

AIRBORNE GREAT WESTERN

A few years ago I had the pleasure of being actively engaged in promoting the start of the rail-air link between Heathrow Airport and the main line of the Western Region, first to Slough and later to Reading. A number of travel agents from the various areas of the Western Region system were invited to the Airport and at one of the luncheons Mr R. J. Hill, then Divisional Passenger Manager, London, observed, "Of course the true ancestor of BEA was the Great Western Railway." Despite dissenting laughs I was among the loudest "Hear, hears" for Mr Hill's statement summed up the situation precisely.

It was as long ago as 1933 that the GWR, way ahead as usual where initiative was concerned, began the first internal air route in the country, the test-bed of which was not anywhere in the Home Counties but between the Westcountry and South Wales. It took the shape of a daily return service between Cardiff, Haldon Airport, near Teignmouth, and Roborough Airport, Plymouth, flown by a three-engined six-seater Westland Wessex monoplane painted — need I say? — in the familiar chocolate and cream so dear to Great Western hearts. The pilot was none other than the famous Captain G. P. Olley, later the founder of Olley Air Services, and the punctuality of the service was, as may be expected, exemplary. Its *raison d'être* was, after all, cutting off one of the most circuitous journeys on the Great Western between South Wales and Devon round through Bristol, and it thus blazed the trail which internal air services ever since have followed, for the peculiar geography of our country makes it a fact that very few internal air lines pay unless they cross water and so save changes from train to ship or tedious detours.

This comparatively little-known example of the GWR's pioneering spirit was destined only to last one year before the other three main line companies, sensing what a good idea it was, wanted to muscle in. But during the fine summer of 1933 it was a piquant alternative to the sea wall to go up on to Haldon and wait for an air-borne Great Western. The return flight from Plymouth to Cardiff was due to leave Roborough at 4.00, land at Haldon at 4.20 and leave again for Cardiff at 4.25. Haldon Aerodrome — now, alas! vanished — crowned the western escarpment above the twin villages of Luton and Ideford and commanded a superb view away across the "in-country" to Dartmoor, the whole extent of which from Three Barrows in the south to Yes Tor and Cordon in the north was clearly visible on a fine day. In the middle of the scene were the three familiar shapes of Hay Tor, Saddle Tor and Rippon Tor and it would be just to the south of the latter at about 4.10 or 4.11 that the eye could discern a speck, growing steadily larger and assuming the form of a bumble-bee seen head-on. A few more minutes and its steady drone broke upon the ear; then it would bank slightly and sweep round into the wind, its chocolate and cream now clearly visible, and make a rapid descent to land, often just out of sight over the curve of the hill, to reveal itself again a moment or two later as it came bumping across the virgin heather which formed the airport towards the single hangar with tiny glass office which served as passenger terminal. When I look around me in the vast passenger

buildings of Heathrow where I now earn my bread and butter I often think nostalgically of Haldon!

The GWR thrived on ritual and its airborne forces had got it off as pat as the rail-borne. The door would open as the aircraft taxied to a halt and the Haldon mechanic would run in and place a small set of steps at the passenger door. Then the incumbents of the cabin would emerge — the ladies often rather gingerly backwards. "What a display of ankles!" discreetly tittered a medical colleague of my step-father's, watching the passengers alight one warm, heather scented afternoon. Then Captain Olley in person would descend and, resplendent in gold braid, walk into the little office with Squadron-Leader Parkhouse, manager of the airport and a future holder of the same position at Exeter. Three minutes elapsed; then back they trooped again, the doors were closed and at 4.25 precisely the aircraft would move bumpily across the heather, to reappear in a few moments roaring steadily if slowly upwards, turning to gleam in the sun and head north-eastwards, rapidly assuming the shape of a bumble-bee seen stern-on in the general direction of Wild Wales. Once again the best, and only the best, would do for the Great Western; whereas there were still passenger aircraft flying on foreign and internal routes where the pilot sat alone outside, muffled up in the best Blériot tradition, in the Westland Wessex he had an enclosed cabin or "flight deck", if I may be so bold as to coin that phrase.

With the advent of the 1934 season the chocolate and cream disappeared, and in its place came the DH 84 *Dragon* biplane, forerunner of the very successful *Rapide*, of which a few examples are still flying. This eight-seater aircraft — the first in which I had the privilege of being airborne — was owned by RAS, or Railway Air Services, and painted silver with a red and green RAS motif on the tail. These colours were supposed to represent the engine colours of the four main line railways who had now joined in a consortium to operate where the GWR had blazed the trail and also other and longer routes — the origins of the modern BEA routes to Glasgow and Belfast, in fact. In Great Western eyes the colour scheme has a nasty connotation of the GWR being eased out in favour of the Southern and LMS — a sort of airborne Somerset and Dorset! — even if it could be argued that Great Western engines were green, as were those of the Southern and LNER and that therefore that colour, with red for the LMS was an adequate representation of all four.

On their longer routes RAS introduced four-engined DH 86s and the whole network might have expended greatly had it not been for Hitler's War which effectively stopped any advance. When the war ended services were nationalised, the internal ones falling to BEA, but despite some attempts by private companies to resuscitate the Plymouth-Cardiff link it has never proved very profitable; the nearest is British Eagle's Birmingham-Newquay service in summer. Haldon airport, of course, has gone the way of all flesh — indeed well before the war RAS had deserted it in favour of the short-lived but grandiloquently termed Torbay Airport situated at Denbury, in the hinterland near Newton Abbot. I recall watching flying there one evening in 1936 and the ground staff laying out a mysterious signal on the grass runway. Puzzled, I waited; then the RAS *Dragon* hove into view over the trees, her engines cut, but as her pilot glimpsed the symbols he gave her full throttle again and flew on — evidently this was the airborne version of the footnote "Calls to pick up or set down passengers on previous notice to the Station Master".

Thirty years later I found myself at London Airport, entertaining the then General Manager of the Western Region, Mr Gerard Fiennes. The High Wycombe link to and from the airport had just been started and I suggested to him that as the West of England main line ran so close to the airport they ought to tap it. Mr Fiennes questioned me closely on this and I showed him a map indicating that in fact Hayes and West Drayton were as near, if not nearer, than the Southern's Feltham or Staines. Moreover, I pointed out that my staff had often been asked by passengers arriving from the Continent during the inward evening rush hour how they could get down to the Westcountry and that they had had to tell them they couldn't because they would not reach Paddington in time for the 6.30.

Mr Fiennes seemed impressed and sure enough soon afterwards the London Airport-Slough link began. This proved so successful that the rail link terminal was moved to Reading, where connections could be made into and out of far more trains daily — a total of some eighty, in fact — and the dislocation to services by pulling up fast trains at Slough, twenty miles out of Paddington, was also saved. In February, 1968 my telephone at Heathrow rang with an invitation for me to attend the ceremony to be held on 4th March when the 100,000th passenger to be carried on the rail-air link in the year was to be encountered. I remembered to wear my rail-air links, a set of cuff-links given me by Mr Pattisson, the then Divisional Manager, and I was thinking nostalgically of a certain chocolate and cream aircraft carrying the very first six airborne Great Western passengers thirty-five years before.