

Malta to Africa Airmail Developments in 1931-1932

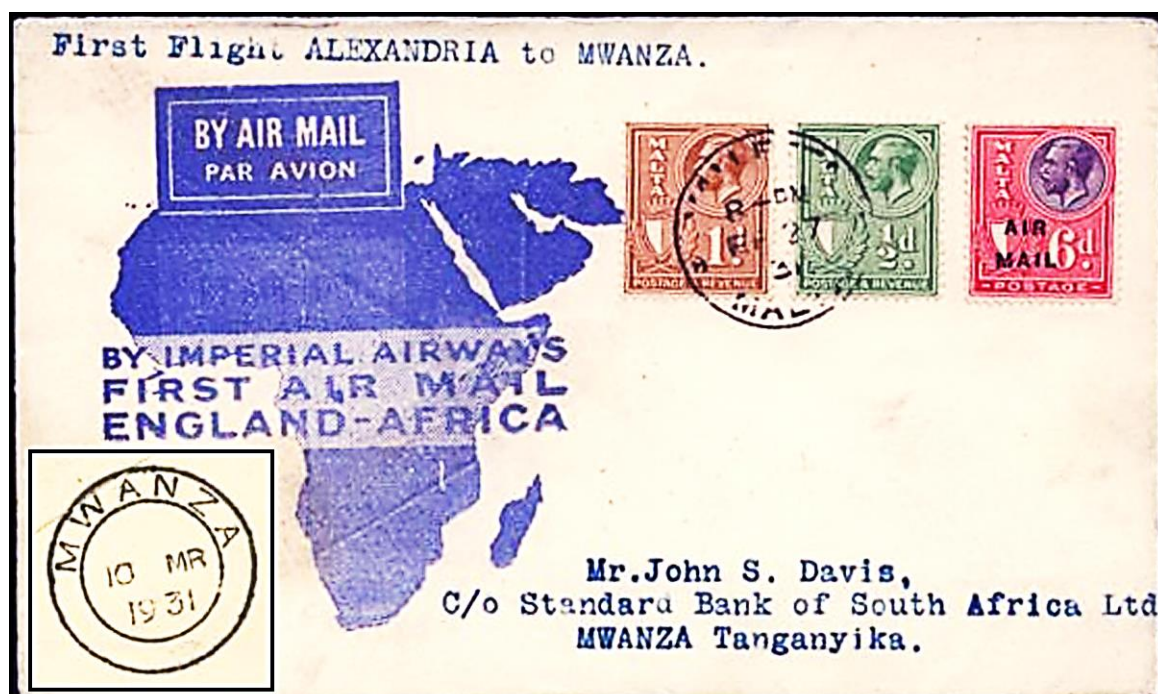
Alan Green

In 1931, Imperial Airways commenced regular air services between London (Croydon) and East Africa, which were extended within twelve months to South Africa. This colossal undertaking has been of interest to aviation historians and philatelists for many years, yet the subject of airmail sent from Malta to join these services still has some unresolved details. The topic was covered at a summary level in MSC Study Paper No.29 (2000), titled 'The Air Mails of Malta' and also in a later article by John Kilroe in Melita Vol.17 No.4. Both these publications are monochrome and either lack detail or contain inconsistencies with other research. This article updates these earlier publications and provides colour illustrations of the associated airmail covers.

The Inaugural Southbound African Service (flight AS1)

This flight departed Croydon Airport on 28 February 1931 and followed the route through Europe already established for the Indian airmail service. This route involved an air sector to Paris, thence by train to Athens, where the service transitioned to flying boats. Crossing the Mediterranean from Athens to Alexandria involved a refuelling stop at Mirabella (Crete), then transferring to the railway to Cairo, where the Indian and African services diverged. The new African route from Cairo to Mwanza, Tanganyika called at Assiut, Luxor, Aswan, Wadi Halfa, Kareima, Khartoum, Kosti, Malakal, Shambe, Juba, Butiaba, Port Bell (for Kampala) and Kisumu (for Nairobi), although the first southbound service omitted the stop at Butiaba. The first service arrived in Mwanza on the southern shore of Lake Victoria on 10 March 1931, only carrying mail south of Khartoum.

Between the wars, there was much interest in the developing air routes, and both collectors and dealers tried different combinations of departure point and destination for these new services. Accordingly, some covers are recorded from Malta, destined for the new service to Mwanza, even though the Malta GPO had not advertised any airmail service using this route, or published any associated airmail fees.



1931 (FE27) Special envelope for first African service sent from Malta to Mwanza. Note the 6d. Air Mail stamp is not cancelled by the Malta GPO and the 1½d. franking pays the surface rate. Backstamped in Port Said 3 Mar 31, Cairo 4 Mar 31 and Mwanza 10 Mar 31.

The above cover was possibly carried from Malta on P&O S.S. *Rajputana*, which left Marseille on 28 February 1931 bound for Yokohama, calling at Malta and Port Said en route. At Cairo, it appears the air mail 6d. stamp was accepted as the air fee and the cover put on to the first southbound African flight, departing Cairo on 5 March 1931. The Mwanza backstamp matches the arrival date of flight AS1.



1931 (FE27) Special envelope for first African service addressed to South Africa. In this case, the 6d. Air Mail stamp has been defaced with blue crayon. Backstamped Alice 24 Mar 31.

There is no evidence that this cover to South Africa was carried on the first African air service. It is more likely that the cover was despatched to London and then to Cape Town on the weekly Union Castle Mail Service, departing Southampton on Friday, 5 March. The sixteen and a half day voyage ended in Cape Town around 21 March, which is consistent with the Alice backstamp of 24 Mar 31. Analysing these two covers and considering the Maltese postal clerk, he would have no information about any air services through Africa. Accordingly, he would probably despatch the Mwanza cover to Egypt as open mail (à découvert) for the Egyptian PO to forward to the destination. For South Africa, a sea route via London as surface mail was possibly the only option available to him.

Revised Flight Routing through Europe from May 1931

During 1931, a new agreement was reached with the Italian authorities allowing Imperial Airways to re-start flights using Italian locations. The new IA timetable issued on 16 May 1931 shows the route between London and Athens as London-Paris-Basle by air, by train through the Alps to Genoa, and then by flying boat via Naples and Corfu to Athens. From Athens, the route to Mwanza was basically unchanged. The new route across the Mediterranean coincided with the delivery to Imperial Airways of Short S.17 Kent flying boats, with increased range and capacity than the Calcuttas used hitherto.

In June 1931, the Malta GPO announced its intentions to offer a service to Africa utilising the Alexandria to Mwanza section of the Imperial Airways route. On 17 June 1931, Government Notice No.230 announced air fees to various destinations, including these in Africa:

Sudan	4d.) For every ½ oz. or fraction thereof.
Belgian Congo (via Juba)	7d.) Air mail fees may be paid in ordinary
Kenya, Uganda & Tanganyika	7d.) postage stamps.

This was followed by a postal notice dated 27th June 1931 announcing *...as from Friday 3rd July, air mails will be made up at this office for Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika and the North East Belgian Congo for transmission by the Egypt-Mwanza air mail service. Such mails will be closed at this office*

on Fridays at 8 p.m. for despatch to Egypt via Syracuse. This notice repeated the air mail fees to African destinations already promulgated on 17 June.

It is noteworthy that the official notice states the connection to the IA service would occur in Egypt and not in Italy, despite the recent introduction of an air service between Malta and Naples via Syracuse. It would appear an agreement was in place co-ordinating the Friday sailings of the *Knight of Malta* to Syracuse with the Saturday departure of Sitmar's weekly Grand Express service between Syracuse and Alexandria. This was operated by the steamers *Ausonia* and *Esperia*, taking two days for the voyage. It is believed this route was used for transmission of mail from Malta for the Egypt-Mwanza air service.



1931 (JY3) Airmail cover to Belgian Congo franked 9½d. (7d. air fee + 2½d. foreign postage) on the first Malta acceptance for the Egypt-Mwanza air service. Offloaded at Juba on 10 July and backstamped Aba 11.7.31, Buta 18.7.31, Stanleyville 22.7.31 and Boma 11.8.31

The above cover confirms the mail from Malta arrived at Alexandria in time to connect with IA flight AS19 that departed Cairo on 7.7.31 with AW.156 Argosy I *City of Wellington* G-EBOZ in charge. This flight called at Assiut 7.7, Wadi Halfa 7.7, Khartoum 9.7 (after a delay of one day). From Khartoum, Short S.8 Calcutta *City of Athens* G-EBVH took the mail, calling at Juba 10.7, Kampala 11.7, Kisumu 11.7 and arrived at Mwanza on 12.7.

Other destinations with mail from Malta on this first acceptance include:-

- Khartoum, Sudan – backstamped 9.VII.31
- Entebbe, Uganda – backstamped Kampala 11 JY 31
- Lira, Uganda – backstamped Kampala 11 JY 31
- Nairobi, Kenya – backstamped Kisumu 11 JY 31

However, a mystery now emerges as the mail from Malta to Mwanza and surface destinations beyond Mwanza e.g. Dar-es-Salaam and South Africa, was backstamped at Mwanza on 20 JY 31. This correlates with the arrival on IA flight AS20 at Mwanza on Sunday 19.7, when the local post office was probably closed, resulting in the mail bearing backstamps of the following day.



1931 (JY3) Airmail cover to Tanganyika franked 8½d. (7d. air fee + 1½d. Empire postage) on the first Malta acceptance for the Egypt-Mwanza air service. Delayed at some point, arriving at Mwanza on 20 JY 1931, probably on the next IA flight AS20.

All examples seen during this research that are either addressed to Mwanza, or to destinations where Mwanza was the air terminal, with onward transmission by surface, have Mwanza backstamps dated 20 JY 1931. Destinations beyond Mwanza include Dar-es-Salaam, Johannesburg and Pietermaritzburg. One example seen to Johannesburg was registered and this usefully has an additional backstamp of Alexandria dated 6 JL 31. This confirms the mail from Malta reached Alexandria in time connect with flight AS19 and also supports the likelihood that Sitmar were used to convey the mail from Syracuse.



1931 (JY3) Registered cover to Johannesburg, showing Alexandria and Mwanza datestamps

Although these flights were popular with collectors, it is possible that the mail quantity from Malta to the various destinations only warranted a single mail bag and was sent in bundles for each destination as open mail (à découvert) to be sorted at Alexandria. What happened next is open to speculation, but could have been at Alexandria, with the bundle for Mwanza put in a wrong mailbag on AS19, or if it was in its own mailbag, either not loaded on to AS19, or removed in error at one of the en-route stops.

Revised Flight Routing through Europe from October 1931

On 17 October 1931, Imperial Airways changed the European route again, and from Paris, a longer rail journey to Brindisi took place of the air/rail route via Basle and Genoa. From Brindisi, the sector to Athens and Alexandria was by air, with the African route to Mwanza unchanged. The Indian and African routes now diverged at Athens, and it is likely that the Malta GPO commenced sending airmail for African and Indian destinations via Brindisi from around this time.

With relatively short notice, Imperial Airways announced that their regular East African service leaving Croydon on 9 December 1931 (flight AS41) would be experimentally extended to Cape Town to carry Christmas mails to South Africa. Malta GPO did not announce any changes ahead of this flight, nor advise any associated air fees. Notwithstanding, collectors and dealers attempted to send airmail covers from Malta through to South Africa, aimed at this flight.



1931 (DE5) Special 'Springbok' envelope sent from Malta to Cape Town, franked 1s. An instructional marking was applied, using the BY AIR TO ROME handstamp manually altered to **Mwanza**. The cover is backstamped Brindisi 10.12.31, Mwanza 18 DE 1931, Dar-es-Salaam 23 DE 1931 and Cape Town 2 JAN 32

Analysing the above cover, Malta GPO had only gazetted the African airmail service as far as Mwanza, with transmission to any destinations beyond Mwanza by surface. The backstamps show that the cover ended its air sector at Mwanza and was transferred to the two day rail journey to Dar-es-Salaam via Tabora. From Dar-es-Salaam by sea to South Africa, arriving in Cape Town after New Year.



1931 (DE5) Backstamps on the reverse of the 'Springbok' envelope

An interesting feature of the arrangements for the extended AS41 service involved transfer of the airmail for South Africa to landplane at Kisumu, leaving the mail for Mwanza from Malta, Italy and

Egypt on board the flying boat which then continued across Lake Victoria to its destination, Mwanza. At Mwanza, the only option was to send the mail by surface onwards to South Africa.

At the same time, some enterprising individuals had sent cards and covers from Malta to London, to connect with the Christmas airmail flight (AS41) there. With dual-franking of Maltese and GB stamps, these appear to have been accepted in London and despatched by air to South Africa, arriving before Christmas.



1931 (DE2) Dual-franked cover from Malta to South Africa via London, with 3½d. in Maltese stamps and 1s. in GB stamps, interestingly cancelled in Valletta. The Maltese franking was the correct rate for carriage by air up to Rome, although there are no markings to confirm this. The only backstamps are Johannesburg 21DEC31 at 3.30AM and Cape Town on 21DEC31 at 8.00p.m. These confirm the cover was carried by flight AS41 from London to South Africa.

In January 1932, Imperial Airways extended their African service to Cape Town on a permanent basis. The first regular service departed Croydon on 20 January 1932 (flight AS47), arriving in Cape Town on 2 February 1932. Malta GPO had anticipated this extension to South Africa, but were somewhat tardy in promulgating the associated air fees. Malta Government Notice No.32 dated 29 January 1932 advised various air fees including the following to Africa, replacing the earlier Notice No.230:

Alexandria	3d.)
Cairo and Upper Egypt	4d.) Air fees per ½ oz.,
Sudan	8d.) in addition to normal postage.
Kenya, Uganda & Tanganyika	1s.1d.)
Belgian Congo (via Juba)	1s.1d.) For transmission from Brindisi.
Northern & Southern Rhodesia	1s.3d.)
South Africa	1s.6d.)

Collectors and dealers were one step ahead of the Malta GPO and various special covers were prepared for this first permanent service. A feature of those sent from Malta is the additional franking that was applied. It would appear that although the official notice had not been issued, Malta GPO already knew the airmail fees that would apply. Most covers for this service from Malta were initially franked on 16 JAN 1932, and returned to the senders for additional air fees, the stamps being cancelled on 18 JAN.



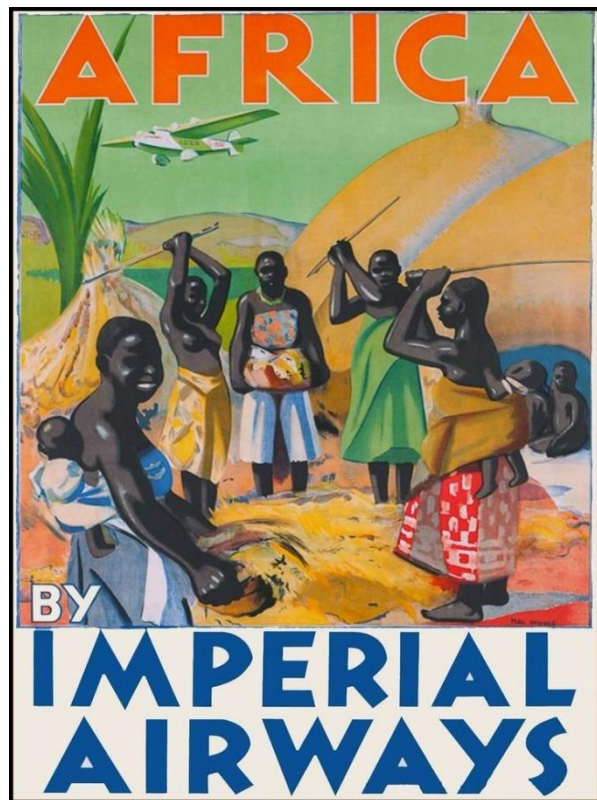
1932 (JA16) Special 'Speedbirds' cover from Malta to South Africa on the first official acceptance for airmail from Malta to locations in Southern Africa. Note the initial 1s.1d. franking cancelled 16 JAN 1932, augmented by 6½d. cancelled 18 JAN 1932 for the 1s.6d. air fee. Backstamped Brindisi 22.1.32, Alexandria 23JA32 and Cape Town 2 FEB 32.

Possibly mindful of the 1931 Christmas flight, some covers were sent via London to connect there with flight AS47. In the event, those sent direct from Malta arrived in Cape Town at the same time.



1932 (JA15) Airmail cover from Malta to South Africa via London with dual franking. The GB stamps were cancelled 19 JA 32 and connected with flight AS47. Backstamped Cape Town 2 FEB 32.

The IA route to South Africa remained substantially unchanged until 1937, when the introduction of new C-class flying boats replaced the overland route south of Kisumu with an East Coastal route to Durban. In the meantime, Imperial Airways shifted its focus to extending the Indian route to Australia.



Examples of the many publicity posters produced by Imperial Airways. The map of Africa shows the IA route used between 1932 and 1937.

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- Intercontinental Airmails Vol.3 Africa (E. Proud 2008)
- MSC Forum question (2022) regarding delay to mail to Mwanza in July 1931

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