

Our Post-War Travel Scene

By Derek Stuart-Findlay

THE AIR LINKS TO SOUTH AFRICA

The first flight service between London and the Cape was offered by Imperial Airways. It was inaugurated in January 1932, and a combination of land-based De Havilland Hercules biplanes and Short Scipio and Short Calcutta flying boats provided the ten and a half day service. The flying time was reduced by a day when, after the first year, Handley-Page Hannibal and Armstrong Whitworth Atalanta class airliners replaced the Hercules biplanes. The weekly service proved to be very popular and by 1937 approximately 56 100 passengers and 3 200 tons of mail had been carried through to various points along the route. But while demand for airmail freight capacity continued to grow, it had become increasingly difficult to design much larger aircraft with the capacity to land and take off at the high altitudes along the route. To solve the problem, Imperial Airways acquired a number of newly-designed 24-passenger Short Empire class flying boats, and the African route was changed in June 1937. The 7 260-mile service was



A BOAC flying boat on the Vaal Dam in 1948. Passengers were taken off by launch to the jetty

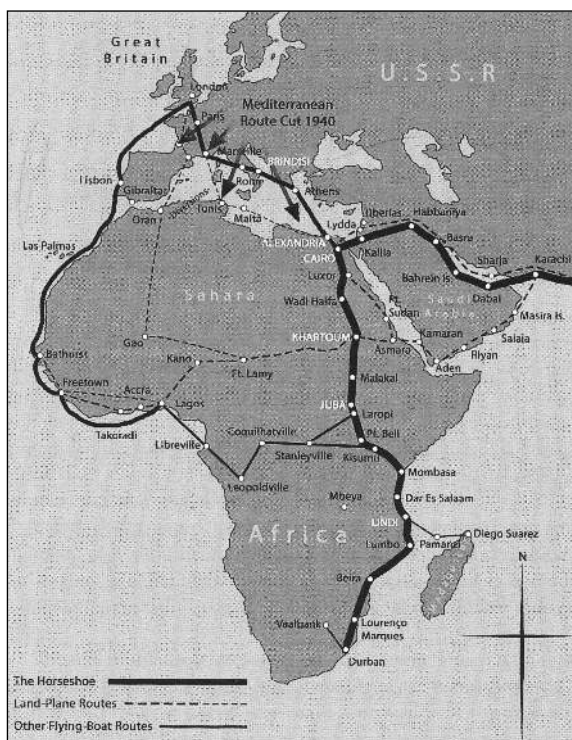
improved to twice-weekly on a 5-day schedule. While the southbound leg from Alexandria in Egypt to Lake Victoria in Uganda remained in place, flights were then diverted east to Mombasa on the Kenyan

coast, and the route followed the coastline down to Dar es Salaam, Lindi, Mozambique and Lourenco Marques before it terminated at a new Marine Airport facility in Durban harbour.

War broke out in September 1939 and within months Imperial Airways was merged into BOAC. The flying boat terminal was moved from Hythe on Southampton Water to Poole, and the service continued with weekly flights to Durban for Government priority passengers, mail and freight. All this was to change in June 1940 when Italy entered the war; the Mediterranean section from London was cut, leaving 16 Empire flying boats south of Italy. Concerned that the flying boat station at Alexandria was vulnerable to a naval attack, the installation was moved to Rod El Farag on the Nile at Cairo. To salvage as much of the service as possible, the so-called Horseshoe Route was instigated, with a weekly service from Durban up to Cairo, where the flying boats turned east and continued on to Singapore and Australia. In August 1940 a link was re-established to England when

a long-range Empire S 30 version flew south from the UK on a survey of the route down the west coast of Africa to Lagos in Nigeria. This was only possible as it was able to fly 1 800 miles nonstop between Lisbon and Bathurst (Banjul) in the Gambia. French Equatorial Africa (Congo) was then persuaded to join the Allied cause, thereafter aircraft could fly over French territory to land at Leopoldville (Kinshasa) in the Belgian Congo en route to Port Bell in Uganda. A month later three S 30s flew from the UK along this route to boost the southern fleet to 19. After this the Belgian airline Sabena provided a service from Lagos to Juba in the Sudan to link up with the Horseshoe Route. Troops were flown out from the UK via the West African route to be trained for operations in the Western Desert at Wadi Saidna outside Khartoum. The Japanese invasion of South-East Asia curtailed the eastern end of the Horseshoe operation, and from February 1942 until the end of the war flights could not continue beyond Calcutta.

The last of the Empire flying boats on the Springbok route,



Imperial Airways Africa Route 1940



Empire flying boat 'Cleopatra' over Durban in 1944

Caledonia, left Durban in March 1947 to fly back to Southampton. They were replaced by Avro Yorks, 18-passenger aircraft derived from the Lancaster heavy bomber. Transport versions of these planes were used intensively during the Berlin Airlift of 1948/49; Avro Yorks flew over 58 000 sorties, close to half of the British contribution.

But the flying boats still had a role to play, and for a few years were able to come back into their own on the Africa route. During the war the RAF had awarded Short Brothers a contract for 40 of an upgraded version of the Short Sunderland long-range general reconnaissance flying boat, dubbed the Seaford. Designed for the Pacific theatre, they were equipped with powerful 1 720 hp Bristol Hercules radial engines. The war came to a close before any of the Seafords could enter service so they were converted to 34-passenger Short Solents and leased to BOAC. For the first time flying boats made use of Central Africa's extensive system of rivers and lakes on an all-inland route from England to South Africa. The terminus at the southern end of the route was moved from Durban harbour to the Vaal River, some 58 miles from Johannesburg. A new weekly service commenced in May 1948, this became three flights a week as the Avro York services were phased out. The Solents brought a new high level of luxury to the route, with three cabin staff attending to the in-flight needs of the passengers. Twenty-two passengers were carried on the lower deck and twelve on the upper



BOAC Short Solent flying boat, 1949

deck, linked by a spiral stairway from a promenade deck. The voyage was a leisurely four and a half days, with four overnight stops. At the end of each day launches would meet the flying boats to convey the passengers to hotels. Outbound from London, stopovers were made at Augusta in Sicily, Luxor in Egypt, Port Bell and Victoria Falls, with refuelling stops at Cairo and Khartoum. The return flight did not include a stop at Luxor, this was substituted with an overnight stop at Cairo. Highlights of the journey included visits to Karnak and the Valley of the Kings during the Luxor layover, whilst at Victoria Falls passengers could view one of the world's greatest natural spectacles and stay at the popular Victoria Falls Hotel. During the flights they could walk up and down the promenade saloon, watching the game below while the pilots circled over large herds for photographs to be taken. This luxury aerial voyage could be undertaken for the princely sum of £295 for the round trip.



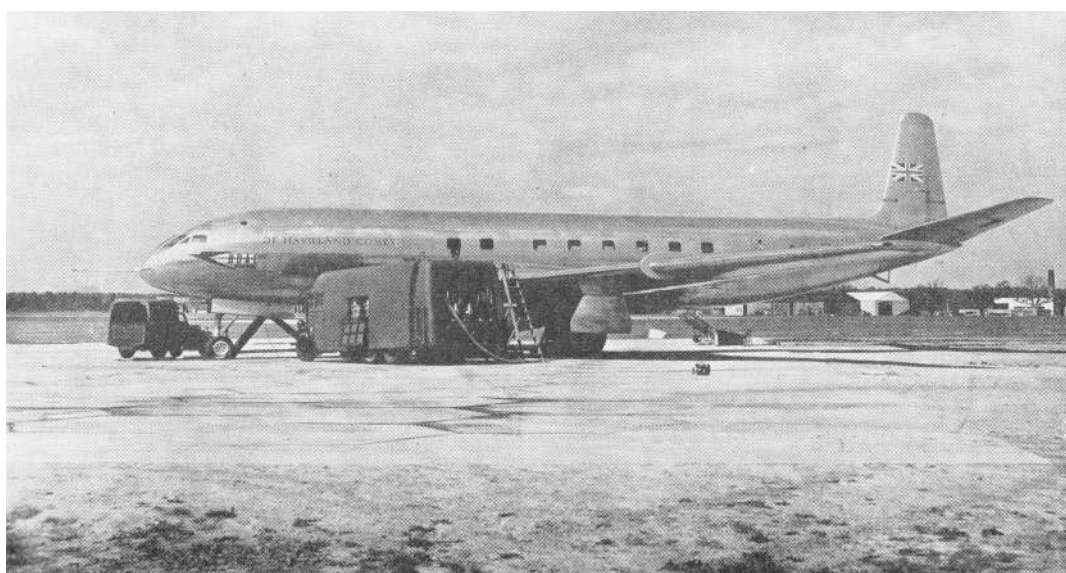
SA Airways Constellation over Johannesburg, 1950

Sadly, the rapid development of long range land-based planes and their associated airports soon made the gracious flying boats obsolete on the South African run, and the last Short Solent from the Vaal Dam returned to Southampton in November 1950. Initially, Lockheed Constellations with their pressurised cabins and prominent triple-tails, replaced the Solents, but within two years the beautiful 36-passenger De Havilland Comet, the first commercial turbojet, was to be unleashed on the South African route. Passengers were most impressed with the silence of the engines after the drumming of the propeller-driven aircraft. The Comet was able to cruise above the turbulence at 30 000 feet at 490 mph, almost 50% faster than the Constellation, and reduced the flying time to Johannesburg to 21 hours 20 minutes. But within a year puzzling accidents started to occur, culminating in the disintegration of a Rome-London flight over the Mediterranean near Elba in January 1954. The fleet was grounded and 60 safety modifications were made to the aircraft. Tragically, three

months later, a London-Johannesburg flight disintegrated in the air over the Mediterranean off the Italian coast near Naples. The fleet was immediately grounded again and a Comet fuselage was subjected to intensive stress tests at Farnborough. It was eventually found that punch rivets and acute metal fatigue on the corners of the cabin's square windows had caused catastrophic failures. The fuselage of the plane was reinforced and oval windows were introduced; learning from this devastating experience, both Boeing and Douglas incorporated changes to the designs of their new commercial jet airliners.

The De Havilland Comet is widely regarded as both an adventurous step forward and a supreme tragedy, but clearly it was the dramatic pioneer of an exhilarating new era of jet-propelled commercial travel.

Acknowledgements to White Water Landings by J.M. Pett, From the City of Cardiff to the Isle of Tahiti by Edward J. Davies, Aeroplane Monthly, January 1990, and Mike Shelly 🚗



BOAC Comet refueling at Koedoespoort Aerodrome, Hatfield, Pretoria, 1953