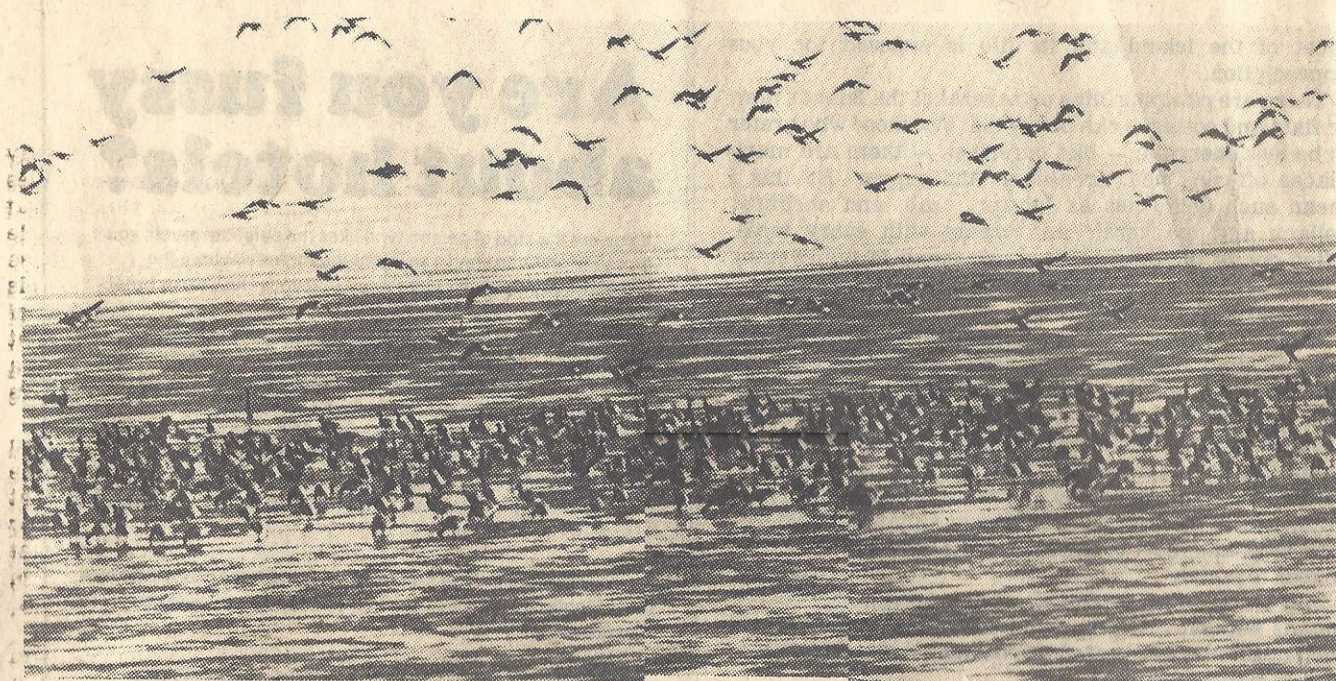


British Isles



Foulness: jetport of tomorrow?

By Jack Goldfarb
Written for
The Christian Science Monitor

Foulness Island, a 6,000-acre flat sprawl on the northern tip of the Thames Estuary, is a familiar name to the British public nowadays.

Although a very restricted few have ever set foot on its muddy, sandy soil, the next decade may bring more than 60 million travelers a year streaming across its lonely rustic landscape. If the British Government carries through its reclamation and development plan, the world's most modern, finest-equipped airport will be built here.

Of course, by that time the quiet country scene will no longer bear the slightest resemblance to a 19th-century Constable painting as it does today.

Bounded on the north by the River Crouch, on the west by the River Roach, and on the southwest by Havengore Creek, shoe-shaped Foulness Island has its sole and heel firmly planted on the solid Maplin and Foulness sandbanks in the North Sea.

It is on these 35 square miles of

offshore sandbanks that the proposed Maplin Airport intends to place its huge double runways, keeping both aircraft noise and jet fuel pollution well away from London and the built-up residential areas of Essex and Kent.

But other kinds of flights have been landing on the Foulness foreshore for

farmers and their visitors, are allowed on the island.

Journalists, closely escorted, occasionally are permitted to look around. Miles of mesh fences fringed with barbed wire weave an un-welcome mat, behind which mysterious towers, sheds, and hangars house their military secrets. It is assumed that nuclear weapons installations are among these forbidding structures.

Gen. Henry Shrapnel, remembered most for inventing the exploding fragmental shell, first acquired a tract of land on Foulness from the government in 1805 to conduct experiments in firing weapons. The area has remained a ballistics training center since, expanding just before World War II to encompass 30,000 acres of North Sea mud flats — the Maplin Sands.

Although there is an air of hush-hush about it all, when the red flags are up and armaments are being tested, there is plenty of noise. Projectiles whine seaward, boom and thud, and columns of smoke dot the horizon.

The government contends that the Foulness site will also provide urban expansion and mass employment in aviation-connected industries throughout Southern Essex, a region largely undeveloped, with many of its workers now tediously commuting to London.

But by 1982 Maplin air travelers are expected to whiz to and from London on a 125-m.p.h. rail link and an arrow-like motorway. The cost of the Maplin project, including an adjacent deep-water seaport, is estimated at £1 billion (\$2.3 billion) minimum, a figure that staggers many Britons.

The sky-high expense, in the midst of Britain's present economic crisis, is a new argument in the 20-year debate over building the airport. The Foulness farmers, naturalists, and Ministry of Defense officials well entrenched on the island have been joined by a considerable number of taxpayers in outspoken opposition.

The newly installed Labour government is on record as favoring scrapping the Maplin airport seaport project. But the opposition Conservatives want a full review of the project, and if Parliament approves the plan, to begin immediate construction.

While the island awaits this decision, the dark-bellied wild geese fly over the gray tidal waters and the lonely mud flats. For the time being, the raucous wildfowl are still rulers of the roost.

ISLAND TREASURES

centuries. The island's name derives from the Saxon words, "headland frequented by birds." As far back as local history remembers, vast flocks of migrating wildfowl, gulls, and wading birds have roosted here, in one of the best natural sanctuaries in Great Britain.

Most numerous of all are the Brent wild geese that summer in Siberia and feed winterlong on the rare zoster grass that thrives on Foulness shores. While the airport planners, assisted by ecologists, are busily devising plans to transplant the zoster grass far up the English east coast so as to lure the birds away from posing a hazard to future air traffic, bird-lovers and conservationists are actively opposing the entire idea of an airport on Foulness Island.

Besides the swarms of migrant birds that gather in great splashes of pointillist color on the drab flatlands, Foulness also has its more permanent inhabitants.

Two large families of farmers comprise most of the tiny Foulness population. They grow an excellent strain of wheat, tall corn, and pasture on their flat, flat ground with not even a hillock in sight.

Their white frame clapboard houses are of the same style that 18th-century Essex emigrants from this region took to America, where it became known as American Colonial architecture. An ancient church, a general store, a school, post office, and two pubs comprise the town of the isolated Foulness civilian community.

But Foulness today, as it has been for almost 170 years, is mainly occupied by the British military. The guardians of the highly secret Proof and Experimental Establishment, operated by the Ministry of Defense, see to it that only holders of special passes, which includes the Foulness

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Future of Foulness Island still up in the air as 20-year debate over building an airport on one of the best natural bird sanctuaries in Britain continues.

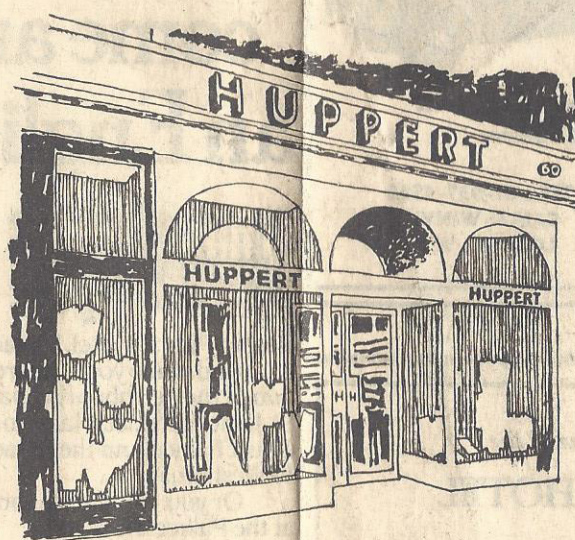
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