new owners wanted to prove that old aircraft can still do it. (Antti Hyvärinen)

► The well-preserved interior of the art deco terminal which today is primarily home to offices. (Raine Haikarainen)

