

Chocks away for an aviation comeback at Coltishall?

Planes could make a return to Norfolk's historic Battle of Britain former airbase, bringing hundreds of new jobs and a multi-million-pound boost to the local economy.

Airliners and private jets, rather than the fighter planes of days gone by, could generate more than 300 jobs at the former RAF Coltishall.

The plans for a specialist decommissioning and storage facility for civil aircraft are at an early stage.

But the principle has gone down well with local politicians concerned about other suggested uses, which have included an eco-town or an immigration detention centre.

Getting the plan off the ground would hinge on whether the 600 acres that remain of the base are put up for sale as expected by the owners, the Ministry of Justice – and on whether international aviation business TAG Aviation (Stansted), which is behind the plans, can beat off other tenders and planning consent can be secured.

A small part of the old base, about 30 acres, has already been converted into a prison, which opened to inmates at the end of November.

Last night, one of the businessmen behind the new project, former RAF air commodore and aerospace consultant Andrew Verdon,

By ED FOSS

pictured below right, told the EDP that the business was well established, well connected and had a good international reputation.

"It's important to stress this is hi-tech work, not a scrapyard," Mr Verdon said. "People hear about this kind of work and think along the lines of a lead ball and chain used to knock houses down. It's not like that at all: it is about recovering high-value items very carefully.

"We call it surgical deconstruction."

Mr Verdon has already begun consulting locally about the plans, including meeting or arranging to meet representatives of Norfolk County Council, North Norfolk District Council, the Coltishall Eco-Town Action Group (Cetag), North Norfolk MP Norman Lamb and Mid Norfolk MP Keith Simpson.



According to the backers, the plan would deliver:

- 323 full-time skilled and semi-skilled jobs.

- Training schemes and apprenticeship

programmes that would be linked in with local colleges.

- Retention of the airbase's heritage.
- Fewer traffic movements than when the RAF base was operational.
- Little need for change at the site, because it would use what was there already, such as hangars, the runway and technical areas.

Glyn Williams, chairman of Cetag, said the project appeared to "press all

the right buttons". He added: "It is early days, and we are looking at this only in principle, but this is a well-established company which has said it will preserve heritage, bring in jobs, help the economy, leave the site pretty much as it is and not put too much pressure on infrastructure.

"Overall, it seems a good option, a very exciting scheme."

The lick of paint that could provide the solution at last

The point about the TAG Aviation (Stansted) project is that it appears to tick all the boxes. No publicly-aided proposition so far for the former RAF Coltishall airbase has come close to doing so.

In some eyes, what has come closest is returning the land to low-employment arable production.

But that would hardly provide the economic shot-in-the-arm most people consider is necessary and fails to answer the "best value" imperative under which firstly the Ministry of Defence, and now the Ministry of Justice, must operate to keep the taxpayer content.

There are 600 acres of Ministry of Justice owned land left now that the prison, HMP Bure, has opened on 30 acres of the old RAF Coltishall site.

Plans for an eco-town and an immigration centre have both been run through the mill in recent years and received decidedly cold shoulders.

The eco-town was particularly heavily questioned, not least because the local planning vision points away from housing use on a rural site that is not well served with any mode of transport, including roads.

HMP Bure encountered more than a little opposition, too; and yet, now it is open, running and generally considered as part of the scenery, that controversy has all but



Back to the future... Could we finally be looking at a use for the beloved former RAF airbase which is both economically viable and acceptable to the community? Or is it too good to

be true? **ED FOSS** argues that, at least in principle, the plan is as close to perfect as one could hope to imagine...

disappeared, especially with the tonic of the 350 jobs or so it created.

The clever money for the remaining acres seemed to point to a mixed use: a worm farm, housing for migrant workers, a private airfield, business park, warehousing, offices, a private school, sports academy, golf course, hotel, equestrian centre, biofuel power station, waste incinerator and composting unit have all come up at one time or another.

This new option has come as something of a surprise.

There is no guarantee that the land will even come up for sale. A change in government policy, not least as a result of a possible change this year in the corridors of power at Westminster, could still see the site being used for government purposes, or even held on to, "just in case".

But it seems likely to be offered and, if this were to happen, the vision from TAG Aviation (Stansted) would have a lot going for it.

Jobs, economic impact, heritage salvation and acceptable traffic movement appear to be the benefits.

One imagines that the air movements will be questioned, especially since these are airliners, but their guaranteed infrequency seems to balance those misgivings.

Despite this, people will want reassurances about the plan, as well as the process of achieving it.

"We want to be completely open, and we are happy to talk to Cetag, the councils, anyone who has concerns or questions," said Andrew Verdon. He is the figure representing the man behind TAG Aviation (Stansted), Trevor Gunn, who has 20 years of

experience in the storage and decommissioning of civil aircraft in this country, America and France.

Mr Verdon added: "About a year ago he asked me to find him an airfield within a sensible distance of the Stansted head office. I was talking to the Ministry of Defence and they said: 'What about Coltishall?'

"Trevor wants his own site, and as a patriot he wants it to be in this country so jobs can be created here.

"When Trevor saw the site he said: 'It just needs a lick of paint,' and, while it is probably a little more complicated than that in terms of electricity supply and water mains, it's pretty close to the truth."

Outdoor decommissioning was common but unsightly, inefficient because poor weather put a stop to it, and in the future it could end up contravening regulations, said Mr Verdon; so, the presence of four hangars was a major boon.

Add to that a runway and the technical parts of the site and the old airbase seems to fit the business needs.

How soon could the project move towards a successful conclusion?

"We would like to start operations today, but of course there is a lot to do; not least, the Ministry of Justice has to offer the site for sale first.

"It's important to stress that this



airfield is not for sale at this time. We are assuming it will be at some stage fairly soon, but that's down to the Ministry of Justice," said Mr Verdon.

"They have made it clear it will be by open tender, run by treasury rules.

"But, if the sale were to go ahead and we won the tender, we hope to have started within two years, and then there would be a five-year period leading up to being fully operational."

The approximation of one aircraft movement per day has been based on a similar site at another place with a long and proud RAF heritage:

Picture: MIKE PAGE



PILOT'S EYE VIEW: An aerial view (left) of the former RAF Coltishall base, where there are new plans to set up a specialist decommissioning and storage facility for civil aircraft. Those behind the scheme say they are keen to preserve the base's rich heritage – clockwise from above, Lightnings at Coltishall during the Cold War, two views of maintenance work being done on Coltishall's Jaguars, and wartime 41 Squadron members at RAF Coltishall posing with a Spitfire.



North Norfolk MP Norman Lamb said: "It is potentially very exciting, a rather remarkable situation which uses the fact it is an airfield without using it as a fully-working airfield in terms of air movements."

"It appears to achieve the best of all worlds in terms of reuse of the site as it is, jobs, the local economy and heritage; and the fact that the business involved has already

started consulting with people so well is exemplary."

The site would not become a working airport, stressed Mr Verdon, with a projected average of one take-off or landing a day.

Boeing 737s would form most of the work. They would be flown in, parked in one of the four existing hangars and carefully taken apart before being packed off into 20ft

trailers, driven away and the scrap metal and valuable spare parts sold.

Unlike the vast majority of proposals for the former airbase, the project would take on the entire remnants of the site.

RAF Coltishall was closed as an operational RAF base in 2006 after the government announced in 2004 that it was surplus to requirements.

BOEING BOEING GONE...

- Boeing 737s, one of the most common airliners in the world, can carry a large range of passenger numbers depending on model and internal layout.
- Seating plans range typically from about 120 to 200.
- Decommissioning a 737 typically takes four weeks, depending on how many people are working on the aircraft.
- Engines, radar, hydraulics and other key parts are taken out, while the aluminium scrap is crushed.



■ The aircraft coming in for decommissioning at the Coltishall site would be quieter than normal because they have no passengers, no baggage and only minimal fuel.

to what to do with old airbase

Pictures: EDP LIBRARY



BEHIND BARS: The new Bure prison occupies just 30 acres of the old airbase site, leaving a substantial area for which a variety of diverse uses has been suggested since the RAF departed.

Lasham, near Basingstoke in Hampshire. "I live very close to Lasham and you wouldn't even know it's there, even though many of the aircraft they bring in are bigger: 757s and 767s," said Mr Verdon.

"We would stick to daylight operations in the working week.

"And, compared with four squadrons of Jaguars, this will be a very quiet and irregular operation."

Asked whether people locally should have safety concerns about apparently older aircraft nearing the end of their useful life being flown to the old Norfolk airbase, Mr Verdon said: "They are fully licensed and

have to meet all of the UK civil aviation requirements."

Pledges also included a key promise to talk to communities, something which other projects had failed to do.

"I am consulting with the local people and will continue to do so," said Mr Verdon.

"Cetag asked if we would set up a standing committee to maintain dialogue, and we think that is a great idea."

Traffic movements generated by the proposed new use would include workers arriving and leaving plus lorries moving the crates of spares and scrap. But the movements would

end up being considerably less than when the RAF was there, said Mr Verdon. He added: "If people are worried this will turn into a commercial flying operation, I can assure them that will not happen."

Heritage considerations have for a long time been key for many who are rightly proud of Coltishall's Battle of Britain links and its association with such aircraft as the Hurricane, Spitfire, Lightning and Jaguar.

"All of us in this organisation are aviation people; we are passionate about the old airbase and want the heritage preserved," said Mr Verdon.

"We see a great deal of public amenity here, from continuing the charity driving days on the runway which have been held for some time, to supporting a museum on the site."

The business says it is unsure of the figure it would bid for the site, which is almost certainly a fair call at this stage as it would depend very much on the competition from whoever else comes forward.

However, the EDP has seen documents under Freedom of Information rules that give a Ministry of Justice "informal evaluation" of £4m. Whether that is even close to the price that ends up being paid is impossible to know.

Whatever the case, it seems many people will have good reason to hope this particular project will take off.

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