

BENNETT'S TUDORS



Despite the Avro Tudor's rejection by BOAC and two mysterious accidents, ex-Pathfinder Air Vice-Marshal Don Bennett remained a staunch supporter of the aircraft. ARCHIE JACKSON tells the tale of one man and his airline

The outbreak of war in 1939 thwarted any hopes that Imperial Airways might have entertained of obtaining a British-manufactured aeroplane to replace its ageing Handley Page H.P.42s. The armed struggle was still continuing when, in 1944, the Air Ministry presented A.V. Roe & Co Ltd with a specification for an airliner able to carry 60 passengers at 235 m.p.h. and 25,000ft across the Atlantic.

Avro had built the highly regarded Lancaster bomber, and Roy Chadwick, its designer, was given the task of producing a successful airliner. In November 1944 the Ministry of Supply ordered 12 Tudor 1s, and the prototype made its first flight in June 1945 (see *Post-war propliners*, December 1993 *Aeroplane*). Yet BOAC, as the airline had by then become via its merger with British Airways, was never consulted about its own requirements with regard to range and payload, and Avro was instructed by the Ministry not to deal directly with its intended customer.

When it was realised that the Tudor would be able to carry only 12 passengers across the Atlantic, Avro agreed to extend the fuselage by 6ft and to provide accommodation for 28 passengers. Meanwhile, Lockheed was receiving orders for the proven Constellation 049 and Douglas was not far behind with its DC-6.

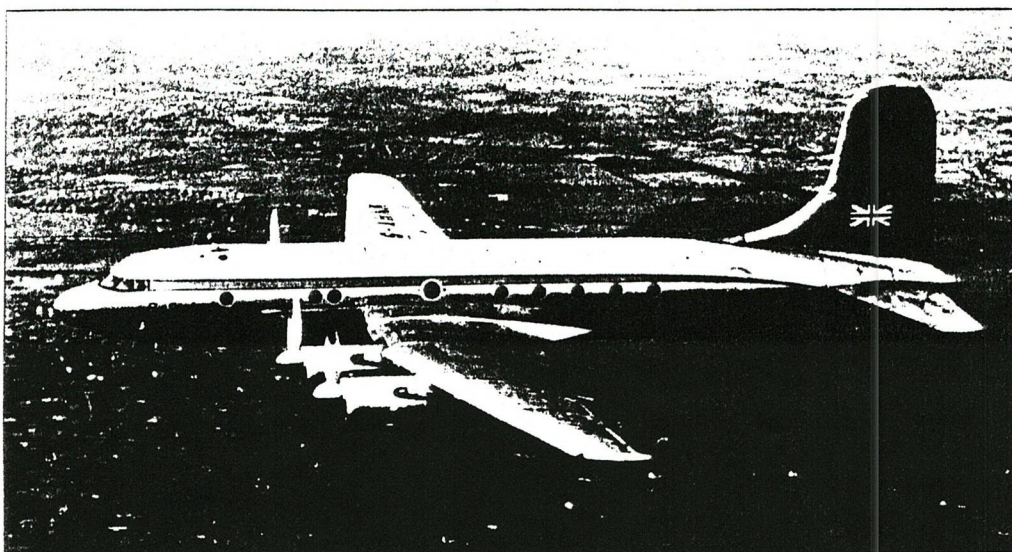
In March 1946 the stretched Tudor made its maiden flight, but the tropical trials conducted in Nairobi later that

year convinced BOAC that the aircraft was totally unsuitable for the airline's African and Indian routes, let alone the North Atlantic. Both Qantas and South African Airways also lost interest and bought American airliners. Avro's problems were further compounded when Roy Chadwick and company test pilot Bill Thorn were killed testing a Tudor.

Meanwhile, British South American Airways (BSAA) was operating "stop-gap" military derivatives — Avro Lancastrians and Yorks. Its chief executive was Air Vice-Marshal Don Bennett, who had led Bomber Command's Path Finder Force. He was determined to operate British-built aircraft, and, subject to the outcome of tropical trials conducted by himself, and a greatly reduced price, he was prepared to consider the Tudor 4, powered by Rolls-Royce Merlin 623 engines.

A deal was done, and in August 1947 Bennett set off for Jamaica, with a refuelling stop at Gander. Over the Atlantic a fuel feed problem developed, presenting the possibility that the aircraft might have to be ditched. An emergency was declared and rescue services alerted, but fortunately the engines kept running and Gander was reached. On landing it was discovered that a fuel service cock, inaccessible in flight, had been left in the shut position.

The tropical trials were completed to Bennett's satisfaction, and he declared the Tudor to be a better aircraft than the Constellation. A number of the



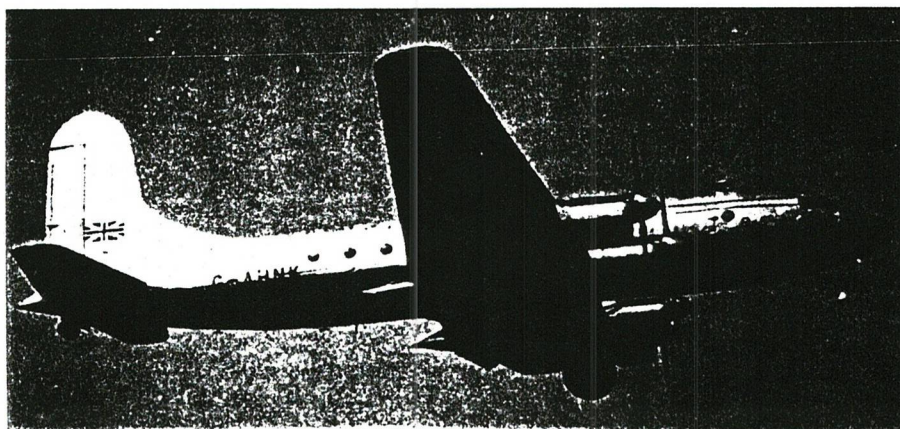
Left, the flagship of BSAA's Tudor fleet was G-AHNN Star Lion, seen here during its first flight, on September 29, 1947, with senior Aero test pilot Capt J.H. Orrell in command. Orrell made a 40min flight, following it with a 2½hr night flight at 20,000ft for a routine check of the pressurisation system, then handed the aircraft over to Bennett, BSAA's director and general manager.

Heading picture, Avro Tudor 4 G-AHNN Star Leopard in BSAA livery. Opposite, far left, Air Vice-Marshal Don Bennett, who retained his faith in the Tudor despite official mistrust of the design resulting from the mysterious disappearances of Star Tiger and Star Ariel in 1948 and 1949 respectively.

rejected Tudor 1s were required for crew training pending deliveries of the Tudor 4. Although this was their first experience of a pressurised airliner, BSAA's pilots were not greatly impressed by its handling or performance.

The manufacturer had not fitted a tri-cycle undercarriage. The massive tail made it difficult for the pilot to keep the aircraft on the runway in gusty crosswind conditions, particularly if the runway surface was covered with a layer of ice or compacted snow. The cabin heater often failed in flight, requiring a swift descent to avoid freezing everyone on board. This procedure often brought the aircraft into cloud, whereupon ice formed on the wings. When stars were visible in the night sky, the lack of an astrodome was unhelpful to navigation.

Notwithstanding these inconveniences, a Tudor carried commercial



passengers for the first time in September 1947. Its destination was Chile, and the following month witnessed the inaugural service of the aircraft to the Caribbean.

On January 27, 1948, Tudor Mk 4 G-AHNP Star Tiger left Heathrow for Bermuda via Lisbon and the Azores. Problems were encountered early on when the heater failed at 21,000ft. Compass trouble and an engine snag were remedied at Lisbon, but the heater failed again en route to the Azores.

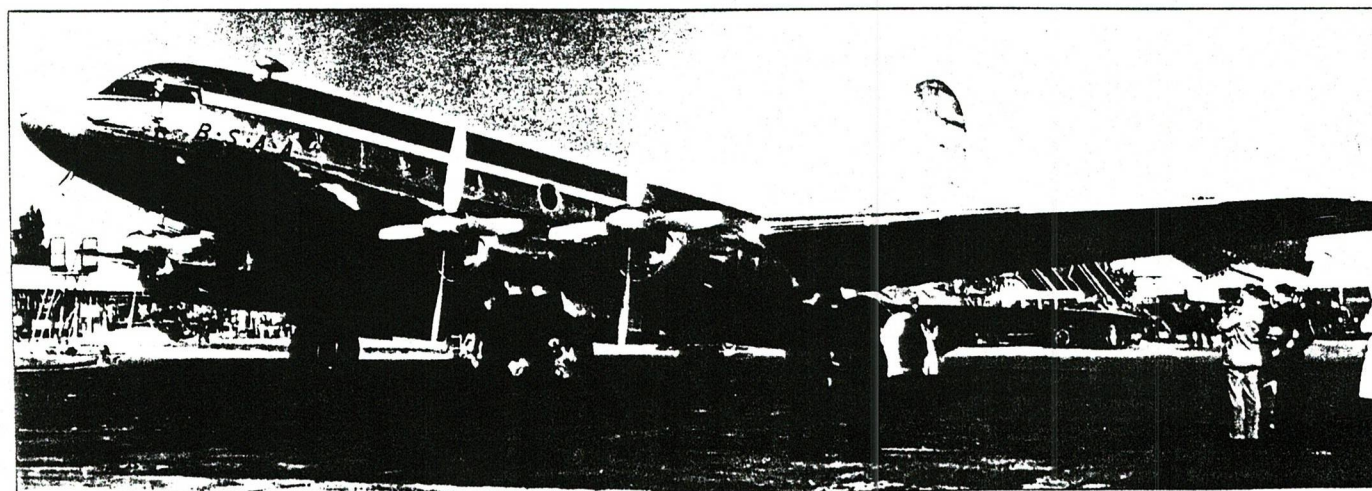
Star Tiger reported nothing untoward on the long flight to Bermuda, its crew having chosen to cruise at 2,000ft to avoid strong headwinds at higher altitudes. The last radio message from

the aircraft was received when it was within 200 miles of the island. Thereafter repeated calls from Bermuda were not answered. Searching aircraft found no trace of wreckage, and the cause of the sudden disaster could not be determined.

Boardroom row

In England, the response of the Air Registration Board (ARB) was to advise the Minister of Civil Aviation, Lord Nathan, to ground the Tudor, pending an investigation. Bennett protested that there was not a shred of evidence to suggest that the aircraft was unsafe to fly. A boardroom row erupted and he left the company, but very shortly after-

Below, Star Lion at London Airport, Heathrow, on September 30, 1947, before Bennett flew it to Buenos Aires on a proving flight.



Right, the first conversion from Tudor 1 to Tudor 4 was G-AHNJ Star Panther, which made its maiden flight, piloted by Avro chief test pilot S.A. Thorn, on April 9, 1947. It is seen during its C of A trials.

wards events brought Bennett and the Tudor together again. The Russians imposed a land blockade on Berlin, and the Western Allies responded with an airlift using every transport aeroplane they could muster, including civilian machines.

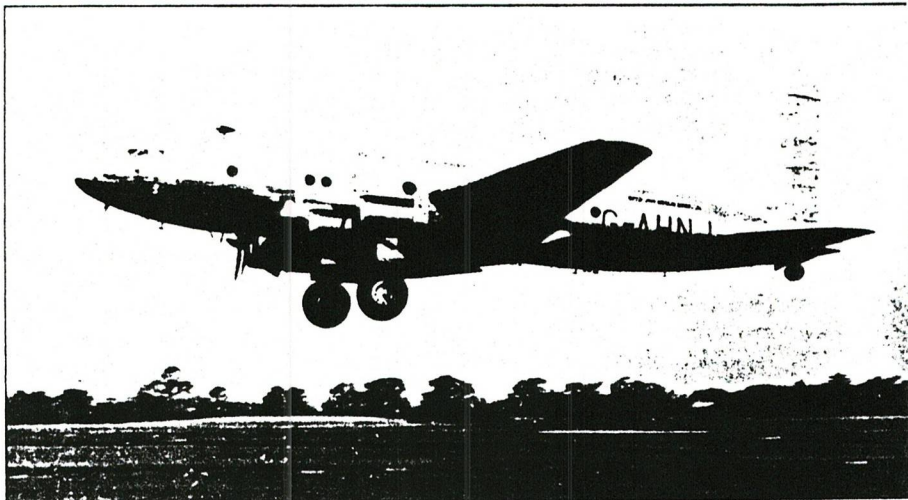
Bennett bought two Tudors from Avro and founded his own company, Airflight. The ARB certificated these aircraft to fly as freighters, unpresurised, and in any case the air corridors into Berlin were flown at low level. The first load, which Bennett himself flew, was ten tons of potatoes. Initially, Airflight's one other pilot was licensed only for daylight flying, so Bennett flew three round trips to Berlin every night. In October 1948 his two Tudors were converted to carry almost ten tons of diesel oil.

Service resumes

The investigation into the airworthiness of the Tudor had found no dangerous characteristics, and BSAA had resumed passenger services. Two Tudors were employed on the airlift, converted into tankers. But in January 1949, in circumstances as mysterious as before, G-AGRE *Star Ariel* disappeared without trace. No warning of trouble had been transmitted since the aircraft had departed Bermuda, and it was cruising towards Nassau in daylight and in perfect weather. Once again BSAA was obliged to withdraw its fleet from passenger service.

These two disasters effectively ended the existence of the company, but Bennett refused to accept that the Tudor possessed any serious defect, attributing the losses to sabotage. His own company had made 977 return

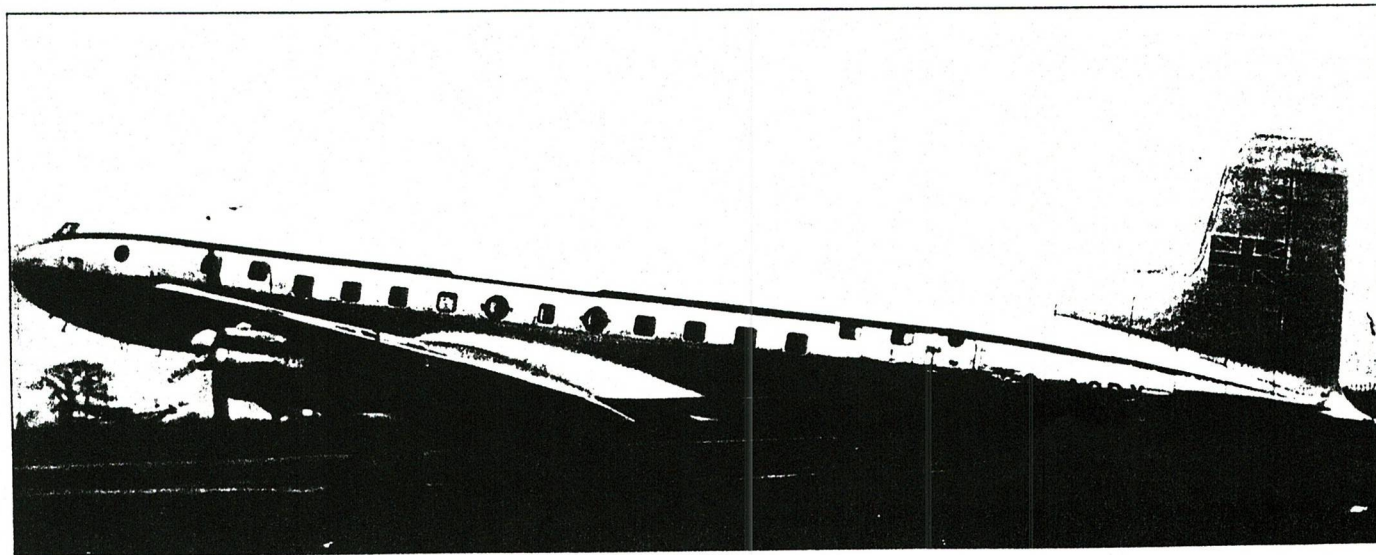
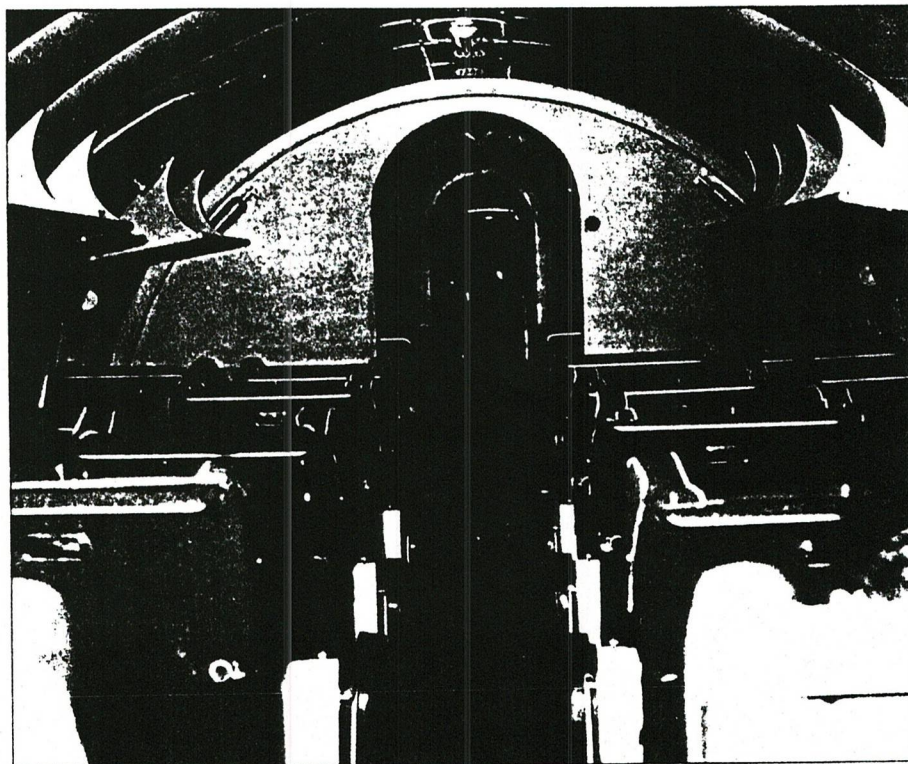
Right, passenger accommodation in the Tudor 4 as converted for BSAA's Buenos Aires service. **Below,** Tudor 2 G-AGRY in service with Air Charter Ltd, founded by Freddie Laker in 1947. It was scrapped in July 1959.



flights to Berlin and earned substantial profits. When the Soviets lifted the blockade of Berlin in August 1949, Bennett's Tudors were converted to carry passengers and various modifi-

cations recommended by the ARB were carried out.

The aircraft were then certificated to carry up to 78 passengers, and Bennett continued operations under the new





Above, Air Vice-Marshall Bennett, right, and groundcrew in front of a Tudor tanker during the Berlin Airlift. **Above right,** passengers boarding a BSAA Tudor 4 in 1948 prepare for the uphill climb to their seats.



company name, Fairflight. The first charter, to carry apprentices to England, was obtained from the Government of Pakistan. Other contracts followed; to Johannesburg, to Japan, and 25 round trips between Aden and Israel.

Then Bennett's company suffered a tragic accident, although the probable cause was less mysterious than those of the earlier disappearances. Tudor 5 G-AKBY, bringing rugby football supporters back from Dublin to a small airfield in Wales, crashed on final approach, and 75 passengers and five crew members were killed. It was known that the pilot had expressed unease about the shortness of the runway, and witnesses described what

appeared to be a stall as the aircraft was about to land.

Bennett continued to obtain contracts for the remaining Tudor. Flights to supply stores to the British troops in Korea were followed by freight services between Hamburg and Berlin.

In November 1951 he sold Fairflight to another entrepreneur who clearly shared his confidence in the Tudor. Freddie Laker had founded Air Charter Ltd in 1947, and conducted *ad hoc* operations from Croydon. By taking over Fairflight he inherited the contract to carry freight from Berlin. Recognising the great capacity of the Tudor, he bought all that remained on the market — four Tudor 1s, two Mk 3s and four Mk 4s. A very thorough conversion programme was carried out, including the installation of a huge freight door.

Renamed the Supertrader, the aircraft was granted a full C of A in February 1954, and the maximum all-up weight was increased to 83,600lb. In a test identical to that undertaken by the ARB in 1946, the aircraft was found to perform far better.

Laker's Supertraders were engaged in trooping to the Middle and Far East,

and a Colonial Coach service to Libya and Nigeria was also operated. In addition, freight services were flown to the Woomera rocket range in Australia for the British government. In every configuration the Supertraders performed extremely well, and were not withdrawn from service until 1959.

If BOAC had been involved in the Tudor's development from the outset, and if the two disasters over the western Atlantic had not taken place, could the Tudor have become a more successful airliner? One handicap was the failure to provide the aircraft with a tricycle undercarriage. In the wartime years, when he designed the airliner, Chadwick had given it the wings and undercarriage of the Lincoln, the Lancaster's successor. Four-engined airliners with tailwheels no longer featured in the products of the major American manufacturers.

At home, Vickers was the first to produce a turbine-powered airliner, the Viscount, and de Havilland led the world with the first pure-jet airliner, the Comet. A new era had been ushered in by the rapid advance of technology as a consequence of wartime priorities.

Below, Tudor 1 G-AGRQ in service with Air Charter as El Alamein. It had previously flown with BSAA as Freighter 1 Star Cressida.

