

Genair

Official British Caledonian Commuter Carrier

Matt Falcus chronicles the development of the UK airline that evolved from the merger between Casair, Eastern Airways and Genair.

In the early 1980s, the idea of a commuter network to feed a larger airline's mainline services was relatively untested. British Caledonian at the time was one of the largest carriers in the UK, with a network of domestic, European and long-haul routes from its London/Gatwick base. As it looked to improve connectivity to its network and reach a wider passenger base, the decision was made towards the end of 1982 to employ a commuter airline to feed its flights from regional airports

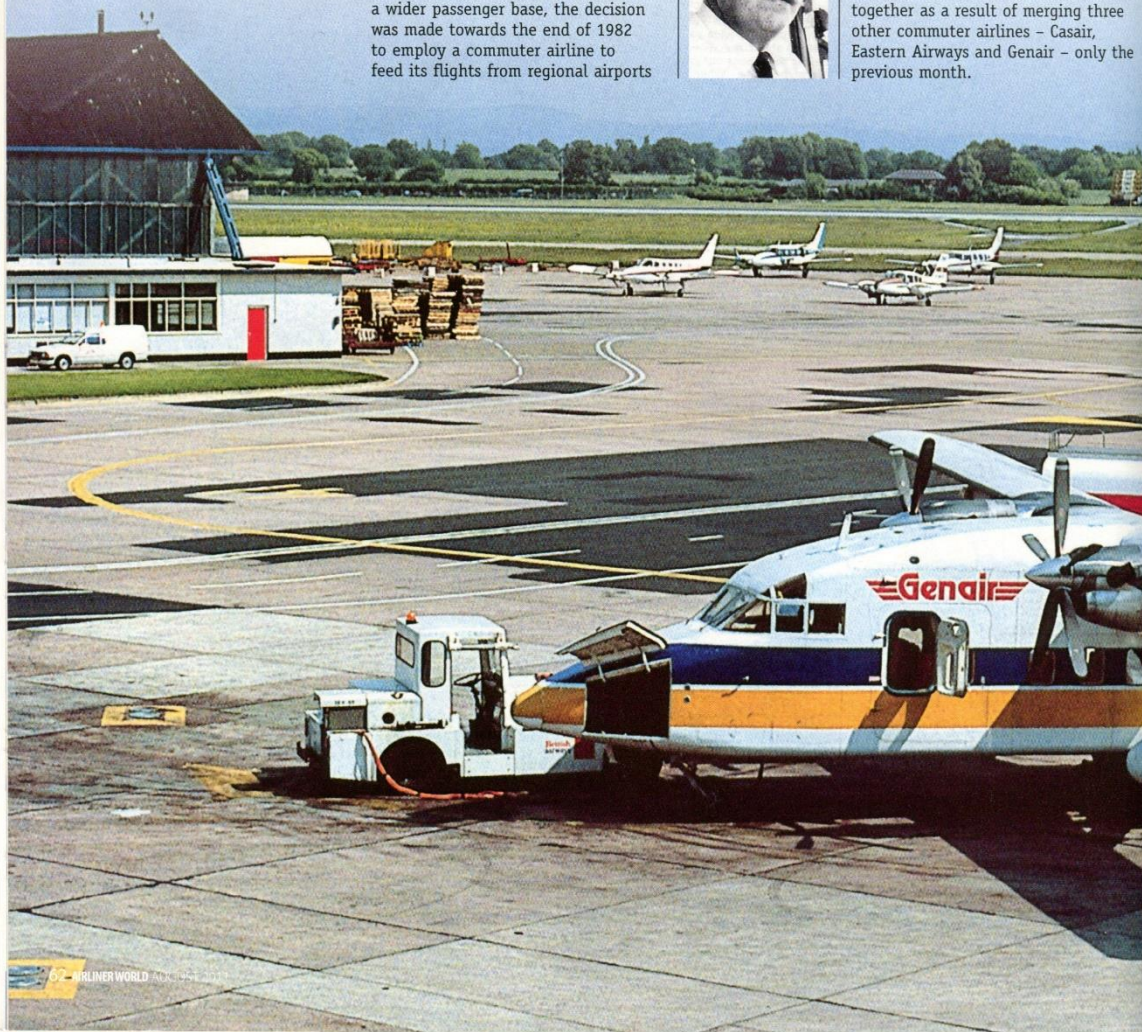
Casair passengers check in for one of the many flights out of Teesside Airport. (All Matt Falcus Collection unless stated.)



Jack Cassidy, the founder of Casair at Teesside Airport.



around the country. Genair, based at Humberside, was chosen to operate the services under the 'British Caledonian Commuter Services' banner. However, this regional carrier had already come together as a result of merging three other commuter airlines – Casair, Eastern Airways and Genair – only the previous month.



Casair

Formed by Jack Cassidy and his business partner Ron Mason in 1965 when they bought a small French Sipa aeroplane, Casair was formed to enabled them to fly about the country on business (Cassidy had learnt to fly in Scotland). Jack wrote a piece about his operation in Teesside Airport's 1985 handbook: "We started to realise that there was potential for a taxi service here at Teesside and will look to expand in the future." True to his word, he later bought a Cessna 337 Super Skymaster for the operation, which was quickly growing in popularity. The company was offering flights almost anywhere in Europe at very competitive rates compared to the airlines.

Bottom - Following the merger of the three airlines, British Caledonian took on the services of Genair. Aircraft appeared with BCal colours and Genair titles.

Below - Eastern Airways Douglas DC-3 G-AMYJ at Humberside in between flights to London/Heathrow.

In 1982, Casair Aviation Services had become part of the William Press Group and had ambitions to expand into passenger services. It obtained permission from the UK's Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) to start scheduled services from Teesside (now Durham Tees Valley Airport) on a number of routes, including Guernsey, London/Gatwick and Ronaldsway (Isle of Man). The Gatwick route in particular would operate twice daily as a commuter link between the North East and London, whereas the other routes would be aimed at weekend leisure travellers. To operate the services, which started on May 31, 1982, a Short SD330 was acquired. It was registered G-OCAS (previously G-BJUK) and wore the airline's white, red and blue livery.

Eastern Airways

Meanwhile, in 1972 a new airline had been set up at Humberside Airport. Eastern Airways was actually the trading name of Lease Air - a subsidiary of the Leighford Group of Companies and initially operated as an air taxi company, offering executive charter flights from 1973. By 1979 the airline operated a fleet of two Douglas DC-3s, two Piper Navajos, seven Piper Aztecs and a single Ce 310. A single Hawker Siddeley HS125 executive jet was added in 1981 and by this time the airline had expanded to offer passenger and cargo charters across Europe. It soon decided to enter the scheduled market, operating its DC-3s from Humberside to London/Heathrow (via Norwich) from 1981 - which brought back memories to enthusiasts who remembered the type in London. Additionally, scheduled routes were operated from Birmingham to Norwich and Humberside to Glasgow.

Sadly, the ageing DC-3s were removed from passenger duties from July 1981 when a SD330 operated on the London/Heathrow to Humberside (and now onwards to Glasgow) route. In June 1982 Eastern also added daily passenger flights between London/Gatwick and Norwich using a Piper Navajo Chieftain. >>





Genair

In northwest England, another new airline emerged in April 1981. Genair was set up by the telecommunications manufacturer General Relays and based at Liverpool Airport with a Beech King Air 90. Originally, it was intended to be the business travel arm of the owners; however, when it started its initial twice-daily scheduled service between Liverpool and London/Gatwick it was an instant success and was opened to the general public. By late October the airline had added a third daily flight on the route. In addition to regular charter services, Genair also opened routes from Liverpool to Exeter and Newquay in its first year of operation. It then ordered a SD360 in August 1982. This allowed capacity on existing routes to be expanded, and new services to be added, such as Leeds Bradford to London/Gatwick, and Liverpool to Amsterdam.

Merging airlines

However, in September 1982 it had been announced that General Relay had purchased both Casair and Eastern Airways with the intention of creating a larger airline with a much more widespread commuter network and larger fleet. Given that all three airlines operated the SD330/360 family and were experiencing a growth in popularity and passenger numbers by operating regional services and feeder services into Gatwick

and Heathrow airports, the future looked bright for combining the operation.

The new carrier was to retain the Genair name, but moved its base to Humberside using the facilities of Lease Air (Eastern Airways). At the head of the new airline was Jim Marsden as Chairman (formerly Chairman of Genair), and Bryan Huxford as joint Managing Director with Bob Marshall, formerly of Eastern Airways and General Relay respectively. Two other General Relay members, Dennis Allen and John Pollock, were also given senior positions.

At the time of the merger, the airline's fleet comprised five SD330s, one SD360 (delivered shortly after the merger), and four Embraer 110 Bandeirantes. Operations began on October 24, 1982, when the new winter timetable commenced. It was clear that management had decided to use the strengths in the existing passenger bases of each of the composite airlines in deciding the services to be flown. New routes were opened immediately, including Norwich to Humberside, Glasgow and Liverpool, Newcastle to Glasgow, Humberside to Belfast and Edinburgh. On its existing services between Humberside and Gatwick, Heathrow and Glasgow, daily frequencies were increased. The airline was operating 140 sectors a day by the time the timetable was in full swing, although an average load of only 11 passengers per flight was less than ideal.

Enter British Caledonian

Immediately after the new airline commenced services, British Caledonian (BCal) decided to make the addition of a commuter network to feed its Gatwick base a priority. Based on the model set by Allegheny Airlines in the USA, which had set up the first commuter system in 1967 to service its mainline operations, BCal wanted to improve the connectivity of its network with the UK's regions. This would give passengers the option of transferring onto its long-haul and European services and in the long-run increase the overall number of passengers carried by the mainline carrier.

The success of Genair and its composite airlines, together with its existing network and services into Gatwick, put it firmly on the radar for BCal. It became the first airline to join the British Caledonian Commuter Services network in November 1982.

Genair's SD330s and SD360 were painted in British Caledonian Commuter colours, with Genair titles, and were unveiled at Gatwick on November 2. The Bandeirantes would be painted in due course, and new deliveries of SD360s would also enter service in these colours. Flights were operated with BCal's BR flight numbers. In addition to this, BCal's aircraft and passenger handling services would look after Genair's aircraft on the ground, and sell its seats for worldwide reservations.

At the helm of the Commuter Services was Bill Ashpole, who undertook significant steps to bring the timetables of Genair in line with the parent company's network to allow the best possible timings for transfers of onward passengers. He also coordinated the >>

The entire fleet of executive and air taxi aircraft operated by Casair is seen at Teesside shortly before their Shorts SD330 aircraft joined the company.

"WE STARTED TO REALISE THAT THERE WAS POTENTIAL FOR A TAXI SERVICE HERE AT TEESSIDE AND WILL LOOK TO EXPAND IN THE FUTURE."

Jack Cassidy.

This Shorts 330 was ordered by Eastern Airways to replace the ageing DC-3s it was using on flights to London and Glasgow.



Casair's brand new Shorts SD330, G-BJUK, arrived in May 1982 and was soon re-registered G-OCAS. (via Aidan Williamson)



airline's Gatwick to Heathrow Airlink service. At the time, BCal's Managing Director Alastair Pugh said of the commuter system: "it creates a broad marketing, promotional, and operational umbrella over the commuter operations so that they become an extension of our system to many provincial points in the UK. Our new initiative is a natural development of our determination to support the efforts of the regional carriers, who now operate more services into Gatwick than Heathrow."

However, it was clear both Genair and BCal were struggling with slot limitations at Heathrow through comments by Genair's Managing Director Bryan Huxford, who in November 1982 stated "the new formula will create a greater awareness of Gatwick – now the world's fourth busiest airport – as the major interlining point for passengers to and from regional UK airports." Bryan left the carrier, however, in April 1983, making way for Bob Marshall who took over the role.

The new commuter service saw the number of daily sectors flown by Genair rise to 160, with an increase in average passengers per flight to 16. In addition to its links to Gatwick, which now fed it from Bristol, Cardiff, Humberside, Leeds Bradford, Liverpool, Norwich and Teesside, it maintained an extensive route network across the country, even opening new routes from Teesside to Guernsey and Glasgow and Norwich

Genair operated Embraer 110 Banderlantes at the time of its merger with Casair and Eastern Airways. Here G-RVIP is seen in 1982.

to Humberside, Teesside and Glasgow. Humberside also gained a link with Jersey and Esbjerg in Denmark.

British Caledonian Commuter Services expanded to include Brymon Airways, Guernsey Airlines and Jersey European, who each linked more regional airports to Gatwick.

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Following the deal with British Caledonian, Genair's Embraer 110 Banderlantes received the airline's colour scheme and Commuter titles. (Bob O'Brien Collection)

Genair's collapse

Despite what appeared to be a rosy outlook for Genair and its relationship with BCal, all was not running smoothly and in July 1984, its operating debts had risen to £4 million. It also owed \$12 million to aircraft lessor Greyhound Leasing Group in unpaid fees and as a result Genair unfortunately ceased flying on July 14, 1984.

While Greyhound was compensated for lost earnings due to a clause in its deal with Shorts, many other creditors were left trying to retain whatever they could.

At Humberside, Genair's aircraft were impounded and the financiers ordered to pay. At Teesside, the vital links with London and other airports were much more valuable than fees, and the airport offered to do whatever it could to keep Genair flying. Unfortunately, nothing was to keep the airline in business, and its management 'escaped' with the

Managing Director reportedly sending in his resignation while on his way to Marbella.

Picking up the pieces

Out of the ashes of Genair, BCal had a big gap to fill and set about finding replacement partners to provide commuter links into Gatwick. In August 1985, Bill Ashpole said that the collapse of Genair, the principal BCal member, left large holes in the domestic network: "but these are gradually being filled." The primary new entrant was Air Ecosse, who began basing a SD330 at Gatwick to provide links to Leeds Bradford and Teesside, but found that British Midland's DC-9 schedules from both of the regional airports into Heathrow were creating a lot of difficult competition.

For Casair, a lifeline was thrown and investors offered it the chance to take staff and aircraft to continue operating flights out of its Teesside base, again under its own name and livery. Using a fleet of five Ce 404s and Navajos, flights were operated between Teesside, Humberside, Glasgow and Aberdeen. It also operated regular charter flights. Sadly, the receivers were called in on March 4, 1988, and after repeated attempts to find a buyer for the airline it closed for good with the loss of 25 jobs.

Today

A new Eastern Airways now operates out of Humberside, with a commuter network stretching to many airports in the UK and Europe, using BAe Jetstream 41s, Saab 2000s and Embraer ERJ 145s. Bryan Huxford, who set up the original Eastern Airways, is Chairman of the new venture, which purchased Air Kilroe in 1997 and Air Southwest in 2010. Today, it offers niche routes with a particular emphasis on business travellers, and has resurrected many of the original routes operated by the original Eastern Airways, and subsequently Genair. With such a model, and given the changes in the airline industry over the past 20 years, it seems unlikely today's Eastern Airways would enter a feeder agreement like that of its predecessor. **EW**

