



Welsh Airways Air Letter Service



Air transport took off (pune intended) after World War I, when many wartime airfields and aircraft became available in peacetime. In 1921 Harold Evanson, a former RAF pilot, living in North Wales offered a charter service to businessmen from Borrass Airfield just outside Wrexham. This was in a Airco De Havilland DH4A, so the passengers, even when enclosed in a Perspex canopy, needed a warm coat and scarf for the journey. Despite this he found himself in demand and made plans for scheduled flights between north and south Wales.

For this he purchased a BAT FK26, a four passenger biplane which was considered a very robust but simple to fly in 1926. With this he launched Wales Airways, with a scheduled return flight from Wrexham to Cardiff Splott Airfield three times a week, and chartered flights in between. By 1928 he was able to purchase a second and he moved HQ to Jersey Marine airfield near Swansea. From here could make scheduled flights from Swansea to Cardiff, Wrexham and onto Caernarfon, four days a week and in both directions. The FK26 came nicely equipped with armchairs for the passengers which could be easily removed should something large need to be transported.

These flights were well used because businessmen did not restrict their operations to one town. Both Wrexham and Cardiff had big interests in coal and steel, while Swansea and Caernarfon interests lay in ores and slates. Passenger numbers continued to rise steadily. In those days you could hop on and off the aircraft and journey times were much less than half the time taken by road or rail. By 1935 demand was sufficient for Evanson to introduce a DH 84, appropriately named The Dragon. With this aircraft in the fleet he could now offer a first class service on a par with Pullman coaches on the trains. The plane's cabin was carpeted and fitted with velvet curtains. There were armchairs and tables for the passengers, with cushions provided for ladies. There was even a well stocked bar towards the rear with hostess service. And at the end of the journey, the pilot would have radioed in with an ETA and a cab would be waiting for each passenger; all for £2.5.0 return. Those were the days.

Evanson was frequently asked to transport letters and important or urgent documents on his flights, and in 1937 he decided to formalise this service as a private letter service. Each item would be logged at a reception desk, placed in a lockable postal box, and could be collected in person at the other end. The railway companies ran similar services, but again By Air was quicker. Documents for signing could be sent from one end of Wales to the other and be returned the same day. And there would be stamps. The standard air letter fee was 2d, twice the price of the Royal Mail but so much quicker and cheaper than a telegram. For 4d the letter had to be signed for by a

named person and a receipt was returned to the sender. Small parcels would be transported for 1/-.

The stamps for these showed a potted history of Wales Airways through their aircraft against a map of Wales. The 2d had the old DH4, the 4d had the FK26 and on the 1/- was the DH84 Dragon. Look out for the inverted frame error on the latter. Collectors have long argued whether the central picture was upside down akin to the famous 'Inverted Jenny' error, but it is obvious from sheets and blocks that it is the frame inverted. Another error occurred on the 4d on one print run due to a temporary hand having cross eyes. By far the most controversial variation can be found on a few of the 2d stamps. Experts from the MOD have studied this and, unsurprisingly, declared it to be an atmospheric illusion ... but not before taking away all the evidence for their files.

Each stamp had its unique serial number added after the sheets were printed and these numbers were used to log each item in the postal ledgers. If you receive any of these stamps and that number is not unique you will know that at least one of them is a fake.

The DH84 Dragon, unlike its sister aircraft the DH86 Express, had few untoward flying incidents. However there was one at the Borrass airfield in August 1938 when the plane overshot the end of the runway during take-off and came to rest in a ploughed field. One passenger, who claimed he needed a drink to calm his nerves, had ordered a flaming sambuca. This spilled onto the floor and into the postal box, and the few letters there were damaged. Even so, Evanson had been prepared for this and had a rubber stamp ready saying "Damaged in Transit". Luckily the fire was soon put out with a soda siphon and no-one even had a singed eyebrow, and the flight was resumed once the glasses had been refilled.

A special stamp was issued in 1939 showing Sikorsky S-38A flying boat. Evanson was going to expand his routes with marine airports at Cardiff, Aberystwyth and Deeside in North Wales, and had had a trial of the aircraft with some passengers. However the political situation in Europe worsened and Evanson held back from an actual purchase. In September that year war broke out and the airfields he used were requisitioned for use by the RAF and literally overnight Wales Airways ceased to be. Naturally Evanson volunteered his services for the RAF, but by then was over 50 and deemed too old for active service. He did however train the next generation of flight instructors and did more than his bit for the war effort.