"I think if you said 'airline captain', you're probably not visualising me" - Five women in aviation talk about forging careers and breaking down barriers with hundreds of young people at Manchester Airport

Friday 6 March, 2026

Five women in various roles across the aviation industry spoke to an audience of hundreds of young people about careers in the sector as part of a one-off special episode of Manchester Airport's official podcast.

The one-off episode of 'Manchester: Your Airport, MAN' was recorded in front of a live audience at the airport's inaugural Aviation Careers Festival last week, with hundreds of secondary school and college age pupils in attendance - and is being released today in audio and video format to mark International Women's Day on Sunday 8 March.

Compered by former BBC Radio 6 Music, Key 103 and Rock FM host Hywel Evans, the episode takes on a Q&A format - with pupils in the audience putting their questions to the panel. The women offering their career tips and insights were;

- **Melanie Lawley, Manchester Airport's Head of Airfield Operations.** Melanie joined Manchester Airport in April 2025 and works within the Aerodrome team, with overall responsibility for Airfield Operations, Airfield Control and Airside Bussing teams. Her role covers the management of runways, aircraft movements and day to day airside operations.
- **Kate Wild - Air Traffic Controller.** Kate has worked for air traffic control operator NATS for 19 years, starting her career at Manchester Airport straight out of the training college, with 3.5 of those years spent working in the Middle East. On a day-to-day basis, she works as a Tower and Approach Controller while also managing the operational ATC team on shift.
- **Lauren Wigglesworth - Pilot.** Lauren is a Captain at Virgin Atlantic, having joined the airline in 2016. She began her Virgin Atlantic career flying the iconic Boeing 747, before moving onto the Airbus A330 fleet in 2021. Over the past few months, Lauren has successfully completed her command course and officially took up her role as Captain on 2 January. Alongside her flying career, she is also a mum to a five-year-old child, proudly showing that it's possible to build a successful aviation career while raising a family.
- **Laura Moskal-Beresford - Cabin Crew.** Laura has been at Virgin Atlantic for 15 years and has taken on a number of roles beyond flying, including volunteering with the *Flying Without Fear* team, supporting guests with severe anxiety about flying. She has also collaborated with British makeup brand Illamasqua on the launch of the 'Virgin' lipstick in 2014, created to coincide with the airline's Vivienne Westwood uniform launch.
- **Abi Owen-Hodgson - Apprentice Aircraft Engineer.** While many of her friends are away at university, 18-year-old Abi, from Liverpool, is already earning, learning and building a career in the aviation sector. Having joined easyJet's Aeronautical Engineering Apprenticeship scheme last year, Abi is now part of a team of 20 apprentices learning their trade over the course of a two-year programme.

A huge range of questions was put to the panel, from how to get into an aviation career, to how an Air Traffic Controller would handle an unidentified aircraft, and which airports are the flight crews' favourites to fly into.

There was also plenty of discussion on efforts being made to address gender imbalances in an industry that has historically had ingrained gender stereotypes - only around five per cent of commercial pilots are women, for example - but all of the panellists affirmed that they had noticed positive changes.

Lauren said: "I think if you said 'airline captain', you're probably not visualising me, so I think I definitely do surprise people. But I've been flying for 20 years, I've flown six different aeroplane types, I have the experience, and I have the knowledge. One of the reasons it's very important for me to be here today is, you can't be what you can't see, and today I hope we're proving that you can be what you want to be."

Melanie added: "To be fair, there are women [employed] in most aspects of an airport - but Airfield Operations does tend to be very male-dominated, and I have been, and still can be the only female in a room at times. But I wouldn't let that put anyone off - no-one's looking at me [saying], 'oh, she's a

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woman'. If you've got the knowledge and the skills and the experience to be able to contribute to the discussions that are going on, that is the most important thing - not what you look like."

And apprentice engineer Abi said: "You don't see too many girls but there are definitely more coming into the industry, which is nice to see - it shouldn't be one gender, it should be a bit of a mix. I do have people ask me sometimes, 'what made you get into this?', but I don't get treated any differently."

The Manchester: Your Airport, MAN podcast launched in 2023 and has now been running for four series, building a listener audience of more than 10,000 and covering topics from holiday trends and new routes to the airport's T2 expansion and community outreach. You can listen on Spotify, Amazon Music and Apple Podcasts among other platforms, and the one-off special International Women's Day episode is also available to watch in video format on YouTube.

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