

Airways of the World

[12] British Overseas Airways Corporation

On April 1st the British Overseas Airways Corporation came into existence by the amalgamation of two famous companies – Imperial Airways and British Airways. Many will regret the passing of the two names especially as they have represented all that is the best in civil aviation and have worthily maintained British prestige, but the new Company inherit a tradition that should be an incentive to them to take a leading place in air traffic.

The history of the two concerns, Imperial Airways chiefly in the development of the long-distance Empire routes and British Airways in the provision of swift and reliable services to and from the Continent, provides a saga in business and technical enterprise.

Imperial Airways came into being on April 1st 1924 by the amalgamation of four pioneering companies – Handley Page Transport Ltd, operating between London and Paris; Instone Air Line Ltd., which ran a service from London to Brussels and Cologne; Daimler Airways Ltd., flying from Manchester and London to Amsterdam; and British Marine Navigation Ltd., which had been formed to cover services from Southampton to Le Havre and the Channel Islands. Following a period of consolidation and a wide survey of the economics of air transport, the newly merged company made the important decision to concentrate on plans for the setting up of Empire routes. The first link established was from Cairo to Basra in 1927. In March 1929 this service was extended eastward and westward thus inaugurated a weekly air service between England and India. In Feb. 1931 the London – Tanganyika was opened and extended to the Cape by the Christmas flight and the First Regular Air Mail of January 1932. The India route was extended to Calcutta in July 1933, to Rangoon in September and to Singapore in December 1933. December 1934 saw a 11,000 miles service between England and Australia and April 30th 1940 the Trans-Tasman link to New Zealand operated. Despite this magnificent record, other services were not neglected. Faster and more commodions aeroplanes were flown on the London – Paris route; a Bermuda – New York service was operated; and on August 5th 1939 a mail service was started from Southampton to New York, via Eire, Newfoundland and Canada, and continued as scheduled until the end of September. It is a matter of great regret that its expected revival this year has had to be sacrificed in the interests of the RAF. The war has also stopped the No Air Fee Air Mail, and the privilege of sending a letter for 11/2d. for 13,000 miles by air must await happier days.

British Airways was also a result of a merger. It was formed in October 1935 from five companies – Hillman’s Airways, United Airways, Spartan Airlines, Northern and Scottish Airways, and Highland Airways. On its inauguration its routes totalled 22,000 miles, serving 25 centres in the British Isles and Western Europe. In February 1936 a subsidy was granted by the Government for the establishment of a passenger and mail service between London and Scandinavia. This Amsterdam – Hamburg – Copenhagen – Malmo route was later extended to Stockholm. In July 1936 British Airways established the first night mail and freight service between Gatwick and Hanover, later extended to Berlin. Until the outbreak of war six return services were run weekly in conjunction with the German air lines. July 1936 also saw British Continental Airways amalgamated with British Airways. BCA had been running a competitive line into Scandinavia, in addition to services between London – Lille, London – Brussels, London – Antwerp – Amsterdam, and in the summer London – Ostend – Le Zoute. In September 1938 British Airways aeroplanes flew the Prime Minister to the Munich Conference with Hitler. Just before the war the company organised a direct service to Scandinavia, and this started on the Monday after the outbreak of hostilities, rendering valuable service to diplomats and British trade.

Since Airways Corporation came into existence, besides the New Zealand link already mentioned, a regular mail will be flown from London to Lisbon starting this month.

The following dates should be noted: 11th November 1938 Sir Kingsley Wood, Minister for Air, announced in the House of Commons the proposed merger; 4th August 1939 the Airways Bill received the Royal Assent; 26th November 1939 Sir John Reith announced as Chairman, Clive Pearson, Deputy-Chairman, W.L. Runciman, member, later, Director-General; 7th March 1940 Clive Pearson appointed Chairman in succession to Sir John Reith; 9th March 1940 Irvine Geddes appointed Deputy-Chairman with Harold Brown and Gerard d’Erlanger members of the BOAC; 20th March 1940 Air Ministry announced April 1st as appointed day for the amalgamation.

The Overseas Corporation appreciate the importance of air communications, but they are under the direction of the National Air Communications, and with their depleted fleet and serious shortage of machines and pilots, they will have to wait for Peace before they can hope to maintain their prestige. The sooner the public realise that the Mercantile Air Service is of equal importance to the Mercantile Marine, the sooner BOAC will be able to maintain air communications that are vital to the life of the British Commonwealth.