



PROUD MOMENT: A South African-owned Beechcraft King Air 200 became the first plane to land at the new airstrip in St Helena this week.

First plane touches down at St Helena

HENRI DU PLESSIS

WHILE the first powered aircraft took flight 113 years ago, the first aircraft to touch down on the island of St Helena landed at the island's new airstrip this week.

The historic moment when the South African-owned Beechcraft King Air 200's wheels touched the tarmac on Tuesday at 3.50pm marked the end of an era during which the only contact the island and its inhabitants had with the outside world was by radiotelephone or by sea.

One of the most important roles to be played by aircraft in this distant outpost is to be able to rapidly extract ill or injured people for advanced medical care elsewhere.

In a statement issued by the British-owned island's governor, Mark Capes, the aircraft flew from Namibe in Angola to cross the large stretch of south Atlantic Ocean before landing on the newly completed airstrip.

The completion of the airstrip took many years as construction continued at a pace allowed by the arrival by sea of much of the supplies and machines required for the task.

"Years of planning and thousands of man hours have gone into this moment and to actually see it happen is an immense feeling," said airport project director Janet Lawrence.

"There are so many people we should be thanking, including people who can't be here with us today. It's not over yet – there's still a great deal more to be done – but this event clearly shows we're going in the right direction."

The pilot of the aircraft, Captain Grant Brighton of TAB Charters, praised the quality of the runway.

"It feels fantastic and we're privileged to have flown the first plane to land on St Helena and to be part of your wonderful project," he said.

"The trip over was good. It was interesting landing here, a bit windy on the threshold but a terrific runway, surface, airport and facility."

Watching the landing – together with numerous residents at various vantage points – St Helena councillor Lawson Henry called the arrival of the first aircraft history in the making.

"First of all, this is quite emotional – we've waited so long for this moment and it has finally happened" he said.

Construction company Basil Read's island director, Deon de Jager, said: "It's brilliant – all the hard work has paid off. I'm very proud of what we've achieved – we've actually done it."

Capes congratulated all who worked to make the airstrip a reality.

"Today we witnessed an event that will feature prominently in the history of this island," he said.

"For the airport project, another important piece of the jigsaw has slotted firmly into place. There are a few more vital pieces to be added before the picture is complete.

"When we launched this work almost four years ago, such were the many obstacles to overcome that there were those who doubted that it would succeed and yet, behold, a plane has landed at St Helena airport."