

Part 2: Setting up Operations in Foynes

Poem:

*For four years they came and went through cloudy skies and fair
And whether the night was dark or bright they landed here quite safe
To rest awhile at Boland's Meadow or over in sweet Adare,
Then away again they all would fly, we seldom knew to where.*

Narrator: Frank Buckley recalls his time working for BOAC.

Frank Buckley: Michael Finucane was the local harbour pilot. Now, I was young, I wasn't 18 at the time, and he said to me "Frank, I've a little job for you" he said. "I want you" he said, "to look after the wages" - I was fairly handy at the figures - "I want you to look after the wages of the men working on the boats."

I was thrilled with myself, I felt a very important guy. Naturally enough to be able to read Morse Code and Semaphore was a great asset. I was fairly lively at the time and I had a liking for the thing. So I became the Chief Operator of the Morse Code and Semaphore. And, during the daytime, when we'd no planes we might go up to the - do you know the monument? - And we'd signal to another place with Morse Code signals and, we'd a special lamp that would signal Morse Code and talk to one another.

What amazed the British people was the ordinary working man, who was a member of the boat crews, was able to communicate with those people.

The plane might come into Foynes - if she came in early - I remember one morning in particular, a plane came in with a kind of suddenness. It flew overhead the pier in Foynes. I flashed up to her 'Will I lay the flares?' And he said 'It's not worth my while, I will have daylight in 10 minutes time, I'll fly around'. So he flew around until he had daylight and he'd be able to land without any lights. Ah Christ, t'were great!

Narrator: It was Sean Lemass of the Irish Dept. of Industry and Commerce that first forwarded the notion of an airport in Ireland. With his blessing the wheels were put in motion to establish an airbase on the west coast.

Frank Buckley: In 1936 we set up in Foynes at the Mont Eagle Hotel below, where the [Foynes Aviation] Museum is now and in Foynes Island. Now Foynes Island was very important, because up on Foynes Island there was a radio station.

Interviewer: Was it a weather station or...?

Frank Buckley: Radio. The weather people would be in the mainland here, but the communications would be with here, the control tower and Foynes Island. Now Foynes Island - up on top of it, it had a complete view of any side of Foynes where it [the plane] could land; it had full control of it, you know?

Poem:

*Paddy Walshe he was a coxswain, young Denny Lane was too,
For years they sailed the Shannon, reliable men and true,
We also had the Buckleys, Frankie, John and Joe,
Bill Kirwan brought the percolator, good coffee for to brew.*

Frank Buckley: So then BOAC decided at one stage to get some of their own launches. So they brought special boats over from England and from Bangkok - in from Bangkok, if you don't mind! - as they'd flying boat bases already out there.

So they brought them into Foynes and I was made senior coxswain with Dennis Lane, another local boy here in Foynes. We went up to Dublin, and we took the full week coming from Dublin. Right down through the canals with the boats down to Foynes, staying in various places down along the way... down though the Shannon - Ardnacrusha.

There were 44 people on the launches alone - forty four! That was a colossal amount of people, and you had people driving... I was driving the passenger boats and the control launch. Then you had special engineering boats, bringing the mechanics in and out. Then you had the rough-and-tumble work to be done; that was another boat - putting tail ropes on the plane, because every time the plane was tested, testing her engines, she was tied by the front, but she had to be tailed behind as well. So that when the engines would start she couldn't move forward, because she'd keep drifting away otherwise.

The captain just wouldn't go out and start his engines, because as soon as he started the engine she was moving forward. So he had to have a tail hook. And there was a rope put from the tail hook onto a mooring buoy. He would check his engines - he'd check one engine at a time... then he might check two of them together and he might check the four of them full blast together, to make sure he was getting the maximum volume out of everything. And then, eventually, he would be ready. And all he had to do was pull a lever and the tail rope opened and dropped down into the water.

Interlude: Music: *Saoirse* by Seán Ó Riada

Narrator: The proving flights began in July 1936. However, the difficulty of the undertaking shouldn't be underestimated.

Dramatization:

Captain Harold Gray of Pan Am Clipper III waited for the all-clear at Gander Lake, New Foundland. He turned to his navigator William Massland and said: "Well, here goes number 85." Massland replied "What? You mean to tell me that there have been 85 transatlantic crossings?" His pilot said "Not at all. There have been 85 attempts. Only 10 have made it." Massland held out his hand and wished his captain luck.