



## HERITAGE SERVICES INFORMATION SHEET NUMBER 5

### ROSS PLAINS AIRFIELD

The 1930s was the age of long distance flights by pilots of the calibre of Amy Johnson and Charles Kingsford Smith. It was an era when air travel was still relatively uncommon; an adventure which was often fraught with danger.

On the 17 March 1930 a reporter described the arrival of the first Queensland Navigation Limited's passenger plane at the Ross Plains aerodrome:

*The big air liner came across the range near Cape Cleveland about 10.45, and then circled the city and proceeded to the Ross Plains, where it was skilfully landed by Captain Treacy. Immediately crowds rushed towards the stationary 'plane to see the passengers alighting, and there was much to interest.*

*The local representatives of the Airways Company, Messrs L.C. Woolrych (also a director),*

*and J.A. Woolrych, were there to greet the pioneer passengers, and it was most encouraging to airways' traffic to see them step out of the spacious cabin as one would do from a railway express.*

(The Townsville Evening Star, Monday, March 17, 1930)

The flight from Rockhampton of the *Star of Townsville*, a ten passenger Fokker, had taken less than four hours and landed at the Ross Plains aerodrome near the foot of Mt Stuart.

Not surprisingly, many people forget that the first airfield in the Townsville/Thuringowa area was established in what was then the Thuringowa Shire Council area.

In late 1929 the Thuringowa Shire Council received a letter from Department of Civil Aviation with reference to the establishment of an airfield on Ross Plains which would be controlled by the Council.





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Queensland Air Navigation Limited, the company interested in establishing air links along the Queensland coast, had initially chosen two sites in the area; one on the Town Common and the other on Ross Plains between Ross River and Mount Stuart.



When the Town Common site was abandoned, representatives of Queensland Air Navigation Ltd and the Commonwealth Inspector of Aerodromes approached the Thuringowa Shire Council. The council agreed to meet the establishment costs estimated at £300 (\$600) to clear the land, fill pot holes and provide a circle of concrete, wind indicator and pole.

In January 1930 Thuringowa Shire Council approached Townsville City Council for a contribution to the cost of

the work. Townsville City Council donated £100 (\$200) to the project and by March 1930 the initial work was completed and the aerodrome was in operation.

The airfield was launched on the 18 March 1930 with the Mayor of Townsville City, Alderman Heatley, christening the *Star of Townsville* and the Chairman of Thuringowa Shire, Mr J.E. Cummins, proposing a toast of "Health and Success to the Queensland Air Navigation Limited".

The following weekend a *Monster Aerial Pageant* was organised. The air show included joy flights, stunt flights and a parachute descent by Captain Ehro, a Finnish Air Force pilot.

In June 1930, a licence was issued by the Controller of Civil Aviation in Melbourne and the aerodrome was officially recognised.

With Queensland Air Navigation Ltd. operating twice weekly flights from Brisbane to Townsville and return, the airfield needed constant maintenance.





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Thuringowa Shire Council carried out the work on a regular basis, grading and filling potholes.

Queensland Air Navigation Limited paid an annual fee of £50 (\$100) for landing rights. They also agreed to collect fees from outside planes using the site.

In April 1931 Qantas, then still only a developing airline, wrote to Council asking for free landing for their planes for the first twelve months or failing that, then a much reduced scale of charges. Council accepted an offer of 10 shillings per week up to 31 December 1931 for Qantas's small planes upon the understanding that the landing fees on all other planes would be collected for the Council by Qantas. The fees for casual aircraft would be retained by Burns Philp & Co (Townsville Agents for Qantas) but those for regular passenger aircraft, other than Qantas, would be paid to the Council. Council further insisted that they be indemnified for all claims that might arise through any act of Qantas's pilots and employees. Also that any damages caused by their

aircraft to the site be made good, free of all costs to the Council.

In June 1931 a caretaker was appointed for the airfield. Captain McCausland was an experienced pilot and had trained at Point Cook on all types of aircraft. When he had been stationed at Bowen he had carried out a survey of the Great Barrier Reef. McCausland received free landing for his Moth in return for his duties.

When the Thuringowa Shire/Townsville City boundary changed in 1937, Townsville City Council acquired responsibility for the Ross Plains aerodrome. During World War II the Ross Plains airfield was used by the air force. It was one of many utilised during the war.

Major works were undertaken in 1942 to upgrade the airstrip, establish aircraft dispersal areas and construct service buildings. The airfield served as home to the RAAF's 84 Sqn late in the war.





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Post war the RAAF decided not to retain the Ross Plains airfield and by April 1946 Civil Aviation authorities advised that with the establishment of an airfield at Garbutt in December 1939 they had no continuing need for RossPlains aerodrome.

The Ross Plains airfield is now part of the Murray Sports Complex and suburb of Annandale.

### Acknowledgements:

- F.E. Gregory, Early Aviation in Northern Queensland.
- Roger Roy Marks, *Queensland Airfields WW2 – 50 Years On*, R & J Marks, Mansfield, 1994.
- North Queensland Photographic Collection, James Cook University
- *Thuringowa Shire Council Minutes*, 1929, 1930, 1931.
- *The Townsville Evening Star*, March-June 1930.
- Townsville City Council, Land Information Unit, aerial photograph Ross Plains airfield 1952.
- [www.austairports.com.au](http://www.austairports.com.au)
- [www.qantas.com.au](http://www.qantas.com.au)