

## BRITISH OVERSEAS AIRWAYS CORPORATION 1940 – 1950 AND ITS LEGACY

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**Abstract**

BOAC was formed in 1939 as a merger of Imperial Airways and British Airways. During the World War the airline operated as directed by the Secretary of State for Air, initially as the transport service for the RAF, with no requirement to act commercially. Sir John Reith, who was Chairman of Imperial Airways and then BOAC until January 1940, laid down the ethos that service to the public rather than profits and dividends should be the driving force for the airline. During the war BOAC operated transatlantic services plus a network of African and Middle Eastern routes centred on Cairo. After the war the airline experienced continuing political interference over routes to be operated and aircraft to be used. It had great difficulty acquiring the American airliners it needed to provide competitive services. The airline set up Aden Airways and Hong Kong Airways, took shareholdings in Middle East Airlines, Cyprus Airways and Gulf Aviation, and set up management contracts with Kuwait Airways and Iraq Airways. In the Far East BOAC became similarly involved with Malayan Airways, Borneo Airways and Fiji Airways. There is a case to be made that the main beneficiaries of BOAC's post imperial activities were the many subsidiary airlines, some of which would develop into the flag carriers of newly independent countries, which were able to exploit the benefits of BOAC's expertise, infrastructure and assets. It is, in the view of the author, one of the best examples of colonial altruism and one which has been an enduring gift from a fading Empire.

**1. Introduction**

BOAC's image in the 1940s versus how its legacy is viewed today is a complete dichotomy. The two could not be more different and it is for this reason that many people have continually been fascinated by its wartime and post-war story.



Figure 1 Better On A Camel

We should ask ourselves how BOAC, particularly in the late 40s, suffered from such an extreme image problem? It was seen by many people to be rather “worthy”, and no matter how hard it tried to be successful it never quite achieved the glamour within the British public eye that Pan American and Air France did within their own countries. It was seen to struggle valiantly against the odds (and the Government in particular) rather than to blossom and this image was perhaps best summarised with the mocking acronym of BOAC (Better On A Camel). And yet in contrast I am sure

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This paper is based on a lecture presented to the Historical Group of the Royal Aeronautical Society on 14 October 2013 by Captain Watson.

that many would consider this to be a very unfair judgment. Indeed the benefit of passing time and our enhanced understanding of the legacy of BOAC have allowed us to view this period of history more kindly than contemporaries and many of us admire its varied achievements that laid the groundwork for future civilian air travel. BOAC has much to be proud of in its legacy and this is perhaps all the more remarkable when one appreciates its rather less auspicious beginnings.

I would argue that the cause for such a dichotomy stems from its inception which thus set the tone for its early story. The former interpretation of weakness and perhaps even ennui is actually one based on ignorance of the times during which the Company came into being. This paper sets out the key narrative of the early BOAC story, picking up the salient turning points for explaining why it was so maligned by those it sought to mollify. By doing so it illustrates the extent of the straitjacket in which BOAC was kept and yet also brings to life some of the intriguing characters who were charged with guiding BOAC with such a limited remit and scope. It goes through the detail of some of the challenges they faced and brings home how the benefit of hindsight once again reveals that the course of events should never be seen as predetermined. These remarkable individuals wove a very careful path in difficult circumstances with no knowledge of how future generations would benefit from their efforts. It was certainly not clear in the 1940s that their work would have such a profound impact and indeed there were many dark periods where the story of BOAC could all have come to naught.

For the author there are a number of reasons why BOAC was so poorly viewed by 1949. The establishment of the company set the tone and yet was compounded by the experience of war, the role of Viscount Knollys, and poor mid-war planning by Government for post-war operations. By the time post-war planning and post-war operations came into being, many viewed BOAC's fate as almost sealed. It would be hard to decide which of these factors may be most to blame for the malaise that afflicted the company although I am sure it will be appreciated that in many ways they were inextricably linked, with one negative experience compounding the next.

## **2. The birth of BOAC**

BOAC was conceived during industrial dispute as the war clouds gathered and actually born in time of war, 1 April 1940. The war was in its "phoney" stage, Germany had still not invaded the Low Countries and France or Denmark and Norway; and yet, the airline was obliged to adopt a war footing from 3 September 1939 with respect to both personnel and flying operations, as well as learning to live as a nationalised Corporation under a coalition government which at one stage preferred the airline to be operationally responsible to the Air Force.

### **2.1 The origins of air transport in Britain**

It is a repetitive story but in order better to understand how all this came about one has to go back in time to the origins of Air Transport in this country and indeed within Europe. We also have to remember that in 1939 airlines had been operating for only 20 years and even then had managed to create and maintain routes within Europe and to far-flung colonies. The second point we should remember is that the development of civil aviation during those early days in the UK was as the result of foresight of individuals rather than Government, in contrast to countries like France, Italy and Germany, and while in 1919 there were already air services of sorts within Europe they were irregular and could not therefore be described as scheduled services.

**Aircraft Transport & Travel Routes from London to Paris, Brussels & Amsterdam, 1919**

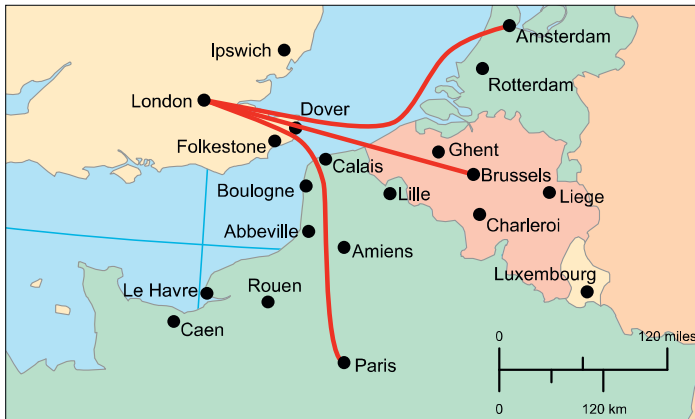


Figure 2 Aircraft Transport and Travel Routes

director of Daimler was George Woods Humphery who would go on to be general manager of Imperial Airways. There was a fifth airline, British Marine Air Navigation, operating between Southampton and Guernsey.

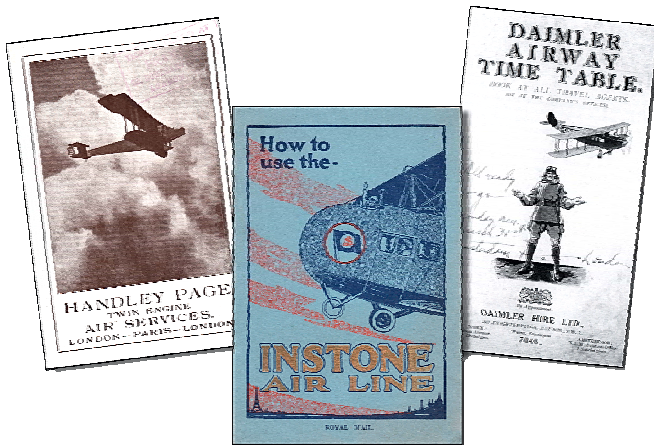


Figure 3 Early European services

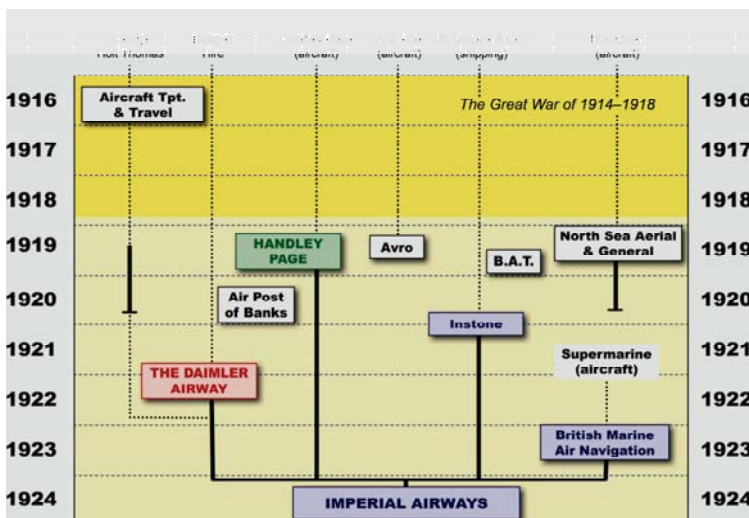


Figure 4 The ancestry of Imperial Airways

The first daily international service was flown by the company founded by George Holt Thomas, Air Transport and Travel, on 25 August 1919 from London to Paris using a D.H.4A. (It has to be added that this service closed down in December 1920).

A week later a second service to Paris was started by Handley Page Air Services followed a few months later by S Instone & Co; finally, a fourth airline, The Daimler Airway, joined them in 1922. Interestingly, the managing

By 1922 there were five airlines on the London to Paris route, two French and three British. All were subsidised to a greater or lesser extent, but survival was precarious and the services were becoming unreliable. In 1923 the UK government was becoming sufficiently concerned that the Secretary of State for Air, Sir Samuel Hoare, decided to set up an inquiry into the future policy for British Air Transport<sup>(1)</sup>.

Chaired by Sir Herbert Hambling, this inquiry came to the conclusion that the four British airlines should be merged to form a single company to be run by private enterprise, albeit still to be subsidised by the Government of the day. The companies in question agreed to the proposals for the formation of an “Imperial Air Transport Company” which would receive a guaranteed subsidy of £1m over 10 years. The new company was formed on 1 April 1924, now to be named Imperial Airways.

The catalyst for expansion for most European airlines during this period was fast communications with the colonies many European countries still possessed; Holland, France and Belgium were good examples of this as was the UK, so though Imperial Airways inherited a route structure within Europe, the main thrust of expansion would be towards Africa and the Far East to India and Australia. Such was the concentration on “Empire routes” that development within Europe was badly neglected and inevitably others cast their eyes in that direction: British Airways Ltd in particular.

## 2.2 British Airways Ltd

Formed by probably one of the most important mergers in British airline history, British Airways Ltd brought together not only a number of airlines, but more importantly, it brought together three men who would later form the backbone of the BOAC Board during the early 1940s and beyond: Pearson, McCrindle and d’Erlanger.

Whitehall Securities was founded in 1907 to handle the business activities of Weetman Dickinson Pearson, who later became 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Cowdray; in 1935 his younger son, Clive Pearson, was Managing Director of Whitehall Securities in which the d’Erlanger Banking House now had a considerable interest. Whitehall also had an interest in Spartan Airlines and Jersey Airways and in April 1935 Whitehall and Jersey Airways were combined to form United Airways. The next airline to join was Hillman’s Airways whose founder was Ted Hillman. However, Hillman’s Airways had become a public Company in December 1934 and control of the company had passed to Whitehall securities. Hillman died very shortly after this and Major Ronald McCrindle became Managing Director of the company.

McCrindle and Pearson were well acquainted with each other and it then became only a matter of time before they came together to form Allied British Airways in September 1935; the name was changed to British Airways Ltd in October and British Continental Airways was absorbed on 1 August 1936 and Crilly Airways a month later.

Meanwhile Imperial Airways was coming under increasing criticism for its lack of investment in Europe, the obsolete fleet and poor labour relations, in particular with the pilots. After some debate in Parliament during November 1937, the government set up an enquiry under the chairmanship of Lord Cadman.

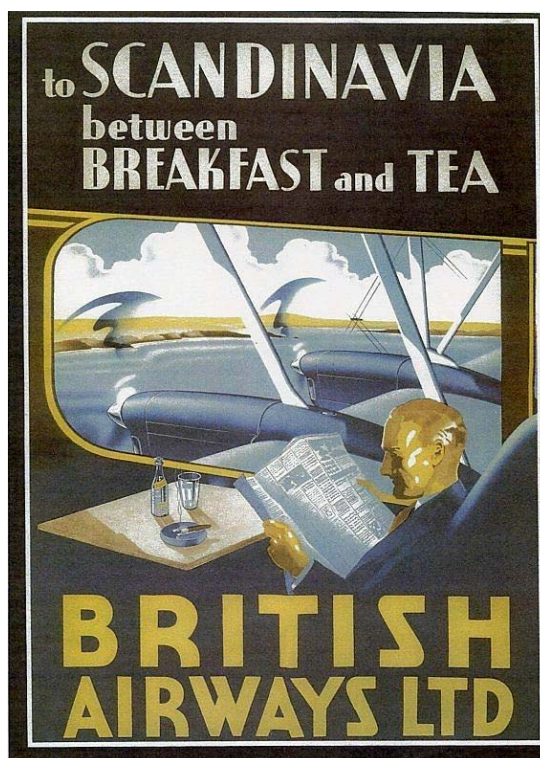


Figure 5 British Airways Ltd



Figure 6 Clive Pearson, Chairman British Airways Ltd



Figure 8 Major Ronald McCrindle  
Managing Director

The Report (known as the Cadman Report)<sup>(2)</sup> was published in March 1938 and amongst other recommendations the report confirmed that Imperial Airways should continue to operate to the Commonwealth countries and that British Airways should operate within Europe but should also explore the viability of a British service to West Africa and on to South America. The one exception to this division of interest was the suggestion that a single company be set up by Imperial and British Airways to operate jointly on the London to Paris route.

It should be noted that apart from this last suggestion of a joint operation on a single route, at no stage did

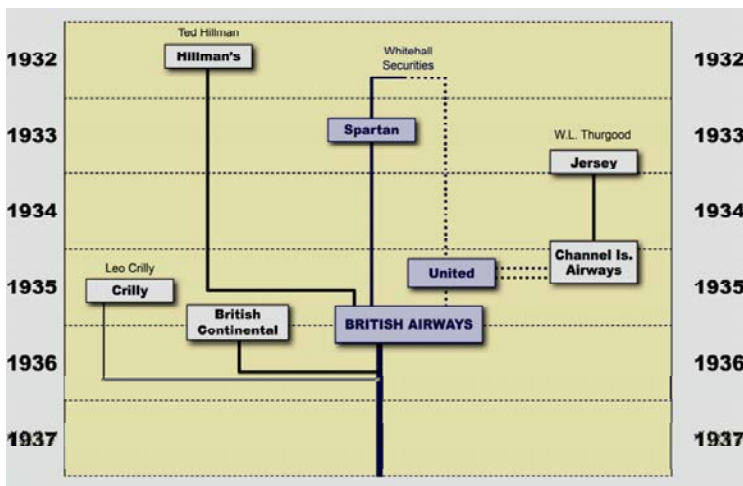


Figure 7 The ancestry of British Airways

Cadman recommend the formation of a joint airline overall, nor did he propose any form of public ownership.

There was also considerable criticism of the Imperial board, though whether it was entirely justified or not is more open to question. However the fact remained that a number of senior Board members had to go.

Cadman also insisted that each company should have a Chairman (as opposed to a Managing Director in the case of Imperial) and while British Airways already

had a Chairman in Pearson, Imperial had one imposed in the form of Sir John Reith who was appointed on 4 July 1938.

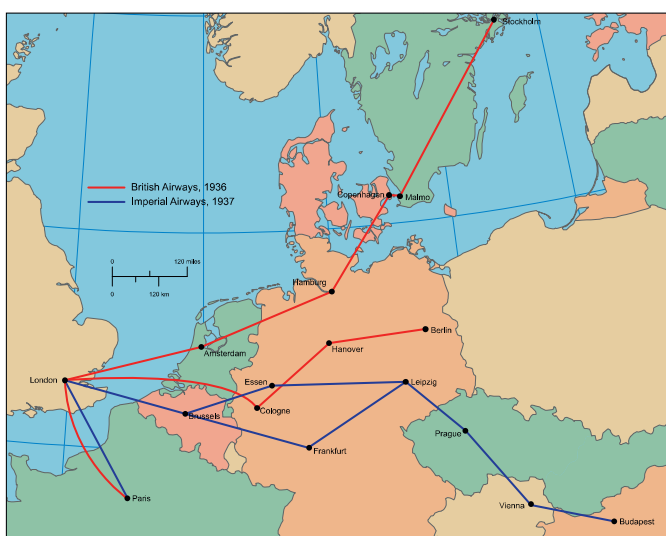


Figure 9 British Airways and Imperial Airways  
European routes 1936 - 37

Sir John Reith (1889-1971) had been a very successful Managing Director of the BBC for the 16 years since its inception and today would have probably been described as a “Mandarin” in government circles; able to take his skill anywhere. He did, however, come to the new Corporation with a reputation for strong advocacy in public service as it had applied to the BBC and it was his belief (and his alone, it would appear) that Imperial Airways and British Airways should be amalgamated into one world-wide company<sup>(3)</sup>.



Figure 10 Sir John Reith

He also believed that such a company should be free of any private share-holding and should be run, like the BBC, as a public Corporation. Service to the public rather than profits and dividends should be the driving force, thus laying down the ethos which in my view would hinder BOAC for the next 20 years and beyond. Reith also advocated the concept that BOAC should one day be a “Commonwealth airline” embracing the Dominions and Colonies throughout the world<sup>(4)</sup>.

Even more surprising in my view was that a Conservative government would agree to a nationalised air transport system and that there were men nominated to the Board, Pearson, McCrindle and Runciman, who were all from private enterprise and who would agree with Reith as well. But they did.

### 2.3 The BOAC Bill

The BOAC Bill was introduced to Parliament in June 1939, the Royal Assent was received in August and BOAC was established on 24 November 1939, though the “Appointed Day” for the Corporation to come into being would not be until 1 April 1940<sup>(5)</sup>. And on this date BOAC became the sole chosen instrument for international overseas routes and entirely at the disposal of the Secretary of State for Air.

However, before this could happen Sir John Reith resigned the Chairmanship in January 1940 when he took up the appointment of Minister for Information in the Chamberlain government. In his place Clive Pearson was appointed Chairman of BOAC, I. C. Geddes as Deputy Chairman and Gerard d’Erlanger was appointed to the Board.

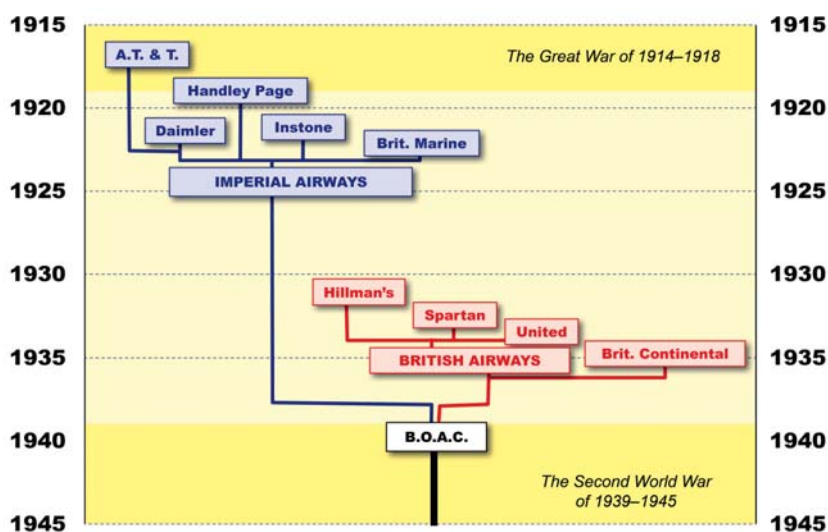


Figure 11 The direct ancestry of B.O.A.C.

In the meantime, the preparation for the outbreak of war had been completed during the summer of 1939 in the form of a “War Book” which detailed policies and plans should war occur<sup>(6)</sup>.

It was these very policies which detailed what BOAC should do and, more importantly, could not do which was the fundamental constrictive force with which the company had to contend during the early years.

A set of priorities was established. BOAC would:

1. Provide the transport for the RAF, there being no Transport Command at this stage <sup>(7)</sup>.
2. Would carry important loads such as passengers and freight at the instructions of the Secretary of State.
3. Would be responsible for the carriage of airmail as directed.
4. A National Air Communications (NAC) of the Air Ministry would be set up which would control the operations of all overseas air services by the airline.
5. The Head Quarters and operating airfields would be moved to Whitchurch and Exeter for landplanes and Pembroke Dock, Falmouth or Poole for flying-boats (it turned out to be Poole). It was also at this stage that Durban, in South Africa, was first mooted as an overseas flying-boat base (and possible HQ) in case the Middle East and Mediterranean were denied to Great Britain by enemy action.
6. Bristol would be the new HQ for the airline as well as the NAC.
7. Shoreham and Heston would remain available as airfields depending on enemy action.

What did not emerge from this planning was any clear role for BOAC; the RAF would be given first call on the airline's resources, both human and aircraft, regardless of any commercial considerations and this last point would remain the most frequent source of friction throughout the war.

For an airline used to budgets and forecasting, the planned accounting system was bizarre; simply, and in the words of the Chairman: "We work for account of the Government, they meet all our expenditure and we credit them with all our revenue" <sup>(8)</sup>. From the other side spares, accommodation and fuel would not be charged for but the Air Ministry would make no payment for services used. This diktat would remain in force until 1946 and which did much to blunt the commercial drive of the airline.

## 2.4 Initial operations

Two days before war was declared the order came to move the entire structure of what was yet to become BOAC to Bristol and Exeter where both companies set up their HQ in the Grand Spa Hotel in Clifton. All commercial operations were abandoned, though only for a short time; the flying-boats were moved from Southampton to Poole and landplanes flown to Whitchurch. All aircraft orders from America and all services both domestic and international ceased and were subordinated to the military.

While there were deep concerns within BOAC at the potential loss of key staff such as air crew and engineers, there were also other demands placed on the airline's resources. In early 1940 the Air Transport Auxiliary was set up, an organisation under the aegis of the Ministry for Aircraft Production (MAP) to ferry service aircraft from factories and repair units to Squadrons. Gerard d'Erlanger, recently appointed to the Board, was put in charge of this organisation to which both flying and engineering staff were seconded, thus making a further drain on the airline's resources. Later in 1941 the entire administrative responsibility for the ATA was placed under the control of BOAC though the ATA was by now staffed with its own pilots and engineers. In May 1940 the MAP informed BOAC that it was to undertake the modification and repair of RAF aircraft as well as the overhaul of its engines and propellers; factories had to be found or built or built in order to achieve this task and in the same month the company was ordered to take over the assembly of American aircraft delivered to Liverpool by ship so



Figure 12 A group of Imperial Airways Ltd. pilots at Whitchurch, 6 September 1939

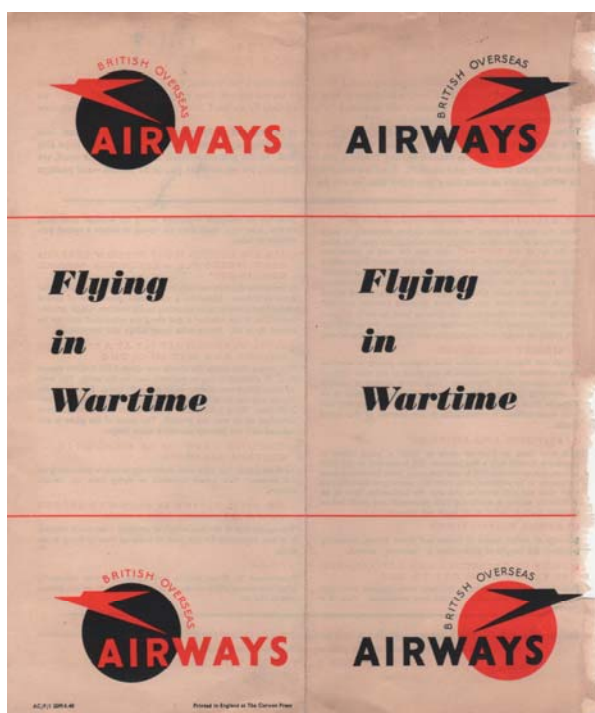


Figure 13 BOAC leaflet explaining air travel restrictions, April 1940

Stavanger and Oslo using the Ju 52 and L-14. On 22 September service was resumed to Egypt routing from Shoreham to Bordeaux, Marseille, Tunis, Malta, Sollum and Alexandria using the L-14. Flying-boat services continued to operate twice weekly to both Australia and South Africa.

After 3 September 1939 there was the period of the phoney war with air services beyond Europe almost at pre-war normality. The surplus fleet in the UK, mainly Ensigns, was engaged in re-supply around the various bases within France. This relative peace came to an end on 9 April 1940 when Germany invaded Denmark and Norway; BOAC lost three aircraft in Norway, a Ju 52 in Oslo on 9 April and two S.30 flying-boats during the Norwegian campaign in May.

further factories were built at Speke. All of this was arranged in a short time at great expense in manpower and skills which the company could ill afford.

Not only was this a ponderous and time-consuming exercise but it also ran the increasing risk of cargo ships being

lost to U-boats. So in the summer of 1940 the MAP, which was now run by Beaverbrook, pressed for a scheme for ferrying American-built bombers across the Atlantic. Four Captains who already had considerable Atlantic experience (one of whom was (later AVM) D. C. T. Bennett) were released to set up the operation. Later, in September 1940 BOAC released 12 further crews for secondment and the first delivery flight took place on 10 November when seven Hudsons landed in Northern Ireland. However this did stretch the BOAC organisation and in March 1941 control of this operation was passed directly to the MAP and named Atlantic Ferry Organisation.

Within a few days after war had been declared air services gradually resumed, and while there was an air of normality about it there were precautions; the services to Scandinavia were transferred to Perth from where the service flew to Stockholm via



## 2.5 The Horseshoe Route

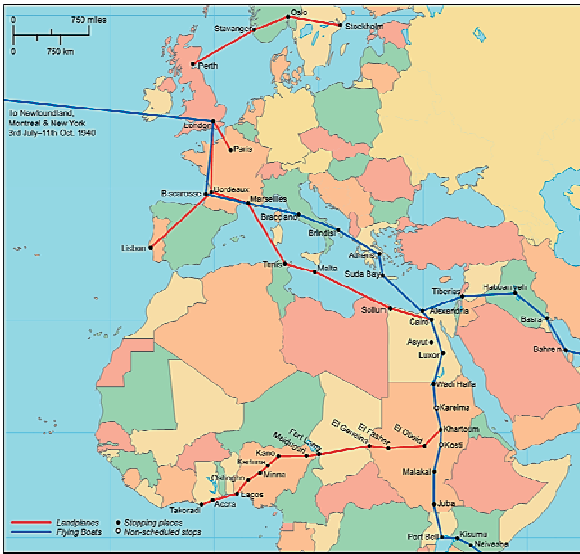


Figure 14 BOAC and subsidiary and associate companies - main routes 1 April 1940

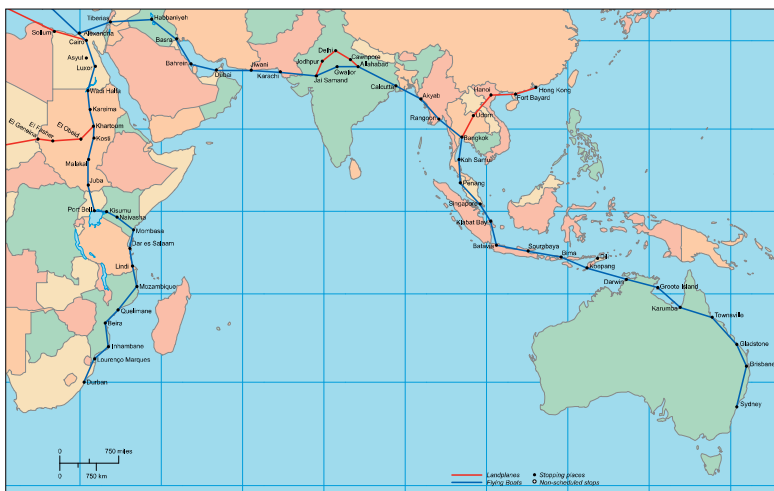


Figure 15 The Horseshoe route, 1 April 1940



Figure 16 BOAC route from Whitchurch to Cairo, June 1940

On 10 May 1940 Germany invaded Belgium, Holland and France, resulting in the French surrender six weeks later on 17 June. On the 10 June Italy entered the war and the Mediterranean was now cut off. The last BOAC flight from Paris was on 11 June, though flights to Khartoum and Cairo were able to continue via Bordeaux, Lezignan, Oran, Gao and Maiduguri, though these were also stopped on 28 June as the result of a French ban; this ban also affected flights from Bangkok to Hong Kong which overflew French Indochina.

All these events had been planned for in the original War Plan set up in 1939 and in order to overcome the shortage of maintenance facilities in the UK Durban had been set up as a base in early 1940 and with 16 C-Class flying-boats

south of Italy on 10 June the Horseshoe Route came into being on 19th June and which flew with various interruptions until 1946.

However with the closure of French north and equatorial Africa it became necessary to extend the Route south from Lisbon to Bathurst and in early August a long range C-Class flying-boat departed for Lisbon, Bathurst, Freetown and Lagos in order to link up with the Trans African route to Khartoum and Cairo. In fact, and as an aside, the same

aircraft then continued on to Leopoldville with a number of Free French Officers on board who were to negotiate with French officers in Brazzaville in an effort to bring them on to the side of de Gaulle. In this task they were successful with the result that air routes overflying French Equatorial Africa were now available to allied operations.

Thus by the end of 1940 the airline had maintained the links with the Middle East and beyond as well as with the USA; but after the losses in the French and Norwegian campaigns, BOAC once again found itself



Figure 17 Clare and Clyde were the two long-range Short C-Class flying boats

severely short of aircraft with sufficient range and payload to service the new routes to Africa as well as maintaining the transatlantic service to the USA. Apart from a couple of long range C-Class flying-boats there were no aircraft of British manufacture which could service these needs and Runciman had been pressing the Air Ministry for a solution.

During the summer of 1940 Harold Balfour (Under Secretary of State for Air) had visited the USA where he succeeded in acquiring three Boeing 314 flying-boats from Pan Am at £259k each. These three aircraft were delivered in May, June and July 1941 with the first service to Africa taking place in May.

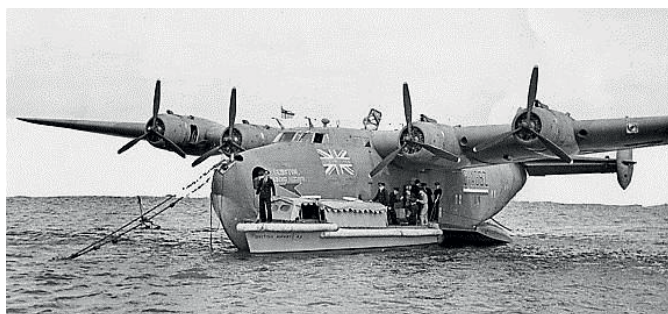


Figure 18 A Boeing 314 flying-boat

Notwithstanding the enormous contribution these three aircraft made there were operational issues in terms of spares under the Lend-Lease agreement which were based in the USA, so Baltimore became the maintenance base where the aircraft returned every 120 hours. During the summer months the 314s would fly from Baltimore to Botwood and Foynes after which they would operate a return flight to Lagos via

Lisbon and Bathurst and then return via Botwood to Baltimore for maintenance.

During the winter months Botwood was unusable so the flights would route from Baltimore to Bermuda, Azores and Lisbon to Foynes and then returning to the USA via Lisbon, Bathurst, Lagos, Belém, Trinidad and Bermuda.

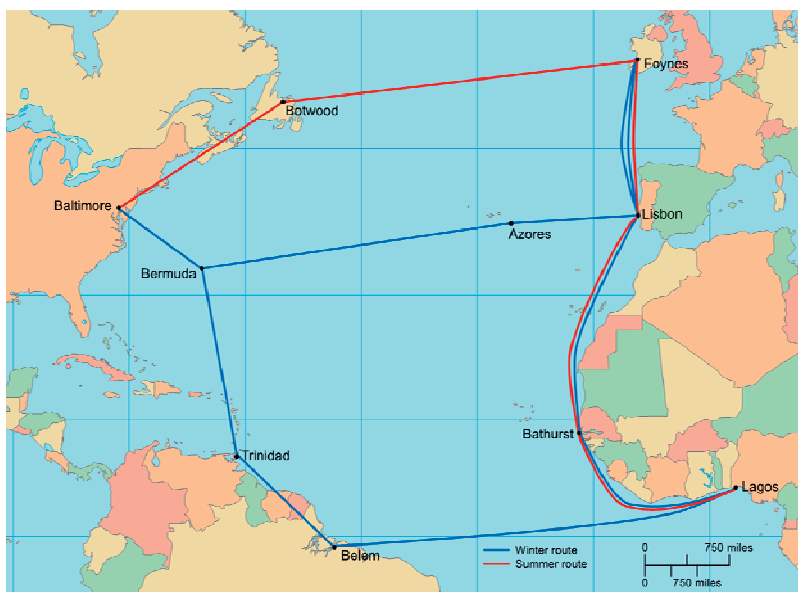


Figure 19 Boeing 314 routes

These three aircraft were a huge asset to BOAC delivering greater speed, range and, most importantly, capacity and provided outstanding service until the end of the Lend-Lease programme in 1946. The last transatlantic flight took place on 7 March 1946, though they remained on the Baltimore—Bermuda route until 17 January 1948.

### 3. Wartime operations after 1940

With the UK to Africa routes well established by mid-1941 and the Trans Africa route at full stretch, Cairo had become the real centre of operations; Malta and Greece were within easy flying times and the Horseshoe Route passed through for both maintenance and cargo. The ground battle for North Africa was still ebbing and flowing and BOAC aircraft were used to ferry both men and supplies to the front line on an ad hoc basis.

In Cairo the two most important people in air operations were Air Marshal Tedder and for the RAF and Robert Maxwell for BOAC. (Not the Robert Maxwell of the Mirror newspaper). Tedder’s proposal was that there should be a joint RAF/BOAC transport organisation established in Cairo to take over the existing and proposed air transport operations in support of the war effort<sup>(9)</sup>. Robert Maxwell would be the GM of this organisation and a new maintenance base would be set up in Asmara, well away from the conflict and which would also ensure a British presence in the Red Sea countries and on to India<sup>(10)</sup>.



Figure 20 Main routes, Europe and Africa - 1 March 1941

#### 3.1 New routes

The first routes established under this scheme were operated by Lockheed Lodestars and would be Cairo—Wadi Halfa—Port Sudan—Asmara, Cairo—Habbaniya—Tehran (for contact with the USSR), Cairo—Lydda—Adana and Asmara—Khartoum. In fact new routes were decided on almost a daily basis and might operate for only a week or two before being replaced by others. Until May 1943 the ebb and flow of the battles in North Africa meant that most aircraft were much in demand for re-supply.

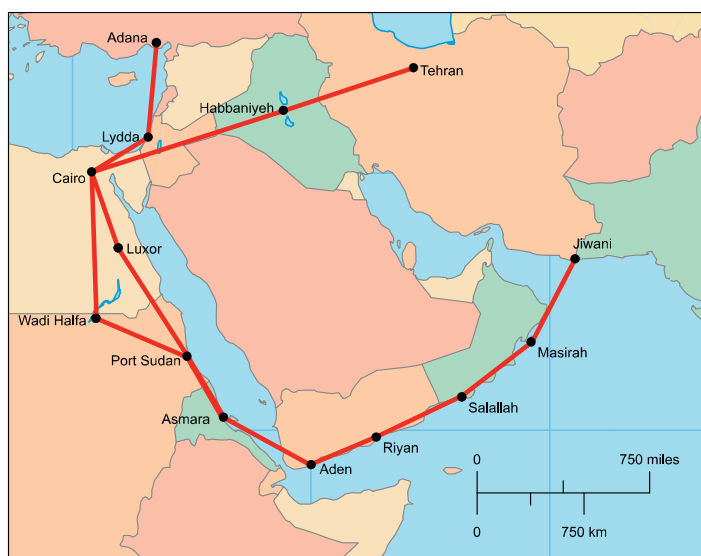


Figure 21 Routes from Cairo, 1942-45

By spring 1942 there were problems with this plan; while the move to Asmara had gone smoothly, it was not being used to its full extent; the real issue was a lack of spares, equipment and aircraft, as well as engineering

management, and pilots and the RAF were deeply disappointed in what they perceived to be a lack of resourcefulness in the BOAC management ethos.

To some extent this was true, but it ignores the fact that the RAF philosophy was one of “solve the problem and get on with it” while the BOAC was one of “let’s see what the consequences of any action will be on next week’s flight”. A further problem was that the RAF had total authority to act in its sphere while BOAC was obliged to refer to HQ in the UK for agreement as per the government directive of 1939.

Back in the UK Runciman met Harold Balfour in April 1942 to discuss these issues; the answer was unequivocal

and would have consequences on both safety and morale. Nevertheless Maxwell persevered, though he was obliged to re-introduce the Trans Africa service after the withdrawal of Pan Am as a consequence of Pearl Harbor. The revolt in Iraq the previous year disrupted the Horseshoe Route for some time and this encouraged Maxwell to establish a route to India through the Red Sea instead routing from Cairo—Port Sudan—Aden—Ryan—Salallah—Masirah—Jiwani.

As time went on into 1943 the relationship between BOAC and the RAF (and Tedder in particular) did not improve. In January McCrindle wrote to Tedder expressing his concern that the Corporation was being forced to operate too many types of aircraft, was obliged to fly into airfields unsuitable for airline operations and was being obliged to take on inexperienced crews from the RAF<sup>(11)</sup>. On 22 February 1943, Pearson himself wrote to the secretary of State for Air, Sir Archibald Sinclair, making suggestions in the way the Corporation should operate, namely be responsible for its own decisions though responsive to the needs of the RAF<sup>(12)</sup>; what he really wanted to know was whether the Corporation would remain the British instrument for overseas air transport or would it be subservient to the RAF.

### 3.2 Resignation of Pearson

Pearson received no real answer from Sinclair but he was called to a meeting on 1 March 1943 during which he was told of the intention to set up an RAF Transport Command; he was not advised what the relationship would be between the two. On 11 March, the day Parliament was told of the decision to set up Transport Command, Pearson was in discussions with the Air Ministry on how the relationship would work<sup>(13)</sup>. By and large compromises were reached on the wording and all issues except for one clause which was considered to be crucial by the BOAC Board: “The general intention is that the Corporation shall be responsible for all

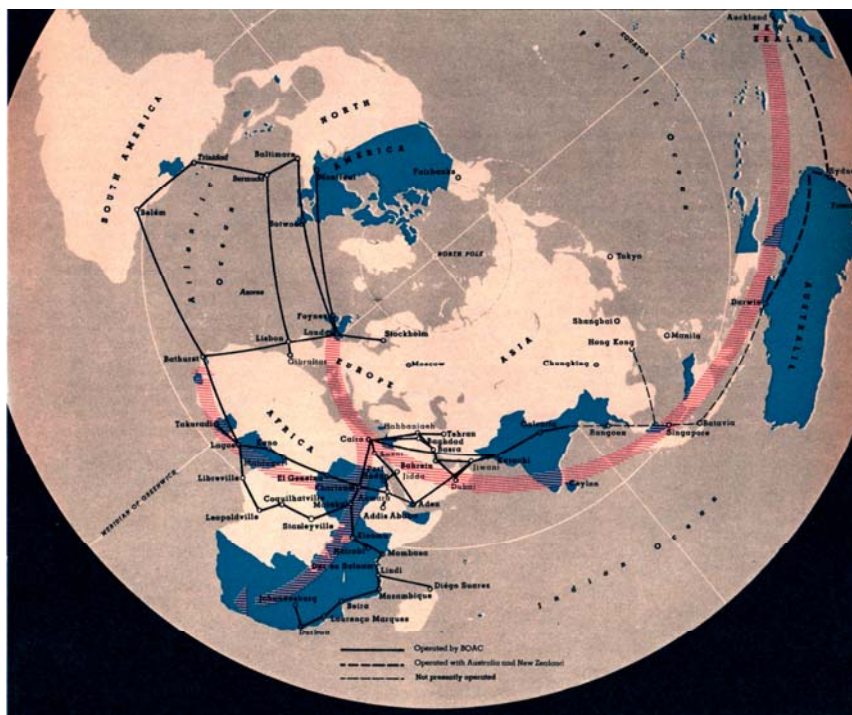


Figure 22 Post-war plans envisaged a Commonwealth Airline linking the UK with all the Commonwealth countries.

regular trunk services except those carrying exclusive RAF loads, and that the Command shall be responsible for all other types of service”.

With, in his view, no definite and independent role for BOAC either in the short or long term, Pearson felt he had no alternative but to resign as did three of his colleagues on the BOAC Board (Geddes, Runciman and Brown). D’Erlanger, who had not been present at any of the meetings, decided to stay, stating that in his view the arrangements should be given a trial.

As tragic as it must have seemed to Pearson and his three colleagues to resign, it would appear that it had become inevitable from the early days of 1942. Pearson had come a long way from the 1930s when Whitehall Securities had become involved in Spartan Airways.

Even when British Airways Ltd was formed, operations were relatively simple with a small fleet and limited route structure in northern Europe. To be then thrust on to the Board of a new and national airline, and one which was a national corporation, might have appeared daunting at first, but with Sir John Reith in the Chair there was clearly someone in place who could deal with the Secretary of State for Air on equal terms. So when Reith departed only a few months after being appointed, the result was to thrust Pearson into a position where he was dealing with unfamiliar adversaries, the mandarins of Government. I would suggest that his resignation was a principled action which displayed great integrity towards the airline which he had done so much to found and which had survived the first three years of (up till then) a losing war.

### 3.3 d’Erlanger and Knollys

On the other hand one should not denigrate d’Erlanger for staying on “to give it a try” ; he was already deeply and successfully involved with the ATA, was about to found the Air Safety Board, and would go on to perform outstanding work for the airline.



Figure 23

It was a couple of months before the new Chairman, Viscount Knollys, was appointed, 26 May 1943. He had been Governor of Bermuda since 1941 and was known for his abilities both in dealing with Whitehall and international business.

From the very start of his appointment a definite change can be seen in both the composition and style of the new BOAC Board. Not only was the size increased to six but the level of experience in military and business affairs was greatly enhanced; at most Board meetings there were more people attending who had responsibilities for major divisions within the airline with the consequence that information flowed up to the Board at a much greater rate than it had hitherto.

This does not mean that the problems had disappeared, nor had the concerns for the airline’s freedom of action, indeed, in a letter

of 28 October 1943 to Balfour, Knollys placed on record his objections and concerns about the Brabazon Committee (see below).

The designs referred to were of course the Brabazon and to a lesser extent the Tudor. Not only was the former was going to be a huge aircraft offering luxury travel (shades of Imperial Airways thinking) and expensive to operate in comparison with the DC-4 and Constellation which were already flying in the USA with far better economics. The Tudor was not really on the horizon yet except as an advanced plan.

Another area of much needed improvement was the relationship with RAF Transport Command; the resignation of Pearson and his colleagues had been a bruising experience for all concerned and the realisation that there had to be more give and take, particularly by the RAF, had been sobering. Nevertheless as the requirements for Transport Command increased so did its need for the return of crews seconded to BOAC which in turn left the airline desperately short.

However on 6 October 1943 there was another directive from the Secretary of State for Air<sup>(14)</sup> stating that he, or his office, “will decide and notify the Corporation of the services or special flights which the Corporation are to operate as well as the type of aircraft and the frequency they are to be operated”. Furthermore, the Corporation was to obey any requests for further services by Transport Command or the Middle East Air Transport Board in Cairo, and this directive would remain in force until well after the war was over.

#### **4. The end of the war and post war thinking**

Upon his appointment as Chairman in 1939, Reith had strongly advocated the formation of an all-embracing Commonwealth Airline and though this concept was not proceeded with as a result of the outbreak of war, the idea remained rooted within the minds of Government ministers concerned with Civil Aviation policy.

But the war was blurring the way the world, and colonies in particular, thought about how they wished to be governed. By the close of the war in 1945 much of the pre-war Empire still existed but it was becoming clear that the former Colonies would not allow themselves to remain so for very much longer. Airlines were still instruments of Government policy of which BOAC was a prime example. A new way of thinking had to be established both within the airline and the Government in order to work with colonies which were about to become independent or self-governing and the professed aim would be to set up airlines in these countries with which BOAC would both co-operate and, if necessary, subsidise; in return passengers would be fed on to BOAC trunk routes for onward travel.

The rationale was that the war had brought about technological and national development to such an extent that traditional routeings, traffic rights and national loyalties would all be thrown into a melting pot. It would become a question of holding on to what one already had and grasping whatever other opportunities might present themselves. If this meant an involvement in the aviation aspirations of an emerging state then perhaps that might be of mutual interest as one might be able to control the direction of their competitive instincts, not only to protect one's own traffic but also to achieve some materialistic return for cooperation in their development.

Nevertheless, there was a conviction within Government circles that the old order would continue as before and the belief persisted that some form of Empire Corporation would emerge with Colonies and Dominions eager to take part<sup>(15)</sup>. The BOAC Board, and Knollys in particular, disagreed.

There was at this time a fundamental change in the way of thinking in the Corporation and to a lesser extent within the government, which was very much preoccupied with the coming invasion in Normandy. It was beginning to dawn on the Board that there was a very good chance the war would eventually be won by the Allies and that there would be a number of countries which had been under British influence before the war might well wish to develop their own airlines or, as BOAC hoped, might well be willing to receive help from their former friends such as Britain. In fact a journey lasting many weeks undertaken by Knollys in 1944 through a number of countries ranging through the Middle East, Africa and the Indian sub-continent convinced him that this would be the correct path to follow and which would form the backbone of BOAC policy for the next ten years.

As 1944 progressed and Europe was gradually being liberated after the breakout from Normandy in August, thoughts turned towards civil operations nearer home. June saw the formation of 110 Wing of RAF Transport Command specifically for the purpose of flying services into European cities as they were liberated. Initially the flights would be flown by military personnel with some BOAC secondments but with the intention that company pilots would take over once the fighting had moved on. By late autumn flights were operating from Croydon to Paris, Lyons and Brussels.

There were also changes in bases within the UK; by the end of 1944 there was a move from Whitchurch to Hurn which was to be the new landplane base for BOAC and not far from Poole or Southampton.

At this stage there were two areas of development taking place: Aircraft procurement and commercial expansion.

#### **4.1 Aircraft Policy**

As the war in Europe drew to its close, BOAC found itself in a curiously difficult position. The Brabazon Committee had had been working together since 1942 on a series of designs of which the Brabazon and the Tudor were of most interest to the company; however, the committee sat in a position which can only best be described as splendid isolation in that the very company for which the aircraft were destined continued to be excluded from any meaningful participation. A further complication was that the UK design teams were small in number and had been required to design for the war effort and therefore lacked the experience in airliner design and economics.

At 31 March 1945 BOAC found itself in possession of 7 different flying-boat types and 11 different landplane types and of the British ones in the fleet the York and Lancastrian were the most modern; there were no British aircraft capable of flying a competitive transatlantic service and these routes were left to the Boeing 314 and converted Liberators to Montreal<sup>(16)</sup>. The government of the day had insisted on a "buy British" policy and this would be enforced even though there would be no British aircraft available until the end of 1946, namely the Tudor 1.

The process of ordering aircraft was peculiar to say the least; as a result made of the Order of 1940, all negotiations on design, performance and manufacture were dealt with by the Civil



Figure 24 Avro Tudor 1

Aviation department of the Air Ministry which then passed on the information through their agents the Ministry of Supply (MOS) which then dealt with the manufacturer<sup>(17)</sup>; in fact so adamant was the Ministry of Supply that BOAC was to accept the Tudor that a directive was sent to the Board

stating that they were to accept the aircraft without any further modifications whether for safety or otherwise. Thus in November 1944 the MOS ordered 14 Tudor 1s for BOAC which were to be ready by March 1945 for operation on the North Atlantic; the Tudor 2s (of which 30 were also ordered) would be ready by May 1945. With little choice in the matter, in April 1945, BOAC requested the numbers be increased to 20 Tudor 1 and 79 Tudor 2 for the Empire routes.

The history of the Tudor is well known and we also know that the initial targets for service were hopelessly optimistic; it underperformed and was eventually rejected by BOAC though the Tudor 4 did fly with BSAA from 1948.

During this time Knollys had been making a case to buy the DC-4 or the Merlin-engined DC-4M2 from Canadair. All requests were turned down, partly through shortage of foreign exchange and partly on the insistence that the "Chosen Instrument" "should only fly British. In October 1945 Knollys wrote to the Minister "We cannot hope to compete effectively or maintain British Airline reputation on the North Atlantic with the Tudor 1s alone"<sup>(18)</sup>. Still the new Labour government prevaricated until the agreement on dollar credits and Lend-Lease was signed with the USA later that year; once this was completed BOAC was given permission to order 5 Constellation 049s on 24 January 1946 with all five aircraft arriving in May, June and July. However permission for 5 Stratocruisers was denied until August 1946 when 6 were ordered for delivery in 1949.

Moving on to the flying-boat question, there have been numerous occasions when I have heard the opinion expressed that BOAC was living in some cloud land in which it felt that the flying-boats had a future in that passengers actually preferred them. In fact BOAC had no choice but to retain these machines as there were simply no other aircraft available which were remotely competitive and as early as 1944 and 1945 the Board had realise that the flying-boats had already had their day but would simply have to remain until better landplanes and airfields came along.

The problem of lack of suitable aircraft was typified on two routes in particular, those to Australia and South Africa.

#### 4.2 Commercial expansion and the start of post-war operations

The first scheduled flight to Sydney departed from Hurn on 31 May 1945 routing via Lydda and Karachi where a QANTAS crew took over to fly via Ceylon and Learmonth (the service



rerouted via Singapore the following year). All expenses and revenues were shared equally between the airlines.

The Lancastrian was capable of carrying only 9 passengers, in primitive conditions. Both the public and the Australian government quickly became disenchanted with the service and in 1946 BOAC was advised that in the absence of any suitable British aircraft becoming available QANTAS would purchase four Constellation 749s for service in December 1947<sup>(19)</sup>. Meanwhile BOAC had added a flying-boat service in May 1946 which was not only more expensive but took 8 days to reach Sydney. In 1947 QANTAS threatened to withdraw from the agreement unless there was a fairer allocation of costs but fortunately Aer Linte, the Irish airline, was selling its 5 Constellations and since these could be paid for in Sterling BOAC was allowed to purchase them in December 1948. This enabled the Hythes to be withdrawn and a suitable service offered.

BOAC and SAA had a similar agreement on the service to Johannesburg which started on 10 November 1945 using the York which carried 12 passengers and taking three days for the journey (the plan was to bring in the Tudor



Figure 25 Transatlantic timetable for the B 314 from July 1945



Figure 26 Lockheed 049E Constellation



Figure 27 Avro Lancastrian at Heathrow



Figure 28 Passenger accommodation in the Lancastrian



Figure 29 Avro York



Figure 30 Passenger accommodation in the York (BSAA)

but of course this never happened). Both passengers and SAA soon became unhappy with the York experience and the traffic started to melt away to the DC-4 flight operated by KLM to Amsterdam, which took half the time the York did. Eventually SAA bought the DC-4 and the York was removed, to be replaced by a flying-boat taking 6 days, but there was no other choice.

By mid-1948 it had become obvious that the Tudor in whatever form would never meet the requirements of BOAC's Empire Routes and it was announced in Parliament in July that the aircraft would be cancelled. At the same time it was also announced that the Government had authorised BOAC to purchase 22 Canadair DC-4Ms, which came into service from 23 August 1949 replacing in the main the Yorks, Plymouths and Lancastrians to the Middle and Far East. The significance of their entry into service can be gauged by the fact that in the last quarter of the 1949/50 year a projected deficit of £80k was converted into a profit of £140k.

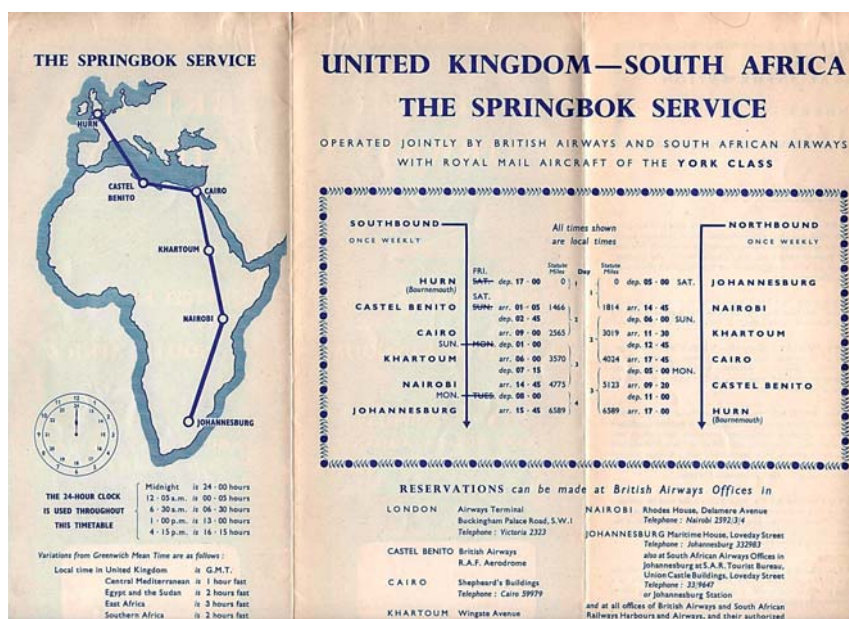


Figure 31 The Springbok Service, operated by Avro Yorks

One last piece of the jigsaw needed to be put into place; in 1949 the Government decided to merge BSAA into BOAC, withdrawing the Tudors at the same time which left a severe capacity gap on the Caribbean and South American routes. The problem was solved by the purchase of 4 Stratocruisers from SILA, the Swedish airline in the process of being merged into SAS, and routing the Constellations from New York and down the west coast of South America to Santiago and the Argonauts down the east coast to Buenos Aires.

Thus with 22 Argonauts, 10 Stratocruisers, 11 Constellations and a motley collection of other aircraft, BOAC was in a reasonable position to compete with its main competitor, Pan American. The flying-boats were now gradually withdrawn and the last service of these

venerable machines took place in November 1950 to be replaced by the Hermes on African routes.



Figure 32 Canadair DC-4M Argonaut



Figure 33 Publicity for the Argonaut



Figure 34 Publicity for the Stratocruiser

unenlightened hand of government had done much to stifle development as it would continue to do for the next 10 years.

### 5. Post-war Operations

Not long after he became Chairman in 1943, Knollys cast his mind forward to the time the war would at least be over, if not won. The Government was also giving thought to the issue but sadly neither side was discussing this with the other. Though Knollys had sent papers to the Air Ministry which laid out his vision these had largely been ignored; in fairness to the Ministry, the Orders dictated to the airline on 1 April 1940 were still in place and the government was still in the position of stating which routes would be flown, which aircraft to be used and the operational policy to be implemented. In one area at least there was no doubt and in a letter of 3 July 1943 Hildred had written to McCrindle stating “You must assume for the present that you will be the sole chosen instrument for overseas operations”.

A further thought process was the desire to meet the assumed post-war aspirations of the Dominions and accepting that they might still wish to operate reciprocal services to London thus continuing the policy of cooperation such as had existed between Imperial Airways and QANTAS. Canada and South Africa had already made clear that they wished to operate in parallel. Colonies would be given help in setting up local air services which would feed into BOAC trunk routes.

It was not really until May 1944, that the Government started to formulate a policy involving a Commonwealth Corporation covering the route to the Far East as far as New Zealand and

administered by an Empire Council. BOAC countered this by arguing there had to be reciprocal arrangements between the UK and the Dominions which could be a joint Commonwealth Corporation operating a round the world service stopping in British and Commonwealth territory only; there would be “Chosen instruments” for services to foreign countries and which would involve both shipping and railway interests. It should be remembered that 5 shipping companies had already got together to set up British Latin American Airways (BLAA).

These were all very grand schemes which would have little in common with the reality which would set in on peace breaking out in August 1945. However, the Chicago Convention in November 1944 was a sound reality check during which BOAC had argued for capacity restrictions rather than frequency restrictions, probably because the Tudor 1 was only going to be able to carry 12 passengers versus the 44 passengers anticipated for the DC-4 and Constellation. In the end the Government had to accede to full access for all airlines with reciprocal arrangements.

The resulting policy would therefore be that BOAC would operate the main Empire routes as well as to Canada and the USA; on the Pacific there would be a joint operating company with BOAC, Australia and New Zealand which would provide a service to the USA and Canada. Local feeder services in Commonwealth countries would flow by local companies with BOAC either owning them as subsidiaries or providing the infrastructure and expertise.

Europe could be served by a separate company and the South American and Caribbean routes would be controlled by the shipping companies which had set up BLAA.



Figure 35 Co-operation with QANTAS



Figure 36 A global route network

Government would have total control over policy and route allocation. There was even a suggestion that BOAC would be renamed British Commonwealth Air Services. Both shipping and surface transport would have a major role to play and British Aircraft would be used exclusively.

However in July there was a general election which was won by labour, a party which had very differing views from the previous Conservative government; the Labour policy was relatively simple: there would be three corporations under public ownership which would take overriding priority in air transport and there would be no financial participation by existing surface transport interests.

On 20 December 1945 the government issued a White Paper before the Civil Aviation Act 1946 to set up the three corporations under public ownership and control. BOAC would operate Commonwealth routes as well as the Far East and North America; South America and the Caribbean would be allocated to a new corporation named British South American Airways while UK domestic and European routes would be flown by BEA already effectively in operation as 110 Wing of Transport Command.

On 1 January 1946 the European Division of BOAC started services previously operated by 110 Wing of Transport Command and on the 1 August of the same year BEA came into being with 21 DC-3 as did BSAA with 6 Lancastrians and 4 Yorks.

One would have thought that BOAC could now expand on a commercial basis, but during the three years after the war the MCA, working through the Priorities Board, had first call on all the airline's capacity, both freight and passengers, and only releasing space at very short notice thus limiting what could be offered to the public at large. Fortunately this ruling ended in July 1948 after which the airline could develop some form of marketing strategy for the future.

BOAC emerged from the war with a financial interest in only two other airlines: a 50% holding in QANTAS and 38% in TEAL; the shareholding in QANTAS was bought by the Australian Government in 1946 (one has to remember their dissatisfaction with the pooling arrangements) but Knollys had quietly persevered in his vision of developing air services in the many colonies with the services of BOAC as a catalyst.

The Foreign and Colonial offices also had an interest and in fact it was through these two agents that the stimulus came to develop air transport in the colonies.

The first such venture was mooted in December 1944 when the BOAC Board was presented with a proposal to found and support an airline in East Africa based in Nairobi but involving the Governments of Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda and Zanzibar; the airline would be named East African Airways and would replace the pre-war Wilson Airways which had been taken over by the RAF. In the first instance, BOAC would provide the senior staff and find the aircraft (6 Dominies) and once the airline was up and running would step back from direct control though it would remain in an advisory capacity for many years.

East African came into being in January 1946 and this was followed a year later in West Africa where Nigeria, The Gold Coast, Sierra Leone and the Gambia were brought together to set up West African Airways which was to operate throughout that area of Africa. At the same time another airline was set up involving BOAC (the UK), Australia and New Zealand to fly the Pacific between Sydney, Auckland and to San Francisco and Vancouver and this airline was

named British Commonwealth Pacific Airlines; a very successful airline as it turned out until Australia decided it wanted the route for QANTAS in 1954.

Not all these ventures were set up directly by the Colonial Office; sometimes there was a directive from it directly to the airline that it should proceed in a certain direction depending on the political climate in the area in which it wished to have an aviation influence. For instance, in October 1945 the Board of BOAC received the following instructions from the Ministry of Civil Aviation:

“I am directed to inform you that this Ministry has been considering in conjunction with the Colonial Office the future requirements for British Air Transport in the Red Sea area. The Civil Attaché in the Middle East has been instructed to investigate the traffic possibilities of local services based at Aden as well as a link with Jeddah and Palestine and it is accordingly Lord Winster’s wish that the investigation referred to above should be completed as rapidly as possible.”

This directive resulted in the setting up of Aden Airways in 1949 as a direct subsidiary of the airline and which later bought Arab Airways (Jerusalem) on behalf of BOAC so as not to inflame anti-colonial sentiments in the region. In the same manner Hong Kong Airways was set up in the colony in 1947, though this enterprise was less successful as a result of opposition from the Government of the colony which was less than willing to be dictated to from London; in the end the civil war in China quickly put paid to that anyway.

In 1949 the policy for involvement was reflected in the Annual Report (and perhaps tacitly and quietly acknowledged the end of the Empire):

“An important aspect of the policy of the Corporation is to take a prominent part in the development and integration of air communications throughout the British Commonwealth of Nations and the Empire. To this end, the operational and commercial experience of the Corporation is made available to foster the development of services connecting with the Corporation’s trunk routes.”

In addition to the airlines and regions I have already mentioned, over the following years shareholdings were taken in the Middle East with Middle East Airlines, Cyprus Airways and Gulf Aviation (later to become Gulf Air), while management contracts were set up with Kuwait Airways and Iraq Airways. In the Far East BOAC became similarly involved with Malayan Airways, Borneo Airways and Fiji Airways.

When BSAA was merged with BOAC in 1949, it brought in British West Indian Airways as well as British Caribbean Airways and Bahamas Airways; BOAC then went on to become involved with Caribbean International, British Colonial Airways, British Guiana Airways and Jamaican Airlines.

On every occasion on which BOAC became involved with a fledgling airline it brought in the key management infrastructure such as accounts, flight operations and engineering, leaving a template for the training of future employees, many of whom would one day rise to senior management positions after independence. We have an excellent example of this in Singapore Airlines today.

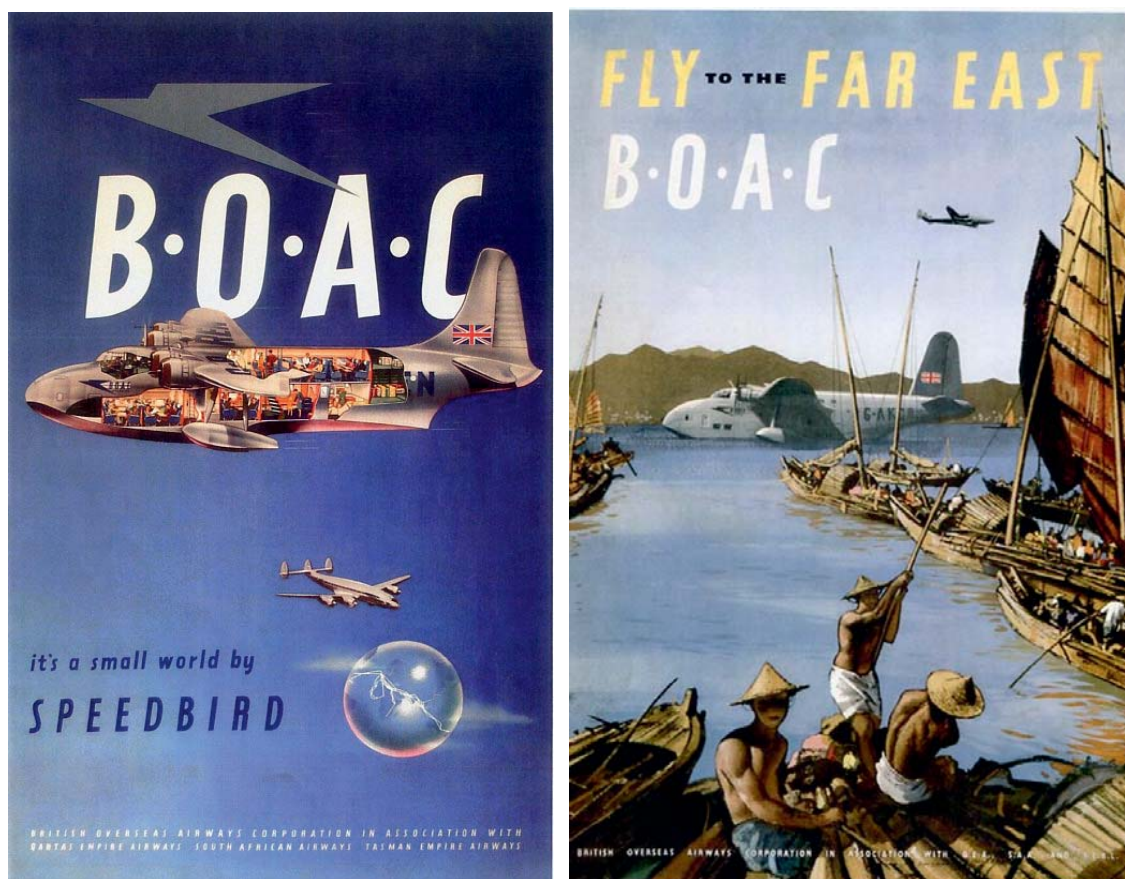


Figure 37 British Overseas Airways Corporation

## 6. The legacy of BOAC

The title of the lecture on which this paper is based referred to the Legacy of BOAC; for its direct descendant, British Airways, there is a rich seam of history which is exemplified by a world class archive of images and a comprehensive record of all that has occurred over the last 80 years in British Civil Aviation, though I think that it is a great pity that the Speedbird has been lost in all but the airline call sign.

However, there is a case to be made that the main beneficiaries of BOAC's post imperial activities were the many subsidiary airlines, some of which would develop into the flag carriers of newly independent countries, perhaps a fitting reversal of the relationship established under Imperial rule; fledgling national airlines such as Singapore and Tasman Empire Airlines were able to exploit the benefits of BOAC's expertise, infrastructure and assets to create a blueprint for continued success into this century.

It is, in the view of the author, one of the best examples of colonial altruism and one which has been an enduring gift from a fading Empire.

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**Attribution of illustrations**

Figures 1, 3, 13, 18, 22, 24, 25, 31, 34, 36.    Dacre Watson collection

Figures 2, 4, 7, 11.    R E G Davies

Figures 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 17, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, 33, 35, 37.    British Airways Archives

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