



A turbulent early history of the Empire Airmail Service was related to members of Kyrle Probus Club by former President John Taylor, who gave a detailed talk at the Club's meeting on Thursday 3 January.

Members heard how the intrepid pioneers travelled across the globe for thousands of miles carrying out air-route surveys, braving desert sandstorms and forced landings, hostile natives and often flying primitive aircraft with open cockpits. An early airmail service was launched by the RAF on 23 June 1921 between Cairo and Baghdad, until it was replaced by Imperial Airways, with an England to India service. The company had become a reality on 1 April 1924, comprising Daimler Airways, Handley Page Transport, Instone Airline and British Marine Air Navigation. They inherited a selection of 16 aircraft built by Handley Page, de Havilland, Vickers and Supermarine, largely hand-built and giving a total seating capacity of 120.

Imperial Airways financed air-route surveys throughout the British Empire, their first being a flight to India and Burma, undertaken by enthusiastic aviator Alan Cobham, later knighted by George V after flying for 320 hours over 78 days, and alighting on the Thames at Westminster on his arrival back in the UK.

In November 1925 Imperial Airways and the British Government decided that the Cairo to Basra route should be extended to Karachi, crossing Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan, Iraq and Persia. Imperial placed an order

for five land planes to maintain a fortnightly freight and mail schedule over the route. In response De Havilland designed the biplane 3-engined DH66.

The pilot and navigator had an open cockpit while the engineer and wireless operator enjoyed the 'comforts' of a small cabin, including an extra payload required for the airmail. The aircraft had an endurance of five hours, and it was hoped that by having three engines forced landings would be kept to a minimum. At that time Imperial Airways averaged a forced landing once every seven flights.

In December 1932 the Government announced the Empire Airmail Programme to carry air mail at a flat rate to all parts of the Empire. #Air Minister Sasson later called for an improved Kent class flying boat capable of carrying 24 passengers and half a ton of mail at 150 mph over 800 miles.

John will give part two of his talk at a later date.