

# Frustrated Promise



As Europe slid into war, de Havilland was taking airliner design to new heights - **Nick Cameron** explains

Until 1937 de Havilland airliner types could be described cautious and uninspiring.

These words, however, could not be applied to the two types developed prior to the outbreak of World War Two. Inspiration for the first came not from the DH.66 Hercules (see page 56) but from the DH.71 Tiger Moth trials machine (p50), the DH.77 fighter prototype (p62) and above all from the DH.88 Comet (p66).

The concept was a 200mph (321km/h) *transatlantic* range mailplane that could be developed into a people-carrier. It would be powered by four specially-developed 525hp (391kW) Gipsy Twelves. In January 1936, the Air Ministry backed DH designer Arthur Hagg to the tune of underwriting two prototypes and Imperial Airways later chipped in with an order for five airliner versions.

The DH.91 Albatross was created from wooden stressed skin, made by laminating ply with balsa. By this time technology had moved on and wood was a thing of the past for airliners, but this sort of construction technique could build a very fast, efficiently produced bomber or fighter without using too many strategic resources. The industrialisation for the as yet pipedream Mosquito was being laid down.

The prototype took to the skies on May 20, 1937, and the first airliner version, G-AFDI *Frobisher*, was delivered to Croydon in October 1938. In June 1939 the last of the breed was issued to service. Impressed into wartime service, all of these

beauties had either crashed, been bombed or scrapped by the autumn of 1943.

## American influence

Designer R E Bishop had different influences for his DH.95 Flamingo. He turned to the Douglas Commercials, the DC-2 that had nearly taken the DH.88 Comet's glory in the MacRobertson race to Australia of October 1934 and the DST (later DC-3) that first flew on December 17, 1935.

Of all-metal, stressed skin construction and powered by a pair of 890hp (663kW) Bristol Perseus XIIC radials, what the Flamingo lacked in the sheer style of the Albatross it more than made up for in potential. Geoffrey de Havilland JNR piloted the prototype on its maiden flight on December 22, 1938.

A trickle of orders had been

received and doubtless there would have been more, but for circumstances. In the end 16 were completed, seeing use with the King's Flight, ferrying Churchill about and with 'comms' specialist 24 Squadron (the latter the subject of next month's *The Way We Were*). An order for 30 of a dedicated troop-carrying variant, the Hertfordshire, was axed.

The fleet performed well during the war, but only one was resurrected in peacetime. Grounded in 1949 at Redhill, G-AFYH lived on until scrapped as late as 1954.

The so-called Flamingo II with a very Mosquito-like single fin was proposed for the Brabazon Committee, which sat from 1942. But by 1945 de Havilland was off in another direction all together; the company was about to pioneer the jetliner. ●

**Above**  
The first Albatross, E.2 (later G-AEUV) showing the early format of the tail, which was cleaned up to a classic twin-fin format. *KEC*



**Left**  
The prototype Flamingo during airline demonstrations at Croydon in early 1939. *KEC*