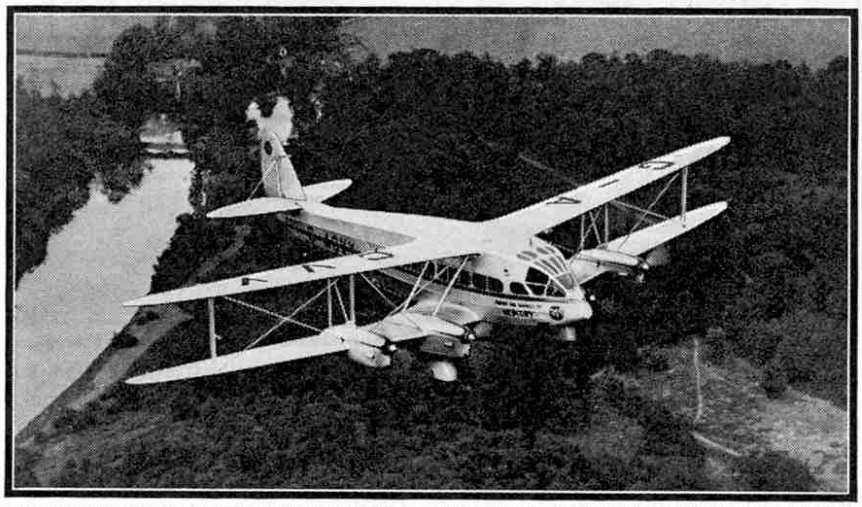
Belfast to Liverpool by Air Liner

Impressions of a Cross-Channel Flight

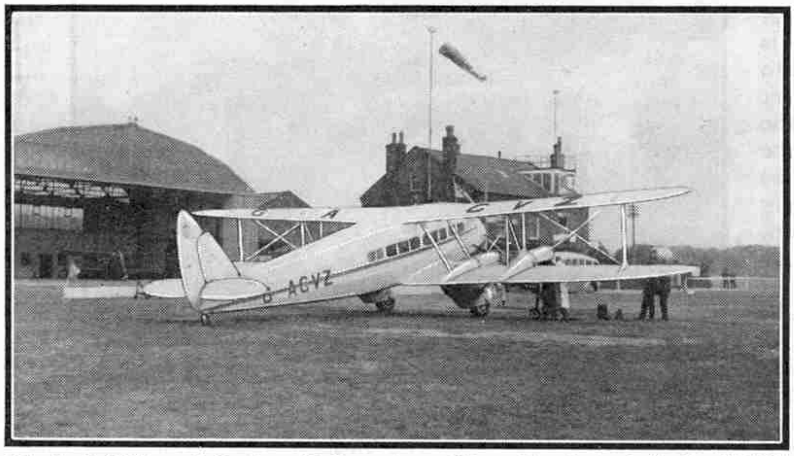
By O. S. Nock, B.Sc., D.I.C.

IT is one of the marvels of this age of speed that the fastest means of travel are incomparably the most soothing and restful. The smooth even pace of a really fast train like *"The Silver Jubilee"* dulls one's sense of speed completely, unless of course you are clocking the quarter-mile posts (!), but the progress of a modern air liner at 200 m.p.h. is so sedate that anyone seeking the thrill of sheer speed would be sadly disappointed. On a recent air journey from Belfast to Liverpool by Railway Air Services there was an entire absence of bustle, formalities were conducted in a quiet leisurely way, and the watchword as far as the passengers were concerned might well have been, "There's no hurry!" Yet from port to port we averaged 130 m.p.h.



The Railway Air Services liner "Mercury," a de Havilland D.H.86 machine. The photographs on this page are reproduced by courtesy of Railway Air Services.

One of the few disadvantages of air travel is that the ports are necessarily situated some miles from the centre of big cities. In his speech at the opening of Gatwick airport, in June last, the Secretary of State for Air said that there would never be an airport in Central London unless the population grew so air minded and so unæsthetic as to pull down every tree in Hyde Park. So it is with other cities. In this country, although the speed while in the air is infinitely faster than anything that has yet been regularly scheduled on land, unless you happen to live close to the aerodromes at each end the fastest means of travel between cities up to about 100 miles apart is still by train. It is when the distance exceeds 200 miles, or the sea has to be crossed, that air transport has such a tremendous advantage. The R.A.S. time of 5½ hours from Glasgow Central Station to Victoria Station, London, including the road journeys at each end, is a big improvement on the 7½-hour run of *"The Royal Scot,"* while 4½ hours from Belfast to London puts the 12 hours 20 minutes of the *"Ulster Express"* completely in the shade.



"Jupiter," of Railway Air Services, at Speke aerodrome. This machine also is a de Havilland D.H.86.

The Belfast airport was, until recently, at Aldergrove, on the shores of Lough Neagh near Antrim, but a short time ago it was transferred to Newtownards in County Down, much nearer the city, but still 10 miles out. A comfortable car picked up passengers in Belfast at about 8.15 a.m. and a pleasant run of about 25 minutes brought us to the airport. It was a very still morning; a hot sun was breaking through and slowly dispersing a mist that hung over the land after a night of rain. Scrabo Hill to the north of the aerodrome, crowned by a monument to a former Marquess of Londonderry, looked very lovely through a thin veil of cloud. Just as we arrived, the air liner *"Mercury"* was approaching, having left Renfrew, the Glasgow airport, at 7.50 a.m. She flew right across, circled round and made a beautiful landing facing what wind there was. *"Mercury"* is one of the well-known de Havilland D.H.86 machines, having four engines each of 200 h.p. and accommodation for eight passengers.

At the time of my trip the German Ambassador-at-large, Herr von Ribbentrop, was in Ulster; his aeroplane was at Newtownards, and was in striking contrast to the R.A.S. air liner. The German machine was a very powerful Junkers monoplane bearing the name *"Wilhelm Siegert"*; it was painted black and carried the familiar Nazi swastika on the tail. *"Mercury,"* on the other hand, is finished aluminium colour picked out with red and green linings, and flew the pale blue ensign while on the ground.

There were four other passengers besides myself, and while our luggage was being weighed and other formalities gone through the machine was being refuelled. The passenger compartment of these liners is most comfortable. It is just wide enough to accommodate two passengers abreast in cosy armchair seats, one on each side of the central gangway. Windows extend almost the whole length of the compartment and give a splendid look-out. Luggage and mails are carried in the tail end of the fuselage.

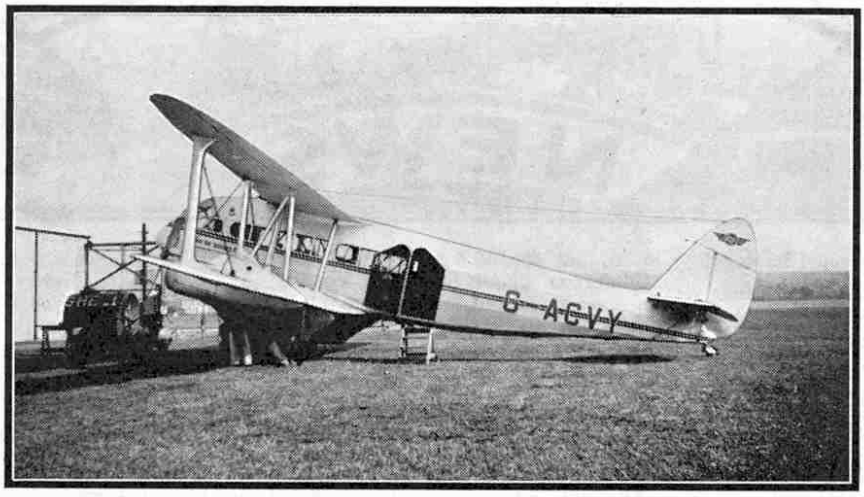
On the stroke of time, 9 a.m., we were off. First of all we ran across the grass to the extreme south end of the landing space. The machine floated smoothly over the uneven patches on the ground, and then it was neatly pivoted round in readiness to take off up wind. Then, full throttle; the engines roared, and after a very gentle start *"Mercury"* developed a truly lightning acceleration. In less than a quarter of a mile we were travelling at 90 m.p.h. and at this speed we took-off, though the exact moment was very difficult to judge.

We soared over the town of Newtownards, all the time swinging round on to our true course, which was approximately south-east; while the machine is banking you get the rather curious impression that the earth below is tilting up towards you—the machine seems perfectly horizontal. We were soon flying over Strangford Lough. Newtownards lies at the head of this long inlet of the sea and the country on both sides of the water is very flat. Fields showed as a chequered pattern; I could just pick out the ruins of Grey Abbey on the eastern shore, and westward a long line of white cumulus clouds sailed level with us where earth and sky blended in the haze.

The tide was out, and from the eastern shore curiously shaped spits of sand trailed out into the water; from above they looked like so many fantastic worms. The long peninsula that separates Strangford Lough from the sea is never more than five miles wide, and at about 9.6 a.m. we passed over the coast near Cloghy Bay. The whole Ards peninsula is very flat and it could be seen stretching

away to the south in a long succession of capes and bays, without a sign of hill or cliff, until it faded into the distance.

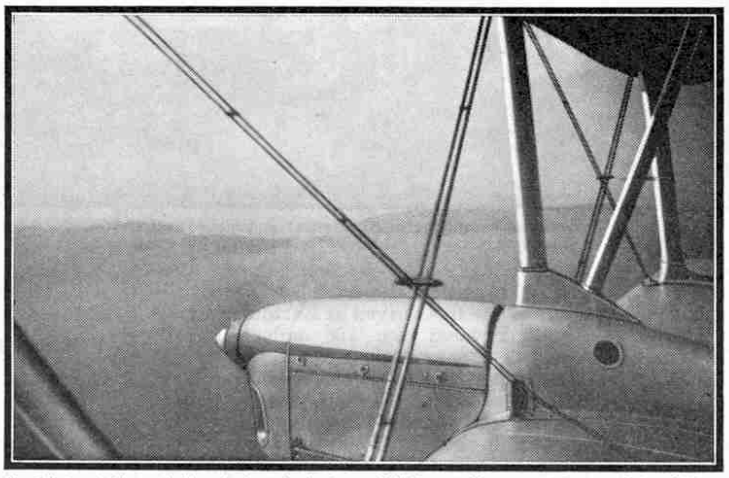
And now sky and sea merged together in a soft blue haze; far below, the water was an intense ultramarine; a few detached little clouds sailed high overhead, and the sense of motion became almost imperceptible. With a complete absence of vibration, the cosy well-ventilated cabin and ever-present drone of the engines induced a strong desire for sleep, and several of the other passengers were nodding over their newspapers before long. Outside, the sun flashed on the silvery aluminium paint of the wings and spars, there was only the slightest motion on the sea below, and it seemed incredible that we were travelling at a land speed of 210 m.p.h.



Refuelling the air liner "Mercury" at Newtownards immediately before the flight described in this article.

The air speed of this machine is 143 m.p.h.; this is the actual speed at which we should travel in perfectly still air, but the land speed naturally varies according to the direction and strength of the wind. In the early stages of this flight conditions were most favourable and the Captain expected to reach Liverpool at 9.59 a.m. The motion was generally very smooth and this is usually the case over the sea in fine weather; occasionally the machine dipped slightly, giving a momentary sensation like that of a lift beginning to descend, but each time this motion was instantly checked.

In less than 10 minutes after our last sight of the Irish coast we were nearing the Isle of Man. Although we were flying at about 2,000 ft. the haze restricted visibility to about six or seven miles; this in a way was most fortunate, for we came upon the island quite suddenly, and a fascinating sight it was! Seen against the strong sunlight, coast and mountain appeared alike as one bluish-grey shadow; queer, devoid of all detail, it looked a veritable phantom isle riding out at sea. But we were approaching at nearly 200 m.p.h.; detail was quickly revealed. To the north was Niarbyl Bay, where the oddly named peak Cronk-ny-Irey-Lhaa sweeps down to the sea; we were heading straight for Port Erin, and at the southern end of the island lay the Calf of Man, a small rocky islet.


Looking out through the starboard windows of "Mercury" approaching the Isle of Man. In the distance on the right is the Calf of Man.

In less time than it takes to describe we had reached the coast and Ronaldsway aerodrome lay far below on our left. Port Erin lies on the western shore of a narrow isthmus only two miles wide, and as we crossed to the opposite coast the aspect of the land changed entirely. Looking backward now the sun was behind, and the whole countryside was picked out in a wealth of exquisite detail. Right below was the picturesque haven of Port St. Mary, its little stone jetty and lighthouse standing out vividly against the blue of the sea; southward to the Calf stretched a rock-wall of magnificent cliffs, while to the north behind Castletown rose the big hills that run northward like a backbone. A red-funnelled paddle steamer was making its way up the coast, leaving a foaming wake that from above looked dazzling white against the deep blue of the sea. It was just as though we had been taken for a novel and lightning tour of the southern end of the island, but although its geography had been so quickly unfolded and almost as soon lost again in the haze, there was none of the breathless haste in seeing beautiful country from a fast train, and the illusion that we were travelling quite slowly remained perfect.

Up to now the wind had been northerly and had helped us not a little in attaining our high land speed, but after we had passed over the Isle of Man it veered round eastward and became quite strong; our air speed of course remained constant at 143 m.p.h. but our land speed was reduced considerably and it was soon evident that we should not reach Liverpool airport until some minutes after what had been anticipated earlier. We came down to about 1,500 ft. and the Captain told me afterwards that the side wind became so strong that he had no less than eleven degrees of drift on. The angle of drift is the angle between the course and the direction the machine would be flying if there were no wind, and from this the navigating officer can calculate the strength and direction of the wind. Just as in the case of a ship, the Captain of an air liner has to make a log of the journey that includes all such particulars; the reports are handed in at each aerodrome where the machine calls, and from these notes weather conditions are wirelessed to all flying stations in the British Isles. The actual steering of these machines is done almost entirely by compass.

As we approached the English coast the haze, which had shown signs of clearing as we came eastward, slowly changed into a grey mist that foretold rain; the air was still too thick to see any great distance but the sea became covered in white breakers. The change in the weather was as surprising as it was complete. Over the Isle of Man it had every appearance of a sultry summer day, calm and quite settled; now the grey clouds were racing across the sky and the machine was bumping a little more frequently.

We were now flying over the steamer track leading to the Mersey; a big merchantman homeward bound was quickly overtaken, and just beyond, a graceful schooner was similarly overhauled. Then at 9.55 a.m. we passed over the Bar lightship. Here is the beginning of the narrow channel that leads through the shallows of the Mersey estuary into the port of Liverpool; it is fascinating enough when seen from the water, especially at night when the gas buoys are flashing red and white, but from the air the winding zig-zag course can be seen in its entirety. The worst bends are marked by the Crosby and Formby lightships, and the long double chain of buoys looks rather like the cork floats of a drift net when seen from an aeroplane. Between this chain of dots steamers were coming and going, and dredgers were at work in several places.

By now the Lancashire coast showed up as a long grey line, the clouds were quite low, there was a hint of rain, and then quite suddenly out of the mist we came upon the mouth of the Mersey, and New Brighton lay below on the right. We flew right up the course of the river, over miles of docks and the shipyards of the Wirral side. Smoke and the mist combined to give the impression that there was fog below though actually we were travelling through the fringe of a cloud. The speed seemed much higher now and familiar landmarks followed each other so quickly that many others went unrecognised.

After crossing the city the air cleared again, though it was now raining hard; we came out over the wide inner basin of the Mersey, past Garston docks, and then the engines went suddenly quiet and we began to turn and descend. Banking moderately we traced out a perfect circle, over the vast railway yard at Speke Junction where every wagon and siding stood out clear to the smallest detail, right out over the river again, and so down to make a beautifully smooth landing at Speke airport. It was 10.8 a.m. and we had covered the 147 odd miles from Newtownards in 68 minutes, an average speed of 130 m.p.h.

So ended a fascinating and most enjoyable trip. To the very end the impression that we had not travelled really fast persisted, though the striking weather changes alone were ample evidence to the contrary, quite apart from the brief time we were in flight.