

SO NEAR BUT YET SO FAR....



Once upon a time... travel between the different Channel Islands was easy, cheap and relatively problem-free. JOHN YOUNG asks: why is it not like that now?



TRISLANDER NEW COLOURS

MY weekly commute between the Islands for the last 14 months has proven to be expensive and unreliable. This is not just an inconvenience but is economically and culturally damaging to all our Channel island communities. Jersey is so very fortunate to have a well organised and efficient airport with some excellent air services; unfortunately it is presently let down by inter-island services. The authorities in both Islands need to get together urgently to plan for improvement.

In 1979, inter-island travel was easy. A day trip to Guernsey was part of a Jersey holiday. There was always 'a boat in the morning', British Rail mailboats always sailed on time, Condor, then under Island ownership, ran frequent fast hydrofoils to St Malo, Guernsey, Sark and Alderney. Using the Aurigny portacabin at Jersey Airport was easy: checking in, being weighed, boarding the Islander and 15 minutes flying time later, arriving in Guernsey.

Things have changed. Guernsey government shareholders acquired Aurigny in 2003. They ended direct flights from Jersey to Alderney

a decade ago. Early in 2015 Trislander aircraft were retired from its Guernsey to Alderney route. The migration to Dornier aircraft has been problematic. Lack of pilot hours, aircraft certification, technical failures, pay load, fuel availability and ground operational problems, have added to delays and cancellations due to weather.

An improvement is promised, but Alderney people are not holding their breath. They have suffered badly from fewer flights, high fares and unreliability which have been very damaging to life and the economy in Alderney, which is trying to attract much needed new residents and businesses.

This experience should sound a warning bell to Jersey to protect our lifeline links.

In March 2014 Aurigny pulled out of the Guernsey – Jersey route, relying on a code share agreement with Blue Islands, operating fewer flights with larger aircraft. Scheduled flight times no longer suit local business needs. Since the notorious Liberation was brought into service, when Condor foolishly replaced their two reliable vessels, the lottery of arrival and departure times and limited seat availability inter-island, means there is no bad weather back-up.

Until the takeover by Flybe on 6 June this year, the Blue Islands air service to Guernsey was reliable and flexible.

The code share with Aurigny worked well, providing lower through fares to Alderney, easy bookings and flight changes. For the first two months the service deteriorated badly. Flybe failed to communicate with passengers about frequent cancellations at short notice and frequent delays. Many business meetings were disrupted or cancelled. Fares are no longer economical for leisure and sports travel, booking is inflexible and customer service has reduced.

There are big problems in Guernsey airport. Having spent many hours delayed in Guernsey airport during the last year while in transit, I could not fail to notice Aurigny aircraft uneconomically on the ground for hours and frequent delayed flights. I heard numerous grumbles of high air fares from Guernsey folk, who look enviously at Jersey's Easyjet service. Their States injected £25 million of capital into the loss making Airline this year, in an attempt to build routes out of Guernsey. Aurigny's future under Guernsey States stewardship must surely be in doubt.

Years ago we had the Channel Island Transport Authority with political representatives of both Islands. It is essential for States members to get together urgently to develop a strategic plan for both Islands' transport. Unless we can improve inter-island links, how will we ever achieve the internationally important World Heritage Site designation for the Channel Islands with our wealth of heritage, so essential to both islands future tourism?

