

Post WW2 Britain had a large number of aerodromes that became superfluous. The East Midlands was a region with many ex-military sites, of which RAF Castle Donington (during WW2) was recognised as a potential commercial airport in the late 1950s. It was close to three cities, Nottingham, Derby and Leicester, and national developments suggested it would be adjacent to the M1 motorway, only just being constructed to the east of the aerodrome, which had a relatively short (about 5,000ft) runway.



The initial concrete layout that was. The initial runway and taxiways laid as the airport opened in the early 1960s allowed access to the apron.

In October 1963 the site was acquired by Derby, Nottingham and Leicester city corporations for £39,000, and was re-named 'East Midlands Airport' (EMA). The three cities are close and have easy access using existing major roads. There was a railway station in each city that offered access almost north, south, east and west from the region. In the late-60s the consortium introduced a passenger terminal and apron, linked to the runway using new taxiways. A relatively small air traffic control (ATC) tower, above the terminal, was equipped with new radio and on-site surveillance radar. The runway also had a

new airport lighting system, and a fire service. Facilities were to begin being expanding, in terms of capacity.

British Midland Airways (previously 'Derby Airline') was the first aircraft operator to provide timetabled services to/from destinations within the UK in 1964. The airline, still relatively small, located its headquarters, training and maintenance facilities on the airport and contributed considerably to expansion of fleet and destinations. Other companies began to use the airport and contributed to the annual passenger usage rising to 1 million by 1984.

In 1993 the airport was bought from the local corporations by National Express and, in 2001, the Manchester Airport Group (MAG) – under Australian and Manchester Corporation ownership – added East



A Boeing 747 freighter on the EMA apron. Once an airliner, all windows have been blanked. Specialist equipment allows rapid unloading/reloading of cargo. Seen here is a scissor lift accessing the lower freight holds, and the main deck is reached by an angled conveyor at the front. Under the rear a larger scissor lift is collecting large containers.

Midlands to Manchester and Stansted airports in the group. It had already become a significant international freight hub, using dedicated aircraft. Notably DHL, UPS and FedEx introduced routes concentrated on European and North Atlantic international operations. By now their services to/from 150 airports in Europe and the USA have become a 24hr/7day pw operation.

Each freight operation uses a dedicated facility. Each facility has more floor space than the airport's passenger terminal. This is despite the fact that the latter had been growing year on year to cope with annual passenger figures that had reached 2.5 million pax per years, and rose to over double this figure prior to the pandemic period. A new ATC control tower, which is the highest building in the region, was built and commissioned around 2002.



The control tower is 51 metres (167 feet) high, and is said to be the 5th highest in the UK.

In 2001 British Midland Airways (BMA) launched a subsidiary airline called BMI Baby. It was based on the airport, and used aircraft that competed with airlines that had arisen as 'deregulation' through international agreements between many nations worldwide. In 2004 Ryanair commenced services to/from EMA



BMI Baby Boeing 747-500 – Used regularly at East Midlands Airport for low-cost international operations between 1986 and 2003

at the same time as Jet2, a new airline based at Leeds Bradford Airport (LBA). Jet2 and many other airlines wanted to spread their low-cost holiday packages that included flight and accommodation costs. It caused EMA annual passenger numbers to rise, and they peaked, around 5 million passengers, around 2012.

As the passenger numbers grew, so too had freight operations. EMA had to ensure it had the 'best' possible facilities for the freight operations. They were largely using larger

aircraft operating at high weights. Many operations tend to arrive/depart during night and carry incoming, and outgoing loads that range from paper-distribution to trans-Atlantic multi-pallet loads for retail companies, such as Amazon. Rolls Royce aero-engines, which are built in Derby, often need a freight aircraft with a larger fuselage cross-section, and have often used Antonov freighters, which are regarded as Russian, although they have been



The complex multi-level road system allows access to the M1 (from top to bottom) and local 'A' roads that reach to the east and west.

EMA and the East Midlands logistics sector

- This area, the 'Golden Triangle', is the heart of the UK logistics industry and 80% of the UK's population are within a 4 hour drive.



designed and built in Ukraine – any plane-spotter's caviar!

The demanding requirement for 24hr operations, passenger and freight, has required EMA to



This view from an incoming aircraft cockpit arriving at EMA on a sunny day shows the runway lighting under the approach and along the 2 mile long runway.

extend and maintain the runway in stages over recent decades. The airport has a daily 24-hour air traffic control (ATC) capability, and runway lighting and approach aids that allow regular flights throughout day and night, and in relatively thick fog. The runway length is now 9,491ft (2,893m), which is almost twice the length it was 60 years ago.

East Midland Airport now has the 6th longest runway in the UK, and an equivalent

statistic is that, based on passenger and freight weight data, EMA is now the 9th busiest commercial airport in Britain.

Notes by Mike Hirst