

de Havilland Comet



Figure 1: BOAC De Havilland Comet in Flight

The Comet (Fig. 1) was first commercial jet airliner in the world and a response to one conclusion of the Brabazon Committee established in 1943. Designed and built by de Havilland as DH106 at Hatfield the prototype first flew on 27 July 1949, well ahead of its main rivals. The Comet entered commercial service with the British Overseas Aircraft Corporation (BOAC) on 2 May 1952 (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: British Aircraft 65p Value on Cover Commemorating the First Commercial Comet Flight

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Figure 5: BEA Comet 4B First Flight Covers, London - Stockholm & Stockholm - London (June '60)



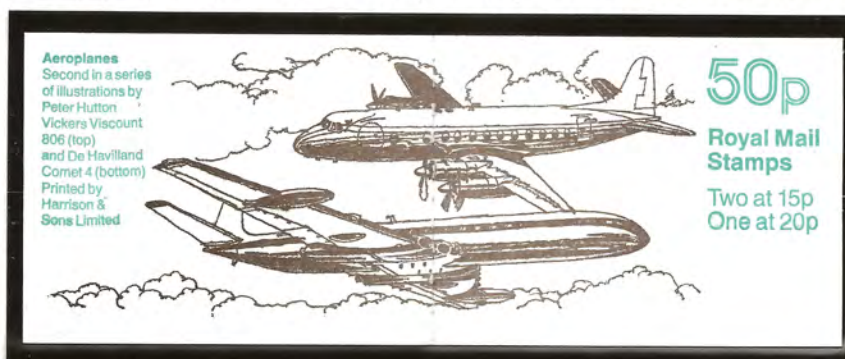
Figure 6: BEA Comet 4B G-APMA at Stockholm Airport (Oct '70)

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Figure 3: BOAC Comet First Flight Covers, London - Tokyo & Tokyo - London (April '53)

The Comet was introduced on many of BOAC's international routes during 1952/3, e.g. London to Tokyo (Figure 3). Then on 10 January 1954 BOAC Comet (G-ALYP) crashed into the sea south of Elba during a scheduled flight from London to Singapore. All 29 passengers and six crew lost their lives. The following day BOAC suspended all its Comet passenger flights while all aircraft were inspected and the accident investigated. By 23 March 1954, modifications had been made and Comet passenger flights resumed on the Johannesburg service with others to follow. However, on 8 April 1954 BOAC Comet (G-ALYY) under charter by South African Airways with a crew of seven and 14 passengers on board broke up over the Mediterranean near Naples. A few days later, its UK Certificates of Airworthiness were withdrawn pending further detailed investigation.



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Figure 4: BOAC Comet 4 First Flight Covers, London - Tokyo & Tokyo - London (April '59)

Testing took place at de Havilland and the Royal Aircraft Establishment in Farnborough. It was concluded that the cause of both accidents was cracks in the fuselage, propagating from the stress points at the corner of one of the square windows due to metal fatigue. Comet 2s, which were used by the RAF, had oval windows, a thicker fuselage skin, more powerful Rolls Royce engines and were slightly longer. The two Comet 3 prototypes were longer still and with larger wings and uprated engines formed the basis of the Comet 4 series. The Comet 4C was introduced on long distance routes such as London to Tokyo in 1959 (Fig. 4), replacing the slower turbo-prop aircraft, e.g. the Bristol Britannia, which had been used during the interim. However, by this time the Boeing 707 had entered service, lessons having been learnt from the UK's experience. It became the preferred aircraft, particularly on the competitive and lucrative North Atlantic route. The UK's lead had been lost.

British European Airways (BEA) used the Comet 4B, which had a shorter wingspan, on many of its continental routes, such as London to Stockholm (Figs. 5 & 6). Several other carriers flew Comet aircraft, e.g. Dan Air. In addition, Comet 4C airframes were used in the development of the Maritime Reconnaissance (MR2) Nimrod and the ill-fated Anti-Electronic Warfare (AEW) variant.