

Poole Flying Boats Celebration (Charity No.1123274)

PFBC Archive: *Our Charity is committed to developing & maintaining its Public-Access Archive... For the purpose of this website a brief selection of items together with information have been provided where references in blue indicate further material is available.* Á

Part Twenty-one... LVE: 'Love Makes the World Go Around'... VP-LVE Southern Cross © PFBC
(*A Flying Boat from Poole Harbour Circumnavigates the World in almost 30 Years*)

As **Bob Kent** (HLM ~ a former pleasure boat Skipper) recalled in late August 1976, the last Flying Boat to access Poole Harbour, skilfully alighted in the stretch of open water between Brownsea Island and the neck of the Wareham Channel.

Arrival of a **Sandringham 4 (Dominion /Tasman Class)** Flying Boat registered as **VP-LVE** with the name **Southern Cross** from the base of the **Antilles Air Boats Inc.** at Saint Croix (the US Virgin Islands) within the Caribbean after being flown *via* Puerto Rico, Boston, Gander Lake (Newfoundland) and Killaloe - near to Lough Derg (in Ireland), to **Poole Harbour**, caused a great deal of excitement in reviving many memories of Poole's Flying Boat History, and also some controversy.

After alighting at Foynes, throughout the remainder of July + into August, trips for tourists were arranged from Killaloe. On the 19th. **Southern Cross** visited Belfast to mark the place of the Conversion to a Sandringham in the Summer of 1947.

At Poole on Monday 23rd. the summer season in the resort was still in full swing during a protracted spell of hot weather which just about continued throughout the week that **Southern Cross** was here, to ensure a series of flights as excursions, whilst the Harbour was crowded with its multitude of cabin cruisers, speedboats, canoes, yachts & dinghies, and the like, let alone the commercial coastal shipping & the military craft of the **Royal Marines/SBS** at the former **RAF Hamworthy**. Amidst this crowded scene, especially with many visitors to **Poole Quay** staring admiringly at **Southern Cross** at anchor, a boat left the quayside, then motored out to the Flying Boat and manoeuvred alongside to collect a delegation of VIPs... Such a scene had not taken place since the mid-1950s when a dozen aircraft were brought to Poole Harbour to be moored off Ham foreshore and stored at Hamworthy either at the former **RAF Hamworthy - Lake**, or on the shore at **Lower Ham**. These had been brokered for purchase as with **St. George**, **Southampton** and **Singapore**, but the majority were dismantled.

Those in the delegation were disembarked at Custom House Steps and directed to a meeting with Poole's Harbourmaster and other representatives of the port authorities, where it was affirmed that **Southern Cross** had to relocate outside of the harbour waters to a relatively sheltered stretch of Studland Bay interestingly described at the time as **Studland Seadrome**.

It is reckoned that the owner of **Antilles Air Boats Inc.** and in command of **Southern Cross** on this Transatlantic venture, **Captain Charles Blair** would have preferred to moor within the confines of the harbour, and to operate from **Poole Quay**! Poole's Harbourmaster Capt. Allinson in advance of the arrival had arranged for the laying of a runway in Studland Bay as advised of the needs of **Southern Cross** by **Michael Coghlan** who had organised the visit and the series of excursions, but choppy waters had mitigated alighting there at first. Soon quieter conditions then allowed **Southern Cross** to relocate -so that the first of a series of 9 excursions over the next three days could begin with a flight for VIP guests & the media.



Photograph: AMEX Vought-Sikorsky VS-44 NC41882 Exeter



Photograph: VP-LVE Southern Cross moored in Studland Bay

Captain Blair had a pedigree in aviation which extended from his enlistment as a naval aviator in the US Naval Reserves having first flown solo at the age of 19 when studying for his degree in mechanical engineering at the Univ. of Vermont. By 1940 he had become suitably qualified /experienced enough to train pilots for **American Export Airlines** (aka Am Ex). In WW2 he had been with the Naval Air Transport Service + Air Transport Command, and a test pilot for various aircraft including Grumman types and the awe-inspiring, giant **Martin Mars**, the world's largest Flying Boat flown operationally. Then with the Vought-Sikorsky VS-44 **NC41882 Exeter** of AmEx ops under temporary licence /navy contract to Lisbon, extended to Foynes, **Capt. Blair** flew to Poole on 22nd. May 1944 for an encounter of barrage balloons & defence stakes. Within this impressive repertoire there was the first non-stop wintertime transatlantic flight in 1943 + 5 record crossings.

When [PanAm](#) had subsumed the flying ops of AmEx, [Captain Blair](#) principally piloted its growing range of Airliners on Transatlantic Routes but achieved national acclaim when he became the first to fly solo over the North Pole (in a fighter), and acted as a consultant for NASA considering parameters of the planning programme for supersonic transport aircraft. He captained Boeing 707s of PanAm during their period of dominance in the 1960s - revolutionising travel in the jet age. In advance of his retirement aged sixty in 1969, he had set up the exciting new venture of [Antilles Air Boats Inc.](#) in 1964 operating from St. Croix - US Virgin Islands, with a fleet of 25 amphibians inc. Grumman Goose, Mallards & Super Cats, as well as the [Sandringham Southern Cross](#) and also a [Sunderland MkV](#) brought up to Sandringham standards as [Islander](#).

As a venture the ops of [Antilles Air Boats Inc.](#) confirmed that [Capt. Blair](#) deeply held a longterm passion for Flying Boats which frequently involved him taking command of various aircraft within his fleet to fulfil his enthusiasm and ambitions. This passion was shared by Irish-borne, Hollywood film-star [Maureen O'Hara](#) who following a romance with [Capt. Blair](#) *oft in the media-glare*, married him on 12th. March 1968 - with the couple enjoying life together for 10 wonderful years! She had starred in classic films inc. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Sitting Pretty*, *The Quiet Man*, *The Parent Trap* etc., alongside leading men eg *Tyrone Power*, *Rex Harrison*, *James Stewart*, *Henry Fonda*, *John Wayne* & *Sir Alec Guinness*. Although she has retained her Irish citizenship, in 1946 [Maureen O'Hara](#) had become the first naturalized citizen of the US to be officially recognised from Ireland...and has shared time between homes in the USA, Virgin Is and Glengariff - Eire. So, the couple tried to combine their range of aircraft with journeying between places for which they had great affection; a reason for travelling by their Flying Boat [Southern Cross](#) from the Caribbean, Transatlantic to Foynes, and on to Poole.



Harry H. Pusey Coll.

© PFBC



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Photo: 'Tis Herself' ~ Maureen O'Hara & Capt. Charles Blair

1970s Hols Sketch: Bantry Bay towards Glengariff + Garnish Is.

This leg concluded a far longer journey for the aircraft spanning 29 years, which commenced on the 15th. October 1947 as newly commissioned Royal Mail Aircraft (RMA) [Auckland](#) left Poole for New Zealand with Capt. Rose in command.

Originally constructed in 1943 as a Sunderland MkIII [JM715](#) at Rochester by Short Bros. this Flying Boat had then been stored at [RAF Wig Bay - Stranraer](#), held in reserve for the wartime trials of air-borne transporting of midget submarines known as *chariots* with intention of attacking the battleship Tirpitz: A project which was never enacted - as certainly not feasible due to the weight factor of the proposed cargo...although Tirpitz was damaged by chariots towed by submarines! Under the auspices of the Marine Aircraft Experimental Establishment (MAEE) which had relocated from Felixstowe to Helensburgh - Scotland, there had been six Sunderlands allocated in this top-secret project inc. [JM713](#), [JM714](#) + [JM715](#).

(ref. 'Chariot Project' by [Capt. Vic Hodgkinson DFC](#), in "Beachcomber" - the Story of a Sandringham: p23-24...signed copy 1992)

In April 1945, [JM715](#) was removed by Scottish Aviation on behalf of Saunders-Roe to the Flying Boat Modification Unit [57 FBMU](#) at Greenock for upgrade to a [Sunderland MkV](#), which was completed during July, and prepared for collection. However, this upgraded Flying Boat was returned to [Wig Bay](#) on the 3rd. August just 12 days before *Victory over Japan*.

Thereafter, [JM715](#) was stored for a further 20 months - until deemed 'Surplus to Requirements' of the [Ministry of Supply](#), at which juncture arrangements were made to deliver [JM715](#) from [Wig Bay](#) to Shorts at Belfast by taxiing 62 kilometres. The reason was that it was not considered safe to fly (or tow) Flying Boats which had been stored for a prolonged period. At Belfast some aircraft brought across the Irish Sea were dismantled for spare parts, but this fate did not await [JM715](#)...

Transfer of [JM715](#) to Shorts was on 30th. April 1947 where civilianised conversion began in removing the gun turrets etc., streamlining of the aircraft's bow & tail sections, fitting larger windows for better viewing also with curved windscreens, replacing the four engines, and then fitting out accommodation between two decks to provide seating for thirty passengers. Designated as a Sandringham Mark IV, Dominion (- later Tasman) Class, with trials [JM715](#) was flown to Poole Harbour as final preparations before undertaking the delivery flight to New Zealand with Captain H.J. 'Tommy' Rose in command.

With registration on the list of the UK Ministry of Transport & Civil Aviation, transfer next would be to the NZ register. This was one of a quartet of converted former Sunderlands destined for Tasman Empire Airways Ltd. (TEAL) Auckland:~ [ML761](#) as [ZK-AMB Tasman](#), [NJ255](#) as [ZK-AMD Australia](#), [NJ179](#) as [ZK-AME New Zealand](#) + [JM715](#) as [ZK-AMH Auckland](#), to replace Empire C-Class S.30 Flying Boats: [ZK-AMA Aotearoa](#) + [ZK-AMC Awarua](#) of TEAL which were being retired.

Three of the quartet had been delivered in 1946: *ZK-AMD* on 5th. Aug., *ZK-AME* on 4th. Sept. and *ZK-AMB* on 17th. Oct., whilst the prospected delivery of *ZK-AMH Auckland* in the following year was indicative of an upturn in travel by Flying Boat immediately postwar between New Zealand and Australia, following on from restoration of a through service from *Poole to Rose Bay* - Sydney as the *Kangaroo Route* surveyed in Feb. 1946 & inaugurated by *G-AGJM Hythe* on 12th. May.

[Furthermore in 1947 a quartet of Sunderland Mk.III's with the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) were civilianised as *ZK-AMF*, *ZK-AMG*, *ZK-AMJ* + *ZK-AMK*, with NZ's National Airways Corp., for service between Auckland and Fiji: *ML792-5* registered with the RNZAF *NZ4101-4*, then becoming *Tainui*, *Tokomaru*, *Mataatua* and *Takitimu* respectively. In effect though, *ZK-AMK Takitimu* replaced *ZK-AMF Tainui*, which had been returned to RNZAF due to malfunctions. The route was passed to TEAL's aircraft on 6th. June 1950, and the 3 remaining converted Sunderlands were withdrawn.]

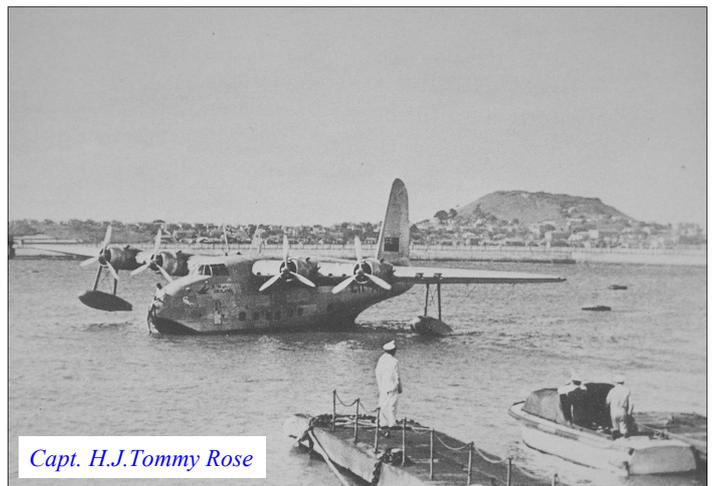
Departing Poole on 15th. October 1947 to arrive at New Zealand's *Mechanics Bay* - Auckland 14 days later on the 28th., *Capt. Tommy Rose* flew *JM715* to Étang de Berre by *Marignane* - Marseilles (*site of the first flight by Fabre's seaplane*), then to *Augusta* - Sicily, via *Rod-el-Farag* on the R.Nile near Cairo, *Bahrain*, *Karachi*, *Hooghly River* - Calcutta, *Rangoon*, *Bangkok*, *Singapore*, next to *Sourabaya* - Java (Indonesia), reaching Australia at *Darwin* (NT), on to *Bowen* (Queensland) and to *Rose Bay* - Sydney, before arriving at Auckland...and in doing so completed over eighty-seven hours flying time !



JM715 on Trials between Belfast and Poole

Yvonne Glover Coll.

© PFBC



Capt. H.J.Tommy Rose

Photo: *JM715* presented by Yvonne Glover (HLM) to PFBC

Photo: *ZK-AMH Auckland* arrives Mechanics Bay from Poole

Following this successful delivery, the next day on the 29th. *JM715* was formally leased to TEAL as *ZK-AMH Auckland*, entering service after maintenance, then operating its first run between *Mechanics Bay* and *Rose Bay* on 7th. November ! However, in a little over 100 days problems emerged with over-heating of the US-manufactured Pratt & Witney Engines that in various types of aircraft had proved to be reliable, but which caused *ZK-AMH* to be withdrawn on 17th. February. The engine problems were rectified which permitted resumption of duties from the 17th. June 1948 until December 1949. TEAL considered that some of the difficulties remained, and so arranged for replacement of the quartet of Sandringhams with four larger, more powerful *Solent 4 FBs* specially constructed at *Shorts* Belfast, augmented by an *ex-BOAC Solent 3*. [See the Archive Section of PFBC's Website ~ Part Twelve: A Compelling Swansong for the Flying Boats... 'Aquila, Artop & TEAL']

Accordingly, *ZK-AMH Auckland* was stored at *RNZAF Hobsonville* - Auckland, (so named after Captain William Hobson, New Zealand's first Lieutenant Governor), where the FB remained whilst being put up for sale/disposal through to 1950. Prior to being sold to *Barrier Reef Airways Ltd.*, *ZK-AMH Auckland* was ferried to Brisbane with Captain S. Middlemiss on the 27th. April 1950 with the sale concluded the next day after safe delivery, and reregistered *VH-BRC Coral Clipper*; joining *ZK-AME New Zealand* as *VH-BRD Capricorn*, before this Sandringham was further renamed as *Princess of Cairns*.

Meanwhile the other Sandringhams *ZK-AMB* + *ZK-AMD* went to Qantas as *VH-EBW Tasman* + *VH-EBX Pacific Chieftain*. In just over a year *VH-EBW Tasman* was damaged beyond repair after sinking at Vila - New Hebrides on 10th. June 1951, whereas *VH-EBX Pacific Chieftain* was operative until 3rd. July 1963 and during 1954 featured significantly in this history.

Coral Clipper re-entered service on 22nd. May 1950 following an increase in capacity to carrying 41 passengers, but ops were ended again in November and the future seemed uncertain including storage at Colmslie - Brisbane until Sept. 1952. However, overheating problems with the Pratt & Witney Engines had been finally resolved by modifying the carburettors. During this *VH-BRD Princess of Cairns* operated twice weekly between Brisbane and Cairns via Townsville + with calls at three of Queensland's islands: Daydream, South Molle & Lindeman, and eventually adding a fourth of Hayman Island. However, on 10th. Sept. 1952 *Princess of Cairns* whilst moored in Hamilton Reach - Brisbane was struck by a ship & sank. The hull which was salvaged for a commercial venture as a night club also sadly sank whilst being towed to Coolangatta.

As a stopgap measure before *VH-BRC Coral Clipper* could be taken out of storage & made serviceable as a replacement, *VH-AKP Tahiti Star* was chartered from *Trans Oceanic Airways* (TAO), before passing to *Ansett Flying Boat Services*... After 7 weeks since the sinking of *Princess of Cairns*, following a refit *Coral Clipper* left Brisbane for trials at Sydney and was at last ready for service, but was finished in the colours/livery of a new owner *Ansett Airways* and with a new name.

For *Coral Clipper* had gone through yet another change of owner & name to famously become *VH-BRC Beachcomber* !



Unattributed Source



© Ian Woodford Coll.

Photo: *Coral Clipper* when operated by Barrier Reef Airways

Beachcomber joined by *Pacific Chieftain* in Ansett's new livery

As *Beachcomber*, *VH-BRC* was re-commissioned on 21st. December 1952, and re-entered service on the 27th. December Rose Bay - Sydney to Brisbane, then also chartered to TAO for the lucrative tourist route Rose Bay to Lord Howe Island, and during March 1953 became the last FB to operate out of Hamilton Reach - Brisbane before switching to Redland Bay. There were also various charter flights about Australia & the Pacific, including round-trips to New Zealand destinations.

1953 was a key year, for *Ansett Airways* (which had already absorbed *Barrier Reef Airways Ltd.* almost 2 years earlier), merged with *Trans Oceanic Airways* to become *Ansett Flying Boat Services* - Australia's largest privately-owned airline. With *VH-BRC Beachcomber* and a pair of Catalinas, as well as the *Pacific Chieftain* (reregistered as *VH-BRE*) purchased from Qantas, *Ansett Flying Boat Services* then became synonymous with the Flying Boat Base and facilities at *Rose Bay*. *VH-AKP Tahiti Star* was also purchased by Ansett in May but only operated for a further year in retaining TAO's livery.

[Ansett's pair of Cats VH-BRA + VH-BRB operated for barely a year on charter flights... In October 1959 an amphibious PBY-5A was acquired from the USA, and as VH-BRI operated to Hayman Is. until July 1962 when landing heavily The Golden Islander sank! Ref. 'Consolidated PBY Catalina - The Peacetime Record' by David Legg, 2001]

The service in travelling 480 nautical miles to *Lord Howe Island* was subsidised by the Australian Govt., with fuel having to be carried on board for the return leg. The island despite its tropical storms became an iconic venue for honeymooners. Over the next 2 decades Ansett Flying Boat flights to the island became increasingly popular with tourists & newly-weds.

Following a period of various charters inc. to TEAL, on 3rd. July 1963 *VH-BRE Pacific Chieftain* when at *Lord Howe Is.* whilst *en route* to Polynesia on a charter flight, succumbed to a storm breaking the moorings, and resulted in a write-off! To maintain *ops* on this popular route a replacement was required, but no Sandringham or comparable type was available. A likely candidate was RNZAF *NZ4108 (ML814)* which had been delivered to *Mechanics Bay* from *RAF Wig Bay* in 1953. This *Sunderland Mk.V* was purchased by Ansett and then converted to near Sandringham standard to carry 42 passengers with the work being undertaken at the FB Base at *Rose Bay*. The new identification was designated as *VH-BRF Islander*, which looked resplendent in the Ansett livery, entering service on 9th. October 1964 from *Rose Bay to Lord Howe Island*.

Besides *ops* to *Lord Howe Is.*, *Beachcomber* + *Islander* were chartered for flights to L.Eucumbene, Hayman Is. & Tahiti. *Beachcomber* operated the final passenger scheduled service by Flying Boat to *Lord Howe Island* on the 31st. May 1974 from *Rose Bay*, which was essentially the end of an era as a landing strip had been installed the island for light aircraft... With the loss of this route *Ansett Flying Boat Services* was wound-up and the two Flying Boats sold to *Antilles Air Boats*.

Both aircraft were to retain their beautifully designed livery - whilst changing the house flag /tail fin logo from Ansett's (approx. to something similar to Delta) to *Antilles Air Boats*' sea eagle, and the airline's title painted along the fuselage. On 25th. September, *Islander* renamed as *Excalibur VIII* (in accordance with the tradition of fleet's personalised aircraft) with the registration *N158J*, departed *Rose Bay* and flew *via* US Samoa, and Honolulu - Hawaii, to America's West Coast arriving at Los Angeles, before heading on to San Juan - Puerto Rico, and eventually to St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands with *Captain Blair* in command.

Just 2 months later he returned to Sydney, and collected *VH-BRC Beachcomber* which had been undergoing repairs after damage incurred in a storm - when chartered for the purpose of surveying the impact of the airstrip on *Lord Howe Island*.

Designated as *N158C Southern Star* the name was changed whilst still inside the hangar at *Rose Bay* to *Southern Cross*: This was significant to Australia's History as the name of the aircraft of pioneering aviator *Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, who flew his monoplane for the first Transpacific flight to Australia - and its re-use caused a few eyebrows to be raised !

As *N158C Southern Cross* left *Rose Bay* on 28th. Nov., there was 'closure' of the splendour of Australia's Flying Boats plying their services from *Sydney Harbour* which had been captured for future generations in photographs + on cine film; a Golden Age focussed primarily on the *Empire C-Class* & successors. However, seaplanes still provide a spectacle today.



Eddie Colton Coll.

VP-LVE Southern Cross



Mike Bayerstock Coll.

of Antilles Air Boats Inc.



Eddie Colton Coll.



Eddie Colton Coll.

arrived at Poole Harbour

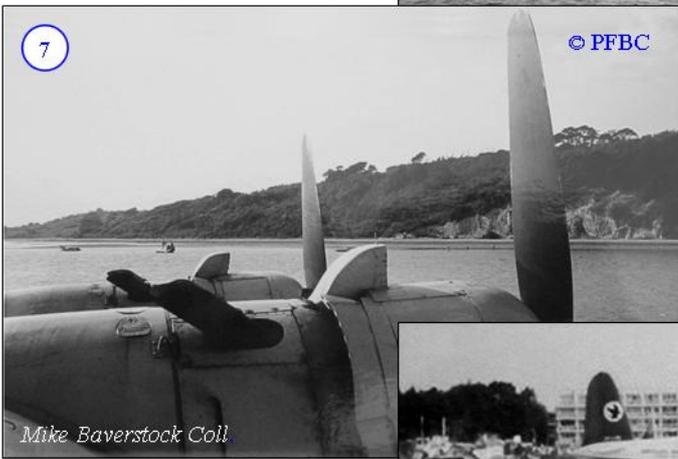


Leslie Dawson Coll.

for Studland Bay flights



Mike Bayerstock Coll.



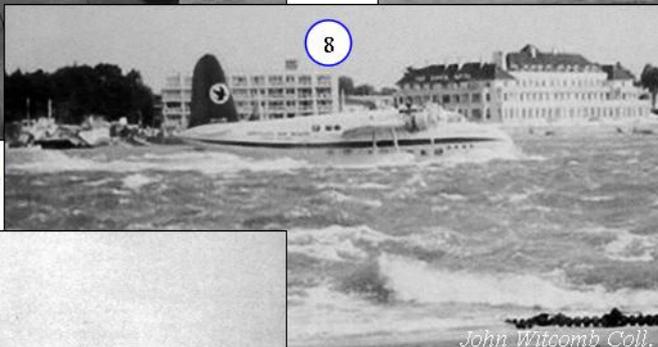
Mike Bayerstock Coll.

as a series of 9 excursions

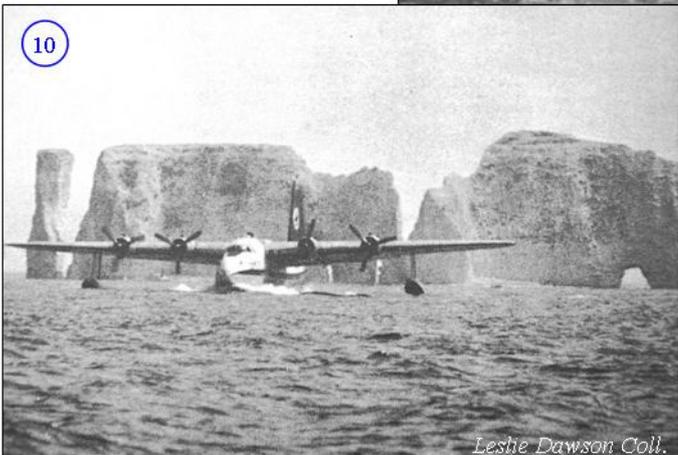


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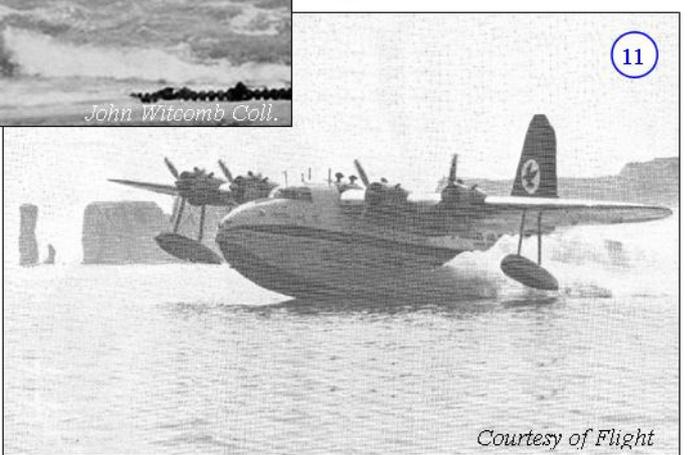
August 24th.-28th. 1976



John Witoomb Coll.



Leslie Dawson Coll.



Courtesy of Flight

Prepared for service from St. Croix both [Antilles Air Boats](#) 'Sandringhams' were to receive Caribbean Island registrations but *Excalibur VIII* still as *NI58J* ran into problems from the US Certification Authority and insurers after just one flight. The cause for these difficulties was that the conversion to near Sandringham standards had been carried out by the work force at Rose Bay FB base and not by a recognised aircraft manufacturer. So reluctantly *Excalibur VIII* was taken out of operation and stored at Isla Grande, San Juan - Puerto Rico, and earmarked for spare parts but thankfully not dismantled !

Meanwhile the registration was confirmed for [VP-LVE Southern Cross](#) which attracted much publicity - whilst proving to be very popular with tourists on excursion flights, especially as the flagship of the charismatic [Captain Charles Blair](#) !

WEST SEAPLANE RAMP
Christiansted ST Croix, US Virgin Islands 00820

"Antilles Air Boats, the world's largest seaplane airline and the Virgin Island's major air carrier, links downtown St. Croix, St. Thomas, St. John, Tortola, Fajardo, St. Maarten and San Juan with over 120 daily flights." Charters available upon request.
(809) 773-4660 Telex ANTAB 347-1099

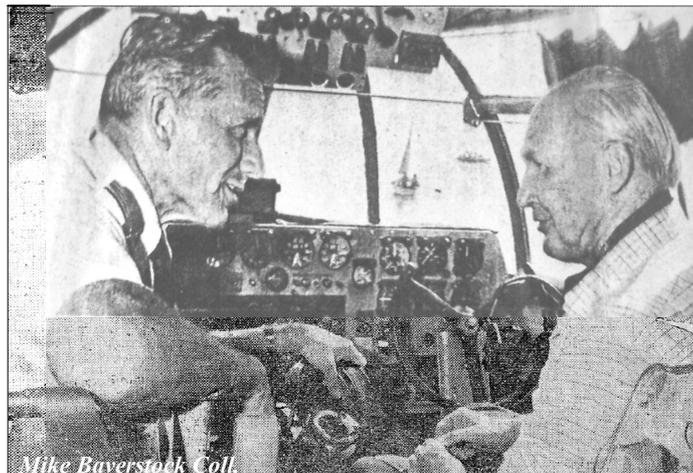
Arven Gillies
Noel Hollé
Charles Blair
Paul Fagan

Photo by Fritz Henle
John Witcomb Coll.

Antilles Air Boats
the downtown seaplane airline

SAN JUAN FAJARDO
PUERTO RICO
ST. THOMAS
WEST END
TORTOLA ROADTOWN
ST. JOHN
ST. MAARTEN
FREDERIKSTED
CHRISTIANSFED ST. CROIX

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Capt. Blair with Bill Craig (exBOAC - British Airways Boeing 314As)

Signed by: Ron & Noreen Gillies, Noel Hollé, Capt. Blair & Paul Fagan

[Numbers in brackets refer to the photographs as individual frames listed in the montage on the previous page...]

(1 & 2) After tying up at first in the Harbour before relocating to the mooring in Studland Bay (3) there was an opportunity for *Southern Cross* to parade in front of historic Poole - as an entertainment for the spectators who thronged the quayside! In the background - to the right, were the Headquarters of Barclays Bank PLC's International Offices, barely one year old, that had been officially opened in January 1976, whilst a residential tower block also towered over the old Town buildings. These provided much altered images from the heyday of the Flying Boats at Poole, as a hint of radical changes yet to come, in sweeping away the characteristics associated with historic Poole Quay * which attracted a School of Artists circa 1920s.

[* Recommended further reading: 'Art in Poole & Dorset' pub. PHT 1989, by Peter Davies]

(4) The backdrop of those chalk cliffs of Handfast Point, fringing Studland Bay, afforded a spectacle with *Southern Cross* accessing the temporary runway. The aircrew was comfortably accommodated at the [Banks Arms](#) near Studland village, whilst the little resort was enjoying regatta time - though some thought that the arrival of a Flying Boat was an intrusion ! Pax for the series of 9 excursions were conveyed by launch from the [Ferry Steps](#) at the Haven Approach, Sandbanks - Poole. However, this seemingly idyllic scene was rudely interrupted overnight by an act of apparent vandalism /grudge, with the aft bilge cap removed from the starboard wing float, 'which was already a third full of sea water'. (ref. [Leslie Dawson, 1983](#))

(5) Alarmingly *Southern Cross* in a freshening wind & choppy sea was listing to the starboard, and in danger of capsizing. The race was now on to save this potentially disastrous situation, the aircrew started the inboard engines and got underway to be escorted by harbour police launch [Alarm](#), via [Swash Channel](#) towards the [Haven Approaches](#). (photo by [Peter Procter](#))

(6) Passage through the Haven battling crosswinds & a strong tide was a demanding task for the skills of [Capt. Ron Gillies](#), but eventually *Southern Cross* was moored in [Poole Harbour](#) - safely in the lee of [Brownsea Island](#) beneath Harry's Point! As [Jack Harris](#) (former Hon. President of PFBC - who sadly died in Jan. 2011) recalled it had been a very close run thing and he was immensely proud of taking over the controls at one critical moment so that [Capt. Gilles](#) could attend elsewhere.

(7) Thankfully successful repairs were completed. Also, *Southern Cross* was refuelled by the efforts of willing volunteers,



VP-LVE Southern Cross moored in Studland Bay, Aug. 1976

[Built in 1887 on the site of the North Haven Inn, the hotel had gone through many changes (and chapters of Poole's History ~ inc. Marconi's experiments there) as recently refurbished in this wonderful photograph courtesy of [John Witcomb PFBC HLM.](#)]

(9) When restored to the Studland Bay mooring *Southern Cross* resumed the series of excursions. Pictured (see above) Capt. Blair was able to enjoy the company of Captain Bill Craig of BOAC, who now retired reminisced about his achievements in piloting the last flight by a 'British Airways' Boeing 314 A from Poole ! Also the honour of concluding [Marine Terminal ops](#) in April 1948.

(10 & 11) However, all-too-soon good things come to an end, as the memorable flights across Poole Bay, low past Bournemouth Pier, over Christchurch + the Solent, before returning via the IoW, were finished so that *Southern Cross* departed on Saturday 28th.

Short Sandringham

This aircraft began life as Sunderland III JM715, built as one of a batch of 50 at Rochester and having no constructor's number, but coming under shop order no S.B.2018. It had four 1,065 h.p. Bristol Pegasus XVIII radial engines. On July 8, 1943, JM715 was allocated to the RAF flying boat station at Wig Bay in Scotland, where it remained until it went to No 57 Maintenance Unit on January 8, 1944. On April 6, 1945 it was delivered to Scottish Aviation Ltd at Greenock, where it was converted to Mark V standard with four Pratt & Whitney R-1830 Twin Wasps of 1,200 h.p. and the ASV Mk IVc radar. It was back at No 57 MU on August 3, 1945.

On April 30, 1947, JM715 went to Short Brothers and Harland at Belfast, where it was converted to a 30-passenger Sandringham 4, its conversion number being SH.55C. Bearing the marks ZK-AMH and named Auckland, it was delivered to Tasman Empire Airways Ltd of New Zealand in 1947 as the last of four Sandringhams ordered to replace two weary Empire Boats on their Sydney-Auckland service. However, TEAL had to withdraw the flying boats from their Tasman service on February 23, 1948, as the engines showed a tendency to overheat. On June 17, following an enquiry and a comprehensive overhaul at Rose Bay, they returned to work, serving until they were replaced by new Solent 4s 18 months later.

In 1950 Ansett Airways of Australia purchased ZK-AMH and sister-ship ZK-AME, the former becoming VH-BRC Beachcomber, and both flew on the Sydney-Lord Howe Island service taken over from Trans-Oceanic Airways in 1953.

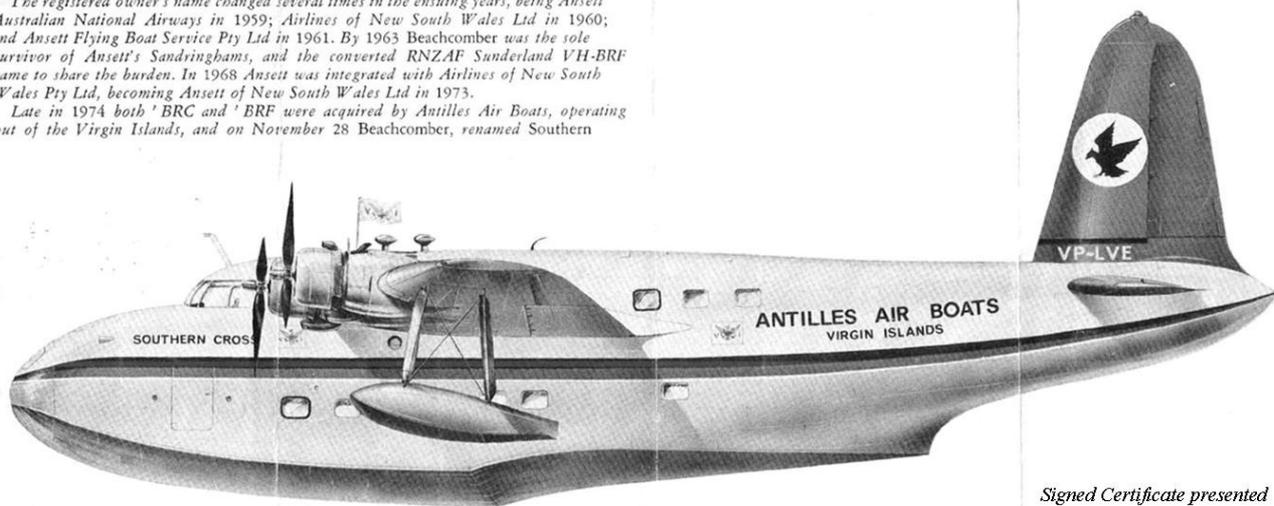
The registered owner's name changed several times in the ensuing years, being Ansett Australian National Airways in 1959; Airlines of New South Wales Ltd in 1960; and Ansett Flying Boat Service Pty Ltd in 1961. By 1963 Beachcomber was the sole survivor of Ansett's Sandringhams, and the converted RNZAF Sunderland VH-BRF came to share the burden. In 1968 Ansett was integrated with Airlines of New South Wales Pty Ltd, becoming Ansett of New South Wales Ltd in 1973.

Late in 1974 both 'BRC and 'BRF were acquired by Antilles Air Boats, operating out of the Virgin Islands, and on November 28 Beachcomber, renamed Southern

Cross and bearing the American registration N158C, commenced the long range, staged ferry flight from Rose Bay to its new home base at St. Croix, which it reached on December 9 after a virtually trouble-free flight of some 9,900 nautical miles. The pilot for this historic journey was Charles Blair, president of Antilles Air Boats Inc. This venerable flying boat, now bearing the Antigua registration VP-LVE, and again flown by Capt. Blair, left St Croix on July 6 and in three days travelled 4,800 miles via Boston to Galway, Eire. During its visit to Ireland, a special visit was made to Belfast on August 19 to mark the completion of a 30-year round the world voyage.

On August 23, Southern Cross arrived at Studland Seadrome to commence a programme of passenger flights under charter to M.M. Aviation, Blandford.

This is to certify that Michael Baverstock flew as a passenger in this aircraft on 26 Aug 76. Signed..... (Captain)



Signed Certificate presented to Michael Baverstock, 1976

Capt. Blair and his aircrew on *Southern Cross* left for Belfast, intending to return to Great Britain + Ireland the next year, for despite the mishap encountered at Poole the round-trip from the US Virgins had been a resounding successful venture in attracting a great deal of publicity and many visitors from near & far to enjoy the prospect of a flight in a Flying Boat !

There had been for some a further memorable encounter of meeting **Maureen O'Hara** dressed as a late-1940s stewardess: 'Soon after we had got into the aircraft a very attractive air stewardess appeared in a 1940s style outfit - Maureen O'Hara the wife of Captain Charles Blair... The joyride was quite spectacular, for I was not prepared for the amount of splashed water as we took off. Then we flew at low level right round the coastline of the Isle of Wight.' ... **Mike Baverstock, PFBC**

In 1977 *Southern Cross* again completed this epic journey up from the Caribbean, and across the Transatlantic to Eire's Lough Derg, but this time visiting **RAF Calshot** instead of Poole, and then mooring off the mouth of the Beaulieu River. For the Southampton Water Authorities mirrored their counterparts in Poole in refusing permission to operate from there, although *Southern Cross* was able to undertake a similar set of excursions along the coastline - especially over the IoW.

However, the following year on 2nd. Sept. 1978 tragedy struck in the Caribbean when Capt. Blair was killed along with 3 others whilst in a **Grumman Goose** when the engine failed near to the base of the **Antilles Air Boats Inc** at St. Thomas. This came at a time when the FB ops were proving to be ever-popular, but the ageing aircraft needed more maintenance. **Maureen O'Hara** took on the running of the outfit, and in doing so became the worlds' first lady owner of an airline ! The difficulties mounted especially the costs, so operations had to be wound-up and aircraft disposed of, or sold as scrap.

This fate seemed to await *Southern Cross* and the stored *Excalibur VIII* as the authorities wanted to recoup charges owed, but by 1980 **Captain Ron Gillies** who after serving as a Wing Commander with the **RAAF**, had spent most of his postwar years on the Flying Boat ops from Australia's east coast - especially to Lord Howe Island, and then in Caribbean Waters, took responsibility to save these 2 aircraft by raising capital to make them serviceable for delivery flights to new owners. An English millionaire, Edward Hulton, became the owner of *Excalibur VIII* and brought this to the UK for restoration as *G-BJHS*, although after subsequent changes of both owners and names this returned to the USA with Kermit Weeks, and is currently kept in flying condition as part of his collection of the Fantasy of Flight based in Florida near Polk City.

Meanwhile *Southern Cross* was bought by the Science Museum and National Heritage for an eventually agreed sum of £85,000 after being delivered to **RAF Calshot** + then stored at **Lee-on-Solent**, before transfer by barge to Southampton's Eastern Docks in 1983. The following year it was moved to Southampton's new Hall of Aviation as a fantastic exhibit...

Aimée ~ with grateful acknowledgement to Michael Baverstock, Leslie Dawson, Captain Vic Hodgkinson DFC and John Witcomb... also to Eddie Colton, Yvonne Glover, Jack Harris, Bob Kent & Harry H.Pusey and to Solent Sky + VH-BRC Beachcomber