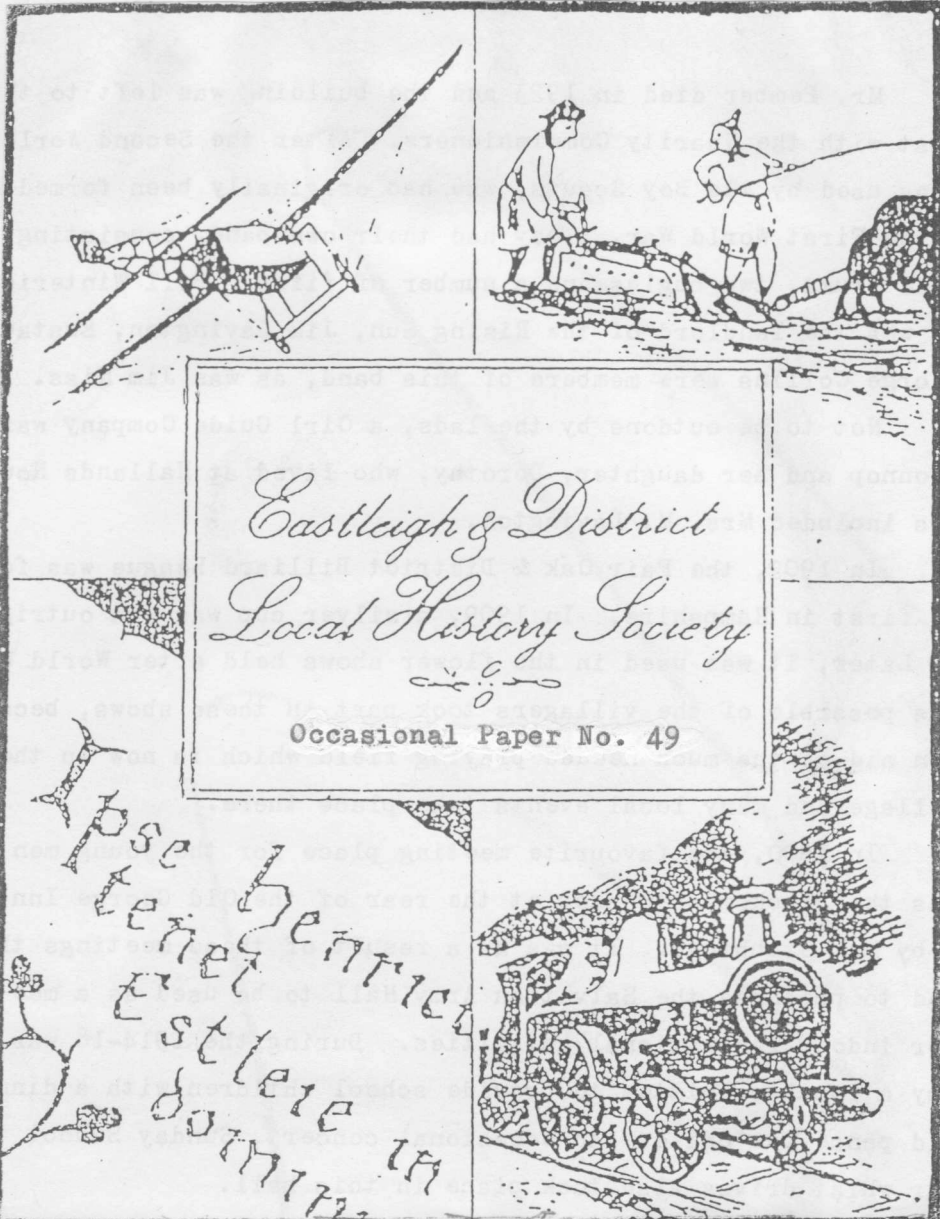
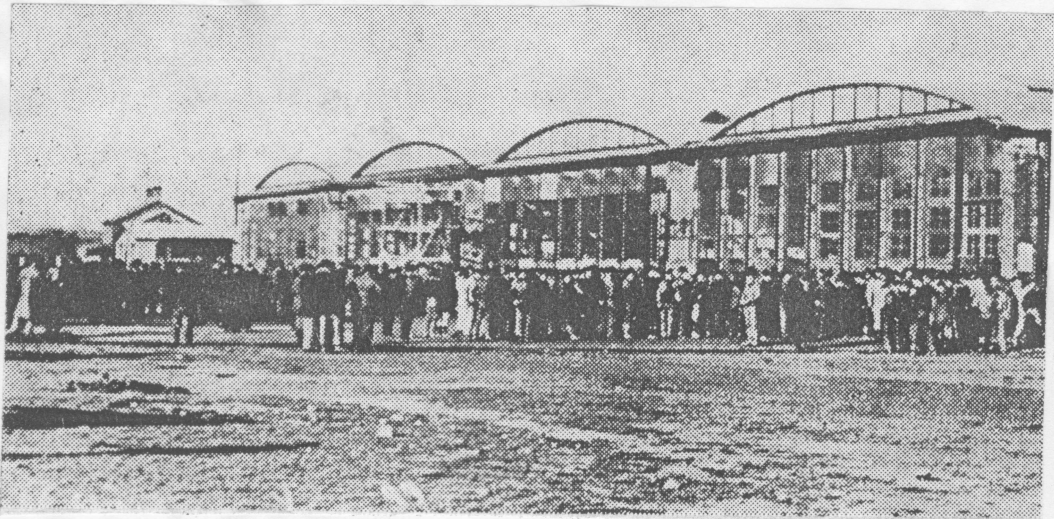


Atlantic Park

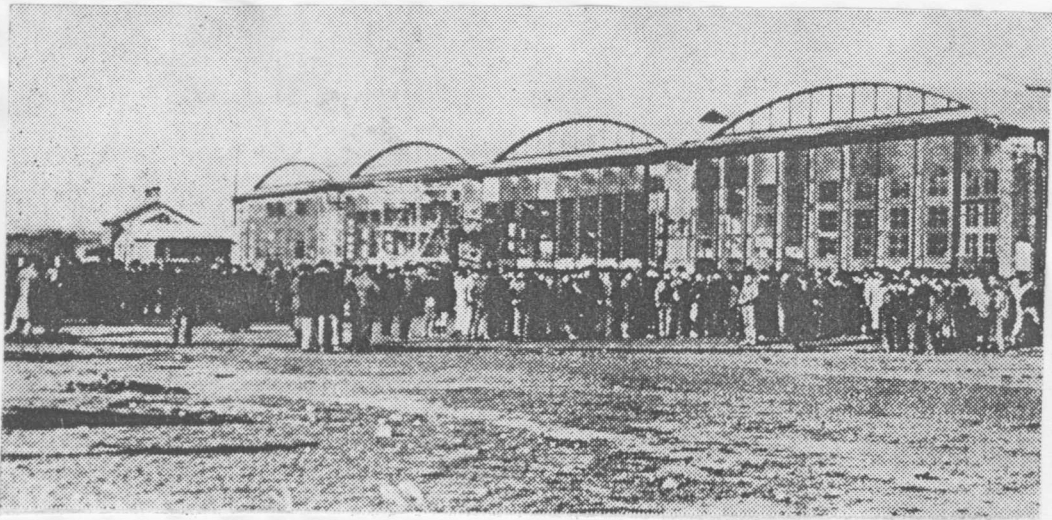




ATLANTIC PARK HOTEL
CANADIAN PACIFIC-GUNARD WHITE
STEAMSHIP LINES







American airmen queue for food at Eastleigh airbase in 1918



Russian emigrants sent back to Eastleigh from Ellis Island

ATLANTIC PARK

What is now known as Southampton International Airport, Eastleigh, was formerly meadowland attached to North Stoneham Farm. The credit for the earliest use of the land for flying purposes must go to Eric Moon and his Moonbeam Mark II monoplane which he flew in 1910. Thereafter the area was used by balloons, airships and aircraft in increasing and varying numbers until in 1918 it was occupied by a large detachment of the U.S.N.A.F. as a supply base in the closing stages of World War I. Then, after the Armistice in November 1918, all the Americans, except for a small holding contingent, went back to the U.S.A. on board the S.S. Leviathan to be home for Christmas. The story of the occupation of the site by the Americans is told in an illustrated booklet entitled THE BATTLE OF EASTLEIGH, a copy of which is in Eastleigh Library.

An inevitable result of war is that a vast number of people lose their homes and become refugees. The situation after World War I was aggravated by the Russian Revolution and thousands of Europeans sought to emigrate to America. What happened when England became a staging post for their onward journey is told in the following story by Peter New.

The arrival of emigrants into Southampton from Europe via Liverpool and Le Havre began after the Great War in November 1919. Inadequate accommodation meant that many of the emigrants were exposed all day to the bitterly cold weather while waiting to board their ships and the pavements outside the Docks Station and South Western Hotel were at times crowded with trans-migrants, mostly from the Central European countries. To overcome this unfortunate state of affairs and realising the need for overnight accommodation, the shipping companies obtained lodgings in London and elsewhere for the trans-migrants. However, this was unsatisfactory as the emigrants, in a strange country, were easy victims of unscrupulous people. Consequently, the shipping companies and others decided to overcome these various shortcomings by bringing all the trans-migrants together in one place and bought the old American aerodrome at Wide Lane, Eastleigh, and formed the Atlantic Park Hostel Company Limited. The company was registered with a nominal capital of £99,000 and was formed by the Cunard, White Star, Oceanic Steamship Navigation and the Canadian Pacific Railway Companies. This move was looked upon as a further development of Southampton as a major Atlantic port.

In 1921, an army of 200 workmen converted the aircraft hangars into dormitories, dining rooms, kitchens, bathrooms, etc., installed a telephone system complete with exchange and a 220 volt supply electric power station.

The hotel virtually became a self contained township and this was evident from the company's registration which stated:- "To carry on the business of passengers, tourist and forwarding agents, hotel lodging and boarding house, refreshment room, restaurant and tavern proprietors, licensed victuallers, surveyors, caterers, motor car, coach and carriage proprietor, livery stable keeper, warehousemen, proprietors of baths, dressing rooms, laundries and waiting rooms, wine and spirit merchants, mineral water manufacturers, tobacconist, stationers, chemists, druggist, clothiers, railway and shipping agent, carriers, shipowners, goods agents, bankers and money changers, caterers for passengers by steamship, sailing vessel, train, motor car, aeroplane, coach or otherwise."

The final accommodation arranged for 150 second class passengers to use the ex N.C.O. and officers quarters; 300 places were reserved for British and Scandinavian emigrants and 3,000 for all other trans-migrants. Private quarters for families were provided, complete with cooking facilities, but generally communal living was the rule with separate dormitories for men and women. The hostel carried a permanent staff of 150 including a matron, medical officer, engineer and four language interpreters. The kitchens were designed to allow for 2,000 lbs of meat to be cooked at any one time and to supply 300 gallons of soup. The meals provided were generally for 2,000 or more people.

The hostel was considered by the authorities to be a clearing house for trans-migrants changing ships in England but what they did not envisage was the fact that it was to become a more than temporary home for the Russian emigrants when the USA quota laws restricted the entry of foreigners into the continent of North America. In 1924, 980 Russians found themselves back at the Atlantic Park Hostel, England's Ellis Island as some people called it, denied entry to the United States and unable to return to Russia. They had previously sailed from the Baltic port of Riga in 1923, crossed the Atlantic via the hostel, only to be detained on Ellis Island in New York Harbour, the station for the examination of immigrants, and then deported to Britain. For some, seven years were to pass before they finally left Southampton for North America. Meanwhile, a few of them changed their plans and sailed for Argentina and Palestine.

As already stated, the hostel became a self-contained town, complete with its own school. for the children, a medical centre, a Synagogue for those of the Jewish faith, shops, etc., and facilities for all forms of study, recreation and amusement. The Library contained books in languages of Russian, German, Polish, Yiddish and English. At one time, the emigrants fielded four football teams and played matches with the local sides, the verdict of the locals being that the Russians made very good soccer players. During the New Year celebrations in January 1925, a play, "Guilty Without Fault" by the Russian author Alexander Ostrovski, was presented by a group of Russian Jews in the hostel theatre, which housed a Christmas tree complete with gifts which were distributed to the children by the hostel manager, Colonel R.D. Barber. The colonel had lived in Russia for some years, spoke the language fluently and his wife was Russian. The first manager of the hostel was Mr. Frank Johnson, whose experience in trans-Atlantic passenger travel, coupled with his ability to speak three languages, made him an ideal person for that position.

While other nationalities came and moved on, the Russian immigrants looked upon Eastleigh as their temporary "home-town" and made every effort to enjoy their enforced stay. They were not confined to the hostel and were free to visit the surrounding Hampshire countryside. To some extent, they adopted a British way of life, visiting the shops, going to the pictures, attending church on Sundays and sending their children to the Eastleigh schools when the fall in numbers at the hostel meant the closing of the school there.

The health and hygiene standards required by U.S. law were high and rigidly enforced by the immigration authorities; therefore it became the responsibility of the shipping companies to ensure that their passengers emigrating to the U.S.A satisfied these conditions and especially as they were under bond to the Home Office to transmit the emigrants as soon as possible. The expense of keeping the immigrants at the hostel was only partly recoverable from the immigrants themselves but it appears to have been cheaper keeping them at the hostel rather than sending them back home, where re-entry might have been difficult if not impossible.

In May 1924, the U.S. commissioner for immigration, the Hon. H. Curran, and his wife, accompanied by Mr. David Drummond., the Canadian Pacific agent, whose office was near the dock gate by the South Western Hotel, visited the Atlantic Park Hostel to study the operation of a large scale emigration centre and meet the Russian emigrants deported from Ellis Island. He was impressed by their intellectual standard and mentioned to them the anticipated alteration to the quota law.

Due to the prolonged and enforced stay of the Russian emigrants, some of them being separated from the rest of their families, Lady Swaythling of Townhill Park interceded on their behalf and, in February 1925, wrote a letter to President Coolidge asking him to remedy this tragedy. She had no wish to interfere with the legislation of the United States but the immigrants at Eastleigh came under new laws which they could not have foreseen. She felt that if the American citizens knew about the plight of the immigrants, they would show sympathy and practical interest.

The letter appeared to be effective because, within 14 months, only 250 emigrants out of the original 980 were left. By October, this number was down to 176 but it was evident that they would be staying for some time so the Jewish community in London asked the Home Office to release the 176, which included 130 women and children, as further detention was cruel and unnecessary. This was eventually granted but not before Mr. A.V.M. Hudson, M.P, asked a question in the House of Commons concerning the protection of British workers. He thought that the release of the emigrants would jeopardise the chances of a British worker getting a job and in those days of high unemployment this was a threat, however small, which was not allowed to pass unnoticed. The Home Secretary, Sir W. Joynson Hicks, reassured Mr. Hudson in his written reply that the Jewish community would accept full responsibility and realised that the emigrants would not be allowed to settle in the U.K. So the 176 were gradually absorbed into the Jewish community before finally sailing for the U.S.A.

To begin with, the emigrants arrived or departed from the hostel via Eastleigh Railway Station which meant travelling by motor coach from the station to the hostel or vice versa. This became unnecessary when a railway halt was erected alongside the railway line outside the hostel not far from the present Parkway Station. The old railway halt, made of wooden sleepers, was dismantled in the late 1950s.

The figures of emigrants passing through Southampton rose rapidly from 1919 to about 8,000 in 1924 and approximately 20,000 in 1928, falling off until the Atlantic Park Hostel closed during the first week of October 1931.

Article by PETER NEW

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