

#### **The development of West Beach Airport<sup>1</sup>**

By the beginning of 1954, commercial traffic density at Parafield had reached the point where the DCA had to stop the Royal Aero Club of South Australia's flying competitions. Trans Australia Airlines (TAA), ANA and Ansett were flying a mix of DC3s, Convair 240s and DC4s on routes to Melbourne, Sydney and Perth; and Guinea Airways – removed from its wartime Adelaide–Darwin route by its award to TAA – was confined to an intrastate network of SA regional centres. Parafield was busting at the seams and its facilities were becoming less and less suitable for the larger aircraft that had come into service. This profile describes the development of a new airport at West Beach and the removal of airline traffic from Parafield.

Parafield Airport was established in October 1927 by the Commonwealth Government as Adelaide's airport to replace the field at Albert Park, which was increasingly encroached by urbanisation and power lines. Its "remoteness" from the city (eighteen kilometres!) was always considered a disadvantage, and as early as 1935 the Royal Aero Club of South Australia's committee had approached the State Government to establish a city aerodrome at Victoria Park racecourse – part of the parklands encircling the city. This was in the context of planning for the Brisbane to Adelaide 1936 Centenary Air Race, and it is perhaps reasonable to assume that the club had in mind a more central location for the arrival of the race fleet rather than the establishment of a new aerodrome there for commercial services.

Although that proposal didn't progress further than the Centenary Committee, the issue stayed alive. Burnside, one of Adelaide's inner suburban councils, suggested use of the Eastwood Mental Hospital site in 1936, a site less than three kilometres from the city centre. In May 1938 Sir Wallace Sandford, who had been elected in March as a Liberal member of the state's Legislative Council, led a City Chamber of Commerce delegation to his boss, Premier Richard Butler, recommending a landing ground be established near Adelaide. The Adelaide City Council quickly opposed use of the city's parklands for the purpose.

By 1939, the Commonwealth, for entirely different reasons, was also floating the idea of establishing a new airport. The Commonwealth by then was coming to the view that light aircraft and pilot training don't mix well with heavy aircraft commercial services, and the DCA began exploring plans for the establishment of two aerodromes in each of the capital cities to separate those functions. However, in Adelaide's case, because Parafield's poor approaches caused by the Adelaide Hills just east of the field were becoming increasingly unsuitable for the heavier aircraft coming into transport service, this meant that general aviation would remain at Parafield and a new airport be established to serve the airlines.

Then the war intervened and the government's priorities changed. An entirely new facility, RAAF Base Mallala, was built by 1941 to house No. 6 SFTS; and existing facilities, including

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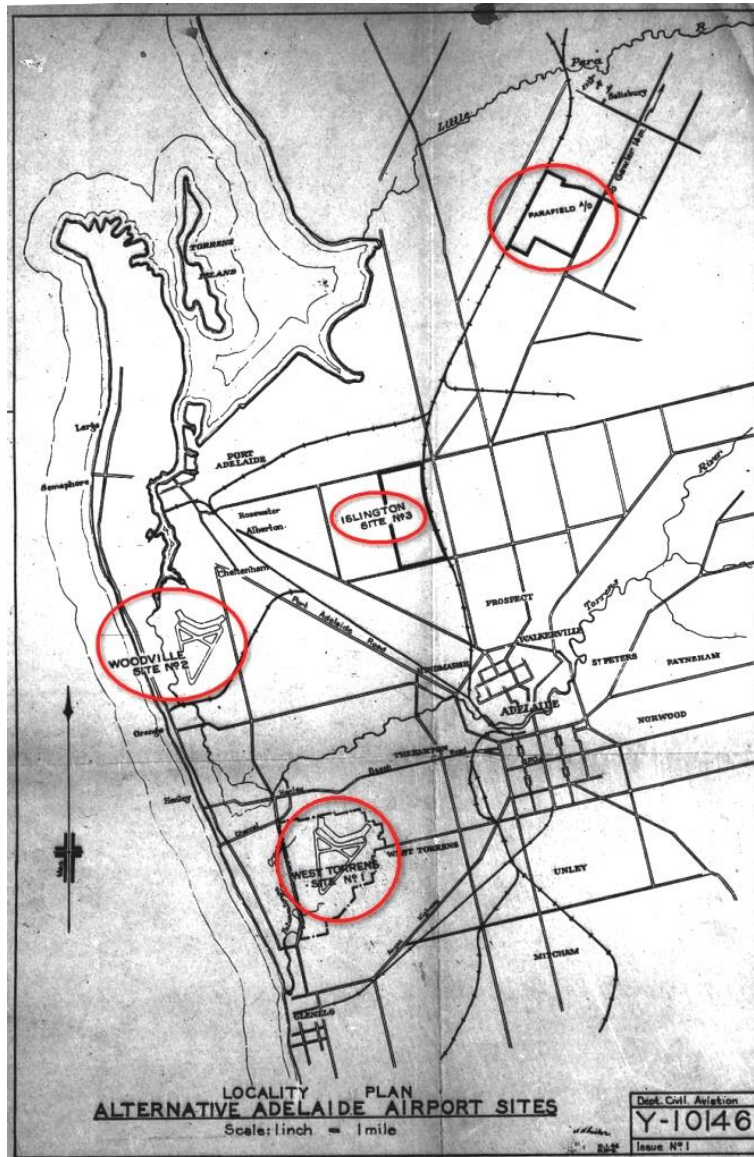
<sup>1</sup> This profile is adapted from Chapter 11 of Mike Milln's book *The Story of The Royal Aero Club of South Australia – Book 2: 1941-1986*, Avonmore Books 2018

Gawler, Port Pirie and Mt Gambier, were expanded for RAAF use. Parafield had to be expanded too for its use by the RAAF as No. 1 EFTS and to accommodate DC3s, Convair CV-240s and the DC4s and even larger transport aircraft that were anticipated. Land acquisition to the west and south of the existing site was necessary to increase the existing maximum runway

length of about 1,500 metres to 2,400 metres on the main north-east–south-west approach. This virtually doubled the aerodrome’s available airside area.

The DCA’s investigation of alternative sites proceeded in the background, with a babble of press, local and state government voices adding unsolicited advice throughout.

This all coalesced into a short list of three sites by 1944, which were then subjected to detailed assessment by a DCA engineer named N.M. (Norm) Fricker. He had already virtually ruled out two of the sites: the Islington Sewerage Farm five kilometres north of the city, and another site favoured by the premier<sup>2</sup> at Woodville, not far from the original Albert Park aerodrome that had been closed in 1927. The Islington site was judged to be too close to Parafield, eight kilometres to the north-east; and the Woodville site, which the premier favoured, because he envisioned an adjacent seaplane basin dug out of the Patawalonga tidal estuary marshes, because seaplanes were already falling



*DCA locality plan of alternative Adelaide Airport sites in relation to Parafield (northernmost circle) [DCA files – SAAM Collection].*

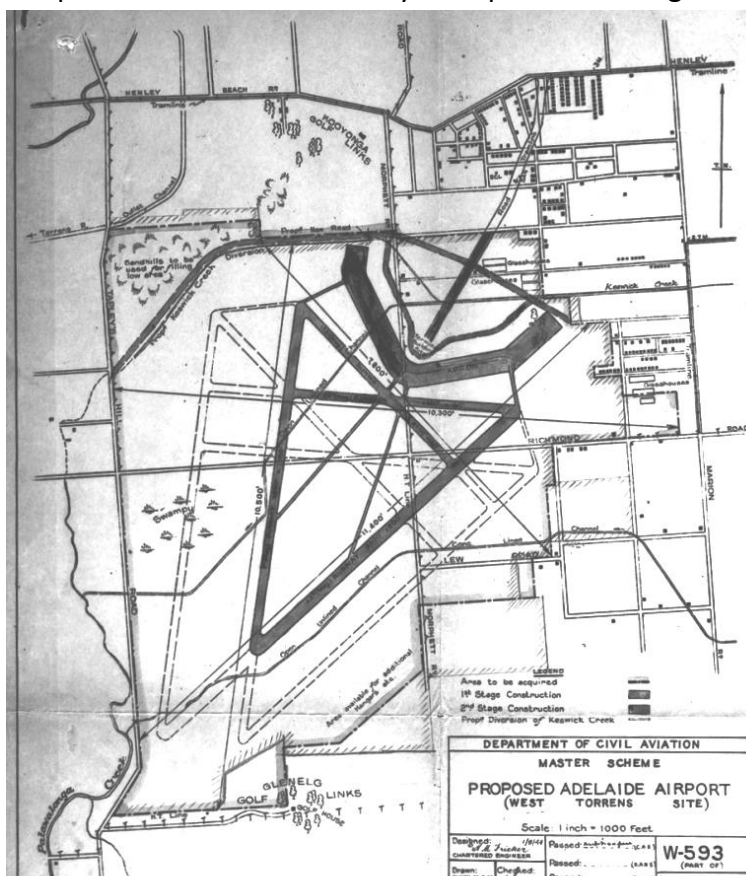
out of use and the idea was generally off the planet anyway.

Fricker duly reported with recommendations on 5 December 1944 that heavily favoured the selection of the third site as the main commercial airport for Adelaide. This site, now Adelaide International Airport, lies within the suburban council of West Torrens, six kilometres south-

<sup>2</sup> Premier Tom Playford, letter to Minister for Civil Aviation, 26 August 1944. Playford was first elected in 1933 and served continuously as premier from 5 November 1938 to 10 March 1965.

west of the city centre. It had much to recommend it: it comprised 1,919 acres<sup>3</sup> of virtually undeveloped land, with only eight houses and some market gardens, pig farms and trotting tracks on it; it was near the centre of anticipated population and an arterial road complex; it was level with good approaches remote from the Adelaide Hills; and it had vast quantities of sand available for filling its marshy western areas.

Arthur McComb, Chief Inspector of Ground Organisations, wrote to the Director- General of Civil Aviation agreeing to the recommendation and suggesting that an official land acquisition cost estimate be obtained from the Department of the Interior to substantiate the initial estimate of £60,000.<sup>4</sup> He copied his minute to Edgar Johnston, then Assistant Director-General of the DCA, annotated *"I should like to discuss the project with you, early pls"*. Johnston replied in another minute with a litany of questions to be answered.<sup>5</sup> After noting what a fine report Fricker had produced, he seemed to want the wheel reinvented: he questioned the very assumption that it was necessary to separate training and commercial operations – the basic



*DCA proposed Adelaide Airport Master Scheme of 1 August 1944, showing the originally planned four-runway layout of 3,200 m and 3,500 m main runways with provision for two more in excess of 3,000 m. The intersection of Morphett and Richmond Roads is at the centre of the site [DCA files – SAAM Collection].*

tenet promulgated by James Fairbairn as Minister for Air in 1939 that had led to Fricker's investigations.

He questioned many of the demand assumptions underpinning the recommended dimensions of the new airport: that Adelaide would ever need to accommodate aircraft larger than DC4/DC6s, much less need the 12,000 foot<sup>6</sup> runways required for transoceanic flights; and the justification for four runways when three were plainly adequate elsewhere. He did not accept that Parafield could not be developed as the primary commercial airport and demanded an estimate of costs to do so.

He questioned the lack of even- ing wind data for the new site, suggested that the fog frequency table for Parafield that Fricker applied to the new site was not representative, asked about the hazard of commercial

<sup>3</sup> Adelaide Airport presently covers 785 hectares, or 1,940 acres.

<sup>4</sup> A.R. McComb, CIGO, minute to DGCA, 12 February 1945.

<sup>5</sup> E.C. Johnston, ADGDCA, minute to CIGO A.R. McComb, 24 February 1945.

<sup>6</sup> 3,658 metres.

radio masts near the new site, claimed the arguments dismissing the Islington site were not clear and, presciently, that building a new airport surrounded by housing was a bad idea. About the only recommendation in the report he did agree with was that the Woodville site and seaplane basin should be discarded.

Fricker was then tasked with answering these criticisms, which he did in a further six-page report tactfully pointing out Johnston's "*misunderstandings*".<sup>7</sup> He restated the case for separating training from rapidly increasing commercial flights, stating that "*A collision in the air is generally fatal*", a patronisingly brave statement to a man of Johnston's seniority and experience. He also stated a new assumption that "*a fairly heavily subsidised scheme for the encouragement of flying training as a defence reserve will be supported by the Commonwealth in post-war years*" made it a Commonwealth responsibility to continue to provide the airport at which the training would be conducted.

He defended the case for "*overseas connections*" from Melbourne and Tasmania passing through Adelaide, even if only on an emergency diversion basis, and that it would therefore be sensible to make provision for them, and that while there was no immediate case to be made for 12,000-foot runways, the site should be able to accommodate them when required in the future.<sup>8</sup> He explained while the 1 in 20 gradient on Parafield approaches were acceptable for the small aircraft used for training, a new airport established for commercial operations should have 1 in 50 gradients, as laid down for Class B airports by the Chicago Convention of the previous year. He established that the radio masts would be shielded by the proposed building area and would not constitute a hazard. He cited the standard set for ninety percent of landings in winds of more than ten miles per hour to be within thirty degrees of the wind direction, and added new wind data that demonstrated that an ultimate scheme of four runways was necessary to meet the standard. He cited estimated costs for developing Parafield to the same scale as being very similar to the £1,600,000 back-of-the-envelope estimates for the West Torrens site. Lastly, he advanced a number of arguments to justify the desirability of the new site's proximity to the city – the reduction in road transport time and costs and the availability of tram services, while acknowledging that "*some opposition can be expected from residents, no matter where an airport is located, but the benefit to the largest number of people must be the deciding factor*".

Fricker's second report seems to have done the trick and there was no further discussion thereafter within the Commonwealth of the merits of the West Torrens site. McComb wrote to the Director-General of Civil Aviation to confirm the West Torrens site was deemed most suitable and that a confirmation of development costs was now needed from the Department of Works.<sup>9</sup> The Minister for Civil Aviation wrote to the premier<sup>10</sup> to tell him the bad news that his Woodville seaplane basin had been ruled out, and to establish that, while no final decision had been made as to the preferred site, the Commonwealth regarded itself as responsible for

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<sup>7</sup> N.M. Fricker, minute to CIGO, *Report on Investigations into Future Airport Facilities for Adelaide*, 23 March 1945.

<sup>8</sup> As it transpired, the main runway was initially built to 2,100 m (6,890 ft), extended to 2,500 m (8,200 ft) in 1969 and eventually to its present length of 3,100 m (10,170 ft) in 1998. The last extension required acquisition of land at the south-west end and diversion of Tapleys Hill Road – so Fricker's 12,000 ft looks increasingly unlikely and unnecessary!

<sup>9</sup> CIGO, minute to DGCA, 7 May 1945.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Drakeford, Minister for Civil Aviation, letter to Premier Playford, 21 June 1945.

the development costs of the new airport, but it would be up to the State Government to fund the road access.

In the meantime the DCA proceeded on the basis that formal acceptance of the West Torrens site would be forthcoming. Since the Adelaide Electricity Services Company was about to upgrade transmission lines along Morphett Road, which bisected the site north–south and would need to be closed, the DCA agreed to pay the additional cost of moving the line to Marion Road, which ran along the eastern boundary of the site. The DCA was also concerned enough about the need to limit any possible development of the site by existing landowners that the director-general wrote to the Adelaide office of the Department of Interior to ask them to inform property owners of its imminent acquisition.<sup>11</sup>

This led to a messy period of NIMBY-ism when everybody except the Glenelg Council, which was keen to see the site developed and wanted the airport to be named Glenelg Airport, objected according to their own special interests. Boundary changes were made to accommodate concerns of the adjoining Kooyonga Golf Course. The West Torrens Council objected to the proposal altogether on the basis of the road closures it would require.<sup>12</sup> The Secretary of the Australian Labor Party (SA Branch) passed a motion *“that this State Executive of the ALP expresses its strong hostility to the proposal to establish an aerodrome ...”*<sup>13</sup> for a number of stated reasons that persist to this day. It objected to the noise and inconvenience that would be inflicted on nearby residents; to some of the best residential building land in the metropolitan area being absorbed; and to the closure of West Beach Road (that bisected the site east–west) and the effect that would have on a popular beach-side resort; and it claimed that developing Parafield was a much better option. Lastly, the landowners themselves mobilised. Various individuals wrote to complain about how grievously they would be affected, and one, a market gardener named Mr H.M. Charlick, was a particular thorn in the government’s side. He formed a landholders’ association and wrote repeatedly, either objecting to the proposal or suggesting how it could be modified to his advantage.

This all dragged on throughout the remainder of 1945 until Cabinet finally made the decision to acquire the West Torrens site at its meeting on 18 January 1946. Arthur Drakeford’s seven-page Cabinet Agendum detailing the arguments for the need for a second airport, the advantages of the West Torrens site, the land acquisition scope of works and their costs recommended: *“the general scheme of establishing a ‘transcontinental’ type airport for Adelaide on one of the alternative sites, and reserving the existing Parafield airport for auxiliary purposes, including flying training, Aero Clubs and other light aircraft activities, be endorsed, and that a decision be given for the necessary land acquisition on the most suitable site”*.<sup>14</sup> The actual Cabinet decision was confirmation of its selection of the West Torrens site and financial provision for the project; and *“that the Minister bring down an Agendum to Cabinet as early as possible embodying a scheme for the recovery of money used in the construction of aerodromes by the levying of landing and other charges etc.”*

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<sup>11</sup> DGCA, minute to Property Officer, Dept of the Interior, Adelaide, 23 June 1945.

<sup>12</sup> Vernon Shepherd, Town Clerk Corporation of the Town of West Torrens, letter to DGCA 7 September 1944.

<sup>13</sup> W.J. Welsh, Sec ALP (SA Branch), letter to Hon. N. Makin MHR, Minister for Munitions and Minister for Aircraft production, 8 November 1945.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur S. Drakeford, Minister for Air and Civil Aviation, Cabinet Agendum, 12 January 1946.

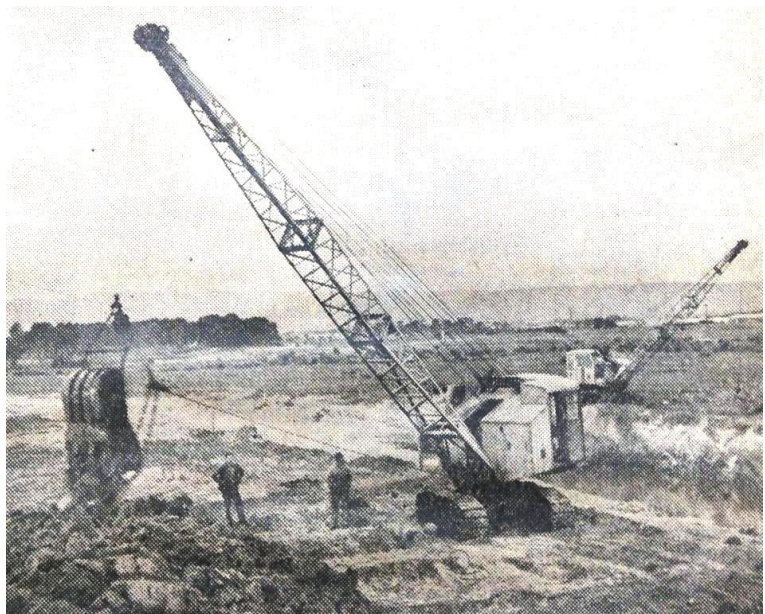




*Adelaide Airport – early earthworks March 1948 [The Advertiser, 18 March 1948].*

The news was transmitted by telegram to the DCA's Adelaide directorate on 24 January<sup>15</sup> and by letter to Premier Playford the following day<sup>16</sup>; and then arrangements were made very quickly with Treasury to make provision in the 1945–46 Estimates for the provision of the necessary funds. The estimate for acquisition costs had by then increased to £133,000 and the all-up cost to £1.6 million, but of that only £10,000 was expected to be spent during the remainder of the 1945–46 financial year.

After all that, it was just a matter of negotiating with landholders for acquisition of the site and getting the work done, all of which proved to be a much longer process than anybody had envisaged. It wasn't until September 1947 that work on site began with earthworks to form the main north east to south west runway. Keswick and Brownhill Creeks had to be diverted around the site, the two main roads that intersected near the centre of the site closed (Richmond Road east–west and Morphett Road north–south), the high tension power lines along Morphett Road through the site diverted to Marion Road east of the site, a new east–west road extension built along the northern boundary and a new access road to and into the site constructed. Although provision for connecting the tram tracks along



*Adelaide Airport – construction July 1948 [The Advertiser, 15 July 1948 – SAAM Collection].*

<sup>15</sup> DGCA, telegram to Aviat Adelaide, 24 January 1946.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Drakeford, Minister for Civil Aviation, letter to Premier Playford, 25 January 1946.

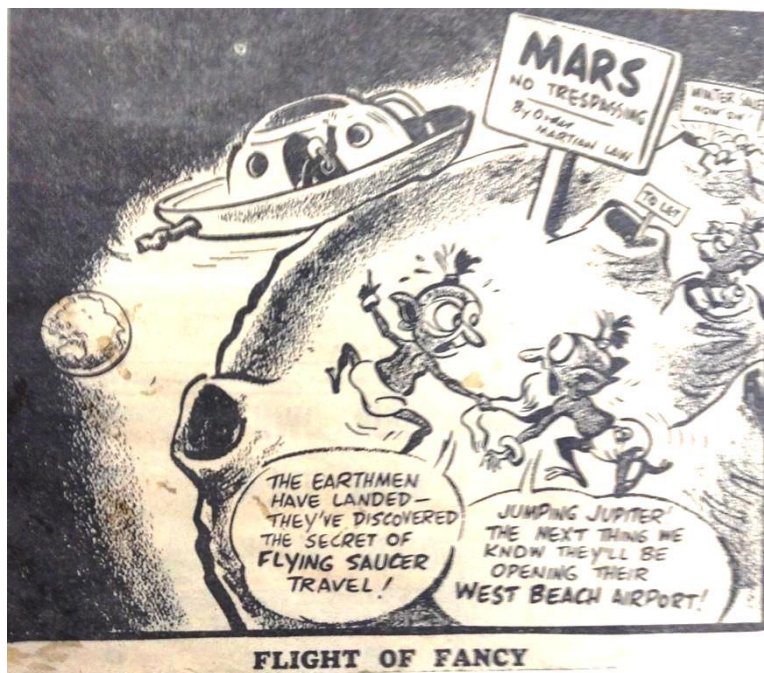


*By mid-1952 the press was reflecting the airlines' and public's frustration with repeated opening delays ...  
[The News, 12 June 1952 – SAAM Collection].*

Parafield to Gawler, and it wasn't until 16 December 1954 that a DCA DC3 made the first landing.

In the meantime, construction of the north west to south east crosswind runway started in 1950, and TAA and ANA shared the construction of an igloo-type hangar that commenced in 1951.

The delays were largely due to defence construction demands arising from Australia's Korean War involvement and the diversion of equipment and labour to the construction of what became Edinburgh Airbase adjacent to the then Weapons Research Establishment at Salisbury. This probably also contributed to the change in the airport's design from the initially envisioned four-runway layout to the existing two intersecting runways.



*... And again in mid-1954 ... [The News, 10 June 1954 – SAAM Collection].*

Henley Beach Road from the city with the new access road was made, trams never happened, although the need for them is periodically raised to this day and the current airport master plan makes provision for them.

By the end of May 1948 Minister Drakeford was promising the first runway and associated apron would be ready by the middle of the next year, but his successor after the election of the Menzies government in 1949, Senator McLeay, had to revise this to the end of 1950, and then for emergency use only. This was repeatedly postponed, under heavy criticism by the airlines, whose flights with the advent of the larger DC4s and CV240s were suffering frequent diversions from



The first commercial landings, on 2 January 1955, weren't planned. One TAA and two ANA DC4s were unable to land at Parafield or divert to Gawler, because of a dust storm blanketing the northern suburbs. Rather than force their diversion to Melbourne, the DCA allowed them



... And again in October 1954 ... [The News, 7 October 1954 – SAAM Collection].

Adelaide's secondary metropolitan airport, for use as a training and general aviation facility. In 1955, of course, the club was its biggest operator and immediately improved its accommodation through acquisition of ANA's hangar and office space in the control tower building. It was the end of an era and the start of a new one.<sup>17</sup>

**Mike Milln**

**History Group**

**South Australian Aviation Museum**

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<sup>17</sup> A much more comprehensive account of the construction of Adelaide Airport, illustrated with many photographs from the period, is available in Nigel Daw's 1982 book *Adelaide – West Beach Airport*.