

Coming to a village near you? The new motorways in the sky

Flight paths at the busiest 20 airports are being transformed to save fuel and cut delays, but people living underneath fear increased noise and pollution



[Nicholas Hellen](#), Transport Editor
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For the first time since the golden age of aviation 70 years ago, the airspace over Britain is changing — to create 25-mile motorways in the sky.

A reorganisation is necessary because aircraft rarely take the shortest route between two airports, often zig-zagging along the way because of restrictions that have grown up thanks to vested interests and a lag in adapting to new technology.

The system was designed in the 1950s for aircraft that have long since retired, such as the VC-10, the Vickers Vanguard and Hawker Sidley Trident. They used ground-based navigation which is now redundant. Modern satellite systems and automation mean aircraft can be packed in on much more closely defined routes.



The new flight path for Gatwick could pass over Hever Castle, near Edenbridge, Kent — the childhood home of Anne Boleyn

Flight paths for the busiest 20 airports in the country could be transformed so that aircraft could have their descents automated along channels about 480 metres wide. The plans could save time and fuel, reduce delays and cut noise for many villages and towns under flight paths. But for those living underneath the new jet highways, the fear is that the noise pollution could be devastating. Plans for the initial stage of this reorganisation, for Gatwick, were released earlier this month, giving the first insight in to how the changes may affect those living near airports.



Campaigners say aircraft heading to and from Gatwick could fly lower for longer

Presently aircraft approaching Gatwick come from a range of directions to start their descent at 7,000ft, about 12 miles to the east.

But under the new plans they could start 25 miles out, further to the south, keeping traffic to one long channel. This is likely to mean, though, that there would be more aircraft at a lower altitude. Campaigners say aircraft will fly lower for longer, creating more noise and meaning the areas under the new flight paths will have more regular air traffic.

Sally Pavey, who chairs Cagne, a group which campaigns about noise from Gatwick, was alarmed to see proposals for new routes overflying the Horsham and Copthorne areas to the south of the airport. She said: “This comes with no compensation, no consideration to the impact it will have on home life or house value.”



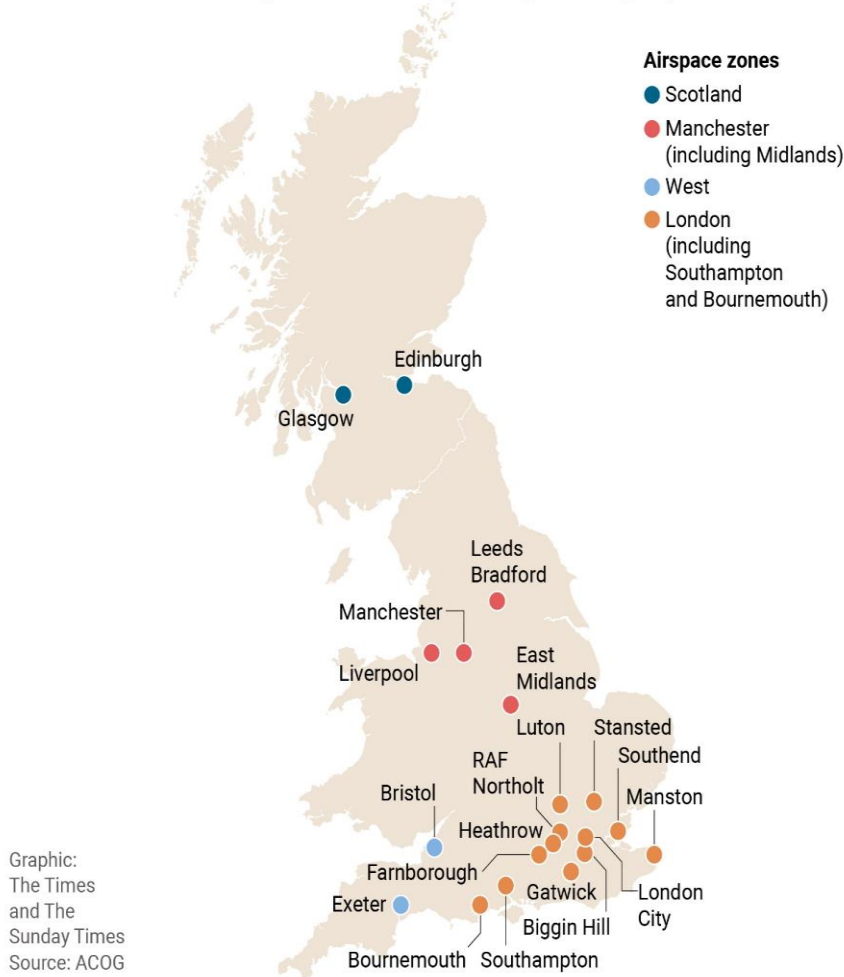
Sally Pavey has expressed concerns about the new route over Horsham

Another campaigner, Charles Lloyd, highlighted the threat to Cowden, a village in the High Weald area of natural beauty. He estimated the frequency of overhead aircraft could increase from one every 15 to 20 minutes in the summer peak to one every 100 seconds.

The new flight path could pass over [Hever Castle](#), near Edenbridge, Kent, the childhood home of Anne Boleyn.

Skyway shake-up

The 20 airports affected by changes to flight paths



Its custodian, Duncan Leslie, has already moved out of the grounds after 15 years partly because of the noise from aircraft. He fears much more regular traffic, which could affect the number of visitors and the opportunities to make money from filming.

Leslie said: “When you hear the aeroplanes you can’t really escape them. Things keep you awake and the aeroplanes are particularly good at doing that. That bothers me, as it does some of our guests, and I dare say some of our guests might choose not to come again if they think there might be more planes.”

The Civil Aviation Authority has set up an industry body, Airspace Change Organising Group (Acog), to oversee the shake-up. The first phase will reorganise Scotland and the London terminal control area, which also includes Heathrow, Stansted and airports as far away as Bournemouth across the south of England.

Planners for Gatwick have said they are calculating how many extra households are likely to be troubled by aircraft noise in different situations. So far, those options affecting the greatest number are being ruled out.



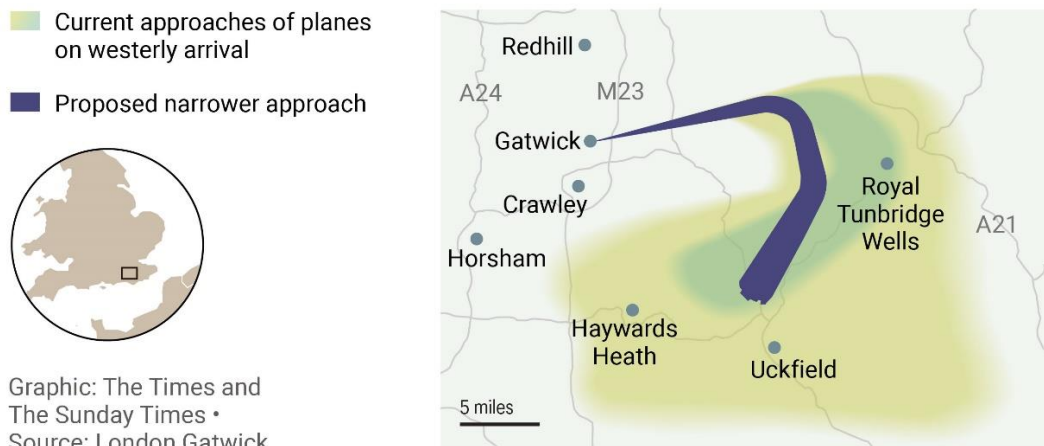
Hever Castle's custodian, Duncan Leslie, has already moved out of the grounds in part because of the noise

Campaigners say that at the moment it is difficult for the public to have a meaningful involvement because an official consultation does not begin until next year and the maps produced by Gatwick showing possible flight paths do not make clear how many aircraft would pass overhead, nor at what altitude or how loud they would be; indeed, they blur out the names of settlements on the ground.

Leslie said the process appeared to be intentionally obscure: “I’m sure they are thinking if we do this, [locals] will give up after a while, because they’ve got other things to do, which is kind of true.”

The plan for Gatwick is particularly significant because it is also [seeking to add a second runway](#), to be in use by 2030.

The Gatwick flight path



While the proposed changes to the airspace used for take-off and landing are still in the early stages, some remarkable work is under way for aircraft at higher altitude. There have been changes to transatlantic flight plans. The old system sent planes on long detours — in one case of 578 miles — because aircraft could be plotted only every 14 minutes in the middle of the ocean and had to be kept 40 nautical miles apart for safety reasons. But with modern technology they can be monitored every eight seconds, meaning they can fly closer together and on more direct routes that make better use of prevailing winds.

A great deal is at stake for aviation, regarded as the villain of climate change for its high-carbon emissions. The administrative task of redesigning airspace to make flights more efficient is much simpler than introducing alternative types of fuels. Yet progress has been tortuously slow. There was a hiatus during the pandemic, and while the changes are forecast to come into force at Gatwick by late 2026, completing the process is expected to take until at least 2033.

Now the plans for Gatwick have been released, campaigners in other parts of the country have begun to worry how the reorganisation will affect them. Paul Beckford, co-ordinator for residents affected by Heathrow flight paths, said: “Airspace modernisation is going to impact millions of people around the country and the vast majority are simply not aware that the infrastructure above their heads is about to undergo a once-in-a-generation change. “Tens of thousands of people have bought or may be buying a home over the next few years as these changes are implemented, without any knowledge of the potential economic, environmental and health blight that will be caused by noise pollution.”

The CAA said in a statement that it would “deliver quicker, quieter and cleaner journeys and more capacity.” ACOG said compensation would be considered for residents “where they experience significantly increased overflight”.