

## Indian Aerophilatelists and 1931 1<sup>st</sup> Imperial Airways Experimental Flight to Australia

This is the story of the first Experimental flight from England to Australia, with emphasis on the cancellations on the various covers emanating within India. What they reveal is that certain aspects of the flight and its philatelic facts need revision.

The flight plan of the venture from England was well established as far as Delhi. What was needed was a track beyond that city as Imperial Airways had not ventured beyond this point.

The actual flight took off the following Saturday morning April 4 from Croydon. It followed the standard Imperial India route through the European Balkans and arrived at Karachi on Sunday April 12.

In that first hectic week before the flight, the Post Office announced two flights three weeks apart and sent the details to the Press, the Post Office daily Lists and the Post Office Circular. With little time for the philatelists in England to ensure that they could prepare any items to commemorate the event, there was nevertheless an impressive almost 300 lbs of mail stowed on take-off destined for places beyond Delhi and Australian and New Zealand ports.

The British mail consisted of the following: -

- Calcutta 1 bag (13 ½ lbs)
- Rangoon 1 bag (15 lbs)
- Singapore 3 bags (67 ¾ lbs)
- Australia ports 13 bags (287 lbs)

It is instructive to realise that there were no bags made up for other intermediate places in London and that the bags, under standard practice, were sealed. For example, mail intended for Jodhpur (the first port East of Delhi) would have flown to Calcutta in the Calcutta bag and then returned by surface to Jodhpur.



Melbourne April 23, 1931, a typical set of sealed mail bags heading for England.

Mail picked up along the way would need to be sorted at the point of departure and bagged accordingly. Surprisingly only an additional 11lbs 9 ½ oz was added for Australian ports. There appears no mention in any of the literature of any mail picked up along the way until we get to Karachi India.

In India, the philatelists were hard at work to commemorate this historic event. The two rival societies in Calcutta “The Aero Philatelic Club of Calcutta” with its energetic Hon. Secretary Charles Griffiths and the other resident Calcutta dentist, Stephen Smith of the “Indian Airmail Society” made sure that they covered the field. Another keen collector/dealer was K.N. Kapur in Delhi. No doubt there were others but these three were certainly prominent.

These gentlemen wanted to record the flight right across India in all its stages. One problem was they were not entirely sure where the landing places were going to be. This is especially so once the flight went further East beyond Burma. It also meant that they had to send envelopes under cover to the various postmasters with a request that they cancel the mail locally and then forward it on the aircraft as it passed through. They had a little more time to get organised than their British counterparts but not much.



Here, a typical example of an intermediate cover created by Charles Griffith from Jodhpur to Alor Star. In this case the cover was registered and terminated at destination, some others were returned to the sender creating multiple cancellations. Since Griffiths is domiciled in Calcutta, this item, fully franked, was sent under separate cover to Jodhpur. There, after completing the registration requirements, it was included in their mail bag for Alor Star.

There must have been other individuals who wanted to be obtain souvenirs of this historic flight and there certainly were also genuine letters sent along the route.

The difficulty I have, is to determine from the quantities quoted, which are official, and which are supplied by one or other of the major philatelists. None of the referenced sources i.e, Anstee<sup>1</sup>, Smith<sup>2</sup>, Pickering<sup>3</sup> or Walker<sup>4</sup> indicate the source of their information, so we have no way of checking on it. One issue is certain, there are varying numbers associated with each leg of the trip. In many cases we have no idea at all.

One thing that does come through is that the overall quantity is not all that large when compared to other flights. For instance, Pickering quotes a number of 15,000 covers being flown from England on that first experimental flight and then says “in addition to those picked up at many stops along the route. In India and Burma, a total of 1,818 were taken aboard from seven places, of which 495 for Indian destinations; 556 for Burmese destinations; 207 for Malaya ; 560 for Australia and beyond.” From the Australian PMG Annual report 1930-31, we get that the real number was 13,188.

Hence a little more than 13% is added to the overall load and most of those do not go to the end point, Darwin, in any case. Yet if we add up the numbers quoted by Gordon Anstee, we get Delhi to Calcutta 182 and Allahabad to Calcutta 148, making 330 covers only. Even that low number incorporates those items for the three Burmese destinations. Clearly there are covers not accounted for in Anstee’s count. An obvious example is those emanating from Karachi and Jodhpur.

Perhaps Anstee was only aware of the Stephen Smith covers and not any other interested parties. An alternative reason why those covers are not in Anstee’s count, or created by Smith, is perhaps because neither the Karachi nor Jodhpur covers are technically first flights, the route already having been established to Delhi by December 1929. That premise is confirmed in Anstee’s omitting any covers or cards from stops before Allahabad, i.e. the first new stopping place on this historic flight.

You may also notice that there seems to be an emphasis on Calcutta where Smith was based, in Anstee’s comments. From my personal observation, no covers have been sighted, created by Smith from Karachi or Jodhpur, only Griffiths cards and covers are evident.

The actual staging across India can be followed by the covers that have been left behind and the diligent use of the back stamp, sometimes applied on the front for lack of space, on the envelopes helps us to discover what happened. That is where the philatelic research starts after the event.

I have used the respected New Zealand Aero historian Douglas Walker and British expert Peter Wingent<sup>5</sup> as the source for much information but even these do not tell the full story.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gordon R. Anstee India Post Vol 1 1968 see appendix

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Smith, “First flights in India”, Indian Airmail Society, 1932. Retold in FIAP Journal 1993 by Dr.D.J.Banerjee.

<sup>3</sup> John Pickering “The routes of the Valkyries”. Picton publishing. Chippenham, Great Britain 1977

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Walker, Airmails of New Zealand Volume II, The Airmail Society of NZ, 1986

<sup>5</sup> Peter Wingent Aircraft Movements on Imperial Airways’ Eastern Route Volume 1 1999

The flight plan across India is shown as in the table below. Where Walker records “via”, I have interpreted that as stopping for fuel and have added the notation of fuel, overnight or overflowed to indicate where there was a stop or not. My conclusions on dates, come from the cancellations of the covers I have sighted or possess.

My addition of Bima to the flight plan, is to incorporate the covers that were created in India, before it was realised that the aircraft would go to Rambang instead. Consequently, there are no covers addressed to Rambang or Koepang!

### 1931 1st Experimental to Australia - Indian sector Path

Arrive	Depart*	Place	
Apr-12	Apr-13	Karachi	Overnight
	Apr-13	Jodhpur	Fuel
	Apr-13	Delhi	Fuel
Apr-13	Apr-14	Allahabad	Overnight
Apr-14	Apr-15	Calcutta	Overnight
	Apr-15	Akyab	Fuel
	Apr-15	Rangoon	Fuel
	Apr-15	Tavoy	Overflowed
Apr-15	Apr-16	Victoria Point	Overnight
	Apr-16	Alor Star	Overflowed
Apr-16	Apr-17	Singapore	Overnight
	Apr-17	Muntok	Fuel
Apr-17	Apr-18	Batavia	Overnight
	Apr-18	Semarang	Fuel
Apr-18	Apr-19	Soerabaja	Overnight
	Apr-19	Rambang	Fuel
	Apr-19	Bima	Overflowed
	Apr-19	Koepang	Crash
		Darwin	

\* Source Douglas Walker 1986

The following table is a composite of information provided by Gordon Anstee<sup>6</sup> and Stephen Smith<sup>7</sup> plus the result of checking the cancellations on over 100 covers.

Indian Mail Bags prepared for the flight				
Karachi to	Jodhpur			
	Delhi			
	Allahabad (14)			
	Calcutta (72)			
	Rangoon (15-40)	Akyab	Tavoy (Apr 17)	Vic. Pt. (Apr 22)
	Singapore	Alor Star (Apr 18)	Batavia	Bima
	Darwin	Sydney		
Jodhpur	Delhi			
	Allahabad			
	Calcutta (25)			
	Rangoon	Akyab	Tavoy (Apr 17)	Vic. Pt. (Apr 22)
	Singapore	Alor Star	Batavia	Bima
	Darwin			
Delhi to	Allahabad			
	Calcutta (85 or 182)			
	Rangoon	Akyab	Tavoy (Apr 17)	Vic. Pt. (Apr 22)
	Singapore	Alor Star	Batavia	Bima
	Darwin			
Allahabad	Calcutta (148)			
	Rangoon (32)	Akyab (6)	Tavoy (Apr 17)	Vic. Pt. (5 or 9) (Apr 22)
	Singapore	Alor Star	Batavia	Bima
	Darwin			
Calcutta	Akyab (32)			
	Rangoon (168)	Tavoy (30)(Apr 17)	Vic. Pt.(30)(Apr 22)	
	Singapore (57)	Alor Star	Batavia	Bima
	Darwin (91)	Rest of AUS (127)	New Zealand (50?)	
Akyab Rangoon	Rangoon?	Tavoy?	Vic. Pt.?	
	Tavoy			
	Vic. Pt. (1) (15 Apr)			
	Singapore	Alor Star	Batavia	Bima
	Darwin	Melbourne		
Tavoy	Vic. Pt. (Apr 22)			
	Singapore	Alor Star	Batavia	Bima
	Darwin			
Alor Star	Sydney (123 incl. NZ)			
Johore	Sydney (84 incl. NZ))			
Singapore	Sydney (273)			

The 2nd column defines the drop off destination, subsequent columns are the additional destinations in the same bag. Numbers in brackets are quantities from quoted sources. Dates are the arrival date stamps on the covers.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon Anstee op cit

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Smith op cit

In Anstee's article he writes "As the Indian Post Office did not receive sufficient notice that the mail would be dropped at Akyab, mails prior to Calcutta, i.e. from Karachi, Jodhpur, Delhi and Allahabad were included in the Rangoon bag and forwarded to their destination by steamer. The same applies to mails for Victoria Point and Tavoy. In consequence, letters and cards dropped off at Akyab, Tavoy and Victoria Point are very scarce."

I had some difficulty understanding what he was saying and have interpreted it as follows.

Mail from Karachi, Jodhpur, Delhi and Allahabad destined for Akyab, Tavoy and Victoria Point were included in the Rangoon bags from each of those places. It is presumed that each of the four named cities would have produced a closed bag for Rangoon and thus by the time Rangoon was reached there would have been 5 bags from Indian cities (including the bag from Calcutta) as well as the bag from London for clearing. From Calcutta, mail for Tavoy and Victoria Point were also included in the Rangoon bag.

For items starting at Karachi there does not appear to be any count available for the next few stopping places. We don't know how many covers were created by the three main protagonists but some samples from Charles Griffiths show that he had at least one item for each of the stops.



A sample of the Charles Griffiths' general purpose cards with additional annotation in red. Posted at Karachi on April 11 to be on board the April 12 flight to Allahabad, cancelled there on April 14.



The back of the card being glossy would not accommodate a backstamp, so the card was cancelled on the front.

The covers and cards that have been sighted from Jodhpur have an additional interesting philatelic aspect. The postal canceller used at the aerodrome, has the date slug upside down to the rest of the instrument as can be seen in the following example.



The rectangular cachet, correctly used here, was applied at Rangoon where this card was dropped before continuing to Tavoy by steamer.

There are a lot of covers from Delhi created by Mr. H.N. Kapur. Rather than a general card such as produced by Griffiths, the envelopes have been printed especially for the event.



The backstamp of Victoria Point April 22 31, indicates that mail was offloaded at Rangoon (on April 15) and continued south by steamer.

An example of Stephen Smith's effort is shown in this cover from Allahabad to Victoria Point. The additional 3-line cachet in black is repeated on the back of this envelope also but is not official, most likely applied by Smith himself. Someone wrote in pencil that only nine items were carried.



Backstamped 22 April this cover was offloaded at Rangoon and went by steamer to destination.

The aircraft left Calcutta on April 15 for the fuel stop at Akyab where it dropped off the Calcutta created covers. This is confirmed by the backstamp of April 15 11 AM on the Stephen Smith letter for Akyab. There appears to have been no mail created at Akyab for any of the next stages of the flight - at least I have not sighted any.



Front unofficial 3-line cachet added subsequently at Calcutta.



The unofficial 3-line cachets were added by Stephen Smith.

The aircraft next took off for Rangoon where it again stopped for fuel, dropped off its 6 bags of mail. It was at Rangoon that there was the first official recognition by way of a cachet placed on the incoming and outgoing mail. Two small rectangular boxed ones were used reading either FIRST AIRMAIL/EUROPE- BURMA or FIRST AIRMAIL/BURMA-AUSTRALIA. There was some confusion as to which cachet to apply. Clearly the incoming mail should have had the first and the outgoing mail the second. However, all the incoming mail sighted is known with the incorrect cachet.



When the Rangoon bags were cleared, some covers were backstamped April 15 11 AM, others 4.30 PM, and in some cases, both! Mail from the same Karachi bag intended for Victoria Point received the correct marking of BURMA-AUSTRALIA despite the short distance it travelled along that route.

The additional covers for Akyab, Tavoy and Victoria Point would have been separated and prepared for surface delivery by steamers northwards for Akyab and southwards for Tavoy and Victoria Point.

The steamer journey is confirmed by the backstamp on the Akyab covers bearing the date of April 21 and a manuscript note in red by the Akyab Postmaster "Recd via Rangoon 21/4/31".



The DH66 *City of Cairo* then headed for a possible landing at Tavoy, which it ignored (proven by the arrival stamp on the front of the cover backstamp of April 17) and a certain landing and overnight stop at Victoria Point on April 15.

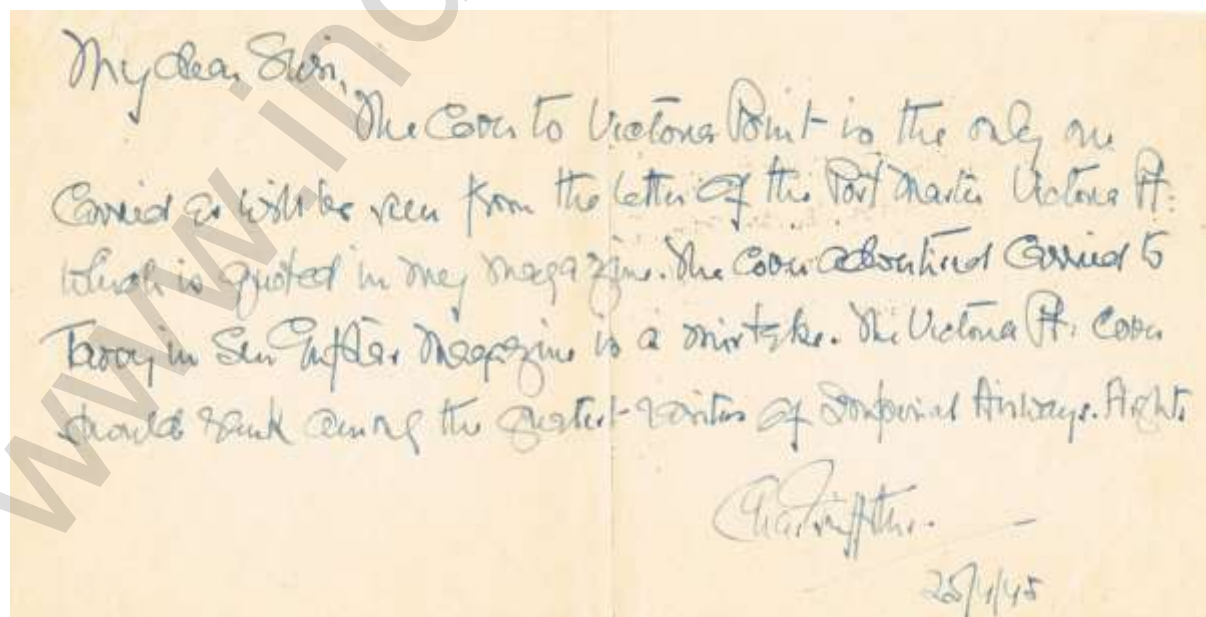


The Victoria Point steamer delivery was not until April 22.

A unique flown cover exists from Rangoon to Victoria Point carrying the backstamp of April 15 with a red manuscript signed by the local postmaster reading "received at 5.40 PM by Airmail".



A letter from Charles Griffiths written in 1945 authenticates the cover



Anstee also records that covers from Tavoy to Victoria Point went direct by air but as the aircraft did not stop at Tavoy that was not possible. The Tavoy cancellation indicates that the letter was initially delivered by steamer having been dropped off at Rangoon as an “Under cover letter” for Tavoy arriving on April 17 and then going on by same or other steamer to Victoria Point where it received the April 22 backstamp.



A clear April 22 backstamp proves that the cover came by steamer, not by air.

Other covers prepared to be sent from Tavoy were for destinations such as Alor Star, Singapore, Batavia, Bima and Darwin. From the Batavia and Bima covers in my possession, it appears that these covers were withheld at Tavoy or moved by surface mail to Alor Star until the Second Experimental service came through two weeks later with the *Southern Cross* flown by Kingsford Smith.

This is confirmed by the Singapore date stamp of May 8. Kingsford Smith ignored the trip to Batavia and went direct to Soerabaja where the Batavia destined cover was stamped 9.5.31 6-7 N (N meaning in the afternoon). It was stamped the next day in Batavia and then went on the return journey to eventually end up back in Calcutta by June 24, but that is another story.



The Bima destined cover had an even more bizarre journey when we follow its cancellations. Like the Batavia cover it went with the *Southern Cross* to Soerabaja, but as it had to travel further east, it went with the privately chartered Pattist aircraft *Abel Tasman* to Koepang on May 13 overflying Bima on the way!

Anstee has this recorded as receiving its diamond shaped cachet at Bima rather than at Soerabaja. The letter was then returned to Soerabaja on May 21 and finally reached Bima on June 3. Again, that was not the end of its journey it went back to Soerabaja on its way to its sender in Calcutta and was despatched to Calcutta on October 2 to arrive home at Calcutta on October 15!



*The City of Cairo* in the meantime continued on its way from Victoria Point overflying Alor Star to arrive at Singapore on April 16 for an overnight stay.



On April 17 the DH66 *City of Cairo* , stopped at Muntok on the island of Banka for fuel and then made it to Batavia for another overnight stop.

On April 18 it took off from Batavia went along the northern coastline of Java stopping at Semarang for fuel and stayed overnight at Soerabaja. The next day after refuelling at Rambang they ran into a violent storm which slowed down their progress and increased their fuel usage to such an extent that they decided on an emergency landing at Koepang.

Unfortunately, the chosen area was not free of obstructions and the aircraft crashed but the crew and the mail were uninjured.

That was the end of the First Imperial Airways Experimental flight to Australia. Several other parties would be involved in completing the journey to the Australian mainland and then to the various major southern cities.

Ed Wolf

May 2020

Attachment:

Gordon Anstee's Article published in "India Post Vol 1" about April 1968

EXPERIMENTAL AIRMAILS - ENGLAND-AUSTRALIA-ENGLAND 1931.

by Gordon R. Anstee E.R.D.

PART I - FIRST EXPERIMENTAL SERVICE

ENGLAND TO AUSTRALIA 4th April, 1931.

The first mail to be flown from England to Australia was that carried unofficially by Sir Ross Smith in November 1919 when winning the "air race" to Australia. Twelve years after that, two flights carrying official mail were made and a further three years before the Regular England to Australia Air Service was inaugurated in December, 1934.

The first official airmail flights to Australia were announced by the Postmaster General on March 31st 1931. The announcement emphasised that the flights were in the nature of an experimental service intended to test the possibility of a regular England to Australia Service and that they would apply only to the (First and Second Experimental) services leaving on the stated dates.

From London to Delhi the service was the normal weekly despatch, so the experiment was really confined to flights between Delhi and Australia with which the weekly despatches to and from India would connect. Imperial Airways portion of the experiment was between Delhi and Darwin via Allahabad, Calcutta, Akyab, Rangoon, Penang, Singapore and Batavia.

The Indian section of this First Experimental commenced from Karachi on the 12th April via Jodhpur, Delhi, Allahabad, Calcutta, Akyab, Rangoon, Tavoy and Victoria Point.

The plane was a triple engined biplane named the "City of Cairo". The pilots were Mr. R.P. Mollard and Mr. H.W.C. Alger. A few official covers prepared by Imperial Airways showing a map of Australia and the words "1st England Australia Official Air Mail 1931 Imperial Airways" printed in blue were flown. Various unofficial special envelopes were also used.

Jodhpur, Delhi and Allahabad were reached on the 13th and Calcutta on the 14th. The liner left Calcutta on the 14th and arrived at Akyab where the night was spent. On the 15th Rangoon and Victoria Point were successfully reached. On the 16th the liner left Victoria Point and proceeded to Singapore arriving there the same evening. Everything ran smoothly according to schedule until April 19th when on reaching the Island of Timor only a few hours from her destination the "City of Cairo", owing to strong head winds causing a shortage of petrol, had to make a forced landing. The field, unfortunately, was not as nice as it looked with the result that the plane was sufficiently damaged to prevent any question of carrying on to Port Darwin. Fortunately the crew and mails were unharmed.

After the crash, Air Commodore Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith left Sydney 2 days later in the "Southern Cross" (VH-USU) to pick up and convey the stranded mails to Port Darwin. After reaching Port Darwin they were handed over to the Queensland and Northern Territorial Aerial Services Ltd. The 'Qantas' machine left Port Darwin for the south on April 27th and reached Brisbane via Camooweal and Charville on the 28th. They were then handed over to the Australian National Airways from whence they flew them to Sydney and Melbourne.

As the Indian Post Office did not receive sufficient notice that the mail would be dropped off at Akyab, mails prior to Calcutta, i.e. from Karachi, Jodhpur, Delhi and Allahabad were included in the Rangoon bag and forwarded to their destinations by steamer. The same applies to mails for Victoria Point and Tavoy. In consequence, letters and cards dropped off at Akyab, Tavoy and Victoria Point are very scarce.

From Calcutta a separate bag was made up for Akyab and letters were delivered there. In the case of Tavoy and Victoria Point, however, no separate mail bag was prepared and mails were included in the Rangoon bag, hence no mail from Calcutta was carried to Tavoy and Victoria Point direct by air.

Letters carried by the Second Experimental Flight which closed at Calcutta on the 5th May are therefore the first direct Air Mail to Victoria Point. Covers from Rangoon were, however, carried by the First Experimental Flight to Tavoy and Victoria Point and also from Ta-voy to Victoria Point. No mail appears to have been picked up at Akyab on the outward journey of the First Experimental Flight. Letters and cards consigned to Akyab, Tavoy and Victoria Point whether booked by the First or Second Experimental Flights are scarce. Few knew that mails were being accepted for these places on the First Flight and they did not take advantage of the Second Flight.

The following are some of the figures of the mail which was received as well as sent from Calcutta:-

#### INWARD

Croydon to Calcutta	401 items
Delhi (incl Akyab, Tavoy & Victoria Pt.) to Calcutta	182 items
Allahabad ( - do - ) to Calcutta	148 items

#### OUTWARD

Calcutta to Akyab	32 items ✓
Calcutta to Rangoon (incl Tavoy & Victoria Point)	228 items ✓
Calcutta to Singapore	57 items ✓
Calcutta to Darwin	268 items

The 228 items for Rangoon include 30 items addressed to Tavoy and Victoria Point whilst 268 items for Darwin include 177 items addressed to stations in Australia and a few in New Zealand. Some covers for Calcutta were dropped off at Karachi and were received in Calcutta 12 hours later than those flown to Delhi.

Covers and cards carried on the Indian and Burma stages:-

Karachi	to	Allahabad; Calcutta; Rangoon (Tavoy and Victoria Point to Rangoon by air and onwards by steamer); Alorstar; Singapore; Bima; Darwin and Australian cities.
Jodhpur	to	Allahabad; Calcutta; Rangoon (Tavoy and Victoria Point as above); Alorstar; Singapore; Batavia; Bima; Darwin and Australian cities.
Delhi	to	Allahabad; Calcutta; Akyab (over-carried to Rangoon and returned by steamer); Rangoon (Tavoy and Victoria Point as above); Alorstar; Singapore; Batavia; Bima; Darwin and Australian cities.
Allahabad	to	Calcutta; Akyab (over-carried to Rangoon and returned by steamer); Rangoon (Tavoy and Victoria Point as above); Alorstar; Singapore; Batavia; Bima; Darwin and Australian cities.
Calcutta (where special cachet - see Type 1 - applied in black, violet and purple)	to	Akyab; Rangoon (Tavoy and Victoria Point as above); Alorstar; Penang; Singapore; Batavia; Bima; Darwin; Australian Cities and New Zealand.

Rangoon (where cachets - see Types 2 & 3 - were applied in either black or violet)

to Tavoy and Victoria Point (direct by air); Alorstar; Singapore; Batavia; Darwin and Australian cities.

Tavoy to Victoria Point (direct by air); Alorstar; Singapore; Batavia; Bima; and Darwin.

At Singapore a special receiving cancellation was applied as Type 4.

At Bima the Abel Tasman Soerabaja 10th May diamond shaped cachet (see Type 4a) was applied.

VIA IMPERIAL AIRWAYS.  
1st. EXPERIMENTAL FLIGHT  
ENGLAND TO AUSTRALIA.

Type 1.

FIRST AIRMAIL  
EUROPE-BURMA

Type 2.

FIRST AIRMAIL  
BURMA-AUSTRALIA

Type 3.

IMPERIAL AIRWAYS  
LTD  
LONDON - AUSTRALIA  
AIR MAIL  
FIRST FLIGHT

Type 4.

FIRST AIRMAIL  
BURMA-ENGLAND

Type 6.



Type 5.

*First Flight, Australia - England,  
"CITY OF KARACHI."*

Type 11.

First Flight.  
By "**SOUTHERN CROSS**" VH - USU.  
Pilot. Commander C. Kingsford Smith.

Type 7.

First Flight from Australia,  
By "**SOUTHERN CROSS**" To Akyab,  
thence by "City of Karachi."

Type 8.

VIA IMPERIAL AIRWAYS  
ALLAHABAD CROYDON

Type 12.

VIA IMPERIAL AIRWAYS.  
1st. EXPERIMENTAL FLIGHT  
AUSTRALIA TO ENGLAND

Type 10.



Type 4a.

FIRST AIR FLIGHT  
AUSTRALIA - ENGLAND  
DELIVERY  
DELHI 4-5-31.

Type 9.