How important was Croydon Airport during WW2?

Croydon Airport became operational as London Terminal Aerodrome in March of 1920 following the closure of Hounslow Heath's temporary aerodrome and it was Britain's only interwar airport. It was opened on a 1915 World War One airfield, on Plough Lane (now Mollison's drive) after the RAF had left the area. Croydon Airport was important during World War Two, for a number of reasons, including its role in preparing for war, its role in the Battle of Britain and its role as an RAF Transport Command.

The airport was one of the most important airports of its time as it operated the most routes in the world of any airport and the most frequently. It operated lines from Croydon to Paris, Amsterdam, Cape Town India and other places. The airport itself was the joining together of two separate aerodromes, Waddon and Beddington, on opposite sides of Plough Lane. It was also the place where many record-breaking pilots would take off from and return to such as Amy Johnson on her flight to Australia, and Charles Lindberg's solo flight across the Atlantic, both of which saw immense numbers of people visiting to see these remarkable feats, with famous visitors to the airport including, John F Kennedy, Winston Churchill, who had flying lessons there, and even the king. The airport received many passengers, and each year from 1931 to 1935 this increased with figures of 45,000 in 1931 which increased threefold to 120,500 in 1935, perhaps due to the inevitable outbreak of war and more people wanting to leave mainland Europe. Just before war broke out on the 30th August 1939 Croydon airport reverted back to its original purpose - a military aircraft base. On 1st September, imperial airlines moved its fleet to Whitchurch, Bristol, and RAF Croydon fell under the control of 11 Group, fighter Command. Over the next few months, during the 'phoney war', many squadrons and aircraft arrived at RAF Croydon or transited through. On the 2nd September, the first arrived with the No.615 Squadron arriving in Gloucester gladiators followed by the No.17 and No.3 squadrons in Hawker Hurricanes. The No.111 Squadron was the only one to remain at RAF Croydon and was involved in the first major engagement of the Battle of Britain, with the Luftwaffe just off the coast to protect a British shipping convoy. Thus Croydon Airport was a major factor in the start of the Battle of Britain and was to become a key asset in the war effort.

Another reason why Croydon Airport was important during the Second World War was because of the adaptation of civil aviation at the airport. The production of an "Appreciation of the Employment of Civil Aircraft" by the Director-General of Civil Aviation as a method of combating Britain's ill-preparation of war first circulated in October 1938 and was a full review of British aviation, contrasting details on 19 private companies, every available aircraft, pilots, engineers and other related areas. It was seen that civil aviation should not be subsidiary to the RAF and consequently, any civil, public is club flying was prohibited without a special permit. The evacuation

of civil aviation from Croydon airport included that of several major airline companies including Imperial Airlines which was moved to Bristol and this ultimately culminated in the total evacuation of 18,000 people from Croydon on the 4th September 1939. This makes Croydon Airport important as this allowed for the transformation of it into RAF Croydon, a key RAF base during the Battle of Britain. The first saturations arrived at RAF Croydon on the 2nd September 1939 and from then it became a common place for squadrons to stay or transit through. Croydon Airport is further important due to the changes in civil aviation such as the prohibiting of aircraft from flying over Eastern areas of the UK as it allowed for the RAF to be able to manage the skies of the UK in order to better detect enemy aircraft. Therefore, Croydon airport is important as a result of the adaptation of civil aviation to military aviation, providing Britain with a key base for the Second World War.

Croydon Airport was important during WW2 was because of its significant role in the Battle of Britain. After the deadly events of Black Thursday, fighting at Croydon intensified, with 111 squadron being scrambled to meet 200 Dornier aircraft and Me 109 fighter escort planes which were on course to hit Dungeness. Flight Lieutenant Henry H. Ferriss throttled into the leading German plane, causing a massive explosion and debris disrupted the German formation. This goes to show the significance of utilising Croydon as a base for operating flights in the South East of England as it helped to successfully defend major coastal towns as well as London. Another example of this was when Kenley airfield Wing commander Thomas Prickman ordered a "survival scramble" where 111 squadron from Croydon and 64 and 615 squadron from Kenley were scrambled intercept the incoming Germans. Despite the loss of Flight Lieutenant Stanley Connors who was hit, the 3 squadrons were largely successful in defending Kenley, so much so that the target was changed to Croydon (which suffered damage although it could have been more severe). This helped defend a key airfield and was significant in reducing the impact of the German Luftwaffe on London's air defences which were in Croydon's, Kenley's and Biggin Hill's hands. This shows how Croydon Airfield was vital to the defence of London, Croydon and played a major role in reducing damage caused during the Battle of Britain.

After the end of the Battle of Britain (October 31st, 1940), Dowding's squadrons were severely depleted, and the surviving pilots were suffering from severe fatigue, with losses increasing per day. The Luftwaffe was concentrating their destructive efforts on Fighter Command's bases, and as such, from 1941, significant building work took place to convert Croydon RAF into a fully operational RAF airfield. Additions include runway extensions, a perimeter track, and air raid sleeping quarters. By March 1943, RAF Transport Command was formed comprising of RAF Ferry Command and the current RAF's aviation. RAF Croydon became a key RAF transport command airfield,

transporting thousands of troops to & from mainland Europe. RAF Croydon would go on to be used as a base of many operations, including but not limited to 110 Wing RAF – formed in December 1943, with its' main base of operations in RAF Croydon – as well as 147 Squadron, and its sister squadron, 167 Squadron. Thanks to this, the threat from the Luftwaffe had diminished over Britain and Northern France by mid 1944; leading into the end of the war. After the end of WWII, the role of Croydon Airport was overall limited. This was due to the expansion of South and urbanisation around the airport, and there was very little space for the airport to grow. Therefore, Heathrow was designed to replace it, as it was in a much more rural area at the time, and there was more space for it to grow. Croydon Airport still did return back to civil control from the RAF in February 1946; but its declining need and availability led to its eventual formal closure in 1959; after 44 years of continual and respected service throughout both peace time and war.

It is clear that Croydon Airport was very important during WW2. It played a leading role in aviation developments before the war that helped prepare it and Britain for war. Then during the war it was important during the Battle of Britain and the remaining years of the war. Despite being closed and forgotten by many people locally it deserves a more appreciation for the significant role it played during WW2.

Bibliography:
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