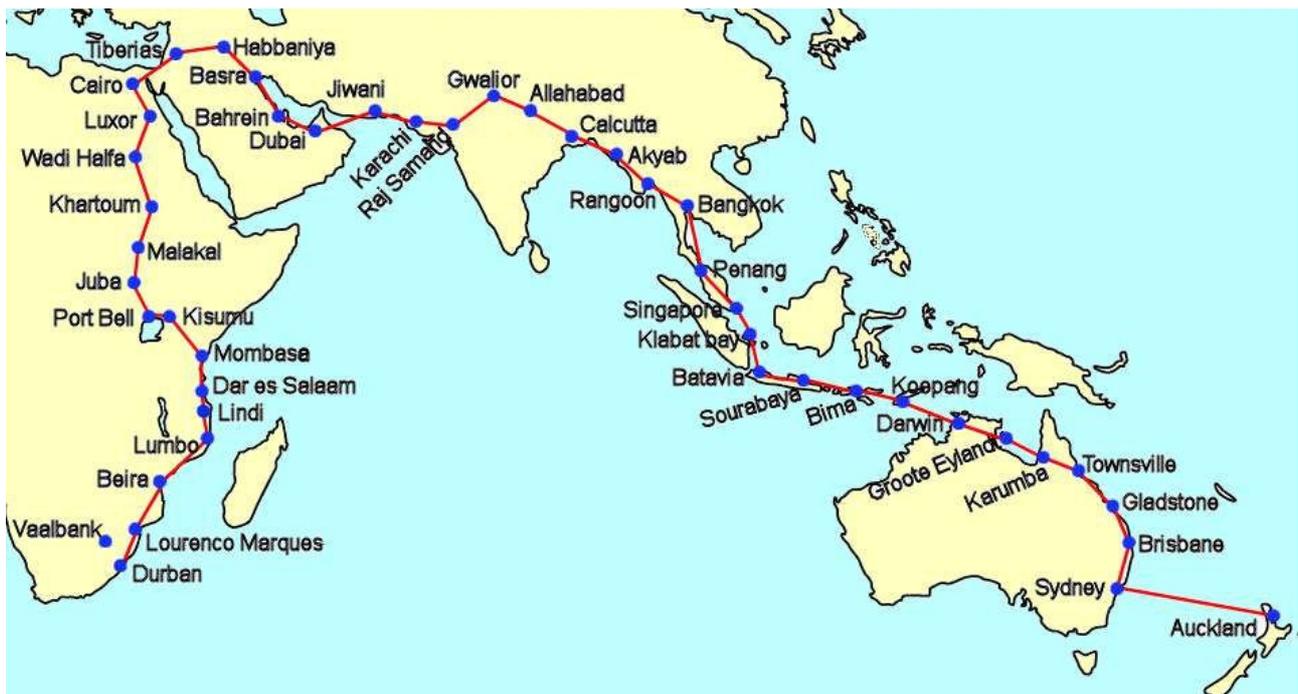


The Horseshoe Route June 1940 – February 1942

Robert G. Clark



May 2024

The information in this report is available as a series of pdf files at:
www.nzstamps.org.uk/horseshoe

© Robert Clark, 2024. For personal, non-commercial, charitable and educational use only. All use of information from this report should be properly acknowledged.

Preface

This report describes the air mail services on the *Horseshoe Route* between Durban and Sydney from June 1940 until it was cut in February 1942. It also deals with the sea connections between London and Durban and the air connections between Sydney and Auckland.

Chapter 1 covers the period immediately before the service began; Chapter 2 covers the interrupted services; Chapter 3 covers sent from the UK in mid June 1940, but not sent on the Horseshoe Route; Chapter 4 covers services in June 1940 by other airlines; Chapter 5 covers the first Horseshoe Services from Durban and Sydney; Chapter 6 covers subsequent services in June and July 1940; Chapter 7 covers August – September 1940; Chapter 8 covers October 1940 – April 1941; Chapter 9 deals with the disruption in services in April – July 1941; Chapter 10 deals with August – November 1941 and Chapter 11 deals with the effects of Japan entering WWII and Reserve Routes 1 & 2; Chapter 12 deals with Reserve Route 3 when Singapore was no longer on the main route; Chapter 13 deals with mail from the UK that was sent by sea from Durban in late 1941; Chapter 14 deals with the end of the service to Australia and New Zealand.

There are four appendices: Appendix 1 shows air mail rates; Appendix 2 shows trans-Tasman flights; Appendix 3 shows Censor Codes and Appendix 4 shows dates of the Bangkok – Hong Kong service.

In the last few years, several publications on air mail services during the Second World War have appeared providing information from original sources that had not been available to a previous generation of researchers as much of it had been confidential or secret. The report combines this information with scans of covers flown on the route in an attempt to give a comprehensive account. Scans of covers in my own collection are shown in the report while references are made to other covers whose scans have either been sent to me or which I have collected from various sources, mainly auction sites.

Original Sources

Wherever possible, references are given to original sources. The sources used are as follows:

1. Aircraft movement charts detailing *BOAC* flights are held in the *British Airways Heritage Collection* [BA] and have been researched by Edward Proud and by Peter Wingent [Win3]. Information from the charts has previously been used in the publications by Aitink and Hovenkamp in 2005 [AH] and Proud in 2009 [Pr].

2. During the war, the *Civil Aviation Authority* produced the *Report on the Progress of Civil Aviation 1939 -1945*.

- Information from *Appendix B* of the *Report* was published by Daynes in 1996 [Da1] along with details of war-time Air Mail Services issued with *Post Office Circulars*.
- A full transcription of the original *Report* was produced by John Wilson in 2009 [Wil]. It includes the transcription of *Appendix B* on services operated by United Kingdom companies and *Appendix C* on services operated within British Empire countries.

3. The *Air Ministry* produced *Civil Aviation Summaries* weekly during the war. These reports were called *National Air Communications Intelligence Summary (NACIS)* (from 5th September 1939 – 1st May 1940) and *Civil Aviation Intelligence Summary (CAIS)* from 8th May onwards. Extracts from

the *Summaries* were published by Peter Wingent in 2010 [Win].

4. The *Royal Mail Archives* hold many documents (many originally secret or confidential) and have an online catalogue [RMA]. Documents include:

- The *Overseas Mails Branch (OMB)* confidential reports produced each week during the war [OMB40, OMB41, OMB42]. An edited version of the reports for 1939-44 which include the information on censorship and air mail services was produced by Daynes [Da2] in 2005.
- Collections titled *Empire Air Services: wartime arrangements* [EAS] and *Papers regarding operation of the Air Mail service through the war* [AMS].
- Post Office Circulars [PO].

5. Since 2009, the *Australian National Library* has made available online scans of Australian newspapers from 1803 – 1954 [Tro].

6. Scans of New Zealand Newspapers available online from the *National Library of New Zealand* [NZ].

7. Scans of *The Straits Times* and *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* available online from the National Library, Singapore [SN].

8. In the UK, the *National Archives* (held in Kew, London) have an online searchable catalogue and details of convoys [NA].

Books

A book titled *Merchant Airmen* was published by HMSO in 1946 [HM]. Although not an original source, it gives a graphic account of war time civil aviation shortly after the actual events. A booklet describing the *Horseshoe Route* was published by *Chavril Press* in 1992 [HR].

Copies of the *Imperial Airways Gazette* are reproduced on the website of the *British Air Mail Society* at www.britishairmailsociety.co.uk.

The Tables

Information about the flights is presented as a series of tables. The information is given in *BOAC* aircraft movement charts from the *BA* archives [BA, Win3] and has been previously published in [AH] and [Pr] although this report contains extra details and some different interpretations.

With a few exceptions where the full route is significant, the tables only show overnight stops (*o'n*) which, on occasion, could last several days. Where there was a change of flying boat, separate entries are given with the arrival (*arr*) and departure (*dep*) dates. There were breaks in several services. Non-connecting services are shown in the same table where they form a pair. The termination of a service is shown as *end*, while the start of a non-connecting service is shown as *nc*. A delay due to bad weather is shown as *W* while *MT* indicates mechanical trouble. On occasion flying boats had to return after taking off and that is shown by *rtn*.

The dates all refer to flights. Typically the mail would close the evening before.

The Flying Boats

The *Short Empire S23 C Class* flying boats initially used on the route were: *Canopus (G-ADHL)*, *Caledonia (G-ADHM)*, *Cambria (G-ADUV)*, *Castor (G-ADUW)*, *Corsair (G-ADVB)*, *Coriolanus (G-AETV)*, *Ceres (G-AETX)*, *Circe (G-AETZ)*, *Camilla (G-AEUB)*, *Corinna (G-AEUC)*, *Cameronian (G-AEUC)*, *Carpentaria (VH-ABA)*, *Corio (G-AEUH)* and *Coorong (G-AEUI)*. The two *Short S33 C Class* flying boats were *Clifton (G-AFPZ)* and *Cleopatra (G-AFRA)*.

CAIS 68 on 2nd October 1940 reported that three *Short S23* flying boats, *Corinthian (G-AEUE)*, *Cassiopeia (G-ADUX)* and *Cooee (VH-ABF)*, were being flown from the UK to Durban via Lisbon, Las Palmas and the West Coast of Africa to join the *Horseshoe* fleet [Win].

UK – Cape Town Service by Sea

In 1936, the *Union Castle Line* signed a new mail contract that specified 14 days between Southampton and Cape Town and this came into effect in 1938. The record for the route of 13 days 9 hours was set in August 1936 by the *Stirling Castle*. The pre-war service was operated by fast mailships, some recently built (*Athlone Castle*, *Capetown Castle*, *Stirling Castle*) while others were re-built for the new contract (*Arundel Castle*, *Carnarvon Castle*, *Warwick Castle*, *Winchester Castle*, *Windsor Castle*), but most were requisitioned as troop transports during the war and the UK – Cape Town mail service was increasingly operated by slower ships which often travelled in convoy between Freetown (Sierra Leone) and Britain.

Proud lists sailings between UK and South Africa [Pr], but does not give the source of his information. The dates of mail dispatches from London are given in the *OMB Reports* [OMB40, OMB41, OMB42]. Dates of delivery in London of around 70 services are listed in the *Mail Notices* of the Singapore press of the period and that helps determine sailing dates from Cape Town [SN]. Information on sailings between the UK and Cape Town is given in a *Website for Merchant Ships during WW2* called *Convoy Web* [CW]. It includes the *Arnold Hague Ports Database* which has information on ships that travelled independently as well as in convoy. Passenger lists of some services in 1940 and convoy lists are available at the *National Archives* [NA].

As usual for information on war-time services, there are often differences in the information between sources and an attempt has been made to coordinate the different accounts.

In the early part of the war, the service was between Southampton and Cape Town and that was the case with the first four UK departures to connect with the *Horseshoe Route*, the first departure from Liverpool being the *Windsor Castle* on 18th July [CW]. The route from Cape Town to Liverpool or Glasgow was often via the north coast of Ireland to keep as far away as possible from the European mainland. None of the arrivals of *Horseshoe* mail from Cape Town was at Southampton.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Peter Wingent and John Wilson for helpful discussions by email and information from many different archives. I would also like to thank Alistair Watt for information and many helpful and informative comments and discussions by email during the preparation of this report and Barbara Priddy for information from the *Post Office Circulars*.