

The Gleneagles Story, Parts 1 and 2

1. Gander Lake or Botwood: The Seaplane Base Debate
2. Examining Property Ownership and Tenancy

By Darrell Hillier
2019-04-11

<http://crossroadsoftheworld.ca/>

Part 1. The Seaplane Base Debate

In August 1935, British officials Ivor McClure and Maurice Banks carried out aerial surveys in Newfoundland for a seaplane base and land aerodrome for a proposed transatlantic air service, with the opening stage being flight experimentation. The pair ultimately recommended the sheltered harbour at Botwood for seaplanes and a plateau north of Gander Lake adjacent the railway known as Hattie's Camp for an aerodrome. Gander Lake itself they recommended as an emergency alternate to Botwood.

At that time, flying boats offered the most practical means of crossing the Atlantic and introducing a scheduled air service, so Botwood became the immediate focal point. Accommodations were arranged for ground engineers and crews, and the seaport equipped with motor launches, moorings, and temporary buoys. In July 1937, the British carrier Imperial Airways (IA) and Juan Trippe's Pan American Airlines (PAA) carried out the first in a series of experimental transatlantic crossings between Botwood and Foynes in Ireland. The flying boat flight trials continued into 1938 and 1939, but not during the winter months.

Due to the project's experimental nature, the British Air Ministry had insisted early on that expenditures on permanent works at Botwood be kept to a minimum. The ministry's budgetary restraints also included Gleneagles on Gander Lake, selected as Botwood's poor weather alternate, and in 1937, likewise equipped with moorings, buoys, a motor launch, wireless and meteorological equipment, and eventually a slipway, boathouse, and staff house (moorings were placed at King's Cove on the lake, and temporary moorings at Gleneagles). As the flight trials continued, and successfully so, airline and Air Ministry officials debated over whether the principal base at Botwood or the auxiliary site at Gleneagles should be the primary and permanent seaplane base in Newfoundland. "It is possible," reported C.J. Galpin, Deputy Director of Civil Aviation at the Air Ministry, "that experience will show the desirability of reversing the order of importance of the two flying boat bases."

Financially, it was a toss-up. Initial estimates had the Air Ministry committed to spending \$26,521 to prepare the auxiliary site at Gleneagles, and \$105,732 at Botwood, with that

figure dropping to \$96,382 if the Newfoundland government arranged temporary accommodations aboard the steamship *Argyle*, thus eliminating the need to construct living quarters. To modify Gleneagles as a principal flying boat base with a proper slipway, road to the new aerodrome, boathouse, workshops, hangar, and water reservoir required an additional \$197,560 for a total expenditure of \$224,081. Retaining its status as the principal base, Botwood would still need a hangar and water reservoir at an estimated \$110,000 for a total expenditure of \$215,732. Of course, these were preliminary estimates and expenditures were bound to change as things evolved.

Several weeks after the first experimental crossings in July 1937, PAA asked IA for its views on changing the alighting area from Botwood to Gander Lake. From the data then collected, both airlines preferred to continue using Botwood, saying it was easier to approach than Gander Lake and less restricted in certain directions. This held true day or night, regardless of weather. The one point in favour of Gander Lake, said IA manager Lieutenant Colonel Harold Burchall, was its close proximity to the developing aerodrome. The Air Ministry likewise shared these views, but the matter was far from settled.

The British had now designated the unfinished aerodrome at Hattie's Camp as the administrative headquarters of the transatlantic organization in Newfoundland. This meant erecting an administration building and moving the main organization, including control, wireless, and meteorological services, from Botwood to the new airport. With this in mind, Squadron Leader H.A.L. Pattison, the ministry's air liaison officer in Newfoundland, made a case for Gander Lake as the principal flying boat base and Botwood as the emergency alternate. Botwood "is undoubtedly an ideal location for flying boats," Pattison admitted in his report to the Air Ministry late in 1937, but in his estimation, "it is difficult to see how" all the services "could be carried out from one point, with the landing bases situated 50 miles apart with no direct means of transport." A railway speeder or motor launch could take three hours to get a control officer to Botwood when the need arose, but the greatest difficulty, he stressed, lay in passing meteorological information to the pilots. The pilots were also required to study the weather maps, which might oblige "the meteorological office to duplicate the staff with the consequent increase in wireless staff at Botwood to receive direct the same information as is received at the airport." The information could be sent by teleprinter, Pattison added, but with subsequent delay and the need for a separate circuit.

Furthering his case, Pattison deferred to three pilots with IA and PAA, all of whom considered Gander Lake suitable based on their aerial observations. Captain Powell with IA had examined the lake too, and landed there in the flying boat *Cambria*. "Powell formed the opinion," said Pattison, "that the area was superior to 90% of flying boat bases now in general use." Still, not everyone agreed. Pattison had examined the area in July 1937 with PAA's operations officer who, although satisfied with the area, expressed concern with the height of the surrounding hills. To Pattison's knowledge, the only dissenting voice with regards to the possibilities of Gander Lake was a Colonel Lake with the Standard Oil Company. After visiting the lake, the colonel supposedly expressed the opinion that Botwood was far superior and said as much to PAA officials in New York, but the extent of his examination was unknown to Pattison who did not speak directly with the man.

Pattison's missive gave pause for thought and prompted J.J.W. Herbertson, Assistant Director of Overseas Civil Aviation at the Air Ministry, to suggest that the ministry reconsider its decision to make Botwood a permanent flying boat base. The matter, he proposed, "should be left an open question" until the airlines had gained more experience and a better understanding of the characteristics of each landing site. "Better to run the risk of a reproach that we do not know our own minds than to adhere to a decision which might ultimately turn out to be the wrong one," Herbertson rationalized. The Air Ministry and Sir Wilfred Woods, Newfoundland Commissioner for Public Utilities, concurred, and at a meeting in London in January 1938, decided to postpone a final decision until year's end. Botwood, they further agreed, would continue as the principal, albeit temporary, flying boat base in Newfoundland for the 1938 programme.

Management at IA recognized the advantages of a centralized service, but like PAA, still expressed little doubt that Botwood was far better for large, heavily loaded transoceanic aircraft. The recurrent criticism against Gander Lake was its high surrounding hills, which "might very well produce turbulent air conditions," said PAA's chief engineer. In any event, it was possible too, that with the anticipated introduction of suitable landplanes, the transatlantic service would require neither.

Thereafter, debate on the matter seems to have waned. Botwood remained the site endorsed by PAA and IA, both steadfast that the flying advantages outweighed any disadvantages associated with the separation from services at the land aerodrome.¹ When the year 1939 opened, the uncertainty of future operations meant status quo with existing arrangements. At the new landplane aerodrome, now called Newfoundland Airport, Pattison had arranged for operations and meteorological staff to travel to Botwood by train and motor launch whenever flying boats were scheduled to arrive, or to use one of the internal (Newfoundland government) air service aircraft. The latter was especially useful for last minute conveyance of staff, more especially "the forecast officer who may have to draw his final map before a flight on information received at the airport." Provisions had been made too, said Pattison, to station a detachment of wireless staff at Botwood throughout the summer, while the officer-in-charge of the meteorological section was making similar arrangements. "Only experience can show," cautioned Pattison, "whether this is going to be workable, depending upon the flight activities at each place."

The vexed question of Gander Lake verses Botwood had also caught the attention of Ireland's T.J. O'Driscoll with the Department of Industry and Commerce, Transport and Marine Branch. When he inquired of this in July 1939, Herbertson replied that this "old question" had been left in abeyance and unsettled. Untried winter operations were on O'Driscoll's mind too, and Herbertson admitted that his interest in the matter had since "died down on being told by operations people that the point is academic." Even if the fresh waters of Gander Lake were ice free, advised operations, a flying boat would be

¹ Despite IA's stated preference for Botwood over Gander Lake, when Air Ministry officials and Woods met again in London in March 1939, they made no decision between the two because IA had requested the matter remain open.

unable to take off “since before it had finished its run its tail would be heavy with ice formed from throw up spray.”

Two months later, the question of Gander Lake verses Botwood became academic too, when war was declared and the flight trials suspended, but the flying boats were soon back as PAA, British Overseas Airways Corporation (formerly IA), and American Export Airlines began transoceanic operations. With no scheduled transatlantic passenger service as such due to the war, these airlines operated under government contract, carrying cargo, mail, diplomatic passengers, and senior military personnel. Botwood continued as the primary flying boat base.

Part 2. Property Ownership and Tenancy

As a continuation, part 2 focuses specifically on the property at Gleneagles, the legal confusion surrounding ownership and tenancy, and the postwar disposal of buildings.

It happened that Robin G. Reid, owner/operator of the Gleneagles Hotel, a tourist lodge located at the selected site, had title to the land recommended for the alternate seaplane base. After some back-and-forth negotiations during the first half of 1937, government and Reid reached a deal. Reid declined to sell the land, but agreed to lease the required acreage and provide right-of-way to the nearby railway for one dollar per annum (Reid had built the road from Gleneagles to the railway and asked only for assistance in its upkeep). In return, government agreed to let Reid provide the meals for their staff at daily and monthly rates, with an option to purchase buildings at the site should the operation cease, for one-third the appraised value. In the event that his hotel ceased supplying meals, ground rent would increase to \$40 per annum. Thereafter, Gleneagles was equipped with a wharf, slipway, and boathouse for a passenger motor launch. For accommodations, and because Reid could not guarantee the required lodging for twelve, government erected its own two-storey staff house, complete with living room, lavatories, bedrooms, office space, linen- and coatrooms, and a cellar. For a salary, Reid supervised the construction and handled the care and maintenance of the staff house and motor launch.

With the base being a seasonal operation and few flights expected during the experimental stage, Reid soon proposed that government allow him to occupy the staff house for his own personal and business use. In return, Reid agreed to maintain the building and guarantee its availability for staff and aircrew when the need arose. Government was receptive, especially in light of its infrequent use, and in December 1937, negotiated a separate, one-year lease with rent for the building set at \$225 per annum, paid in three equal installments of \$75, due on the first days of August, September, and October. When required in connection with seaplane flights, board and lodging for staff was set at \$65 per month, with lesser daily and weekly rates. The first lease covered the period June 1938 to May 1939. Government agreed to notify Reid on or before 1 January 1939 if the lease was not to be renewed, and subsequently extended the lease for another year on the same terms, set to expire on 1 June 1940.

The 1940 expiration date came and went with no request from Reid for an extension; not that it mattered. With the war underway and increased activity anticipated at the Newfoundland Airport, officials advised Reid that government would not renew the lease. It is possible, said Raymond Manning, Secretary for Public Works, that “the accommodation at Gleneagles may be required at any time to relieve pressure on the Airport.” Additionally, airport staff had requested the beds and bedding at the staff house as an emergency supply. As for Reid, he had apparently shut down his entire operation at Gleneagles in 1940 and moved elsewhere.

In April 1941, following negotiations between Canada and Newfoundland, the RCAF assumed control of Gander airport (formerly Newfoundland Airport), Botwood seaplane base, and Gleneagles. The Canadians had an engineer survey Gleneagles for shore facilities and a railway spur line for a potential seaplane station; however, Ottawa deferred the project. Instead, the Canadians made some minor alterations to the staff house and used the site during the war as a rest camp for their officers.

In July 1944, the RCAF wrote Squadron Leader H.A.L. Pattison, Newfoundland director of civil aviation, for clarification on the lease arrangement between government and Reid on the land they now occupied (By assuming control of Gleneagles, the RCAF also took over the lease). Pattison came to discover that the \$40 per annum for ground rent as agreed to in 1937 had gone unpaid for several years. Newfoundland subsequently covered the arrears for the period 1 July 1938 to 16 April 1941, and Canada from 17 April 1941 to 30 June 1944. It took the Canadians a year to issue a cheque, by which time more rent was due. To avoid further delays and break the lease agreement, which allowed Reid to re-enter the property, Newfoundland covered the rent for the period 1 July 1944 to 30 June 1945 (later reimbursed by Canada).

By agreement, Newfoundland re-established control of Gander, Botwood, and Gleneagles at midnight on 31 March 1946. The Gleneagles site, and staff house in particular, soon caught the attention of a number of aspiring civilian entrepreneurs. The location appealed to former RAF pilot, Newfoundlander Edgar Baird, as a personal residence and eventually tourist or sportsmen’s hotel, from where he hoped to operate a light seaplane. Government was hamstrung, however, because the terms of the original lease held that the buildings, if no longer required, be conveyed to the landlord (Reid) for a price, likewise determined in accordance with the terms set out in the lease. Ultimately, advised the secretary for Public Works in September 1946, these stipulations precluded government from subletting to Baird and others interested in the property as a tourist resort, including Harvey and Company, and Rex Nicholl, owner of the Blue Puttee restaurant in St. John’s. Government recognized Gleneagles’ tourism potential and determined that the only workable solution was to sell the staff house to Reid and advise any prospective tenant to approach him directly.

In May 1947, with Rex Nicholl still interested and contemplating buying the land from Reid, secretary Manning requested R.A. Bradley, chief engineer at Gander, to have the staff house appraised. Bradley visited Gleneagles and valued the building and boathouse at \$12,000 collectively, but also discovered that culprits had stolen a Kohler lighting plant

and removed linoleum from the staff house. Nicholl's, apparently, soon lost interest in the property.

Several months later, director Pattison made a surprising discovery. Reid, it transpired, had originally obtained the land in question under an agricultural lease and not fee simple (absolute ownership), as had been the impression all along. This changed everything. The five-year lease, issued in 1933, required that Reid apply for a grant at the end of the term, provided he had complied with the conditions of the lease. Reid had not done so, said the secretary for Natural Resources, so "no grant was issued and the land was considered by us to have reverted automatically to the Crown." Reid, he revealed, "has had no title to the land from us since 1938." Manning then sought legal advice from the Justice Department, which concluded in March 1948 that Public Works could consider Reid's agricultural lease as terminated and could continue to hold the land without rent. With no right or title to the land, the private buildings belonging to Reid, neglected and of little value, reported Manning, also came into the possession of the Crown.

Word of this development quickly spread and others came forward, interested in establishing a tourism operation at Gleneagles, but there were further complications. Previous to issuing Reid his agricultural lease in 1933, Bowater's pulp and paper held a timber licence for the area. Government regulations stipulated that Crown Lands held under such a license could be granted for the purposes of agriculture and mining only. As an alternate approach, Public Works tried and failed to get title to the land from the current administrators, the Department of Natural Resources. The Crown Lands Act applied only to "unoccupied Crown lands," explained the secretary for Natural Resources, which defined the land leased from Reid by Public Works as "occupied Crown land." The stalemate continued.

In April 1949, H.A.L. Pattison, now manager of Gander airport, advised government that "the use of Gleneagles has long since lost all its operational value," and suggested that the buildings "be disposed of to avoid further deterioration." Worse yet, reports from Glenwood told that the windows, doors, baths, showers, light fixtures, and radiators had been removed from the staff house, and that the boathouse had been stripped of roofing and clapboard. Following an investigation by the local Newfoundland Ranger, multiple convictions were recorded and fines and compensation imposed by the magistrate at Grand Falls.

Government put the matter to rest late in 1951 and placed the buildings on tender, to be removed within 30 days of sale. In January 1952, E.S. Spencer, Minister of Public Works, received a joint submission from Miss Z. Steele and Mrs. Murphy of Murphy and Steele sawmill in Appleton. The pair placed a bid of \$350 and stated their intention to donate the lumber to the community of Appleton for a school. Spencer was supportive of the initiative and suggested that government "will be inclined to sell the property to you, in view of the very generous thought you have in mind about the school." He was right, and word shortly arrived that the Department of Supply had accepted their tender. "Anything we can do for the children of this community shall not go undone," wrote the grateful pair to Spencer in

reply to the news. Appleton would have its school, and government had finally rid itself of the legal and administrative confusion that was Gleneagles.

Note: the documents consulted for part 1 are located at the British National Archives under AVIA 2/1943, parts 1 and 2, "Survey of Newfoundland for suitable air base for transatlantic service." The documents consulted for part 2 are located in the "Civil Aviation" (GN 4/5) files at the Rooms Provincial Archives.



Staff house plans by Newfoundland Airport Chief Engineer T.A. Hall, circa March 1937. The Rooms Provincial Archives.