

Taking to the skies



Birmingham Airport has ambition, the most prominent symbol of which is Monarch Aircraft Engineering's (MAEL) massive aircraft hangar. Built only last year, this behemoth of a building is 110,000 sq ft in area, and can house 10 narrow-body aircraft. Alternatively: four full-size football pitches, 2,400 Minis or 450 double decker buses. Simply put, it makes aeroplanes look small. Charlie Kortens went to find out more

The hangar itself is barely a stone's throw from the airport's runway, as a petrol station is to a motorway. Ground was broken in January 2013, with the site opening 11 months later. But why here? Birmingham is hardly the first place you think of when it comes to international air travel. Apparently it is something of a meeting of minds, Monarch Airlines fleet is expanding and MAEL is taking on more and more third party maintenance

work, Birmingham airport has similarly ambitious aims. The hangar being here benefits both, and it was a natural location for the build.

Besides, there is a lot more to Birmingham Airport than you might expect. While not a Heathrow or Gatwick, it certainly isn't just a cluster of fields hiding a dirt track runway. Over nine million passengers fly into, or out of, Birmingham annually, making it the seventh busiest airport in the UK. By



comparison Heathrow's passenger traffic tops 70 million, Gatwick comes in at around half that, Manchester and Stansted roughly 20 million apiece.

Monarch Aircraft Engineering has other hangars in Luton and Manchester where it can carry out what is known as base maintenance, a full and comprehensive service of the aircraft. But it is the Midlands site that is the real pride of the portfolio. Therefore, as you might expect, security is high on the agenda.

SECURITY

Visitors to the site need to present photo ID before they are allowed to enter. For

guests, and staff, camera phones are banned. Partly this is because, with such important work being carried out Monarch Aircraft Engineering doesn't want engineers distracted, but, even more importantly, pictures of staff can pose a serious terror threat. Taking photographs of colleagues is against company policy and viewed as gross misconduct.

Security personnel are on site, 24/7, every single day of the year. On those occasions when military aircraft are serviced, a guard remains on board at all times. Security here is serious business. Key cards are needed for access, as well as to log tools out, and there are plans to replace these cards with fingerprint scanners as soon as practical.

Tough security doesn't make the atmosphere sour though. One of the first things you see upon entry is a massive picture of Ant and Dec, who visited while making ITV's Saturday Night Takeaway. Artwork created by local children also adorn the walls. The artists themselves were invited to the grand opening last year, when sister company Monarch Airline's longest-serving pilot flew over the hangar, only 200 feet off the ground, dipping his wing in salute.

But of course, the main part of the building is the work floor itself. When FMJ came to visit there were four aircraft present, and the hangar was less than half full. Today, 60 per cent of the world's airlines outsource heavy maintenance work, with the global maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) market worth US\$49 billion. This is predicted to grow to US\$65 billion over the next 10 years. The multi-million pound maintenance hangar, will enable the organisation to service a greater share of the growing market for aircraft maintenance services in the UK and Europe.

STAFF

There are over 150 staff on site, a number that is set to grow in the near future. Those staff don't just look after the Monarch Airlines aircraft that fly out of Birmingham but Flybe's fleet and a variety of other airlines too. On the floor each aircraft has specialist toolboxes waiting, with contents specifically tailored for it. This saves time as engineers no longer carry around their own toolboxes. All toolboxes, each containing tools fit for several different classes of aircraft would take up quite a bit of space.

The staging that is found around the floor fulfills a similar purpose. Previously scaffolding was erected around aircraft after they were parked in a hangar. Here in Birmingham staging is pre-erected. Each is designed for a specific aircraft, and just wheeled into place as and when needed.



“As you would expect managing such a large and modern site presents plenty of unique challenges for the resident FM team.”

As you would expect health and safety is of paramount importance, emergency showers and eye wash stations are found around the walls and the airport fire station is within spitting distance.

Best of all however, when FMJ arrives Harriet the Hawk has just finished swooping through the hangar. As part of Monarch's pest control initiative Harriet visits every week to make sure no pigeons decide that that the hangar would make a good place for them to start nesting.

As you would expect managing such a large and modern site presents plenty of unique challenges for the resident FM team. Carl Webb-Snowling joined The Monarch Group as head of property and facilities last November, after spending many years working for high street retail

firms. He has responsibility not just for the Birmingham hangar but a portfolio of 43 UK properties, that Monarch are looking to grow, and numerous sites abroad.

Webb-Snowling missed the build itself, which was undertaken by builders John Sisk and Son, but managed the mobilisation. Naturally the plan was for the new facility and team to be eased in, after all, as Webb-Snowling himself says “mobilisation is always the hard part”. But unexpected aircraft maintenance pushed them to full capacity right from the off.

SERVICES

In terms of service provision, Mitie handles cleaning, with the white hangar floor providing a particular challenge. Webb-

Snowling is determined to make sure this floor remains clean. “I've agreed with our managing director that this building will never look more than six months old,” he chuckles, quite a challenge, but one he clearly relishes. To this end he has even ordered special socks for all machinery and wheels to prevent them marking the floor.

Under Webb-Snowling, and Dave Major, property and facilities manager, a Monarch



MONARCH - FACTS AND FIGURES

- 110,000 SQ FT - ROOM ENOUGH FOR FOUR FOOTBALL PITCHES, 2,400 MINIS OR 450 DOUBLE DECKER BUSES
- GROUND BROKEN IN JANUARY 2013
- OPENED IN NOVEMBER 2013
- FITS 10 AIRCRAFT INSIDE
- 150 ENGINEERS, RISING TO 220
- 700 APPRENTICES ANNUALLY
- 28 UK PROPERTIES
- NINE MILLION PASSENGERS FLY OUT OF BIRMINGHAM EACH YEAR

SERVICE PROVIDERS

- SERVICE WORKS - QFM SYSTEM
- MITIE - CLEANING
- JOHN SISK AND SON - BUILDERS
- BLUE APPLE - CATERERS

employee for the past nine years, there is a helpdesk team based in Luton, alongside in-house plumbers and electricians. “We try to do as much as we can ourselves to ensure ownership and direct control” Webb-Snowling says. “The site is very new so there isn't all that much to worry about.”

Catering is handled by Blue Apple, across the entire business, not just at Birmingham. Hot meals, subsidised by Monarch, are provided at breakfast and lunch in a canteen area, where iPads are

also found so staff can access the internet.

But there is much more to Webb-Snowling's job than merely managing the hangar. He was appointed to implement The Monarch Group's property strategy.

“The economic downturn made things tough for everyone,” he explains, “but now things are looking a little brighter Monarch needed a group strategy on property. For example, our overseas sites. When we send engineers abroad to set up line maintenance stations we take care of their homes, vehicles, engineering spaces, everything. That way Monarch knows exactly what they have and we can work much more efficiently.”

Monarch, and its subsidiaries, have a very diverse property portfolio. Webb-Snowling has spent a lot of time pooling that, if there is an engineering office next to an airline office, then often they can be condensed into one adding value to the business.

Also Cosmos, a package holidays provider owned by The Monarch Group, was having its entire FM & H&S functions run internally. Though this has become increasingly common over the last five years, Webb-Snowling explains it doesn't represent value for money or provide full compliance, experience or knowledge. “Though you might save money by having fewer staff, FM & H&S won't be run as efficiently, as the operational teams speciality isn't in that sector.” Such ideas have been rolled out across the group.

SOFTWARE

Service Works' facilities management software, QFM 5 is another innovation. In the past this was just used for logging jobs, now staff, from engineers to flight attendants are being taught how to use the latest version for maximum benefit.

“We can manage jobs from end to end,” says Webb-Snowling. “Everyone involved

receives email updates. We have complete visibility from a reactive point of view, we can see average values for lighting, plumbing etc and we have a much better picture of how we are spending our money. This is extremely helpful given we are coming to the end of our first year running this hangar. Scheduling was previously archaic, on a very old version of QFM. Now we can build schedules and plan them in, adding things in quite easily. And as the group grows, as we add new property in, it is quite an easy process.”

Knowledge really is power at Monarch, across the office walls are banks of television screens showing staff details of almost every facet of their operation. Real time maintenance schedules, weather projections (as strong winds can affect the opening of hangar doors), central tool control provides visibility of tooling and ensures that the workplace is safe and productive. Most ominously there is camera footage of Monarch's other hangars in Luton and Manchester. Apparently this is so Birmingham can see instantly how many aircraft are in each hangar, though I'm sure staff in both locations are well aware that ‘Big Brother’ is watching.

Finally, no feature on Monarch's new hangar could be complete without a word on the Apprenticeship scheme. Started in 1971, 20 apprentices are selected each year. With over 700 having been trained so far, and Monarch is looking to grow this scheme along with the business. “There is a shortage of skilled engineers in the industry. We're trying to tackle this through our apprentice scheme and our recruitment strategy,” Webb-Snowling states. He goes on “its about maintaining a highly skilled workforce and with the skilled engineers we have at all of our facilities, we can tap into this expertise and experience and pass down the skills to the apprentices.” **EXU**