

Bound for Lyonesse

The history of flying in the Isles of Scilly

by Maurice Wickstead

Some of you may have sampled the magical and mystical delights of the Isles of Scilly, not least during the Devon Strut's annual fly-outs. Romanticised in the poems of Tennyson and Thomas Hardy as the ancient sunken land of Lyonesse, the islands were first settled in the Stone Age, and today derive some 85% of their income from tourism, with many visitors and day-trippers arriving by air.

It was early in 1917 that the aeroplane first appeared in Scilly, with the stationing of a handful of Short 184 seaplanes at Porth Mellon on St Mary's, in response to the resurgence of Germany's submarines menacing the Western Approaches. They were shortly followed by several Curtiss H.12 flying-boats from Plymouth's RNAS Cattewater, but it was soon discovered that the tidal surge was too great for these relatively fragile machines. Towards the end of February, the detachment moved across to the neighbouring island of Tresco, there to form RNAS Tresco based at New Grimsby. The new unit's first patrol was undertaken on 26th February 1917 and engagement with enemy submarines followed two months later, during which Curtiss '8654' sustained gunfire damage. Conditions for the airmen were a best spartan, but perhaps somewhat enlivened when a vessel stuffed to the gunwales with port wine was wrecked nearby! The first conclusive action took place on 17th May 1917, when an unidentified U-boat was sunk by an H.12, whose crew were later decorated. By the summer, full facilities had been established and from August, the Curtiss boats had been augmented by Short

184s and Felixstowe F.5 flying-boats. A number of other significant actions followed, notably the thwarting of U-boat attacks on the White Star liner *Persic* and later, a hospital ship. The last patrol was made on 10th November 1918, by which time all four Flights had been incorporated into the RAF as No. 234 Squadron, before being disbanded in May 1919. A reminder of RNAS Tresco can be found today in the Flying Boat Club, a small holiday accommodation complex overlooking New Grimsby Harbour.

Although various barnstormers and aerial circuses toured Cornwall's mainland, it would be another decade before a civilian aircraft first touched down on Scilly. Mid-way through August 1929, a Gipsy Moth, flown by pre-war aviation personality Colonel the Master of Semphill, alighted on the golf course near Hugh Town after a short hop from the Lizard. Seven months later, another Moth (G-AALG), owned by the Prince of Wales, brought the Secretary to the Duchy of Cornwall for a brief visit.

In October 1930, there was considerable excitement when an

Wrecked Felixstowe seaplane at Tresco.

Photograph: Pete White



American aircraft 'dropped in' on Tresco's Pentle Beach. This was none other than the Bellanca WB-2 *Maple Leaf* (NR237), flown by Lieutenants Errol Boyd and Harry Connor. Their direct flight from Newfoundland to Croydon was interrupted by a malfunctioning reserve fuel tank, forcing an unplanned landing in the islands. After a night in the governor's castle, and with assistance from locals in preparing a take-off run, the pair continued to Croydon the next day to be greeted by Giuseppe Bellanca's business partner, Charles Levine, who with pilot Clarence Chamberlain had already flown the same aircraft (as *Columbia*) non-stop between New York and Berlin in June 1927. Ironically, the Bellanca had been Lindbergh's chosen vehicle for his record-breaking NYC-Paris flight, but a dispute with the feisty Levine steered him towards Ryan Aircraft. In fact, the aircraft had itself also been prepared for the Orteig Prize transatlantic attempt, but an intervening lawsuit against the company prevented its participation, leaving the field clear for Lindbergh and his Ryan monoplane. The

Bellanca, unfortunately destroyed in a factory hangar fire in 1934, became the progenitor of a long line of innovative and successful designs that historically link through to the modern-day Citabria, Viking and Skyrocket recreational aircraft.

Semphill made another sortie late in 1930 during a tour around the British coastline, this time flying a DH Puss Moth floatplane (G-AAVB), and using St Mary's Town Beach as its base; he reappeared in March 1932, to carry fresh flowers back to London for Buckingham Palace. The Royal connection was again in evidence in May of the same year, when the Prince of Wales arrived by air for a reception on St Mary's with a flight of four RAF Supermarine Southampton flying-boats from Falmouth.

Other than these occasional visitors, there was little sustained activity until the mid-1930s, when (Sir) Alan Cobham began prospecting the possibilities of opening a regular air service to the islands. His company, Cobham Air Routes, was already running a service between Croydon and Guernsey and by late August 1935, he had

secured landing rights from the Duchy of Cornwall. Another airline, Provincial Airways, whose DH Fox Moths and Dragons linked Croydon with Penzance via the south coast, had already expressed an interest in extending their *West Country Air Service* during summer months, but folded in the autumn of 1935 before the idea could be developed.

Cobham planned to commence flying in September 1935, but was forestalled by the loss of his company's Westland Wessex, which ditched in the Channel in July 1935, the adverse publicity from which eventually forcing him out of business. Another well-known commercial aviator, Gordon Olley, former senior Imperial Airways pilot and head of their charter department, soon took up the reins. Olley was already familiar with the West Country, having operated the Great Western Railway's experimental Cardiff-Plymouth air service two years earlier. After acquiring the assets of Cobham Air Routes in May 1936, he formed Channel Air Ferries as a subsidiary of his successful charter company, Olley Air Service. Readers familiar with the post-war



RNAS station Tresco around the WW1 period.

Photograph: Pete White



► Croydon Airport, will no doubt nostalgically recall the comings and goings of Olley's fleet of Doves and Herons, busily plying routes to the Channel Islands. Operating from Shoreham, CAF initially concerned itself with links to the Isle of Wight, but on 15th September 1937, DH Dragon G-ADCR made the first scheduled run from the mainland to St Mary's in just 20 minutes, returning with five passengers including the island's oldest resident, octogenarian John Mumford, who declared that as a boy it had sometimes taken him 15 hours by sea to get to the mainland and now it took just 15 minutes!

The landing area chosen at St Mary's covered part of the golf course, where a small booking hut was sited on the second green, and part adjoining land at an annual rent of £100 (c. £3,750 today). Two runways were laid out NE/SW (393m) & NW/SE (416m) and a bell was rung to warn golfers of an impending arrival. Indeed, players were often called upon to help manhandle the aircraft in high winds.

On the mainland, land was obtained at St Just near Kelynack Downs, where along with

a small booking office, a hangar, transported from Blackpool, was erected; the field at St Just gave a landing distance of 680m. The initial service was once daily at a return fare of £1.15s (£1.75), interchangeable with the IOS Steamship services, and connections could be made to the GWR Cornish Riviera Express via a bus service to nearby Penzance. Additionally, a Fox Moth (G-ACFF) was positioned to offer pleasure flights and charters. A second Dragon (G-ACPY) was in operation from early 1938, allowing frequencies to be increased, at least until the original machine was written-off after crashing in fog at St Just towards the end of June 1938, killing its pilot, New Zealander Capt D L Dustin, who had flown the very first service. A replacement arrived in the shape of G-ADDI, but in December it too was badly damaged, failing to get airborne at Lands End and colliding with the boundary hedge. During the same month, Olley's aviation interests joined with those of the railway companies controlling Railway Air Services, resulting in the formation of Great Western & Southern Airlines, which from

March 1939 took over CAF and RAS West Country services. This made it possible to fly from St Mary's to Bristol via Plymouth and make onward connections to the North, Scotland and across the Irish Sea to Belfast and Dublin. Another route, flown by Western Airways linked Lands End along Cornwall's north coast to Swansea.

For the summer of 1939, up to eight daily return trips were being flown with periodic assistance from Dragon Rapide G-ACPP, while association with the railways allowed the interchange of tickets and the advance carriage of excess baggage by surface transport. The increased number of flights was taking its toll on the golf course, leading the Duchy to allocate land for a dedicated airfield at High Cross on St Mary's, overlooking the Old Town and providing three strips, the longest of which was 610m. This was first used on 25th July 1939, and by the time that services were terminated at the outbreak of war a total of 10,000 passengers and 10.5 tonnes of freight and newspapers had been carried between the mainland and the islands.



with later marques before returning in mid-June.

During the hostilities, various unscheduled visitors arrived; a training AW Whitley crashed on take-off in January 1943; a damaged Liberator of Coastal Command was similarly lost in February 1944, while assorted Sunderlands, a Catalina and an American C-47 and P-38 Lightning were amongst those that limped in with battle damage, fuel shortage or mechanical problems.

Much of No. 1449 Flight's, as it had become in March 1942, work involved escorting battle damaged aircraft or Walrus SAR sorties, but before withdrawal in late February 1944, it had accounted for six confirmed 'kills' and two 'probables' for the loss or damage to eight of its own aircraft. St Mary's was reduced to Care & Maintenance status in September 1944 in readiness to resume its civilian role.

With the reinstatement of civil flying on January 1, 1946, a bevy of independent charter operators sprung up, one of which was Island Air Services based at St Mary's. Using two Percival Proctors, regular trips were made to Lands End carrying fresh flowers and vegetable produce to local wholesale markets, in addition to summer pleasure flights from both locations. Patrick Duval Aviation of Birmingham, similarly employed Proctors and an Airspeed Consul, feeding the Midlands' markets. IAS' first pilot was former wartime ATA flyer, Monique Agazarian, who later bought the company after it had decamped to Croydon. Some older readers may have been fortunate

enough to enjoy a 'spin' in an IAS Rapide, a regular sight at Heathrow, flying incessant summer sightseeing trips over London in those leisurely 1950s days before the coming of 'jetwash'. 'Aggie', as Monique affectionately became known, continued in light aviation, latterly with Aviation Training Services of Booker, until her death in 1992.

The helicopter first appeared at St Mary's in February 1948, when a Sikorsky S-51 flown by Alan Bristol carried provisions to the keepers of Wolf Rock lighthouse, marooned by bad weather. Echoing wartime days, flying-boats returned briefly to St Mary's during the summer of 1949 when Aquila Airways undertook a series of holiday charter flights from Falmouth with civilised Sunderlands. By this time, under nationalisation GW&S had been absorbed into BEA, while operation of Land's End was now the responsibility of the Ministry of Transport & Civil Aviation. At St Mary's a new control tower was erected in August 1949, together with a basic passenger waiting room and facilities for emergency vehicles. Poor visibility was often a feature around Lands End and lacking any sophisticated landing aids, a sort of chequerboard approach reminiscent of Hong Kong's Kai Tak airport was adopted. Turning ESE over Brisons Rock and Cape Cornwall, a descent was made below the ceiling along the Cot Valley to Kelynack Farm, where after crossing the St Just-Sennen road and spotting two telegraph poles painted with bold red and white strips, a sharp right turn was made to re-cross the road and drop onto the aerodrome.

Following a brief cessation immediately after war was declared, GW&S was allowed to re-open what had now become a lifeline air service on 25th September 1939, and from October 1940, mail was also flown over the route. Services were again halted in May and June 1940, when all available aircraft were pressed into service for the evacuation of the BEF from France. The tragedy of war was brought home to the island community with the loss of Dragon G-ACPY on 3rd June 1941 and five passengers, all members of the same family on a day trip. The aircraft fell victim to chance encounter with a Heinkel III returning from an abortive raid on the carrier *HMS Indomitable* at Barrow-in-Furness shipyard. The incident was particularly unfortunate, since six Hurricanes of No.87 Sq, detached to St Mary's on 19th May had been withdrawn only four days previously to re-equip

Island Air Services Rapide G-AGUF at St. Mary's in the late 1940s.



Photograph: John Havers Collection

▶ The short hop to St Mary's proved exceptionally popular, with 36,000 passengers carried in 1953 alone, often amounting to a shuttle service with up to 20 daily round trips at high season. Apart from brief incursions by Murray Chown Aviation of Staverton flying via Cardiff and Newquay (St Mawgan/Perranporth) with Proctors, Melba Airways from Manchester and the returning Olley Air Service from Croydon via Bristol and Exeter, all for a single season in 1951, the 28-mile crossing remained the sole domain of BEA until March 1961, when Mayflower Air Services arrived on the scene. Formed by Capt Philip Cleife, Plymouth Aero Club's former CFI, services began midway through June 1961 with a single Rapide, operating Plymouth-St Mary's. Over the next couple of years, with a second Rapide, Newquay, Bristol and Cardiff were added together with a licence for Plymouth-London (Gatwick) for which it was planned to acquire Herons or Twin Pioneers. Sadly the brave venture came to an end on 20th July 1963, when Rapide 'HLM crashed on take-off at St Mary's following a tyre burst. Although there were no fatalities, Capt Cleife was seriously injured, putting paid to his flying career. Mayflower was taken over by Scillonian Air Services, which operated intermittently until May 1964 when it was bought out by British Westpoint, which continued the Scillies routes for a couple of years, now linked to London by Dakota via Exeter. Meanwhile, in March 1962 Capt Morris 'Skipper' Hearn MBE, BEA's long-serving Senior Pilot at Lands End retired after 21 years of continuous service, during which time he had completed a staggering 15,000 hours and 31,650 flights over the route.

When BEA commissioned two Sikorsky S-61N helicopters to operate from a new dedicated base at Eastern Green, Penzance in the spring of 1964, it signalled almost the end of the Rapide era. The type's swansong on the route began midway through 1966, when Scillonia Airways, formed by ex-BOAC pilot Capt KB Neely, took to the skies with three Rapides flying out of St Just. The operation lasted until May 1970. A year later, another former BOAC man, Capt Howard Fry, fetched up in the area with his Westward Airways, flying a single Islander between Gatwick and Newquay via Plymouth. A second aircraft late in the summer allowed an extension to the St Mary's, but disaster struck in February 1970, when G-AXXJ was seriously damaged, having overrun and buried its nose in the stone wall at the end of Runway 10/28. Westward was forced to rely on costly lease-ins to maintain the service, which ceased at the end of the season when the airline succumbed to financial problems.

The Westward name resurfaced again almost immediately with the formation in 1970 of Westward Airways (Lands End), founded by 'Viv' Bellamy, notable aviation personality and principal of the Hampshire Aero Club. Bellamy twice tried unsuccessfully to start an Islander service to the Scillies, but his licence applications always fell foul of objections from BEA. Instead he developed the company as an engineering, restoration and replica building facility *par excellence*, together with the local flying club and pleasure flying, the latter with Rapide G-AIYR; family management continued for many years in the hands of Viv's son, Rod. Apart from the numerous historical aircraft rebuilds and replicas that passed through Viv's hands, one particular machine was the sole surviving British DH86B, G-ACZP, which appeared on Scilly in 1958, but was sadly wrecked later that year when airport authorities at Madrid roughly bundled it off the runway following a tyre burst on landing.

A new lease of life for fixed-wing air services came with the arrival of Brymon Airways, originally formed as a charter outfit

at Fairoaks by motor racing personalities, Bill Bryce and Chris Amon. After a season of pleasure flying and hauling crayfish from Brittany to Lands End with an Islander (G-AXXJ again!), in June 1972 Brymon opened a scheduled service from Newquay to St Mary's and later, from Exeter, carrying 2,500 passengers in its first season. Brymon eventually set up shop at Plymouth and in April 1974, became UK launch customer for the Twin Otter. A year earlier, Prime Minister Harold Wilson, a frequent holiday visitor to the islands, opened the brand-new purpose-built £170,000 terminal at St Mary's.

By the early 1980s, BA Helicopters, now with a second route to Tresco, had carried well over one million passengers in perfect safety, but this admirable record was tragically dashed midway through July 1981 when S-61 G-BEON flew into the sea in poor visibility just two miles off St Mary's; despite a swift rescue effort by the island's lifeboat only six of the 26 souls aboard survived.

A potential competitor emerged in July 1984 when the Isles of Scilly Steamship Company proposed a daily Land's End-St



Photograph: John Havers Collection

Monique Agazarian, a WW2 ATA pilot, was Island Air Services first pilot when it recommenced operations in 1947. She is seen here on a Proctor.

Mary's service carrying both passengers and freight with a Short Skyvan. After several years of wrangling with BAH and the island's council, during which time it was restricted mainly to freight charter work, Isles of Scilly Skybus was finally able to commence scheduled services on April 1, 1987. Since then, the small airline has become a firm fixture in the region, presently operating three Islanders and two Twin Otters to Lands End, Newquay, Exeter, Bristol and Southampton, carrying over 40,000 passengers annually with over 40 trips a day from Lands End alone, especially at peak periods or when a particularly rare bird has been spotted in the islands. The withdrawal of the last Twin Otter in March 1991 marked the end of Brymon services to Scilly and two years later it was absorbed into British Airways, though its distant successor, Air Southwest, remains as the only airline operator at Plymouth.

In preparation for their 1985 transatlantic Blue Riband power boat record attempt in *Virgin Atlantic Challenger* between New York and Bishop Rock, Richard Branson and Chay Blyth flew to St Mary's in a Skybus Islander. Meanwhile a Virgin Atlantic B747 carrying a party of journalists had already ramped up the publicity by making very low passes of both Hugh Town and St Just. Scilly buzzed with air traffic in mid-August, perhaps just as well that the island's new NDB had become fully operational just two months previously, in eager anticipation of *Challenger's* imminent arrival, but two hours out from Bishop Rock the boat was holed



On 15th September 1937, DH Dragon G-ADCR, operated by Channel Air Ferries, made the first scheduled run from the mainland to St Mary's.

and sank, though a second attempt a year later was ultimately successful.

Another dramatic rescue occurred late in July 1986, when a Grob motor-glider was forced to ditch five miles east of Scilly while returning to the mainland. Attended by a Skybus islander, BAH helicopter and an RAF Wessex, the occupant was safely picked up, while the hapless aircraft was towed to Porth Mellon and beached, before eventually being removed and restored to flying condition. Other interesting visitors of the period were four Danish light aircraft on a tour of southern Britain, and an American Grumman Widgeon amphibian. St Mary's eventually received a new hard surface runway (15/33) some five years after CAA

inspectors had expressed misgivings at the state of the grass surfaces. About the same time, in September 1986, BAH adopted its current title, British International Helicopters, after sale to infamous newspaper proprietor Robert Maxwell. The company changed hands again in 2000 after a management buy-out from the then owners, Canadian Helicopter Corp. In addition to passenger operations BIH undertakes a number of military contracts, including the Falkland Islands and police support at Cardiff.

For its diminutive size, St Mary's handles a surprising amount of traffic, averaging a throughput of 134,000 passengers and around 14,000 aircraft movements annually; there are just five resident light aircraft, two Cessnas, a Gardan Horizon, a CEA Chevalier and a Jodel D.120A. Although the landing and parking fees are relatively high, the islands are definitely worth a visit; you can easily enjoy the charms of St Mary's in single a day on foot – or hire a bike, while a short boat ride to Tresco's Abbey Gardens is definitely not to be missed. If you wish to stay longer be warned that accommodation in the holiday season is at a premium so will need to be booked in advance. Weekend visitors should also note that flying is prohibited on Sundays, though prior arrangement can be made for departure between 1500 and 1600. The local ATC is very user friendly and will often allow a sightseeing flight around the islands before you head back to the mainland. ■



A BN Islander comes in to land at St. Mary's.