

**BETTER
AIR
MAILS**



*With the compliments of the Civil Aviation
Section of the London Chamber of Commerce
(Incorporated)*

BETTER AIR MAILS

IT IS TRUE that the public is now making much greater use of the air mails than ever before, but the Post Office is not entitled to much credit for that result. As an article on another page to-day explains, so far as Imperial Airways is concerned the company takes all the commercial risk while the Post Office takes any profits that are going but yet does little to forward the use of air mails beyond selling the stamps. Sir Kingsley Wood gave no hint yesterday of any change in policy that would reduce air mail rates and provide faster services. But the period of Imperial Airways' existing subsidy is drawing to a close, a Cabinet committee is considering the question, and some alteration cannot be deferred much longer. Sir Kingsley Wood mentioned that 400,000 more letters had been sent by air in the March quarter of this year than in that of 1933. That is excellent, but it is important to see how the increase was distributed. It is significant that while the volume of air mail to Empire destinations rose by 48 per cent., the amount dispatched to Europe actually doubled itself. Why? One good reason is that Continental air companies are now providing a network of mail routes served by fast 'planes which often fly by night. You can post a letter in London in the evening which will be delivered in Berlin or Stockholm the following morning, but that letter will have been carried from Croydon by a German night-flying 'plane. No British night air mail service exists. It is curious, too, that it should have been left to a Dutch company to run a service from Hull to the Continent—a service which the Post Office now thinks worthy to be trusted 'experimentally' with the carriage of his Majesty's mails. The demand for some overhauling of British air mails and of Post Office arrangements with Imperial Airways is not growing any less.

The Manchester Guardian, 7 June, 1934

BETTER AIR-MAIL SERVICES

To-day's Deputation to the P.M.G.

(From a Correspondent)

THE Postmaster-General will to-day (June 7) receive a deputation from business men urging all-round improvements in the air mail services, and a Cabinet committee is now considering the question. The benefits to

industry from the fastest possible carriage of letters require no stressing, and there is a widespread feeling that this country is not making the use of the aeroplane it ought to be making. There is equally a feeling that this is not due to technical backwardness but to a mistaken Government policy and lack of proper encouragement of the air mails.

The London Chamber of Commerce, which has an energetic civil aviation section, has for years been pressing reforms on the Post Office. To-day's deputation, in which it will be joined by the National Association of Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of British Industries, can be trusted to put a strong case before Sir Kingsley Wood.

OUR PRESENT BACKWARDNESS

One way to get an idea of our present backwardness is to compare Great Britain with America, or rather, if it is objected that America is a continent, to compare air mail traffic in the United States with that in Europe as a whole. (Though many of the European lines are mail carriers to beyond Europe.)

People in England scarcely realise the extent to which the ordinary American business man is now making use of the air services which private enterprise and lavish Government subsidies (some think too lavish) have between them built up in the last few years. For six months of 1932 a weight of letters was carried in the United States corresponding in a full year to about 3,500 tons. In the whole of 1932 Britain was carrying under 140 tons. Even within Europe, Germany was carrying more than two and a half times as many letters by air as ourselves (about 378 tons). But if all the mail carried by all the European companies in 1932 were added together it would still come to much less than half that carried in the United States.

What is the reason for this contrast so far as our own Empire mails are concerned? It is no use blaming Imperial Airways. Imperial Airways not only receives less in the way of direct State aid than any comparable system (£551,000 in 1932 compared with £1,239,835 given to French companies and about £5,000,000 in combined subsidy and air mail revenue to companies in the United States), it is also entirely under the thumb of a rigid Post Office policy which makes any radical departure from present practice impossible.

IMPERIAL AIRWAYS' POSITION

Critics often say that the air mails are 'too slow'—that it is preposterous to be taking nine days to Capetown and to be proposing to take nearly a fortnight to Australia, when with proper organisation and the fast machines now available the times might be cut to both destinations to four or five days. But Imperial Airways has neither the money available for high-speed specialised mail 'planes nor any incentive from the Post Office to employ them if it had. The present arrangement is that Imperial Airways carries air mails at bulk contract rate. The Post Office fixes the rates to be paid by the public but gives no guarantee of minimum loads. Consequently the whole commercial risk is borne by Imperial Airways. No compensation is offered to the company for higher cruising speeds or for night flying, as is done in the United States, and it is not surprising if it should fail to attempt them.

Imperial Airways is committed to that policy of building up traffic on its Empire routes with those steady, slowish mail-cum-passenger liners which have long been the most comfortable in the world. It has neither money nor incentive for trying dramatic and thankless experiments. Meanwhile the Post Office, which takes no risk whatever, is actually making a small profit on the air mails.

So far as the average user is concerned, the chief grudge against the air mails lies as much in the differential scale of charging for air mail postage as in the still fairly high cost and inferior service. It is exasperating when one is in a hurry to post a letter for abroad to have to consult the fairly bulky Air Mail Guide each time in order to verify that the postage to Bombay is 6d. the half-ounce, to East Africa 10d., or to Egypt 3½d., and that it has not been changed since the last issue of the Guide.

SCALE OF CHARGES

As for the information on air mail surcharges to foreign destinations, it resembles a cross between a set of logarithms and a railway time-table. Air mail rates indeed are almost as complicated as the rates of surface carrying in the pre-Rowland Hill days. This is not a small grumble either. Uncertainty has always held back the use of the post as much as uniformity has encouraged it. No one doubts that in the present state of air transport some degree of differential charging must exist; speed is enormously expensive and it would

clearly be ridiculous to expect that a half-pound parcel should be carried to Singapore by air at the same rates as a half-ounce letter to Paris. This is carrying Rowland Hillian principles to absurdity. But there is a growing volume of opinion that holds that nothing would stimulate the use of the air mails more than a flat rate within the Empire for the carriage of some if not all first-class mail matter.

The Post Office replies that the cost would be too high. The total amount of first-class matter sent from Britain to other parts of the Empire has been estimated at 1,650 tons a year, and the amount incoming from the Empire at 950 tons. (The difference between the incoming and outgoing volume is noteworthy; if specialised mail 'planes were used the incoming 'planes would be loaded to less than half the capacity of the outgoing.)

SERVICE AND DEMAND

To carry such a volume by air instead of by surface transport (though it would still be less than that carried by the American air lines) at the same postage rates would, argues the Post Office, involve an additional expense of many thousands a year. The critics reply that in this calculation the Post Office is ignoring the effect that improved speed mail services would have on the demand for them and the working economies which would come from greater volume of traffic. One suggestion is that to raise the Empire postage to the rate of foreign postage ($2\frac{1}{2}$ d.) would not seriously affect the use made of it and would go far to meet the additional expense involved in the carriage of mails by air throughout.

There are other matters in which business is by no means satisfied with present Post Office policy. The present minimum of weight on Empire routes is the half-ounce letter. The London Chamber of Commerce has long been pressing for this to be reduced to a quarter-ounce, arguing that for large amounts of correspondence the quarter-ounce size is ample. It also asks for night mail services—especially to the Continent. Mail trains and steamers run throughout the night and so could the mail 'planes. Given proper ground organisation it is perfectly feasible; in the United States, for example, 43 per cent. of all commercial flying is done at night. At present the only night mail service to and from this country, as the Postmaster-General admitted in the Commons on May 14, is a German one.

The Manchester Guardian, 7 June, 1934

PRESS NOTICE

ISSUED BY THE GENERAL POST
OFFICE

Report of a Deputation received by the
Postmaster-General on 7 June, 1934

Imperial Air Mail Services

THE Postmaster-General to-day received a deputation from the London Chamber of Commerce, the Association of British Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of British Industries on the subject of the air mail.

Lord Leverhulme, President of the London Chamber, when introducing the deputation from the three organisations which, he said, represented the whole of British industry and commerce, congratulated the Postmaster-General on his statement in the House of Commons on Wednesday. As business men, they felt strongly that the time had come when the air mail should no longer be looked upon as something abnormal. On a previous occasion, when approaching the Post Office with regard to improvements in the air mail services, the London Chamber had been referred to the Air Ministry, but the deputation felt that they were right in coming to the Postmaster-General as the provision of efficient mail services was in their view the function of the Post Office.

Sir Geoffrey Clarke, Chairman of the Council of the London Chamber, who put the case of the deputation, referred to the fact that when the London Chamber's deputation had been received by the Secretary of State for Air in September 1933, they had drawn attention to the very small percentage of the first-class mail carried by air and to the fact that the air mail did not adequately meet the requirements of the business community, which expected the fastest possible transit for its mail that modern developments could offer. The British Post Office, he said, had always been to the front in the matter of improving the mail services.

He felt some diffidence in mentioning exact figures, but, under the present arrangements, about five days were occupied in the conveyance of mail by air between London and Karachi and between London and Nairobi, a distance of approximately 5,000 miles in each case. In its representations to the Secretary of State for Air the London Chamber

had submitted that the mail should travel at least 2,500 miles per day. This would mean that both Karachi and Nairobi could be reached in two days.

Whilst there had been some improvements, both on the Indian and African air routes, it was urged that there should be a definite increase in the speed of the services.

The deputation held the view that the first-class Empire mail should be sent by air at as low a flat rate of postage as possible. The present high charges were really more in the category of telegraph rates than postal rates and accordingly acted as a deterrent to the use of the air mail.

Sir Geoffrey referred to the fact that the London Chamber, in a letter to the Postmaster-General in August 1932, had expressed the view that air services should be utilised by the Post Office for the carriage of all first-class mail matter in the ordinary course of business at the ordinary rate of postage. He recognised, however, that this was an ideal and that some considerable time must elapse before agreement could be reached on the question of the abolition of the air mail surcharge amongst the various signatories to the Universal Postal Convention. In the meantime, however, it was urged that the Postmaster-General should use his influence with the Postal Authorities in the Dominions and Colonies with a view to the first-class mail being dispatched by air within the Empire at as low a flat rate as possible.

The adoption of such a scheme would mean that the air mail would no longer be regarded as an additional service which the public could use at their option and for which they must pay the full cost. Indeed, the principle had apparently been recognised by the Post Office in that no extra charge was being made for the conveyance of mail on the recently inaugurated air service between Inverness and the Orkneys.

It was true that the principle of a special air mail fee had been recognised at the recent Postal Congress at Cairo, and therefore, for the time being, it would hardly be in conformity with international regulations for all first-class mail to be sent by air at existing rates of postage. However, in the Convention, under Article 4 (5) of the General Provisions for the Conveyance of Mails by Air, ' Administrations had the option of not collecting any special fee for conveyance by air, provided that notice was given to the country of destination and by agreement beforehand with

countries of transit.' It seemed clear that, under this article, a flat rate for Empire air mails would be permissible.

It has been suggested that the rates might be fixed at the foreign postage rates, viz. : 2½d. for the first ounce and 1½d. for each subsequent ounce. Although some such low rate was advocated, it was difficult for the deputation to say whether the figure suggested would be suitable. It seemed clear, however, that the Post Office would have to retain the present Empire postage rate of 1½d. for the first ounce and 1d. for each subsequent ounce, otherwise there would be an outcry from that body of correspondents who were not so much concerned with the saving of transit time in their correspondence as with the cost of it. Therefore, until all first-class mail matter could be carried by air at the existing rates applying to surface transit, it would seem to be the best policy to give an option to correspondents to send their letters by the surface route at the existing Empire rate instead of by air mail at a higher flat rate.

The joint deputation wished again to urge that it was the function of the Post Office to provide for the dispatch of the business mail by the quickest possible form of transport and that therefore the cost of such services should be borne by the Post Office. They were indeed strongly of the opinion that all air mail contracts should be controlled and financed by the Post Office and that payment should be for services rendered and should be met out of Post Office funds as in the case of other mails. In view of the great estimated surplus, to which the Postmaster-General had referred in his speech in the House of Commons on Wednesday, surely money could be no object.

Finally, the deputation were convinced that the business community would welcome the improved facilities which would be attained by the introduction of a twice-weekly British air service to the East and to South Africa.

They were definitely of the opinion that improvements in air communications on the lines mentioned were of vital importance to the country and to the Empire as a whole, particularly in view of the developments taking place in foreign services.

In his reply the Postmaster-General said that he was very glad to receive the deputation and grateful for all the assistance which the Chambers and the Federation had given to him.

So far as the specific points dealt with by the deputation were concerned, the reply would

of necessity have to be of a general character. The subjects raised were most important, both from the point of view of this country and of the Empire as a whole, and he was fully in sympathy with the motives underlying the ideas put forward.

Although it was not the function of the Post Office to establish air services, it was the settled policy to use any established air service which offered sufficient regularity and acceleration as compared with the surface routes. The whole question of the air services was at present being examined by the departments concerned, and due note would be taken of all that the deputation had said to him. They would appreciate that such examination raised questions of much complexity and that it would take some time before any conclusion was reached.

It had been suggested that the duty of subsidising air services should be transferred from the Air Ministry to the Post Office; but the Postmaster-General pointed out that, although the Post Office had a surplus of 13 million pounds, under the Finance Act of last year, $10\frac{3}{4}$ millions of that sum had to be handed over to the Exchequer, and certainly this large contribution was most valuable in reducing taxation and thus helping trade and industry. Many people would like to see a larger amount available for the Post Office, but it must be clear that money taken away from the Exchequer must be found in some other way by the general taxpayer. Many people were urging such things as a return to *id.* postage, which would cost £6,000,000, reductions in the charges for telegrams and in many other directions.

The position was that for the carriage of air mails the Post Office paid the charges due for the services rendered by the Air Companies, and the view would certainly be taken in many quarters that it would be unwise for this Department to pay anything in the nature of a hidden subsidy. At present the appropriate subsidy was paid by the Air Ministry, and Parliament and the public knew exactly what was being paid.

GENERAL POST OFFICE.

7 June, 1934.

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