Foynes Aeradio in the years 1936 to 1945

by Michael Kirwan

Jim Connolly was the Officer-in-Charge. Initially, the radio station was set up in the waiting room of the railway station. The equipment consisted of a Marconi RG25 long-wave receiver and a Marconi RC34 short-wave receiver. Foynes was connected to Ballygirrane by Morse sounder landline telegraph and it could also key the transmitter in hut “A” in Ballygirrane over Post Office lines.

On the western side of Foynes Island a Marconi medium-wave direction finder was installed in a hut, its purpose being to bring flying boats over the landing area in its final stage during poor visibility. A 70-watt transmitter was also installed capable of transmitting on 333kHz and 860kHz. A battery and a Lucas wind generator provided power for the hut.

In the radio station, radio officers searched the Atlantic for signs of weather news every hour of the day, picking up ship’s messages, making contact with Botwood and receiving weather reports in five-figure code groups from other parts of the world. All these transmissions were in Morse code. This data went into the preparation of a daily weather chart, which would show the captain of the flying boat the actual weather conditions over the ocean and the forecast for the flight.

On Thursday 25 February 1937 Foynes saw its first flying boat when Imperial Airways Cambria touched down on the River Shannon shortly after 5 pm. It had come from Southampton. The following day the Cambria took off and went along the west coast in trial communications with Foynes and Ballygirrane. When Captain Powell came ashore he said they had flown about 400 miles up and down the coast between Valentia and the Aran Islands. During that time they had remained in contact with Foynes and Ballygirrane and he reported that both radio stations worked perfectly and no further trials were necessary locally. When the Cambria was making her return flight to Southampton it was a bitterly cold morning with Foynes covered in snow. She ran into bad weather after flying about 60 miles and was forced to return to the moorings outside Foynes harbour three-quarters of an hour later. Her return was totally unexpected and a wireless message to the radio station on Foynes Island was transmitted to the officials on the mainland just in time to enable them to have the service launch out for the Cambria’s landing.

John Finnucane was born on Foynes Island and was one of the last inhabitants to leave and settle on the mainland. The new radio station was located on his grandmother’s land. “I remember very vividly the arrival of the first flying-boat,” he recalled. “There was great excitement on the island because of the location of the radio station there. My grandmother was a very hospitable lady so the radio officers spent a lot of time in her kitchen where the...
kettle was always on the boil." The radio station personnel were ferried the half-mile ashore in a fleet of boats.

My father, Dermot Kirwan was a radio officer in Foynes and he also remembers the first flight.

"About ten days before the flight was to take place I was transferred from Ballygirreen to Foynes radio. The work consisted of receiving meteorological bulletins, which were in five figure code groups in Morse, but unfortunately three days before the flight I was taken ill with an attack of asthma. The result was that all I knew of the first flight was to bear the aircraft, a C class flying-boat, passing overhead St John's Hospital in Limerick."

In March, 1937 additional radio masts were erected on a hill beyond Foynes, to improve reception of the weather reports and the radio station was moved from the railway station waiting room into the Montagle Arms Hotel where the meteorological office had been organised by Mr. Peters and two assistants who had temporarily moved from Croydon from the British Air Ministry. At this stage there were 17 radio operators employed between the two stations at Ballygirreen and Foynes whose numbers would be increased when the trans-Atlantic service started. Throughout the next few months, daily contact was established by Morse code between Ballygirreen, Foynes and Botwood, Newfoundland with occasional contact also with Fort Washington.

By June 1937, final preparations for the start of the series of trans-Atlantic test flights were completed. On Sunday 4 July the Imperial Airways Caledonia flying boat that was going to fly the east to west crossing arrived in Foynes from Southampron to rapturous applause.

On Monday evening 5 July the Caledonia (G-ADHM) departed for Botwood on its historic flight. Meanwhile on the other side of the Atlantic similar scenes were taking place. Pan American Airways Sikorsky S-42B flying boat NC16736 named Clipper III departed from Botwood. Both flights crossed the Atlantic at the same time. During the crossing they were in constant communication in Morse, with Ballygirreen and Botwood, passing position reports and height at half hourly intervals, sending and receiving weather reports. On the eastbound flight Ballygirreen and Foynes took direction-finding bearings on the flying boat and were able to advise the flight if it had drifted north or south from its intended routing. The course was then adjusted. In the meteorological room in Foynes weather reports were checked with the forecasts. The radio operators copied weather reports from ships and relayed this information to the flight. At 4 am the radio operators were

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### Positions Of Radio Stations

And Details Of Equipment

1939 - 1945

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1939 'Shannon Aeradio' radio stations located at Ballygirreen, Urlanmore, Foynes and Foynes Island

(Courtesy of Brady Graphics)
still at work and by that time the Caledonia
was in contact with Botwood. Ballygirreen
and Foynes were in touch with the Clipper
LIII as it got near to Ireland. At 10.41 am on
Tuesday morning 6 July, just 12 hours 31
minutes after take off the Clipper landed at
Foynes.

Only three flying boats visited Foynes in
1938 and this was all in the space of a
week. On 15 July, a French flying boat
Latecevere, the Lieutenant de Vaisseau
Paris (F-NORD) came from Marseilles.
Four days later it departed and the Mercury
and the mother craft Maia landed. The Mer-
cury and the Maia was a piggy-
back system where the Mercury was
bolted on top of the Maia. The Mercury
was only used to assist the take off and the
Maia continued to Newfoundland.

Scheduled trans-Atlantic flying boat
services began in Foynes in 1939. Three
Air Corps controllers, Capt. L. J. Devoy,
Joe Kearney and Larry O'Riordan were
transferred to Foynes for tower duties.
The trans-Atlantic flight season started
on 28 June and finished on 10 October.
Twenty-six Pan American Airways flights,
sixteen Imperial Airways flights and two
double crossings by Export Airlines were
made. Communications from ground to
to air was mainly on 333 kHz and 5672 kHz
with a back up of 8240 kHz and 3082 kHz
and air to ground on 333 kHz and 5165 kHz.
Pan American Airways used three aircraft
- American Clipper, Yankee Clipper and
Dixie Clipper. Imperial Airways used two
- Caribou and Coho. Westbound departures
were generally around 4 pm with a flying
time of 16 hours. It was not unusual to go
off work at midnight and come in the fol-
lowing day and hear the same flight still
flying and working Gander. Eastbound fligh-
tes took about 14 hours depending on
wind. Shannon Aerolin provided the flight
with about twenty direction-finding bear-
ings and about 300 to 500 words of Morse
code would be exchanged using the Q code.

For most of 1940 there were no aviation
arrivals or departures as flight across the
Atlantic were severely curtailed due to the
Second World War. The first movement
was on 3 August when the flying boat Clare
refuelled in Foynes on its way from Poole
to New York, via Foynes, Botwood and
Montreal, as the first British passenger
and mail service. The flying boats Clare
and Clyde opened the Poole-Lisbon-Bothwell-
Freetown- Lagos service on 19 October
1940 but Clyde was sunk during a severe
storm while moored on the River Tagus at
Lisbon in February 1941.

In 1941 Foynes became busy again when it
played a key role in keeping the
UK Ireland and its African
and Asian colonies. From West Africa it
was linked up with the trans-Sahara route to Egypt.
Foynes was the key base, enabling BOAC's
fleet of flying boats to carry the optimum
payload of passengers, freight and mail,
with increased security, between the air-
lines home base at Poole Harbour in
Dorset, and Lisbon. From 23 May 1941, the
aircraft stayed well away from occupied
France by using Foynes and as a further
security measure, both north and south-
bound flights were flown at night time
leaving Foynes, when outbound at 'last
light' and arriving, homebound, at 'first
light'.

In January 1942 flying boats Golden
Hind and Golden Horn joined the Poole-
Foynes-Lisbon service and from July they
continued onto the Bathurst, Freetown, Accra and Lagos route. The Lisbon-Bathurst leg was flown non-stop in 13 hours. In the same year the Department of Industry and Commerce took over responsibility for air traffic control. Captain Saul, a Wing Commander in the coastal command at Plymouth was recruited to organise air traffic control in Ireland. The control tower was eventually completed on top of the airport office building. Before that, radio operators handled the departures and arrivals of the flying boats.

On 28 July 1943 a BOAC Sunderland (G-AGES) flying-boat en-route from Lisbon to Foynes crashed on Mount Brandon, County Kerry. The aircraft had arrived before dawn and being unable to land due to cloud, had turned and was flying out to sea to wait for sunrise when visibility was expected to improve. Shannon Aeradio, Ballygirreen sent out a broadcast to “look out for aircraft G-AGES out of communication since 0408 hours probably in coastal area vicinity south and west coast Ireland”. Nine passengers were killed.

The number of West African bound flights from Foynes increased annually during the winter months (roughly October to March) when the trans-Atlantic westbound flights had to be re-routed because of excessive headwinds on the direct North Atlantic route (Foynes to Botwood, Newfoundland) and the high risk of Gander Lake being frozen over. The West African flying-boat bases used for the South Atlantic Ocean crossings were Bathurst and Dakar, Senegal.

During the War years, Foynes was an exciting place to work with many dignitaries passing through on the flying boats. Capt Norman Hewett was Irish Intelligence and Security Officer and he recalls some of them “Among them were Princes Faisal and Faisal of Saudi Arabia, Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, Eleanor Roosevelt, Fighting Bill Donovan, Yehudi Menuhin, Admiral Byrd, Anthony Eden, Bob Hope, Jan Masaryk, Crown Prince Olaf of Norway to name but a few.”

Between 1941 and 1945 approximately 48,000 passengers passed through Foynes and between 1941 and 1943 about 2,080 journeys were made by flying boats.

Pan American Atlantic Clipper arrived in Foynes on 11 August 1945 with 34 passengers. This was the greatest number of passengers ever carried across the Atlantic at this time. However, at this stage the days of the flying boats were nearly over. The War had boosted the development of airfields on both sides of the Atlantic. The land plane had also reached a stage of development where it was much more efficient and capable than the flying boat and available in much larger numbers. All of this spelled the end of the flying boat era.

On 22 October 1945 Foynes air terminal closed and Captain Charles Blair of American Export Airlines piloted the last flying boat to New York. All the services closed and the Foynes staff transferred to Shannon and Shannon Aeradio, Ballygirreen, Newmarket-on-Fergus.

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