

Flight Data

The suitcases swirl around the carousel and I keep my eyes peeled for mine: a khaki wheelie-bag that would be considered carry-on for a U.S. domestic flight, but not on Virgin Atlantic. Dozens of bags of similar size and shape glide by, and I reach for the wrong one twice. My mouth is dry and sticky from my overnight flight; the quick oral hygiene effort in the bathroom before passport control didn't help much. Finally my bag arrives, and I heave it over the ledge and flip up the handle. I stride with confidence to the left and straight through Customs, having made this trip umpteen times before.

But instead of heading for the Underground as I usually do, I pull a scrap of paper from my pocket and search for the Central Bus Station. I'm following directions e-mailed to me at my home the other side of the globe, trying to find the British Airways Museum at Heathrow Airport.

Who knew such a thing existed? I stumbled upon it on-line just three weeks ago. Open Tuesdays through Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. My flight from San Francisco happens to land at eleven on a Thursday. It's not that I'm some sort of weird aficionado so enthralled with air travel that I search out an aeronautic museum after ten hours on a plane. No, I'm a writer engaged in a crucial piece of research for my novel. Plus, if I make straight for my brother's house in Kent, I will be tempted to doze on the train. This mission will be the perfect antidote for jet lag. Stay awake, that's my mantra.

Outside, I re-check my instructions and scan the numbers on the approaching buses. Finally the 285 arrives and the khaki suitcase and I clamber aboard. I sit right behind the driver, a

burly West Indian who grunts in agreement when I ask him to announce my stop. I sink into my seat and fight off a wave of fatigue.

I know Heathrow is huge and I'm not surprised that I have to take a bus, but I'd expected to be shuttled off to another terminal. The guy e-mailed that the bus would be free, that all travel within the airport boundary is complimentary. I suppose I'm imagining something like the museum at SFO which is right inside the International Terminal. Instead, the bus seems to be circling away from the airport, on wide sweeping roundabouts, past plane hangars and an industrial estate. This circling continues for fifteen minutes or more. Perhaps the driver didn't understand me or has forgotten my destination. Where on earth am I going? I blink hard to keep my eyes from surrendering to sleep. I should have stopped for coffee at Terminal Three.

The bus jerks to a halt right opposite Hatton Cross Underground station.

"Over there, M'am," the driver says, turning to me and pointing down a smaller street leading away from the intersection.

We're right by the Tube station? Why wasn't I told to just get on the Underground? Seems like it would have been much simpler. But I thank the driver and lumber down the steps with my suitcase, which feels heavier each time I lift it. I cross the street, grateful for the *Look Right* signs painted on the curb.

The driver had pointed down a street called Viscount Way. Again I think I must be lost but then I spot it: a nondescript single storey red-brick building with a small plaque identifying it as the museum. The door is wide open. There's a glass case at the entrance, displaying vintage model planes and other paraphernalia, flanked by two full-size mannequins dressed in 1960's pilot and stewardess uniforms. But the place is deserted.

I'm writing a novel set in Europe in World War II. It's loosely based on my late mother's experience as a refugee from Czechoslovakia. I have a 20-year old audio recording of her telling me her story, but there're lots of gaps in the narrative, and because I like fiction and like making stuff up, I decided to turn her story into a novel instead of a biography. But I am trying to make it as historically accurate as possible. Easy in the age of the Internet. Just toggle from *Word* to *Firefox*, and you can Google anything you need. Would my character have had such a thing as a dry-cleaning receipt? Wikipedia has a complete history of dry cleaning. What did a primus stove look like in the 1940's? With five clicks, I find a photo. When did the air raids on England start up again in the last years of the war? What did the *All Clear* siren sound like? What was the weekly cheese ration? The answers all right there at my finger tips.

I was able to find some amazing stuff on-line. When I read about the Myra Hess lunch-time concerts at London's National Gallery, I knew I wanted to include one in the novel. Where were they held exactly? The National Gallery web site has that information, and provides a map of the gallery so I could describe my characters making their way to that section. What did Myra Hess look like? Not only did I find a photo of her, I hit the jackpot on *YouTube*: a grainy film clip of her actually performing at one of these concerts.

And then there was the army camp in Northern England. My mother had told me that her father and brother had escaped from occupied Czechoslovakia and eventually made their way to England where they joined the Free Czech Army. She went to visit them once in their camp somewhere in the north of England; that was all I knew. I found a web site on the Czechs in England during WWII: somewhat amateur in appearance, but with a wealth of information. It included full details of the camp – located in Cholmondeley Park, Cheshire – complete with photographs of the camp and grounds, and a list of all the soldiers. I found the names and ranks

of my grandfather and uncle. With a bit more digging, I found out that Chomondeley is pronounced *Chumley*. I had all I needed for that chapter.

But every now and then, my on-line research hit a wall. Each year on March 9, my mother would tell me that this was the anniversary of her arrival in England in 1940, and that she had flown to London from Paris, the first time she'd ever been in an airplane. But when I tried to find out what type of plane it would have been, I came upon this puzzling fact: everywhere I looked on-line, I was told that all civilian air travel between France and England came to halt with the outbreak of war in September 1939, and did not resume until after the liberation of Paris in 1944.

That was when I discovered the British Airways Museum at Heathrow Airport.

"Hello," I call out, edging my suitcase around the stewardess mannequin in her crisp navy uniform. "Anyone here?"

"Come in, come in. I'm in the back."

I peer into the dimly-lit interior, and see a figure crouched over a box on a counter.

"Mr. Davis?" I extend my hand and introduce myself. "I e-mailed you about the research I am doing..."

"Just take a look at this," he says without missing a beat. He's pulling papers and small objects out of the box. "Arrived this morning. Widow of a BOAC pilot found it in her attic."

"Ah." I nod politely.

"Oh my goodness!" He extracts a dog-eared paperback that looks like a technical guide. "The DC-7's flight manual."

He thumbs through it briefly and hands it to me. It has that mildew odor of an old book that has spent years in hiding. I take a peek at a few pages; it's incomprehensible to me.

“This is splendid,” he continues. He’s back rummaging through the box like a boy on Christmas morning.

When I’d stumbled upon the museum’s website, I’d clicked on the *Contact Us* tab and sent an e-mail with my questions about civilian flights in March 1940. All I’d received in response was a friendly message from the curator, telling me the hours that the museum was open and inviting me to come on by.

“Here’s a real collector’s item,” he says now, fishing out some new treasure, which he hands to me. I’m still holding the technical manual, so I place it on the counter and receive two small gold studs. It takes me a moment to identify them.

“Cuff links,” he chuckles. “You don’t see them much these days. That’s the Imperial Airways emblem. Marvelous. They merged with the original British Airways, of course, to form BOAC.”

“Oh. Yes.” I feel another wave of fatigue and dizziness wash over me, and I’m afraid I might faint. I make for a stool behind the counter.

He looks up. “I’m sorry, forgive me.” He pushes the box aside, wipes his hands against each other. His kind eyes sparkle under bushy eyebrows. “You had a particular question, I believe. You are researching – what was it again?”

He leads the way over to another section that is brighter, under large fluorescent lights. There are piles of storage boxes everywhere, and one wall is completely filled with a mammoth bookcase extending twelve feet towards the ceiling. He moves a box of files from a table and invites me to sit. I present my conundrum.

“Hmmm,” he says, rubbing his chin. “That is curious. I also would have said that civilian flights ended in September 1939.”

“There’s no way that my mother could have been wrong about that. The fact that she flew.” Perhaps he won’t believe me. “Or the date.” It’s hard to explain to an outsider how precise both my parents were about these sorts of details.

“Oh, I believe you.”

“After all, there was nothing much happening on the Western Front until May 1940,” I offer.

“Yes, that’s right. The phoney war.”

We look at each other. He nods. He knows his history; I’ve done my research.

A moment later, he jumps up and turns to survey his enormous bookcase, hands on hips. His tweed jacket has leather patches at the elbows.

“We’ll just have to get to the bottom of this, won’t we?”

He pulls down a large volume from a chest-high shelf, and starts flipping through the pages, grunting softly to himself. He shakes his head and snaps it shut, selects another, then another. He mutters something I don’t catch and heads for a filing cabinet in the corner. I notice the photographs mounted on the wall above the storage boxes, featuring various old aircraft.

“What sort of plane would have flown that route in 1940?” I ask.

He’s ferreting through files. “Either the Frobisher or the Ensign.”

Without looking up, he points to a display case behind me. There’s an impressive arrangement of a model of both the Armstrong Whitworth AW27 Ensign and the De Havilland DH19 Albatross Frobisher with their respective specifications and statistics and black and white photographs of the interior cabins. The windows are framed with cloth curtains suspended from dainty brass rods. Elegantly dressed passengers sip champagne from fluted glasses. I think of my

plastic tray on Virgin Atlantic. And the three-hundred economy class passengers scraping knees against seats, elbows tucked in tight.

“I know!” His shout from the filing cabinet startles me. I turn to see him marching back towards the bookcase, index finger pointed to the sky. “Bray will have it.”

He beams with joy as he maneuvers a ladder into position. “Winston Bray.” He scrambles up to the top shelf. “Here it is.” He hands it down to me. I feel compelled to steady the ladder as he descends. “The definitive history of BOAC.”

Back at the table, it doesn’t take him long to find it. A short passage entitled *Operations up to June 1940*. He passes it to me with delight spread over his face. “There you are.”

I read “*All services came to a halt initially, but on October 13 the Paris service restarted with Ensigns... and continued until June 11 1940, when they were withdrawn in the face of the German advance on Paris.*”

He’s back at the filing cabinet, extracting papers from the top drawer. “Here’s the timetable for the Paris-London route before the war.” He squints at the small font. “But it’s both Frobishers and Ensigns. Must have been a reduced service when flights resumed.”

He passes it to me: the Imperial Airways and British Airways Joint Service between Le Bourget and Croydon. The flight took about an hour and a half. I remember Croydon Airport from when I was a child; we never flew from there – we never flew anywhere – but I remember seeing the planes from the train. Croydon was on the London-Brighton line.

“Wait a minute.” He’s on the hunt again, this time at another set of drawers in the opposite corner. He pulls out a couple of large bound notebooks, ledgers of some sort. “These are the passenger manifests. Let’s see. 1939 is here. Where’s 1940?”

Passenger manifests? My heart pounds in my chest. I'm wide awake now. I can't believe we might find my mother's name on a passenger list.

But we don't. We pour over hand-written entries in neat cursive script: names such as Mr. and Mrs. Reginald Saint John Stevens, Miss Olivia Courtney-Bennett, the Rt. Hon Sir Archibald Sinclair. Only a dozen or so people for each flight; the planes were small. But there's nothing here after September 1939. Mr. Davis seems as disappointed as I am.

"Let's have a cup of tea, shall we?"

I can't suppress a light laugh. "That would be lovely."

He fills an electric kettle at a tiny sink in the rear, and reaches for two thick white mugs.

"Do you have many people coming in here?" I ask.

"Not too many. Next week we have the North Bedfordshire Vintage Aviation Club. They come once a year." He puts a tea bag in each mug. "Last month, I had a lady novelist. She wanted to know all about the routes to Singapore in the 1930's. That was interesting."

I sit drinking tea, while he uses a very basic copy machine to Xerox for me some of the black and white photographs of the interior of the Ensign, along with the timetable and the page from Bray's book. I'm thinking that I should get ready to leave, when he suddenly points his finger in the air again, and is off on another rummage through files.

"I can't believe I forgot about these," he says, extracting another bound volume. "The Annual Reports of Imperial Airways. They recorded passenger numbers each year. Here's 1940."

And there we do find it. No names, but on Saturday March 9 1940, an Imperial Airways Ensign AW27 left Paris Le Bourget at 10:30 a.m. bound for London with ten passengers on board. My mother was on that flight. That flight saved her life.

Google, Wikipedia, YouTube: indispensable. But a visit to the airport museum: priceless.