

A History of Moorabbin Airport & Control Tower



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Compiled from records held by Moorabbin Tower
and the
Civil Aviation Historical Society
www.airwaysmuseum.com

by Warren Sparrow

Beginnings

The search for what would be Melbourne's second civil airport began before World War 2. In order to avoid the airspace associated with Laverton and Point Cook aerodromes, sites were investigated to the west of the city beyond Werribee. These were considered unsuitable to serve the city of Melbourne.

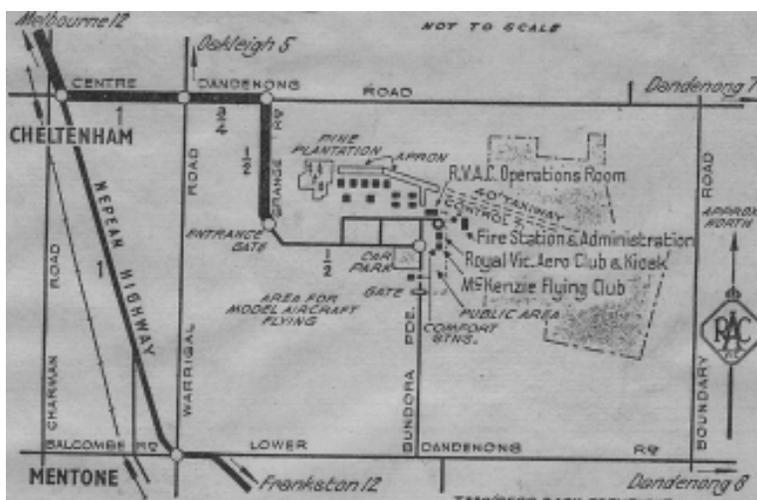
In post-World War 2 Melbourne it was even more apparent a new aerodrome was required. Too many light aircraft conducting flying training were mixing it with the Regular Public Transport airliners at Essendon. Some of the light aircraft did not have radios and consequently "could not be so efficiently directed by the Department's control organization"¹

In November 1946, Air Marshal Williams, Director General of Civil Aviation announced that a "mile square site behind the Mentone racecourse and near Lower Dandenong Road...will be acquired by the Federal Government for a secondary aerodrome".²

Using figures supplied by local vegetable growers and the Department of Commerce and Agriculture it was determined that the airport construction would remove 1/20th of one percent of Victoria's vegetable growing capacity. The aerodrome proceeded in spite of the lettuce loss.

Although some delays occurred as the result of materials shortages, by September 1949 eight Bellman hangars had been erected, the Aero Club rooms and ancillary buildings were constructed and the apron area was ready for sealing. The aerodrome opened for operations on December 15th 1949, and movements in the first year totalled about 9,600. Alan Rea, then Managing Director of Flinders Island Airlines, was quoted as saying about those early days: "It wasn't uncommon to find beetroot and carrots on the runways".³ He did not mention lettuce. However green vegetables featured again when a 1980 headline referring to Moorabbin Airport appeared declaring "When cabbage patches were attacked by Tiger Moths".⁴

In 1958 Moorabbin was so popular as a weekend destination, the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria produced this map as a guide to would-be Moorabbin visitors.



(Royal Automobile Club of Victoria, 1958)

¹ Undated minute to Aviation Minister

² Melbourne Age, 7 November 1946

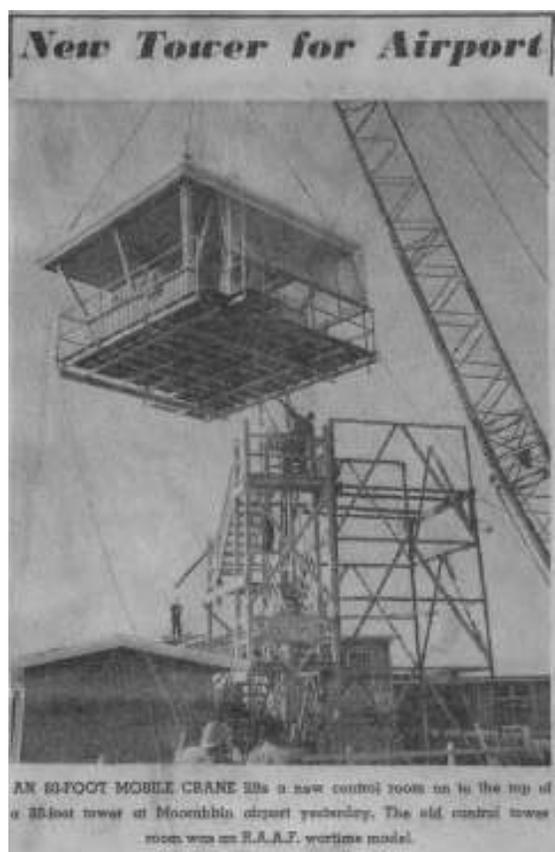
³ Melbourne Herald, 29 September 1973

⁴ Moorabbin Standard, 2 April 1980

The Tower

The first Tower was a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) wartime model, and was erected at the eastern end of First Avenue. The Department of Civil Aviation provided one Aerodrome Controller using light signals to operate the Tower, servicing an all-over field. A Parking Officer provided guidance to the hangar area. A low powered NDB with the ident "MRB" was also provided. Airports such as Moorabbin became known as Secondary Airports, operating under Secondary Airport Procedures.

The RAAF cab was replaced in June 1962 by a new unit costing £2,500.



(Melbourne Age 27 June 1962)

Moorabbin Airport Develops

By this time the runway layout was as follows:

Runway direction	Length	Surface
Runway 17/35	3,500 feet	Unsealed crushed rock
Runway 13/31	3,050 feet	Ash reinforced
Runway 04/22	3,000 feet	Grass

Aprons were constructed of sealed crushed rock. A fourth runway, 4,550 feet long, was planned parallel to runway 17/35.

ATC procedures in 1964 provided “circuit surveillance with traffic clearances limited to take-offs”.⁵

In 1965 the Royal Victorian Aero Club had had a fleet of 21 aircraft and other firms operating then included Schutt Flying Academy, Civil Flying Services (“the hangar in the pines” - see the Pine Plantation on the map on page 2), Pipeair, International Helicopters, Flinders Island Airlines and Nicholas Air Charter. Several aerial agriculture operators including Superspread were also based at Moorabbin.

The 3-man Tower operated on frequencies 3023.5 Kcs and 118.1 MHz. On the 15th August an ATIS frequency, 118.7, was introduced on a 3-month trial and this was later changed to 120.9.

A public meeting on 1st February 1966 decided to ask the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) if the airport could be re-named Harry Hawker Airport. This was adopted at a later unknown date.

In 1967 a suggestion was made for a terminal building with a public lounge, restaurant, cocktail bar, motel, specialty shops and coffee lounge. This idea surfaced again in 1969 when it appeared in several newspapers following a statement by Mr. R.W Swartz, the Minister for Civil Aviation that “A \$210,000 terminal commercial centre is to be built at Moorabbin Airport”.⁶ The idea did not come to fruition.

Movements grew steadily in the sixties - from 130,752 in 1961/62 to 273,328 in 1965/66. By 1967 Moorabbin became known as the “Bourke Street circuit”.⁷ In the year 1967/68, 85 commercial and 375 private licenses were issued to Moorabbin students and approximately 900 student licences were also issued. On April 30th 1967, 2077 movements occurred with a peak hour of 353 movements.

Other names on the scene by now included General Flying Services (not the current GFS), Peninsula Air and Jayrow Helicopters.

Newspaper headlines about Moorabbin traffic included “Danger at busy airport”⁸, “Moorabbin needs relief airport”⁹ and, after the October 1968 mid-air collision, “Pilots to talk on safety”¹⁰.

To cater for the traffic growth a works program commenced which included:

Facility	Cost	Start date	Finish date
Sealed apron	\$55,000	18 Oct. 1967	Dec. 1967
Runway 17L/35R lighting	\$10,000	23 Oct. 1967	Dec. 1967
Parallel runway 13/31 and associated taxiway	\$260,000	23 Oct. 1967	Mar. 1968

A new Control Tower was placed on the works agenda.

From 4 May 1968 the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) base at Point Cook was available on weekends for civil training with the DCA providing ATC and Fire Services from 0900-1700. However it was not well patronised – daily average movements at Point Cook were 78 compared to 1155 at Moorabbin.

⁵ DCA minute, 1968

⁶ Press release, 17 Sept 1969

⁷ Reference to a busy Melbourne city street

⁸ Melbourne *Truth*, 27 January 1968

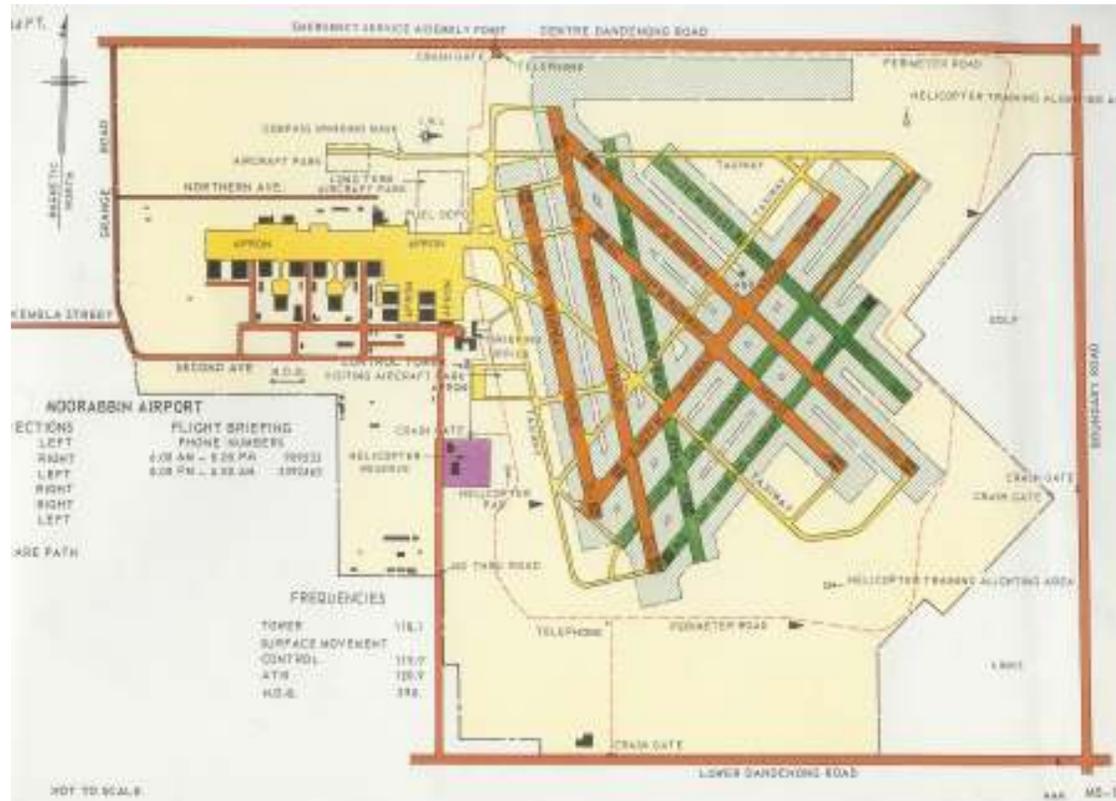
⁹ *Sun*, 1 January 1968

¹⁰ *Herald*, 7 October 1968

A DCA minute of 1968 indicated great concern about the Moorabbin traffic situation. By this time there were 3 parallel runways in the 04/22, 13/31 and 17/35 directions with the runway furthest from the apron used for touch and go landings, the centre runway for takeoffs, and the runway closest to the apron for full stop landings. The control system had been modified such that in-flight calls were limited to “turning base for runway ... (left or right)” with no ATC acknowledgement. Crosswind training and night flying were subject to “full control”.

Contra-rotating circuits were considered for Moorabbin at this time but it was deemed “not possible at Moorabbin because of the closeness of the strips”.¹¹

The Seventies



Aerodrome layout 1977

¹¹ DCA minute 1968



(Melbourne Herald, 29 Sep 1973)

In the seventies aircraft numbers based at the aerodrome were measured as “The average aircraft population” and some of these figures are detailed below.

Date	Single-engined	Multi-engined	Helicopters	Total
November 1972	208	Nil	8	216
November 1977	308	76	4	388
December 1979	319	96	5	420
December 1981	317	76	4	397

The high movement rates at Secondary Airports around Australia continued in the seventies, and a 1975 review of procedures recommended “an in-depth overseas study be made of general aviation airport procedures, particularly in respect of contra-rotating circuits and runway separation standards.” A four-man team visited 17 US and Canadian general aviation airports during 1977 and, following their recommendations, the current General Aviation Airport Procedures (GAAP) and associated standards were designed. GAAP was introduced at Parafield (South Australia) in 1978, on a trial basis.

GAAP commenced at Moorabbin on 10th June 1980. A staff of 21 Moorabbin ATCs provided a daily service of:

- 4 Tower positions from 0700-2100 (in two 7 hour shifts)
- 1 ATC Pilot Briefing Officer from 0600-1900.
- 2 Flight Service officers and a Bureau of Meteorology officer also provided Briefing Office service daily

In 1993 the Briefing Offices at GAAP locations were closed.

Moorabbin Tower staff numbers and hours of operation progressively reduced until in 1998 Moorabbin had 7 ATCs providing a daily service of 3 Tower positions from 0800-1800. This was in response to the perception that Australian ATC services might be open to competition.

The current Control Tower was opened in 1977, and appears below as photographed in 1996



In 2005 the ATC service was extended by 3 hours on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and this resulted in an increase to 8 staff.

The ATC age profile in the early 2000s brought the realisation that many Controllers would retire leading up to 2010, and that Airservices Australia had to begin a very active recruitment and training program to replace its ageing workforce. Moorabbin played a big role in this training with 12 new staff trained in Moorabbin procedures during the period 2003 to 2006.

A Final Word...

In the early days the flying population at Moorabbin were seen as a risqué lot..... The Melbourne Sun of 12 May 1959 carried the headline "FLIERS WARNED - 'NO PEEKIN' AT NUDISTS'" and reported that a young cadet pilot had been caught beating up a "health camp" in the Dandenong Ranges east of Melbourne.

The morals of young people were seen to be threatened when the following airport roadside sign appeared in April 1962...



After consultation between local ministers of religion, DCA and John Brookes from Civil Flying School it was agreed to re-clad the poster girl in a more demure neck-to-knee costume.

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