

Air Mails to South America by British South American Airways: 1946-1949

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Introduction

It was late in the 1930s before the British government decided to plan a British South Atlantic air route for passengers and mail, but the advent of the Second World War in September 1939 put an end to these proposals (Refs 1 and 2). However, as the war proceeded, plans were being laid for peace time air routes. In January 1944, British Latin-American Air Lines Ltd was founded by a group of British shipping interests. In October 1945 the name of the company was changed to British South American Airways Limited (BSAA) (3). Australian born Air Vice-Marshal Donald Bennett, CB, CBE, DSO, a pre-war Imperial Airways Captain and chief of Bomber Command's Pathfinder force, became managing director (4). Following the passage of the 1946 Civil Aviation Act, BSAA was nationalised on 1 August 1946, to be known as the British South American Airways Corporation.

Route development

To the east coast of South America

BSAA's first survey flight left Heathrow on 1 January 1946 for Buenos Aires, Argentina (Fig 1). Bennett piloted the Avro 691 Lancastrian G-AGWG, *Star Light*, stops being made at Lisbon, Bathurst, Natal, Montevideo (4 January) with arrival in Argentina on 6 January. The first regular flight to South America left London for Buenos Aires on 23 March 1946. From the flight of 5 April the Bathurst night stop was omitted reducing the London-Montevideo transit time from 77 to 56 hours. On 24 September 1946 BSAA made the first call at Dakar instead of Bathurst.

To the west coast of South America

The first survey flight took place on 22 April 1946 when Bennett followed the established route to Buenos Aires and then proceeded to London via Santiago-Lima-Bogota-Curacao-Trinidad-Natal-Bathurst. London was reached on 5 May. The formal London-Santiago service was inaugurated on 27 June 1946 with a night stop at Lisbon. Buenos Aires was reached on 29 June (night stop) and Santiago on 30 June.

To the Caribbean

On 17 July 1946 a survey flight was made by Bennett along the route London-Azores-Bermuda - Nassau - Mexico - Belize - Panama - Kingston-Trinidad-Bermuda-Azores-London in the Lancastrian G-AGWI *Star Land*. A regular twice monthly service was inaugurated on 2 September 1946 routed from London to Caracas via the Azores, Bermuda and Jamaica. In 1948 BSAA started operating a weekly London-Jamaica service via Keflavik (Iceland), Gander (Newfoundland), Bermuda and Nassau.

Air Mails

Starting with the very first survey flight on 1 January 1946, it would appear that BSAA carried significant mail loads on virtually all services. However, BSAA's flown covers are little collected and references in today's philatelic literature are few and far between. Why is this so? It is probable that whilst BSAA were delighted to carry such heavy mail loads for the revenue generated, they had little interest in, or appreciation of, the publicity benefits which would have arisen if they had adopted a positive attitude to aerophilately.

East Coast Mails

Bennett has written that mail was carried on that 1 January 1946 trial flight (5) and Hayter confirms that 5000lbs of mail were carried (6). Presumably none of these covers carried any specific marking and hence, none have survived.

Contemporary accounts in the aerophilatelic press suggest that the British Post Office was slow to inform the public about the new mail service. The *Aero Field* commented on the second proving flight:

It was rather annoying to read in the evening press of 21 January (1946) that the machine carried 1400kg of mail. The Post Office announcement appeared as usual when it was too late to take advantage of the opportunity, being dated 24 January and stating that: Air mail correspondence for destinations in South America, prepaid at existing postage rates for air transmission throughout by the North Atlantic route is being forwarded by flights being made by British South American Airways. (7)



1. London Heathrow 1 January 1946 – the first BSAA mail plane leaves for Buenos Aires.

The postage rate was 2s 6d per half ounce, the same rate as had been charged via the North Atlantic and by air from the USA. Baldwin lists covers from Argentina and Uruguay flown on the return of the second proving flight (8). From the first regular flight of 23 March 1946, mail was accepted at 1s 6d per half ounce (postcards 9d) for Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Falkland Islands, The Guianas, Paraguay and Uruguay. Correspondence for these destinations was no longer accepted for transmission by the North Atlantic route (9). First flight covers are known

flown in both directions (10). Although first flight covers are remarkably scarce, regular commercial or family mail from Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, etc, destined for Europe, can be found with manuscript, typed or rubber stamped endorsements such as "Via BSAA" or "Via British South American Airways".

West Coast mails

Mail can be found from the first regular London-Santiago service on 27 June 1946. The souvenir cover franked at the 1s 6d rate shown

as in fig 2 has a LONDON WC machine cancellation for 26 JNE 1946 and a Santiago backstamp for 30 June.

Caribbean mails

The only cover known to the writer was carried on the first return flight from Jamaica to London. This was an air letter franked at the 6d rate and bearing a boxed cachet lettered: AIR MAIL/FIRST FLIGHT/JAMAICA-/London-Via Bermuda/Sept 5 1946/Via "SPEED MAN".

Crashes & Crash Mail

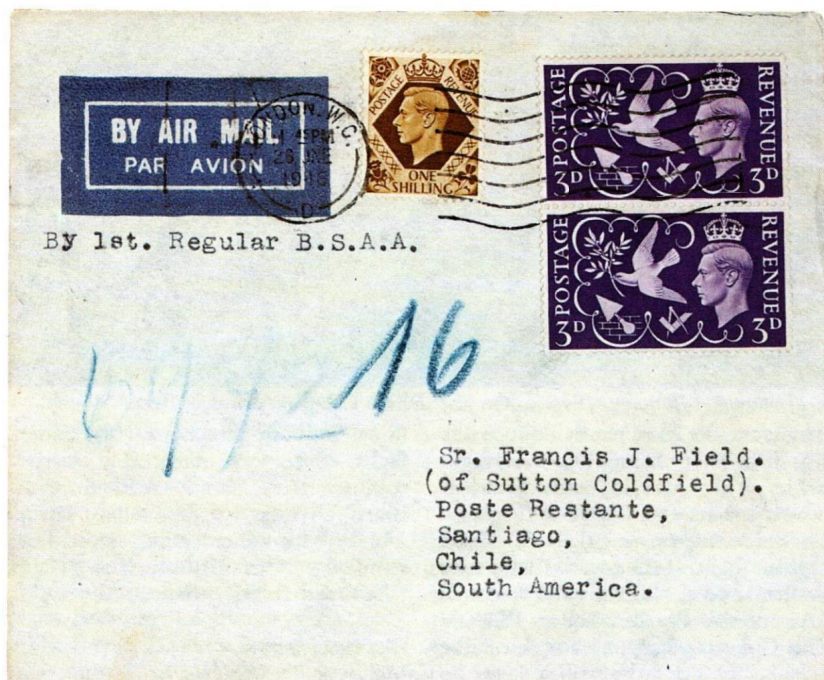
Unfortunately, BSAA operations were not free of serious crashes, indeed it was the total loss of two Avro Tudor IVs at sea in 1948 and 1949 which finally brought about the end of the airline (qv). A total of 10 crashes, many of them involving fatalities, were recorded between 30 August 1946 and 17 January 1949.

The End of BSAA

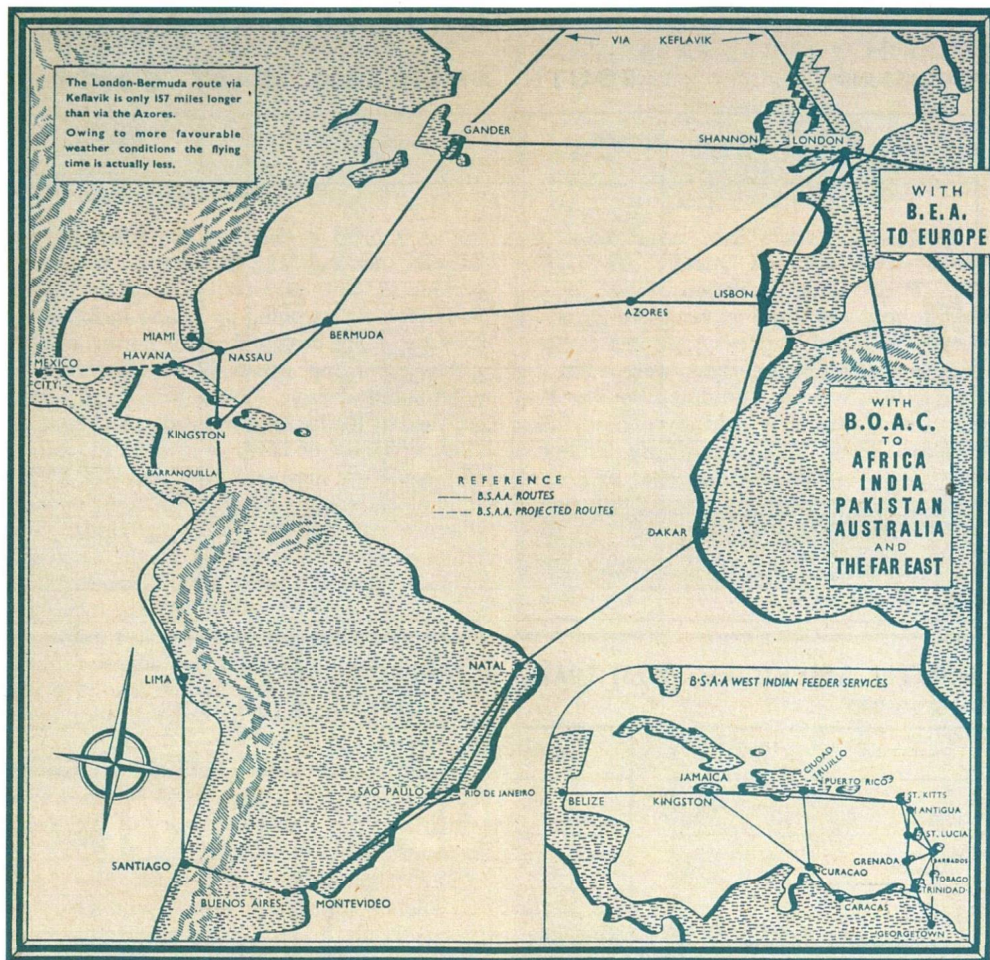
During its first two years of operations, BSAA achieved 74.5 million passenger-miles, but with the loss of 55 passengers. In financial terms, however, BSAA was much more successful. A profit of £107,000 was declared for the year

ending 31 March 1947, at a time when BOAC was losing millions (11). In September 1947, BSAA acquired a controlling interest in British West Indian Airways, overambitiously introducing a fleet of second hand Vickers Vikings which lost money. During the enquiry into the loss of *Star Tiger* on 29 January 1948, BSAA's operating methods were questioned and it was recommended that pilot training be put on a more thorough basis. It was at this time that A V M Bennett left the Corporation. Figure 3 shows the route map from BSAA's September 1948 timetable which probably represents the airline's operations at their peak.

With the unexplained loss at sea of a second Tudor 4, *Star Ariel*, on 17 January 1949, all the Tudors (other than those operating the Berlin Airlift) were grounded, leaving the airline with a severe shortage of aircraft. Services were maintained after a fashion, but with the added problems of the BWIA subsidiary, the end of BSAA was near. As a result of the Airways Corporations Act, 1949, BSAA was absorbed into BOAC on 30 July 1949. The majority of BSAA crew and staff joined BOAC, but BOAC still didn't have any planes with which to operate the South Atlantic routes.



2. Cover carried on first regular BSAA flight to Chile.



3. BSAA Route Map – September 1948.

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