

ROSE BAY



A common sight at Rose Bay from 1938 to 1941 — three C Class flying boats — Champion, Coolangatta and Calypso.

'Sydney's Water Airport'

Today many Australians would be surprised to know that Sydney Harbour once housed the busiest international airport in Australia — the 'Sydney Water Airport' at Rose Bay.

Qantas (originally 'Queensland and Northern Territory Aerial Services') is now an extremely large airline, operating both extensive international routes and an all-encompassing internal service. In 1922, however, it ran just one airmail service from Charleville to Cloncurry in north-west Queensland, around 920km, using two

Armstrong Whitworth FK8 aircraft. This trip took four and a half hours, at an average speed of about 200km an hour.

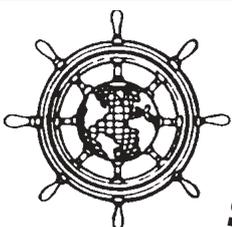
The Company was founded in 1921 by Hudson Fysh and P.J. McGinness, two young men who had met in the Australian Flying Corps (later the RAAF) in World War I, fighting the

From its beginnings in 1938 to its closure in 1974, Rose Bay catered first for our international civil air link with Britain, and later for our services to New Zealand, and later still for our last remaining flying boat routes, to the Barrier Reef and Norfolk and Lord Howe Islands.

Rose Bay was chosen as our flying boat base in 1938 by Qantas when it co-pioneered the new flying boat air service to England. Qantas and Britain's Imperial Airways were partners in this venture, operating together the longest air passenger service in the world, more than 20,000km, a journey which took nine days.



Poster for Qantas Empire Airways 1938.



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Turks in the Arabian desert. Arthur Baird, their engineer during the war, became another early member of the company.

By 1925 the company flew passengers, freight and mail to Longreach and Camooweal, and in 1929 they linked Charleville to Brisbane and to Darwin. In the same year the company headquarters was moved from Longreach to Brisbane's Archerfield Aerodrome, where they began a flying school and an aircraft assembly plant as well as running their increasingly popular passenger, freight and airmail services across Queensland and the Northern Territory.

In 1930 the first England-Australia airmail flight took place. Initiated by Britain's Imperial Airways, it was a makeshift affair. It took 24 days and relied on many ad hoc landing arrangements and rescues from difficulties by enterprising Australian airmen, including Charles Kingsford-Smith. It involved also five different types of aircraft. A regular service on this route didn't yet seem possible.

Meanwhile Qantas grew, and by 1934 was sufficiently successful and confident to enter into negotiations with Britain's Imperial Airways about an England-Australia air service. A new company, Qantas Empire Airways, was formed to operate the route, with Qantas and Imperial Airways holding equal shares. The original idea was to use land-based Qantas DH86 Dragon aircraft on the Singapore-Sydney section. The plan relied on gaining the Australian Government's airmail contract, and when this was achieved the service began in late 1934.

Aircraft of several different types were, however, still used, and since these had different passenger capacities and freight loadings, problems continued. Qantas knew that the DH86 planes would need replacement within a few years, and a decision was finally taken to use flying boats rather than landplanes, because most of the Qantas portion of the route was over water.

Though slower, flying boats were larger, more comfortable, and able to survive in almost any conditions if forced down on the water. Qantas surveyed the water route from Singapore to Sydney, and decided that Darwin, Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria, Townsville and Brisbane would be the intermediate stops.

Very quickly it was realised by both Imperial and Qantas that the whole route, from Britain to Australia, would best be operated by flying boats. The new Short S23 Empire aircraft had all the qualities needed for such a long haul, and their use would obviate the problems of using a mixture of aircraft. They could carry 39 passengers in great comfort, as well as four tons of cargo and mail. A twice weekly service,



Coo-ee lands at Rose Bay, 1938, escorted by safety launches.

taking nine days, was proposed. The aircraft included names soon to become well known to Australians of the period, such as *Centaurus*, *Coriolanus*, *Coogee*, *Carpentaria*, *Coolangatta* and *Coorong*.

It was decided that Imperial Airways crews would fly the Britain to Singapore leg, and Qantas crews would continue to Sydney. The British base was in Poole Harbour, near Bournemouth, a short train ride from London, and Rose Bay was chosen as the terminal in Australia. Work then proceeded on hangars for aircraft storage and maintenance, fuelling and repair facilities, and boats for servicing the aircraft and bringing passengers ashore. A proving flight, with the S23 Empire Flying Boat *Centaurus*, arrived in Brisbane in December 1937, with senior Qantas pilot Lester Brain aboard.

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Official Opening of Rose Bay, 1938. The car park area became main hanger.

Qantas Headquarters made another move at this point — from Brisbane to Sydney — and two Short S23 Empire aircraft arrived at Rose Bay on 10 June 1938, *Coolangatta* captained by Lester Brain and *Coogee* by Arthur Baird. The first northbound flight took off on 5 July with *Coo-ee*, captained by Lynch Blossie. The base was officially opened on 4 August, when the *Camilla* took off for Britain under the



Pre-war luxury on the C Class flying boats ... with even quilts and clock golf available.

command of Lester Brain. At this stage, however, the slipway to haul the flying boats out of the water had not been completed, and the construction of the hangars to house them for maintenance had not even begun.

Landing and taking off in Rose Bay was rather different from the way landplanes used airports. Sydney Harbour was essentially a public space, and measures had to be developed to ensure that both the flying boats and other craft using the Harbour were safe. 'Notices to Mariners' indicated that the area used by the flying boats had to be kept clear most of the time, and when landings or take-offs were imminent speed boats with large flags ran the length of the 'runway' area on both sides at high speed to ensure the space was left clear.

Surely it wouldn't have worked so well in the more crowded harbour conditions of the twenty-first century! ↓

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