AIR TRANSPORT

Knock—at the end of the beginning

KNOCK

Knock Airport has been one
of the Republic of Ireland's
most controversial public
works projects. Critics said
that it was badly sited and
would never pay. But, having
won the political argument by
becoming an operational
airport in May 1986, Knock
now seems set to win a broad-
based economic argument.
Mark Blacklock talked to
retiring airport director
Maurice Buckby, who was
recently replaced by Michael
McGrath.

"One of the popularly held
misconceptions about Knock
airport is that it was built for
the use of pilgrims to Knock
shrine," says Buckby. "In fact,
shrine traffic only accounts
for a small proportion of our
total business."
Knock lies in the centre of
the Connaught region of
western Ireland, where half a
million people (14-7 per cent
of the country's population)
live. The region suffered from
poor communication links
and high unemployment.
Prime mover behind the
project, local priest

Monsignor James Horan saw
that, in order to encourage
industrial development and
aid the local economy, the
area's accessibility had to be
improved. He took his plans
to the Government in Dublin,
which approved a 100 per cent
construction grant.
The grant was costed at
IR£8'4 million in 1980 prices
with allowance for inflation,
but a change of government in
1983 led to the withdrawal of
official support, and the grant
was never fully inflation
proofed. Final Government
spending totalled IR£9-7
million, and Horan set out to
raise a further IR£3 million by
public subscription to com-
plete the airport. Sadly the
Monsignor died two months
after the airport opened, and
it is now called Horan Inter-
national.

The airport is vested in the
Connaught Airport Devel-
opment Company (CADC),
run by a board of local busi-
nessmen, which is responsible
for financing the current
operational deficit.
"The airport was always
seen as a stimulant to regional
development, and was never

Ryanair and Aer Lingus are Knock's main operators

intended to generate a major
operating surplus. Our main
aim at the moment is break-
even," he explains. "It took
Cork Airport over 20 years to
break even; we should do it in
three."

CADC employs 23 local
people who report to the
director, and they are trained
to cope with a variety of jobs
throughout the working day.
For example, the office staff
intersperse general adminis-
tration work with a spell on
the duty-free shop tills when
flights are departing. The fire-
men see each flight safely up
or down, and otherwise
handle baggage. This enables
the CADC to keep its landing
and handling charges low.

Buckby also believes in
being self-sufficient as far as
is possible, to keep control
and maximise revenue feed.
The CADC performs airline
handling, refuelling, security
checks, and runs the duty-free
shop. The only concessions let
are for the cafe/bar and car
hire to Avis. The air traffic
control tower staff are
employed directly by the Irish
Department of Tourism and
Transport.

Negotiations are under way
with Shell Ireland to reduce
the fuel price; the increasing
volume of flying at Knock will
also help.
"We are on a shoestring,"
says Buckby. "Safety and
security come first, and the
luxuries come later," as the
unclad walls of the arrivals
hall testify. But passengers
use Knock for its
convenience, not for its
aesthetic beauty. A large
proportion of the UK's Irish
population has its roots in the
Connaught region, and
current traffic is predomi-

nantly VFR (visiting friends
and relatives), with 60 per
cent originating in the UK
and 40 per cent locally.
Monthly passenger through-
put is running at 8,100 for
July, 11,200 for August, and
8,000 for September, which
compares with a mere 9,208
passengers for all the oper-
ational months of 1986. Total
passengers for 1987 should
reach 55,000, with an 85 per
cent increase forecast for
1988. The boost has come
from the introduction of
Ryanair's low-cost scheduled
service.

"Our Knock scheduled
services have been enor-
mously successful," says
Ryanair's chief executive,
Eugene O'Neill. The low-fare
carrier started operations on
December 16, 1986, with a
modest schedule of three
round trips a week from
London's Luton Airport,
using 44-seat BAe 748s. Now
all UK services are operated
by 104-seat BAe One-Eleven
500s with flights to
Luton, Birmingham, and
Manchester. A service to
Glasgow is due to start next
year. "Our Knock operation
carried 60,000 passengers
during 1987, and we expect to
double this for 1988," says
O'Neill.

Knock was also the desti-
nation for Ryanair's first Irish
domestic service, opened at
the end of 1987. A 15-seat
Bandeirante currently oper-
ates two return services each
weekday from Dublin at an
average load factor of 45 per
cent. "Knock-Dublin is just
covering its DOC," says
O'Neill, "but we expect load
factors to build up to the mid
70s."

Ryanair recently won

licences from the Irish
Department of Tourism and
Transport for routes between
Knock and Brussels, Munich,
Paris, and Stuttgart, but
direct continental services are
likely to be operated as
seasonal charters.
O'Neill believes that there
is significant potential for the
development of tourism by
promoting the attractions of
western Ireland, with its fish-
ing, sailing, and golf facilities.
He also thinks that shrine
traffic can be built up from its
low base. There are 200,000
annual visitors from the UK
to Knock shrine, but 95 per
cent presently use surface
transport. ,

Ryanair's competitor in the
VFR market, Destination
Knock (DK), has now ceased
trading. Celtic Air, intended
to be Knock's base operator
and handling agent, never
actually flew its Fokker F.27s
as planned because its backer
pulled out.
Charters for Irish-
originating passengers are
flown by Aer Lingus and Club
Air, but Knock augments
revenue from passenger
flights by promoting itself as
a training airport. With
Ireland's second-longest run-
way, at 8,200ft, uncluttered
airspace, and clear approach
and climb-out, it is already
used by Air Lingus for Shorts
360 sorties, Club Air's
727-100, and Ryanair's One-
Eleven 500s.

"We are at the end of the
beginning," says Maurice
Buckby. His breakeven
throughput of 100,000 passen-
gers a year is in sight for 1988,
and he feels that the medium-
term traffic potential is
between 200,000 and 250,000
passengers a year.

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