



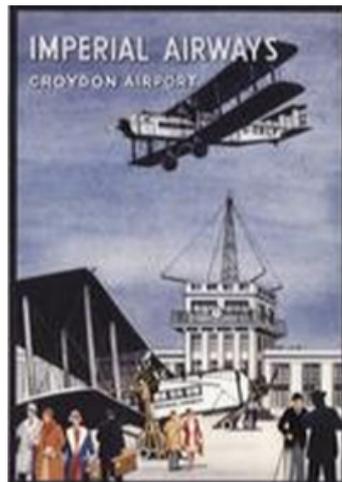
## IMPERIAL AIRWAYS – A Short History THE HANDLEY PAGE HP 42



**The Milton Keynes Branch of Air-Britain**

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In 1923 a Government Committee was appointed to review the policy of subsidising airlines. It duly reported and recommended that the main existing aircraft companies should be merged into one organisation, with the mission of developing British Commercial Air Transport on an economic basis, and creating a company which would be strong enough to develop Britain's external air services. As a result Imperial Airways Limited was formed on 31st March 1924 and on 1st April 1924 it took over the aircraft and services of:

*Handley Page Transport Limited*

Fleet: Three Handley Page W8B's - 'Princess Mary', 'Prince Henry' and 'Prince George'.

*The Instone Air Line Limited*

Fleet: Vickers Vimy Commercial - 'City of London', and four de Havilland DH 34's.

*The Daimler Airway*

Fleet: Three de Havilland DH 34's.

*British Marine Air Navigation Company Limited*

Fleet: Two Supermarine Sea Eagle amphibian flying boats.

Imperial Airways Limited inherited 1,760 miles of cross-Channel routes, and out of the collection of aircraft, most were obsolete and five unserviceable. The landplane operations were based at Croydon Airport which opened on 25th March 1920.

Imperial Airways had the task of reopening British European air routes and also developing air communications between Britain and the Empire. Both routes required aircraft to be designed to operate them, but the Empire routes would additionally require major planning, and knowledge of flying conditions (varying extremes of climate, etc) which until that point had not been regularly experienced.

Industrial troubles with the pilots delayed the operation of services until 26th April 1924, when a daily London-Paris service was opened with a DH34. Thereafter began the task



### IMPERIAL AIRWAYS – A Short History

*[I had intended to put together an article on the HP 42 four-engined biplane airliner (which in fact follows this one). To put it in context with its contemporaries I decided to precede it with a short history of Imperial Airways and its airliners. I have not included flying boat services nor attempts to establish an Atlantic service. Both articles are a combination of various bits and pieces so I have not attempted to credit sources. Editor]*

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of expanding the routes between England and the Continent, Southampton-Guernsey on 1st May, London-Brussels, Ostend and Cologne on 3rd May, and a summer service from London to Basle and Zürich via Paris.



The first new airliner commissioned by Imperial Airways, was the Handley Page W8F 'City of Washington' (above) on the 3rd November 1924. In the first year of operation the company flew 853,042 miles, carried 11,395 passengers and 212,380 letters.

### The Beginning of the Empire Routes

As the name 'Imperial Airways' implied the organisation had been formed to cast its eyes on more distant horizons than the boundaries of Europe. It was charged with the task of pioneering a chain of long-distance intercontinental air services linking the countries of the British Empire with each other and with the United Kingdom. Between the two World Wars it achieved that aim.

The start of the Empire routes occurred when surveys of the Cairo-Karachi air route had been completed by 1st October 1925. In 1926 there was a large increase in the company's fleet: A Handley Page W9 'City of New York', and four twin-engined Handley Page W10s (variants on the W8) were all christened at Croydon airport on 31st March.



On 16th July the new Armstrong Whitworth Argosy (above) introduced a new standard of roominess into air passenger flying came into service. On 1st May 1927, an Argosy inaugurated the world's first 'named' air service - it was the London-Paris 'Silver Wing' service on which meals were served. (Other European routes on which

Argosies operated were those to Basle, Brussels and Cologne.)

On 20th December the first of the de Havilland Hercules airliners (below - ordered by Imperial Airways for service on overseas routes) left England for their new route from Egypt to India.



In January 1927 a service was opened between Cairo and Basra, in the Persian Gulf. To solve the difficulty of navigating across the trackless desert between Palestine and Baghdad a furrow, several hundred miles long, was ploughed in the sand. It was probably the longest furrow ever ploughed.

### The Four Engined Airliners Arrive:

In 1931, first land-based four-engined airliner came on to the scene. The first of the Handley Page HP 42s, 'Hannibal', operated on the London-Paris route for the first time on 11th June. This aircraft type is described in more detail in a separate article after this one.



In 1933 the Armstrong Whitworth AW15 Atalantas (below) was introduced. It was the first monoplane ordered by Imperial Airways and offered the first significant increase in airliner cruising speed since 1919, cruising at 130 mph. It was described as 'the fastest and most luxurious aircraft designed and produced for the tropics, with ample room for passengers to walk about and chat and to enjoy refreshments'.

The type operated from Central Africa to Cape Town and east of Karachi, as the service was extended to Calcutta



on 6th July, Rangoon on 23rd September and Singapore on 9th December. 1933 also saw Imperial Airways complete 10,000,000 miles of flying. During 1938 the Armstrong Whitworth Ensign and de Havilland Albatross were entered into service.



There were two versions of the Armstrong Whitworth AW27 Ensign airliner. A short range European version carried 36-40 passengers and a longer-range Empire version carried 27 day-passengers or 20 night-passengers sleeping in berths. The Ensign was the first British large, four-engined, all-metal land (as distinct from flying boat) monoplane airliner.

The Ensign saw service on European routes, and first went into service on the London-Paris route on 20th October 1938. They carried heavy mail loads during the Christmas period in 1938, and did valuable work between the United Kingdom and France in 1939 and 1940. The Ensigns were used in the Empire by B.O.A.C., but World War II put an end to the original plans for its use. (Another factor in their failure was that they were delivered about two years late to Imperial Airways due to problems with the engines and rearmament.)



The second airliner to be introduced in 1938 was the de Havilland DH91 Albatross, (above) known as the 'Frobisher' class (after the name of their flagship), which was designed for the European routes. The Albatross was the first British airliner to top the 200 mph cruising

speed, and with a top speed of 234 mph, it set a number of records for flights between European capitals, such as a 200 mile trip from London to Brussels in forty-eight minutes by the aircraft 'Falcon'.

### British Overseas Airways Company

Between 1931 and 1935 four other airways companies were consolidated into British Airways Ltd. In 1939 this company combined with Imperial Airways Ltd to become BOAC.

### THE HANDLEY PAGE HP 42



I have often wondered about that 4-engined biplane airliner that appears next to the passenger terminal in pictures of pre-war Croyden, which I now know to be the Handley Page HP 42. It has a Victorian Gothic look about it, as if designed by Brunel, or perhaps Heath-Robinson; indeed, its designer probably was born in the Victorian era.

If you look at the film on <http://tinyurl.com/mor7lba> you will hear it clanking away like a steam engine yet landing as light as a feather with those huge 130ft wings. A longer film clip is on: <http://tinyurl.com/lv4btcc> .

In 1931, at the beginning of its 8-year spell of civil operations, it did not look much out of place. Yet within a few years along came the DC2 & 3 and Lockheed Electra, and in 1938 the Armstrong Whitworth Ensign and de Havilland Albatross which made the HP 82 look archaic.



To be fair the HP 42 did have an elegant streamlined metal fuselage with an enclosed flight deck. Inside the passenger cabin was as ornate and spacious as the Orient Express, but

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those wings and the undercarriage! But despite the luxury there were some passengers who found the cruising speed just too slow.

The Handley Page HP 42 was a British four-engine biplane airliner designed by Handley Page of Radlett in Hertfordshire to a 1928 Imperial Airways specification. The crew compartment was enclosed, a new development, and there were two passenger cabins, one forward and one aft of the wings.

Two classes of HP 42 were made: The 'Heracles' (W) class for European routes were based at Croydon. These seated 18 forward and 20 aft, with reduced baggage capacity. The 'Hannibal' (E) class were for routes in Egypt, India, and Central Africa and were based at Cairo. These seated six (later 12) in the forward compartment and twelve in the aft. There was substantial baggage room.

The HP 42 was a large unequal-span biplane, all-metal except for the fabric coverings of the wings, tail surfaces and rear fuselage. The tail was biplane with three fins. Two engines were on the upper wing and one on each side of the fuselage on the lower wing.

For the four H.P.42 (W – European models) 4 Jupiter XFBM supercharged engines of 555 hp (414 kW) were fitted. The engines for the four H.P.42 (E – Eastern models) were 4 Bristol Jupiter XIFs of 490 hp (370 kW).

Span: 130ft	Speed: 120mph
Length: 89ft 9in	Cruise: 100mph
Height: 27ft	Landing Speed: 52mph
Wing Area: 2,989 sq ft	Empty Weight: 17,740lb
	Max Weight: 28,000lb



These airliners brought a new standard of service, comfort, and safety to passengers. Stewards served full course meals and the Pullman style upholstery was

unrivalled. *No passenger was ever hurt even though each of the eight HP 42s built flew over a million miles.*

On 20th January 1932, the England-Central Africa service was extended to the Cape for the carriage of mail. Passengers first left London by air for South Africa on 27th April. In 1937 'Hengist' was destroyed in an airship hanger fire in Karachi; the first HP 42 to be lost.

The outbreak of war in spelt the end of commercial flying in Europe for some years. Seven HP 42s were in service with Imperial Airways in September 1939, comprising three HP 42Ws in the UK and four HP 42Es in the Middle East. The HP 42s were given coats of camouflage paint and pressed into service for military transport duties.

Three HP 42Ws were used for ferrying supplies and personnel to France. 'Hadrian' was destroyed in a gale in 1940 while picketed out at Doncaster. Of the four HP 42Es based in the Middle East 'Hannibal' was lost without trace over the Gulf of Oman, between Jask and Sharjah, with 8 people on board in March 1940. By the end of that year all HP 42s were withdrawn from service.

We may yet see an HP 42 in the air, possibly! A group called 'Team Merlin', who operated the replica Vickers Vimy bomber, are apparently planning to build an HP 42. There are no clear indications of timescale or progress for this project on their website beyond dates for exhibition and museums. See:

[http://www.team-merlin.com/#!\\_\\_imperial-42](http://www.team-merlin.com/#!__imperial-42)

**Andy Cornwell**