



The "Horsa" in flight  
over Kisumu, Africa.  
Photo: A. W. Green.

## The Story of the ENGLAND-INDIA AIR MAIL

by  
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(Authors of "The Romance of the Flying Mail")

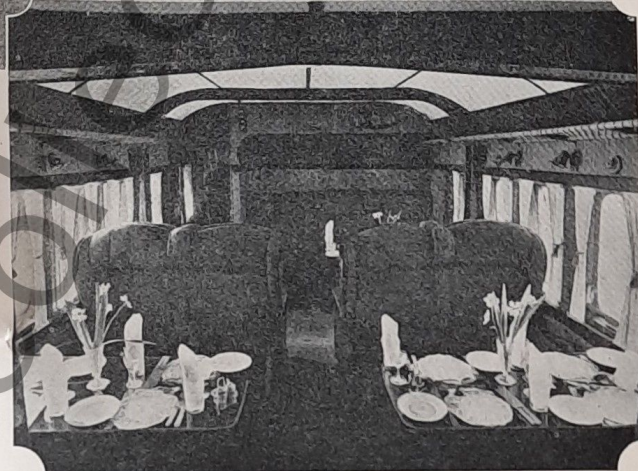
### I

**I** REGARD this as the real start of British civil aviation."

Those were the words which, six years ago, were uttered by the then British Secretary of State for Air, Sir Samuel Hoare, as he watched the first regular India-bound air mail vanish over the Surrey Hills from Croydon on a 5,000 miles journey which forged a new high speed link across the Empire.

The story of this England-India air mail is one of the greatest romances of human enterprise. As far back as twenty-four years ago, in February, 1911, India was the scene of the first "official" air mail in which letters, after being received by the postal authorities and after being postmarked and sorted, were handed to an aeroplane pilot for delivery at a pre-arranged place and, on arrival, were passed through again into the ordinary postal channels of circulation, the "aerial postman" during his flight being recognised officially as a servant of the Post Office.

This first "official" air mail flight in India, as contrasted with many unofficial experiments of early days, was made in connection with the Allahabad Exhibition. Its organiser was Capt. Walter Windham—now Sir Walter Windham—who later in that same year was the moving spirit in the first officially sanctioned air mail to be flown in England, which was carried out between Hendon and Windsor in connection with the Coronation festivities of King George. After these pioneer tests of 1911 in the use of aircraft for mail-carrying, we had to wait until after the Great



Interior of the "Scipio,"  
with tables laid. Photo:  
Imperial Airways.

War before there was any attempt to use aeroplanes regularly for the transport of mail matter. Towards the end of the war the British Government established an official committee—the Civil Aerial Transport Committee—which was entrusted with the task of indicating the directions in which it thought post-war civil aviation might develop. One of its main conclusions was that there was immense scope for the institution of a regular air mail service between England and India, and also along other great Imperial highways.

Following the recommendations of this committee, early in 1919 the British Air Ministry sanctioned officially the inauguration of civil aviation, and this was followed a few months later by the establishment of the world's first daily air express service between London and Paris. British enterprise in this London-Paris service and also in other air services between London and the Continent was regarded as a convenient form of practical training for the greater and more important task of establishing a first long-distance air mail between England and India. The postal authorities took great interest in these pioneer air lines between London and the Continent, which were operated in winter as well as in summer, and in connection with which it was sought to demonstrate that the aeroplane could be flown to a regular schedule in bad weather as well as in fine.

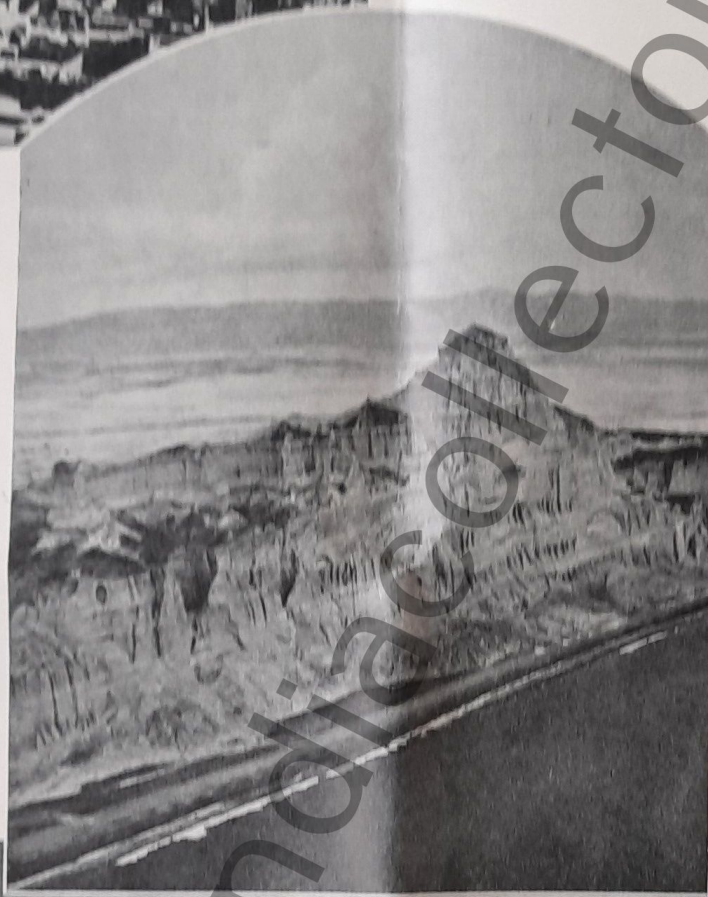


## II



*El Khodimain Mosque, Baghdad, Iraq. Photo: Imperial Airways.*

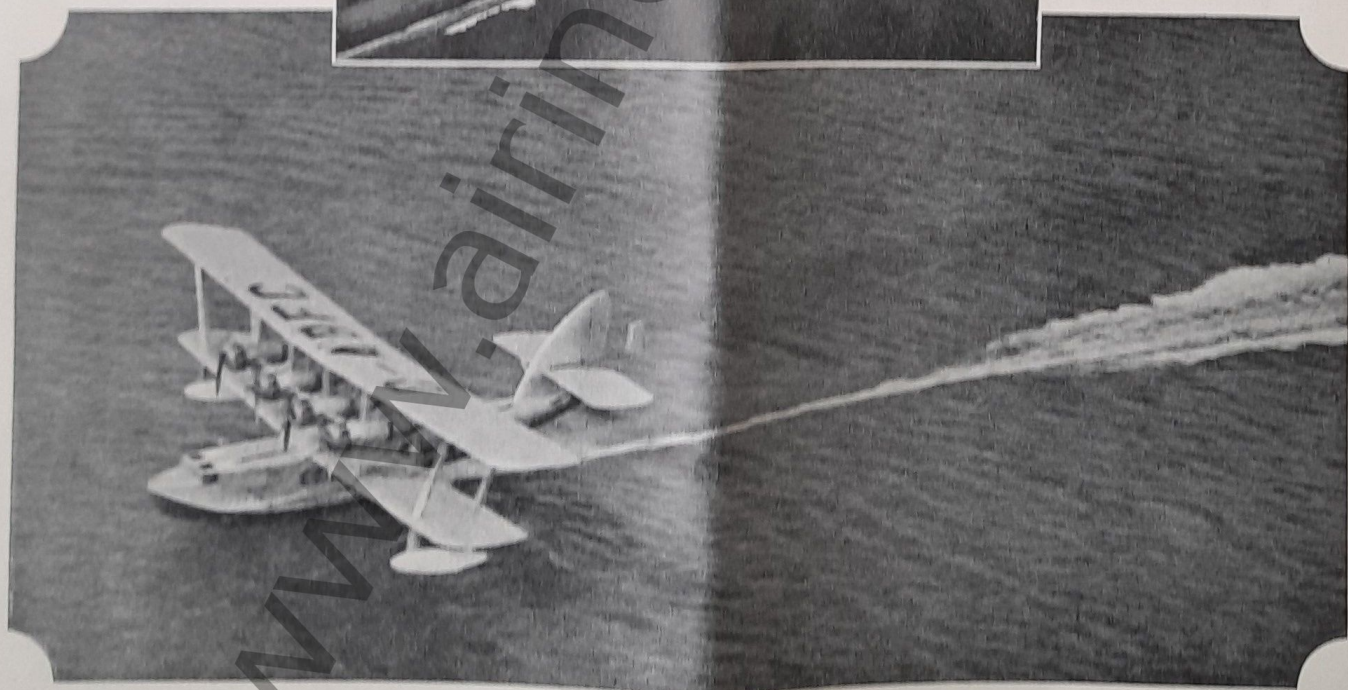
The proof of the ability of aeroplanes to combat bad weather was shown so conclusively, even during the initial stages of the London-Paris route, that the Post Office soon came forward with a formal contract for the carriage of mails on this service; and this paved the way for the employment of aeroplanes as mail carriers, in due course, on the England-India and other Empire air routes.



*Air view of typical hills in Baluchistan. Photo: Imperial Airways.*

In tracing the development of the England-India air route, there are many interesting milestones that come within one's purview. As far back as 1918 a first "blazing the trail" flight was made between England and India *via* Egypt by a big Handley Page bombing plane, and it was early in 1922 that troop-carrying and communication squadrons of the R.A.F. in Iraq were

given the task of establishing an aerial mail service between Cairo and Baghdad. Just before this, in 1921, a guiding line, or furrow, had been ploughed across the desert by a Royal Air Force car convoy, assisted by aeroplanes, this guiding line extending across the desert from Cairo to Baghdad, *via* Jerusalem, Amman, Azrak and Ramadi. In 1922, apart from establishing an official Cairo-Baghdad air mail, the British Government established a Civil Aviation Advisory Board, and this Board advised that a technical and scientific investigation should be made immediately to ascertain the most suitable type or types of aircraft and engines for a regular air service between England and India. The Board also suggested that surveys should be carried out to ascertain



*Air mail liners of this type are equipped with four Bristol 'Jupiter' engines of 555 h.p. each, and the speed is 135 miles an hour. Photo: Charles E. Brown.*



the most economical length of the stages along this England-India route.

A further recommendation by the Board was that the route from Baghdad to Karachi should be laid out and prepared for the use of civil aircraft; also that the Cairo-Baghdad section—already flown over by the R.A.F.—should be made ready for regular civil operation, and that tenders should be invited for a commercial air mail over the route, the Government giving State assistance to the organisation whose tender was accepted. It was this report which really paved the way for the institution of a commercial air mail between England and India.

Before, however, any practical progress could be effected, another important step had to be taken officially. By this time four separate British companies were engaged in operating air routes; but it was felt by the Government—and this view was supported by a Civil Air Subsidies Committee which had been examining the question—that the development of a system of long distance airways stretching from England across the Empire would be carried out to best advantage if, instead of there being a number of different organisations to be considered, British

*Air view of the River Tigris. Photo: American Colony Photographers (courtesy, Imperial Airways, Ltd.)*



air progress was focussed into a single spearhead of effort. This plan was recommended very clearly in the report of the Civil Air Subsidies Committee, which recommended the formation of a new national company, with a subsidy of £1,000,000 spread over a period of ten years. This led in April, 1924, to yet another big landmark in aerial history, the establishment of Imperial Airways. This national company absorbed the previously-operating companies and embarked immediately upon the initial stages for the operation of an air mail between England and India.

*Aerial view of Karachi. Photo: Imperial Airways.*



### III

Preliminary work was now reaching a practical stage, and in 1925 the then Director of Civil Aviation, the late Air Vice-Marshal Sir Sefton Branker, embarked on an official survey flight from England to India and back, being piloted by Mr. Alan Cobham, now Sir Alan Cobham. Sir Sefton Branker flew as far as Rangoon on this aerial survey and, by the time he had reached London on his return flight, had covered a distance of approximately 18,000 miles. His general impression, he said, was that a regular aeroplane service from England to India was quite feasible from a technical point of view.

Following Sir Sefton Branker's report a joint survey party, representing the Air Ministry and Imperial



Airways, went over the route from Cairo and Karachi during

*The Passengers' Rest House at Karachi Air Port, India.*

August and September 1925. Final details of the ground organisation were arranged during this survey, and in November, 1925, an official agreement was signed for the operation by Imperial Airways of a regular service between Egypt and India, with subsequent links to carry sections of the route between



England and Egypt. It was agreed that the commercial Egypt-India route, after leaving Cairo, was to go by way of Gaza, Amman, Rutbah Wells, Baghdad, Bushire, and on down the Persian Gulf to Karachi. Imperial Airways agreed to begin the service in 1927 and to build a fleet of new 3-engined air-liners which would be capable of maintaining their height with a full load with any one engine stopped, and which were to be equipped specially for semi-tropical air travel.

The Air Ministry, on their part, agreed to subsidise the service and to instal wireless and meteorological stations along the route.

It was shortly after this that Sir Samuel Hoare, then Secretary of State for Air, decided to make an inaugural flight from London through to Delhi in one of the first of the 3-engined aircraft which had been designed and built for the India route. Some of his friends reminded him that the only other Minister of the Crown who had taken part in the opening of a new line of transport had been Huskisson, the President of the Board of Trade, and that something like 100 years ago he had been killed in the first railway journey of the Liverpool and Manchester railway. But, needless to say, this did not deter Sir Samuel Hoare, and, accompanied by Lady Maud Hoare, he made a most successful air journey from London through to Delhi, this being actually the first flight made between England and India by a purely civil machine. His pilots on that occasion were the late Capt. F. L. Barnard, and Capt. C. F. Wolley-Dod, now Manager of the European Division of Imperial Airways.

Imperial Airways had, by the autumn of 1926, completed their preparations for the start of the sections of the England-India air mail stretching from Cairo to Karachi; but now political difficulties were encountered with regard to the operation of the route along the Persian shores of the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, in January, 1927, the Company took over from the R.A.F. the Cairo-Baghdad air mail service, and extended it to Basra, at the head of the Persian Gulf.

Negotiations with Persia dragged on, and at one time broke down completely. But by 1929 the difficulties had been overcome, and the Persian Government gave an authorisation to Imperial Airways to fly once weekly in each direction for a period of three years along the Persian coast. Negotiations had also been in progress for the extension of the service from Cairo to London, and these reached a successful issue at approximately the same time; so that it became possible to extend the service eastward to India and westward to London simultaneously, thus providing a 5,000 miles air service connecting Britain, Egypt, Palestine, Iraq and India—this being the first regular air service from Britain to any part of the Empire. Apart from the new fleet of land-planes and flying-boats which was necessary for operating this England-India air mail, and the extensive ground organisation which had to be created in the shape of main aerodromes, subsidiary alighting points, and wireless and meteorological stations, Imperial Airways sent out to the various stations and depots along the route approximately 200 expert airwaymen and engineers. These men were all specialists at their various tasks—pioneers in the field of trans-Empire aerial transport.

It was aerial history that these men were making, as those air folk realised who watched the departure from London of the first little group of picked men who went out to staff some of the more distant stations

along the India route. They joked and laughed, those pioneers, and made light of the big tasks they were about to undertake. But at the back of their minds they realised the significance of the occasion. They were the first units of a new Empire-wide organisation which stands for a method of high speed transport reducing journeys of weeks to days and those of days to hours and which, as it expands at the rate at which it is now expanding, will mean the development of a great industry rivalling, and perhaps in due course even eclipsing, the world's great shipping industry.

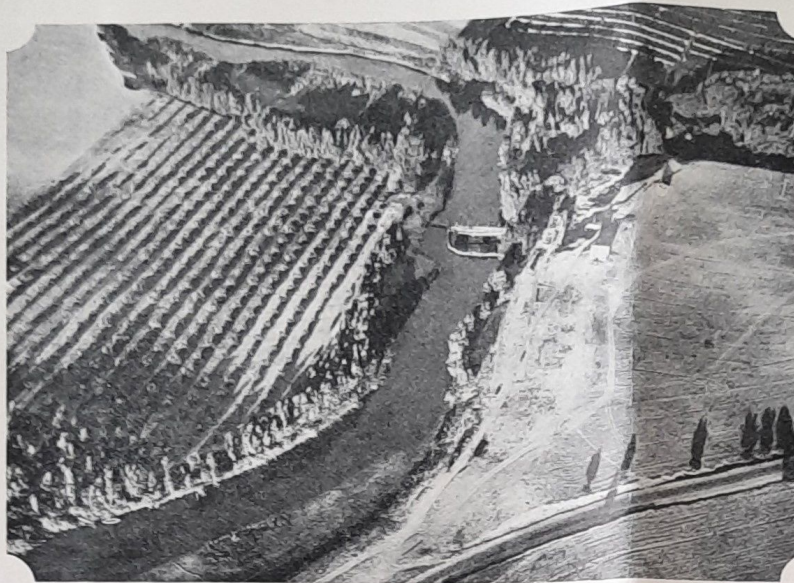
#### IV

On a long route like that between England and India there were many problems to be solved. On desert sections it was necessary to instal reserve petrol depots, some of them far from civilisation. It was a formidable task in itself, apart from a hundred and one other details, to establish and maintain these remote refuelling posts. Great tanks had to be sunk below the ground. Supplies of petrol had to be conveyed to them. Then, as it was not possible to guard them constantly, devices had to be installed to make it impossible to get at the petrol unless one was an authorised person with the requisite key. When such sunken stores were first introduced in the early days of the desert air mail, local shaikhs who were modern enough to possess motor cars were not averse from endeavouring to get a little free petrol from these unattended posts. Hence the need for adequate construction against such desert pilferage.

Another problem which the organisers of the England-India air mail had to face was this. Until night flying can be in regular progress throughout such a route, the daily stages sometimes take a big craft in the evening to some remote point where, in addition to facilities in the shape of fuel replenishment and sheds, it is essential that there should be comfortable accommodation for the passengers who are making their journey in the machine. Thus the work of the airway organisers takes on yet another phase. The officials must arrange for the provision, where they do not exist already at remote air-halts, of comfortably equipped rest-houses. And here a staff, with adequate catering arrangements, must be in readiness for the arrival of the air-liners and their occupants. This implies another romantic feature of airway working on a long distance route like that between England and India. Down comes one of the big 'planes, as dusk falls, at some tiny intermediate station. A handful of local folk, to whom the arrival of the air-liner is one of the big events of their existence, come hurrying up. The passengers disembark. The air-liner captain and his first officer attend to the refuelling of their big machine. Then the passengers who have just descended from the clouds are escorted to the neighbouring rest-house which has been provided for their accommodation. Here, right out somewhere in the wilds, they find that all the amenities of a modern hotel, including a well-cooked dinner, have been prepared for them; and after they have enjoyed it and have discussed the special features of interest in their day's flying, they retire to rest and sleep the sleep of thoroughly contented travellers. Next morning, early, breakfast awaits them, and then they take their places again in the big air-liner and go winging their way along the next sections of the great England-India route.

It was on the trans-desert stages between Cairo, Baghdad and Basra that it became necessary to establish





west of Baghdad, when he decided to alight in the desert to make some minor adjustment. Assuring his passengers that all was well, he glanced over the sandy wastes surrounding the air-liner and observed: "Well, here you have the real desert." But he had spoken just a little too soon, because hardly had his words been uttered when, despite the fact that they had come down in such an apparently desolate spot, visitors began to arrive in a simply astonishing way. First came five cars, dashing up at high speed, and bringing interested spectators. Then several aeroplanes of the R.A.F. appeared in the sky above, and, after finding out that nothing much was amiss, they entertained the air-liner's passengers with a little impromptu flying display. These

*The Jordan after it leaves the Sea of Galilee, showing the new dam under construction. Photo: American Colony Stores.*

a fort—a romantic alighting point—right out in the heart of the desert at Rutbah Wells. This fort was armed so that it could protect itself adequately against the possible onslaught of any desert marauders. But these nomads of the desert, after they saw how well protected the fort was, made up their minds that a friendly policy would serve their purpose best, and relations between this air-*fort* and the occupants of the surrounding desert have always been of a satisfactory character.

There is, incidentally, an illuminating little story that can be told to illustrate how modern travel is beginning to alter conditions even in the heart of deserts. On one of the services of the England-India air mail the captain of one air-liner had arrived midway between Baghdad and the Gulf of Suez, roughly 80 miles

*Air view of the river Jordan flowing into the Dead Sea, showing the salt pans near the river and the mountains of Moab in the background. Photo: American Colony Photographers.*



R.A.F. machines were followed almost immediately by another aeroplane, this time a machine flown by a pilot who was engaged on special work for Iraq petroleum interests. He landed close to the air-liner and wanted to know if he could be of any assistance, while his passengers joined the other interested spectators. And then just after that a couple of cars appeared, driven by natives, who just glanced over casually but did not stop, taking the whole scene quite for granted. "And there you have the desert to-day" was the air-liner pilot's terse comment.

The way in which science now annihilates distance was shown on another occasion when, by means of the



*Rutbah Wells taken from an Imperial Airways liner of the "Hannibal" class, showing another liner of the same class on the ground. Photo: American Colony Photographers.*



a wireless service which plays so important a part in the organisation of a modern airway, passengers who were flying to India heard the result of the Derby, while high above the desert, within a minute or so of the conclusion of the race on Epsom Downs.

On one section of the India route, while crossing the Mediterranean, travellers experience yet another novelty. Instead of their halting point taking the form of a rest-house, it assumes the shape of a fine, graceful marine motor vessel, the "Imperia." Moored in a beautiful lagoon on the island of Crete, she acts as a floating hotel for England-India passengers. This, it may be mentioned incidentally, is by no means the sole purpose of her existence. She is a completely equipped marine tender for the big flying-boats on this section of the route, carrying spare parts and all such materials as may be required; and, being a mobile unit, she can proceed at a moment's notice in any direction. Her employment as a marine hotel and restaurant is, as one can imagine, greatly appreciated by England-India air passengers. The big flying-boats come down gently and alight on the lagoon. Whereupon the passengers are conveyed quickly to the "Imperia," and enjoy a meal on board while the flying-boat takes on a fresh supply of fuel. They then return to their aircraft and are soon aloft again.

#### V

In its initial stages the whole of the England-India route, with the exception of two short train links—one from Basle to Genoa and the other from Alexandria to Cairo—was accomplished by air. Machines flew from London *via* Basle to Paris. Then the route continued by flying-boat from Genoa to Alexandria; while Empire-type air-liners operated the remainder of the route from Cairo to Karachi. After functioning satisfactorily for nearly a year, and bringing India within seven days of England, political difficulties with Italy developed, and it became necessary to divert the air route for eighteen months through Central Europe. Then, however, the political troubles were smoothed away, and Imperial Airways returned to a Genoa-Naples-Corfu route.

Later on a land link, by sleeping car train, was adopted between Paris and Brindisi, at which port the flying-boats picked up their loads and flew with them to Alexandria. Certain shortenings of the route, eastward from Athens, also enabled the previous seven day England-India schedule to be reduced to six days.

Not long after this the agreement with Persia expired, and as an alternative route which the Persian authorities suggested did not meet with approval from a technical point of view, it was decided to transfer the Persian Gulf section of the India route to the other side of the Persian Gulf, and to establish the necessary organisation along the Arabian side of the Gulf, aerodromes being established at Bahrein and Sharjah, with intermediate landing-grounds at various other points. Sharjah, located on what used to be called "the pirate coast," became an important night halt, and here was constructed a picturesque, well protected fort on much the same lines as the one at Rutbah Wells.

#### VI

From the very commencement of the air route to India, the object has been to extend the service across India from Karachi onwards towards Australia. Difficulties, however, delayed these extensions for some time. A temporary extension from Karachi was operated for some time to Delhi, the machines being chartered from the Indian Government. This extension service

terminated in December, 1932, and arrangements were then made by the Indian Government for light planes belonging to the Delhi Aero Club to connect with the mail planes at Karachi, and carry mails between Karachi and Delhi. Commercial interests in India also inaugurated a service of light planes which connected with the England-India mail at Karachi, and operated a mail service from there to Bombay and Madras.

In the early part of 1933 difficulties in India were smoothed away and an Indian Company—India Trans-Continental Airways—was formed to operate an air mail service across India. On July 7, 1933, the service was actually extended from Karachi *via* Jodhpur, Delhi and Cawnpore to Calcutta; and this was followed by further extensions eastward to Rangoon and Singapore, culminating, at the end of 1934, by the establishment of those additional links in the great Empire air chain which carried the route from Singapore to Port Darwin and Brisbane, there to connect with the air mail system of Australia. From the inception of the India air mail, and in spite of adverse conditions brought about by the great depression and other causes, the traffic growth on this great route has been consistently encouraging. It has increased not in any spectacular way, nor by fits and starts. The growth has been steady and dependable, particularly in regard to the carriage of mails. During 1934, in fact, traffic progress was such that it was decided to duplicate the weekly service between London and Calcutta and this duplicated service, providing two flights weekly in each direction, came into regular operation at the beginning of the present year.

In many other important aspects has progress continued on this great England-India air mail. By an accelerated service Calcutta is now only 6½ days from London. Giant 4-engined air-liners, some of them attaining a speed of 150 miles an hour, have replaced the 3-engined craft with which the service was inaugurated. Fares for passengers have been reduced; so also have the postage rates for air-borne mails, and half-ounce letters are now carried between England and India for a fee of sixpence.

Nor is this all. Far from it. An even greater era of expansion now impends. The authorities have, in principle, agreed to the bulk transport of first-class mails by air on the main Empire routes without any surcharges or special labels. A great scheme is also being embarked upon for illuminating the main Empire air routes, so that flying can proceed on a 24-hours' basis. At the same time designs are being worked on for Empire-type air-liners which will be far larger and swifter in flight than any machines in use at present. These huge aircraft are to contain luxurious sleeping as well as day accommodation for the passengers using them. They will fly night and day over the England-India and other routes, halting only to replenish their fuel-tanks and to change crews, and their occupants will be just as comfortable in these continuous day-and-night journeys as they would be in an ocean-going liner.

The result of all these developments and improvements, providing a fitting culmination to years of arduous and ceaseless work, will be that in approximately two years' time a great luxury air speed service will be flying from London to Egypt in 1½ days, and through from England to India in not more than 2½ days, while it is also probable that, by that time, there will be four or possibly five services a week in each direction along this vital England-India airway.