

Useful Facts



There is a cap of 480,000 flights permitted to use Heathrow. In recent years the actual number of flights has hovered between 473,000 and 476,000.

Heathrow is the busiest international airport in the world. One of the reasons why it is so busy is that it is very cheap for airlines to land there, much cheaper than Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Tokyo or JFK in New York, and 50% cheaper than Manchester and Birmingham. The reason for this is the odd way that landing charges are calculated. The more income an airport has from other sources, the lower the landing charges. Heathrow's are thus very low because of all the money it generates from its retail outlets.

ILS (Instrument Landing System) is the name given to the aircraft's final descent path. Air Traffic Controllers, who are responsible for actually landing the planes at Heathrow, must ensure that an aircraft locks on to the ILS some way before it lands. Planes coming into land at Heathrow from the east used to lock on over Barnes, but now can lock on as far east as Greenwich. This is what has caused the real problems in South and East London in recent years. The ILS has also been extended into Berkshire, and even Oxfordshire, when planes land from the west.

Wind direction has been important for aircraft. Planes generally land into the wind. Since the west wind prevails in Britain for at 70/75% of the time, planes coming into Heathrow have had to fly over London. This is known as westerly operations. Westerly preference is also used at Heathrow. That means that the policy is still to land planes from the east even if an east wind is blowing, as long as it is not stronger than 5 knots.

Runway Alternation is used at Heathrow. This means that planes use one runway from 7am to 3pm and the other from 3pm to 11.30pm. This is to give relief to people living under the flight path. But it doesn't apply to areas east of about Fulham/Putney or and not at all to areas west of Heathrow. And it doesn't apply anywhere between 6am and 7am, though this may change.

Night flights are limited in number. "Night" is defined as between 11.30pm and 6am. But an experiment with night flights has brought night aircraft noise to many more areas of London in the last decade. See 'Aircraft Noise at Night' Briefing Sheet.