

# R E A C H I N G F O R T H E S K I E S

FAST BECOMING A SPACIOUS GREEN SANCTUARY FROM THE CITY, A NEW COMMUNITY IS THRIVING ON THE SITE OF AN IMPORTANT PART OF LONDON'S AVIATION HERITAGE

WORDS BY DAVID LONG

What was once Hendon Aerodrome, the scene of much pioneering activity during the early days of aviation, is now the site of a thriving new community. The area's aviation heritage is partly what makes Beaufort Park a destination for Londoners craving a breath of fresh air and a dose of British history, but it is its unrivalled location that has them flocking to make it home. Just 22 minutes from King's Cross on the Underground and with a 24-hour weekend service, it is within easy reach of the City and West End, not to mention the nearby trendy areas of Brent Cross and Hampstead.

But that's only if you ever want to leave. Beaufort Park has its own residents' gym, pool, spa, dry cleaner, beauty salon and childcare, as well as a fine selection of restaurants, cafés, shops and cultural pursuits, so there's little need to venture out of this leafy corner of London. The area's transformation into a residential hub, with a

plethora of gardens, parks and courtyards to encourage a more relaxed, al fresco lifestyle, has created a real sense of space and place while providing a fascinating contrast with all that has gone before.

In the '20s and '30s, the site played host to a series of internationally important flying displays, then called the Royal Air Force Tournament. These were annual events that gave tens of thousands of spectators the chance to see the latest military aircraft for the first time. It also meant pilots could demonstrate their daring tricks and top-quality flying skills.





THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT  
The 'New Types' Park  
ready for the RAF Display,  
Hendon, 25th June 1932;  
an advertisement for the  
Royal Air Force Display,  
Hendon, 1933

OPPOSITE PAGE,  
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT  
The Beaufort Bar and  
Restaurant at Beaufort Park;  
landscaped parkland at  
Beaufort Park; the Sterling  
Apartments are a beautiful  
selection of two- and three-  
bedroom homes

These events were enormously popular, as much a part of the London season as the Epsom Derby and Royal Ascot. The money raised was used to support RAF charities while the pilots' derring-do did much to encourage the public's interest and to generate real excitement about this incredible new technology.

Aviation greats at this time included Grahame-White, De Havilland and Handley Page, with a series of rapid technological advances enabling these and other British manufacturers to lead the world for much of this period.

From 1908 to 1968, the aerodrome became known for its key role in several important landmark events including the first airmail flight, the first parachute descent from a powered aircraft, the first night flight, and more chillingly, the first-ever aerial defence of a city (by pilots of the Royal Naval Air Service).

Decades earlier (in 1862), the first Hydrogen balloon, piloted by Henry Tracey Coxwell and Dr James Glaisher, ascended from Hendon and by 1906 the *Daily Mail* was offering a staggering £10,000 prize for the first aviator

who could fly from here to Manchester. Inspired by Blériot's flight across the English Channel, Claude Grahame-White made two valiant attempts, but in 1910 was beaten by another Frenchman, Louis Paulhan, who made the distance in just over 12 hours.

Undeterred, Grahame-White took control of the 200-acre site with its watchtower – this has since been moved to form part of the Royal Air Force Museum a short distance away at Hendon – and created what is now recognised as the first proper airfield. As flying became a more routine activity it looked as though the new aerodrome might become what one observer called 'the Charing Cross of international air routes'. Among those who kept aircraft at Hendon were the Prince of Wales and the Duke of York. But with the rapid expansion of military activity, civilian and leisure flights were scaled back dramatically, eventually relocating to Croydon and, later still, to Heathrow.

Today, the old aerodrome is gone but not forgotten, and as a new story unfolds we still have the Royal Air Force Museum to remind us of the men and women who flew from here, into battle as well as in happier times. ♦

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Computer-generated image is indicative only

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**BEAUFORT PARK**

SHOW APARTMENTS & MARKETING SUITE

16-18 Aerodrome Road, London NW9 5GW  
sales@beaufortpark.co.uk | +44 (0)20 3411 8738  
beaufortpark.co.uk