Airmail

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First carriage of mail by air

The first scheduled air mail service, from Hendon to Windsor, began on 9 September 1911 as part of the celebrations for the coronation of King George V. It was planned to run until 15 September, with a single trip in the reverse direction on 16 September. However, bad weather caused a backlog of commemorative cards and envelopes, the only mail being carried, which was not cleared until 26 September.

Early days

In 1918, an overseas air mail was organised by the Royal Air Force and the British Army Post Office, who co-operated in an experimental Folkestone-Cologne service. At this time, the Royal Air Force also operated a mail and passenger service for delegates from London to the Paris Peace Conference. This service ended in August 1919. On 14 June 1919, John Alcock and Arthur Whitten-Brown completed the first non-stop flight across the Atlantic, carrying with them 196 ordinary letters and one letter packet. Ross and Keith Smith carried the first air mail from England to Australia from 12 November to 10 December 1919. On 11 November 1919, the first public overseas air mail service began, flying between London and Paris. The service was extended to Holland, Belgium and Morocco the following year.

Further expansion

It was soon realised that the four main airlines flying at this time would not be able to cover the British Empire. In April 1924 the companies were merged into a single firm, Imperial Airways, based at Croydon. In its early years, Imperial Airways concentrated on developing traffic with Europe. However, on 30 March 1929 the first through service to India departed from Croydon and by December 1929 the route had extended to Jodhpur and Delhi. On 28 February 1931, a regular London-Tanganyika

(now Tanzania) service began and on 20 January 1932 regular flights to Cape Town started. In 1933, the London-Karachi route was extended to Calcutta and later to Singapore. Finally, on 8 December 1934, a regular London to Brisbane service began. The journey of 12,700 miles was the world's longest air route and took around 12 days.

Inland air mail introduced

On 20 August 1934, inland air mail began with the town-to-town service. This served major centres such as London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Cardiff, Belfast and Glasgow. It was initially an experimental service, but it lasted until World War II.

Empire Air Mail Scheme

The idea of an Empire Air Mail Scheme was conceived in 1933. It aimed to carry all first class mail through the British Empire at a rate of one and a half pence per half ounce, with a charge of one penny for postcards. The scheme began on 28 June 1937, when the flying boat Centurion flew from Southampton to South Africa. The second stage, to India and Malaya, began in February 1938 and the third stage to Australia in July 1938. The Empire Air Mail Service was intended to last for 15 years, but was halted by the war and formally ended on 31 March 1947. Imperial Airways were merged with British Airways in 1940 to form the British Overseas Airways Corporation.

Air Mail during World War II

In August 1939, the British North Atlantic Air Mail Service began, and eight round trips were completed before the start of the war. The Empire and European schemes were suspended at the outbreak of the war, but many services were re-established once a secure system of censorship was introduced. However, owing to the limited space available on the aircraft, a high surcharge of a flat rate of 1s. 3d. per

half ounce for letters and 7d. for postcards was raised for Empire mail.

During the war, the Post Office introduced the Airgraph Service for messages between servicemen and civilians. The message was written onto a special form which was then given an identification number and photographed onto microfilm. The microfilm was flown to its destination, developed into a full size print, and posted to the recipient. The first airgraphs left Cairo on 21 April 1941, arriving in Britain on 13 May. In August 1941, a service from Britain to the Middle East began and gradually extended to other war zones. The service ended on 31 July 1945.

After the war, services were gradually restored; for example, on 1 July 1948, the service for letters, letter packets and postcards to Europe was re-instated. Also in 1948, air mail services for printed papers and other second class mail to countries outside Europe were introduced. In April 1949, an air mail service for parcels to most European countries was introduced.

Inland Air Mails extended

From the end of the war, the Post Office began to use the increasing number of scheduled inland flights to carry mail, and in November 1961 introduced a direct air mail service from London to Glasgow, Edinburgh and Belfast.

On 2 July 1979, a new inland network was established, when Speke airport in Liverpool became the hub of nightly flights to and from five provincial centres, known as "spokes of Speke". Over the next decade, the operation grew ten times and more "spokes" were added. It also began to exchange mail between air and road. In October 1982, a second air hub was created at the East Midlands Airport, near Derby. Its main role was to link air, rail and road.

Air Mail today

Today air mail operations centre around the Royal Mail International building at London Heathrow, with Gatwick, Manchester and Edinburgh airports handling smaller amounts of outgoing mail. The Post Office's national air network, Skynet, ensures millions of letters reach their destination the day after posting.

Sources

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