

Passenger numbers soar as state's gateway comes of age

NEALE MAYNARD

WHEN Charles Kingsford Smith, Charles Ulm and their crew touched down at Brisbane's Eagle Farm Airport in Brisbane in 1928 (pictured), 26,000 people turned out to welcome the arrival of the Southern Cross – the first plane to fly the Pacific.

For context, that was roughly 10 per cent of the city's population at the time.

Later visits by "celebrity" aircraft – the Concorde in 1996, and the first Airbus A380 in 2005 – drew large crowds, but nothing like the masses that turned out for the Southern Cross arrival.

The jet age, and affordable air travel, had seen the city's

fascination with aviation fade and the airport had been largely relegated to a place where planes were serviced, holidays began and ended, and where you could buy duty-free booze.

As a piece of Brisbane infrastructure, it was important, but as a city, we probably didn't understand just how important.

That started to change in the late-1980s, when a new domestic terminal opened.

Then prime minister Bob Hawke opened the facility in 1988, declaring that the Commonwealth's \$425 million investment had delivered "an air terminal capable of handling passenger traffic into the 21st century.

"Up to 10,000 people an

hour, or seven million passengers a year, can be accommodated comfortably here," Mr Hawke said.

"The people of Queensland and their visitors will, from now on, be able to take advantage of an airport as good as any in the world," Mr Hawke announced.

The then prime minister's vision for Brisbane's growth, while seemingly bold at the time, was ultimately dwarfed by reality.

Last year, passenger numbers through the domestic terminal hit 17.5 million, with another six million or so leaving or arriving through the international airport.

Total passenger numbers were more than 23.6 million.



That figure is forecast to fly through 30 million between 2025 and 2029, and cross the 50 million benchmark in 2039-40, according to the Brisbane Airport Corporation's

2020 Master Plan preliminary draft summary.

Some of that growth will be driven by new markets and new air links to cities well beyond the non-stop reach of

most airliners just a few years ago. From April next year, Brisbane will have a direct connection to Chicago via Qantas's 787-9 Dreamliners, "hub buster" aircraft, which can fly almost 15,000km and allow airlines to bypass traditional long-haul hubs such as Los Angeles.

Qantas has been testing the range of the jets with a series of ultra-long-haul flights like a pioneering New York-Sydney marathon under Project Sunrise – an initiative that may eventually further fuel Brisbane Airport's growth by linking it to a range of untapped destinations.

NEALE MAYNARD WAS THE COURIER-MAIL'S AVIATION EDITOR FROM 1995-2002