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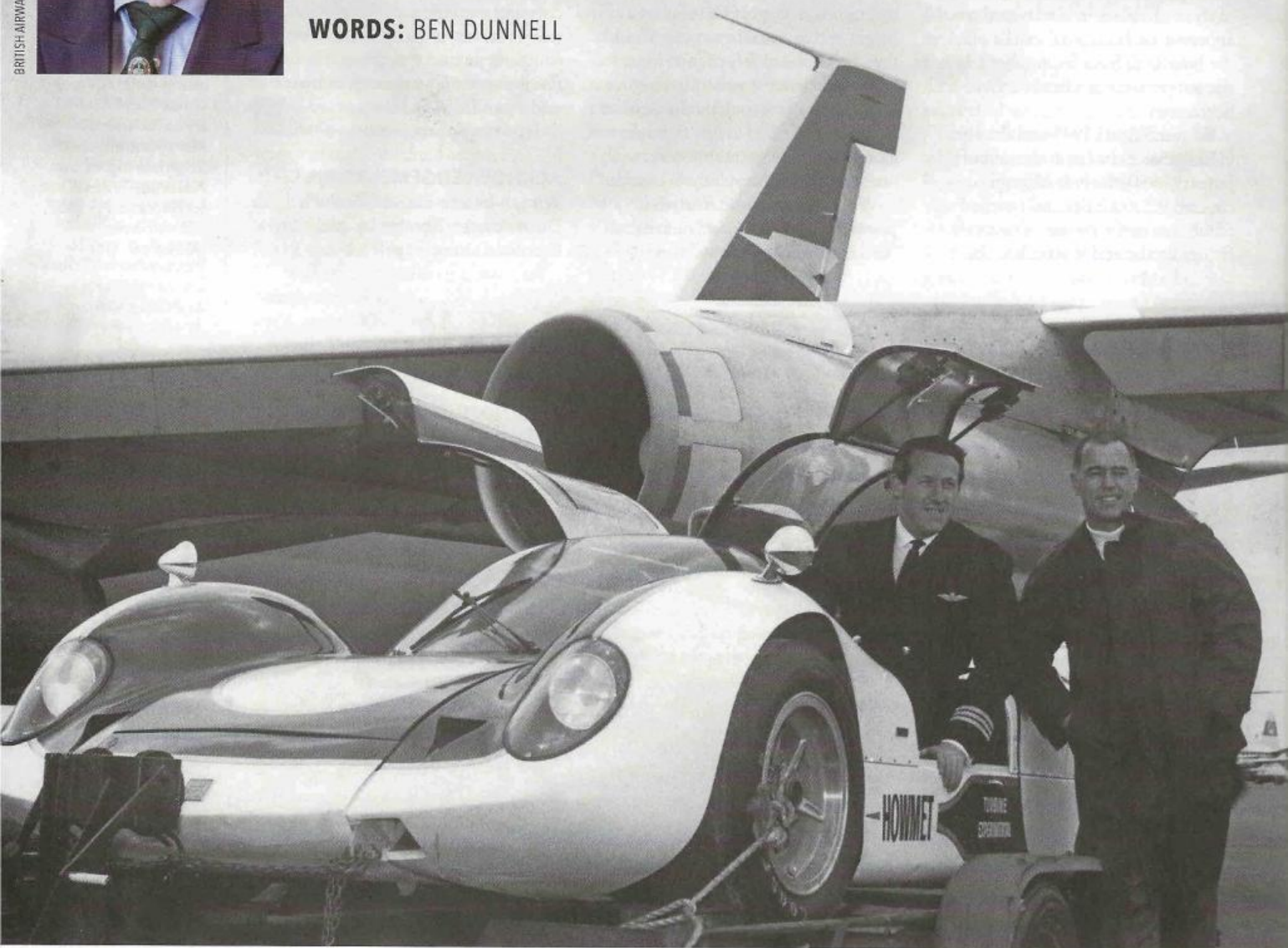
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Joining the JETSET



He could have made a career as a racing driver — in which world he was no stranger to turbine power. But Hugh Dibley was having too good a time flying for BOAC and British Airways, spanning the eras from DC-7C to 747. He recalls this memorable period

WORDS: BEN DUNNELL



In the early 1960s, former Grand Prix winner Tony Brooks was interviewing the victorious driver in a Formula Junior race at Goodwood. "Would you like to go on to Formula One?", he asked. "No, not really", replied Hugh Dibley. Even then, with his motor racing activities in the ascendant, the day job with the British Overseas Airways Corporation still took priority. Progressing to sports car racing, even with a busy programme of national and international meetings at home and abroad, that never changed.

As his BOAC career progressed, motorsport took a back seat. "If you're going to do motor racing full-time", Dibley says, "you've got to be so focused on it". Rather, he focused on flying, becoming a captain with British Airways and going on to spend many years in command of big commercial jets. He remains a member of the British Racing Drivers' Club, but is more active in the Royal Aeronautical Society, at whose London premises we met. Hugh sits on various committees, and runs its Toulouse branch, as he's kept a flat in the French city since retiring from his last job with Airbus in 2002.

Hugh grew up near Lee-on-Solent. "All I wanted to do was fly aeroplanes in the Royal Navy", he says. He learned to fly at school with the Combined Cadet Force, getting his private pilot's licence on Tiger Moths with the flying club at Gosport, and flying Austers from Portsmouth. He joined the RN as a national serviceman, and trained on Provost T1s at RAF Syerston. Then came the defence cuts administered by Duncan Sandys in his 1957 Defence White Paper. Dibley ended up finishing national service and leaving. "I hadn't got an idea of what to do afterwards, because I'd missed university by that stage. Frank Hopkins — who became Sir Frank, a full admiral, captain of the *Ark Royal* — said to me, 'What do you think of civil flying?' I hadn't ever really thought about it.

"All I knew was BEA and BOAC... I decided I'd try for BOAC. I went for an interview and, in short, they said that if I really wanted to join, I must go to Air Service Training at Hamble. They trusted them, and if they gave me a satisfactory report, they might take me on. I went there, and in September 1958 I just scraped in to BOAC.

"You joined on the PIN — pilot and initial navigation — scheme, which started in '52. In due course they made the straight navigators

redundant, so pilots joined and became flight navigators for about three years, so you did astro [navigation] before being given a pilot's aircraft type rating. The other good thing was that the flight navigation licence was the highest academic licence, so if you got your flight nav, as soon as you accumulated the hours you immediately got your air transport pilot's licence. It was a good system, I thought, because in so doing you were flying all over the world, you were seeing what the general operation was like, and you got a good grounding in flight planning and navigation. Many pilots resented that. I thought completely the reverse. I had 250 hours or something, and I felt as a 21-year-old I wasn't qualified to sit in the right-hand seat of a Stratocruiser with a captain who was very old at 35...

"My first flights were on the DC-7C, leaving at about 11 o'clock at night from the north side of the airport with all the tents, which was just a shambles. We did London-Prestwick-Gander-Boston-New York, and by the time we got to New York I didn't know which way was up, I was so tired. I did three trips on '7Cs. One of them shows the problems with air safety then: on the way back there was a Stratocruiser which had an uncontained engine failure, and a big part of the cowlings flew up like an airbrake. This aircraft had descended

to 3,000ft and was crawling back to Shannon, and it was thought it might have to ditch, but it didn't. We turned around and helped it until the RAF came along.

"Then I went to Britannia 312s, going to Nairobi, and I spent about a year on Britannia 102s, operating primarily to India and out to Australia. They had engine problems on the Britannia — we used to do London-Barcelona-Accra, getting off at Barcelona part of the time, and the aeroplane was quite often overflying on three engines. We spent an undue amount of time in Europe 'slipping', non-operational.

"I was posted to Comet 4s for about a year. We still didn't have Doppler, so we had no drift and ground speed. The only drift you could get was on the weather radar, when there

was something to look at. We were doing Singapore-Jakarta-Darwin on a Comet 4, and between Jakarta and Darwin was a nav sector where I was navigating because there were no aids. I did my astro and found there was a wind of about 90kt — you always wondered if it was really there or if it was your calculations. Then the islands came into sight on the weather radar, and we could see we had about 10° of drift, which showed it was 90kt. In those days you had to write a cross-section, filling out a piece of paper with lots of pretty clouds, and take it up to the met office

“You were flying all over the world, and you got a good grounding in flight planning and navigation”

LEFT: Hugh Dibley in the Howmet TX following its trans-Atlantic flight aboard a BOAC Cargo Boeing 707, with the Continental turbine-powered car's other driver, Dr Dick Thompson, standing alongside. The rest of the 707's load, a consignment of gold bullion, is not pictured...

ALAMY

BELOW: Dibley's first BOAC trips as a flight navigator were on the carrier's majestic Douglas DC-7Cs.

KEY COLLECTION





ABOVE:
The first Boeing 747-136 for BOAC, at this time registered N17998 but later to become G-AWNA, on a test flight out of Seattle. At this stage the type's Pratt & Whitney JT9D engines were giving cause for concern.

KEY COLLECTION

RIGHT:
In the newly formed British Airways, Dibley returned to the Boeing 707 fleet in 1978 as flight training and technical manager.

VIA HUGH DIBLEY

in Darwin. I filled it out with all the winds in and scamped upstairs. They took one look and said, 'Stupid Pommie bastard. We don't get winds like that up here...'

How, I wondered, were relations with the more senior captains? After all, much has been said about the autocratic nature of the so-called 'North Atlantic Barons', who'd flown that route for BOAC during wartime. "People found some of them rather oppressive", says Hugh, "but I found them to be really respectful and very pleasant". However, less-than-optimal practices lingered among a few of the older generation. "Some of the ex-Imperial Airways people did not use checklists. Tom Nisbet, who went on to become general manager and in charge of industrial relations, told me a story that, when he was a young instructor, he taxied out at Shannon for a training flight on a Stratocruiser with an Imperial Airways captain. As they got out towards the runway the captain said, 'I don't bother with checklists'. Tom said, 'I have control', taxied back to the ramp, shut down and told him, 'If you don't use checklists you have no place in BOAC'."

BOAC co-pilots were given the same type ratings as captains in order

to improve safety, and to allow proper monitoring. This brought the odd interesting moment. "There was a very effusive captain who was going in to Idlewild with Jack Butt as his co-pilot. Idlewild said, 'Speedbird, tell us when you have the field in sight'. The captain said, 'Tell him we've got the field'. Jack started taking his straps off and getting out of his seat. 'What are you doing?' Jack said, 'If

you're going to land there, I'm not going to be sitting beside you when you do. That's Naval Air Station New York.'"

The Boeing 707 started its BOAC service with two pilots and a flight navigator. "BALPA [the British Air Line Pilots' Association] wanted three pilots, so it was decided that all we PIN pilots who were still navigating would go to the 707 to become third



“ I asked Jim Clark, ‘Why aren’t you travelling with us?’ He said, ‘If I knew you were on the aeroplane I’d go with you’. I tried to get us to fly the Formula One cars, and failed ”

pilot navigators. I spent a year just navigating on it and then did my pilot's course. Basically, most of our training was done on the aeroplane, up at Prestwick. We were having to do engine failures on the aeroplane. Our procedure in BOAC was that we gave the engine failure on the runway — they trained a lot of young pilots on the 707 that way, and we didn't have any significant incidents.

"It was faster than the Comet. The Comet used to cruise at Mach 0.72. The Americans' Mach limit for the 'Seven-O' was over Mach 0.9 — the British limit was 0.86 and the cruise speed was around 0.82. And, of course, it carried twice as many passengers, so it was commercially far better than the poor old Comet, which was hopeless commercially". Hugh became a first officer, qualified to both sit in the right-hand seat and to navigate. Initially he was on the North Atlantic route, before switching largely to services to the Far East and Africa.



By now, motor racing was occupying many free weekends. The switch from single-seaters to sports cars brought Dibley his greatest successes, as he won the British Grand Prix support race at Brands Hatch twice. In 1964 he triumphed with a 2.5-litre Brabham BT8 run by SMART, the Stirling Moss Automobile Racing Team. He repeated the result in 1966 — ironically in a race sponsored by British Eagle — with a Lola T70, coming home ahead of the likes of Chris Amon and Jacky Ickx.

At Heathrow, Dibley saw a friend, two-time Formula One world champion Jim Clark. "I said, 'Why aren't you travelling with us?' He said, 'If I knew you were on the aeroplane I'd go with you'. I asked around, and the only motor racing team that was going with BOAC was Reg Parnell. All the others went by TWA or Pan Am. I then wrote a letter to Sir Giles Guthrie, and I got a reply by return saying we'd got to do better than that. I tried to get us to fly the Formula One cars, and failed miserably."

Even so, Dibley's intervention could well have been the catalyst for the airline's sponsorship of the big sports car race at Brands Hatch, which became the BOAC 500. "I think it was a superb marketing operation. It cost them £1,000 cash and about £1,000 in free tickets. Graham Hill, I know, went to BOAC and asked if they'd sponsor him. ❧



Dibley practising in the Howmet for the 1968 BOAC 500 at Brands Hatch. This was the first time a turbine car had ever competed at a British meeting, the experimental Rover-BRM having only raced at Le Mans. ASSOCIATED NEWSPAPERS/SHUTTERSTOCK

TURBINE POWER ON TRACK

Gas turbine-engined racing cars: ultimately a blind alley, but a fascinating one. The Howmet TX was among the more successful efforts, and Hugh Dibley — no stranger to such powerplants — drove it several times.

Conceived by driver and mechanic Ray Heppenstall, the sports car project was taken up by the Michigan-based Howmet Corporation, which made castings for gas turbine engines. Bob McKee built the closed-cockpit, gullwing-door design, while the engine was a Continental TS325-1 (or T65-T-1) producing 350hp. This powerplant had been developed for the US Army Light Observation Helicopter requirement won by the Hughes OH-6, which used the competing Allison T63.

The TX made its race debut at the 1968 Daytona 24 Hours, where Dibley — there to try and encourage entries for the BOAC 500 at Brands Hatch — saw it. "The Howmet was a bit of a lash-up", he recalls, "and they were surprised how well it went". After the subsequent 12 Hours of Sebring, he was driven in it by Heppenstall. "All the gauges were the same as a 707's, so he couldn't impress me that much. We drove off down the straight, which, of course, at Sebring was an old airfield and quite dusty. He proceeded to lose it in a straight line. After that he really couldn't say a lot..."

Dibley joined one of the regular Howmet drivers, the very rapid Washington DC dentist Dr Dick Thompson, for April's BOAC 500 at Brands Hatch. In a publicity stunt, he was part of the BOAC Cargo Boeing 707 crew that transported the TX across the Atlantic, though he wasn't actually flying. "The rest of the cargo was 36 tonnes of gold, with the Howmet plonked on top of it. Heppenstall was mesmerised by this. He said, 'Forget the bloody race. Let's hijack the cargo'."

What was the Continental engine's throttle response like? "Minimal. You had to keep the revs up, and what they did very well was fit what they called a wastegate — I would call it a bleed valve. It just had two big pedals, the brake and accelerator. When you took your foot off the accelerator, the wastegate opened and the revs would go to zero. You had minimum thrust, but still quite a bit. Then when you went up to roughly half-throttle it would bring the revs up, so you were getting full thrust from the engine but a lot of it was being bled off by the wastegate. When you wanted full thrust/power, you put your foot on the floor and the wastegate closed. While still braking with your left foot until entering a corner, you would bring the power up to get the engine up to speed. Then you put your foot on the floor. It was very different."

Hugh practised in the car at Brands, but Thompson crashed before he got to drive it in the race. "He said the wastegate jammed... Then I went up to Oulton Park, and I was quite proud in a way because I put it on the front row of the grid next to Brian Redman in a Lola. It was decided that I should continue driving it at Watkins Glen and Le Mans."

Sadly, Dibley's sole run in the French 24-hour classic didn't go to plan. He was paired in one Howmet with Bob Tullius, later the owner of many historic aircraft, including a P-51D Mustang he donated to the RAF Museum. "There was something odd with the engine, because we were well down on performance. Then it picked up, and we were running alright. We weren't that quick — I reckon we were doing about 160mph on the Mulsanne Straight". Several long pit stops to replace a rear upright — when mechanics first fitted the wrong side for the knock-on hubs — saw the machine being disqualified at midnight. The second car, of Heppenstall and Thompson, crashed.



ABOVE:
In the left-hand seat
of BOAC's Boeing
747 simulator at the
Cranebank training
centre in 1971.

ALAMY

They said, 'No. We sponsor the race. It doesn't matter who wins'."

The Boeing 747 became a real winner, but its introduction by BOAC got off to a less than auspicious start. Its first 747-136 arrived at Heathrow in April 1970, but an industrial dispute delayed the type's service entry for nearly a year. Dibley was in at the beginning. "The 747 had INS [an inertial navigation system], which was totally new. You didn't know how it was going to work — some of these things work very well to begin with, some of them don't. I was put on the first 747 course as a nav instructor, in case the INS didn't work and we had to operate as navigators. You might say this was very cautious, but the first three 747s for BOAC had sextant mounts.

"We soon realised that the INS worked very well, but the engines did not. If you looked in our incident reports, there were a number of three-liners: 'On take-off from Bangkok, close to V1, a loud bang was heard and number three engine was seen

to be over temperature. It was shut down, fuel was dumped and the aeroplane landed back'. That was a fairly routine occurrence. At the top of descent, when you changed the thrust levels at high altitude the engines could stall. You had to be careful moving the thrust levers — there was a thing called a throttle bar, so you couldn't close them completely. I remember once that going to Bermuda, we were losing oil on one, so we just shut it down and started it up again at a lower altitude.



"But, as an aeroplane, it was super. There was the challenge of landing it, just because your height judgment was different. As I've said many times, it was like landing a block of flats from the second floor. But you soon got used to it. The autopilot was the first time we had vertical operation. Especially at high altitude, the climb rate was not spectacular, shall we say: right at the end you'd be climbing at about 200-300ft per minute.

Sometimes you'd get a premature capture to the cruise altitude and a sudden pitch-up. If you didn't take out the height lock, you'd lose all the speed. You did have to watch it all the time. Very different to the digital 747-400 20 years later."

Hugh retired from racing in 1971, though he made a brief comeback in practice for the 1974 Brands Hatch 1,000km in a Gulf Mirage. At work he was increasingly involved in fuel-saving and noise abatement measures, topics close to his heart, and during 1975 he upgraded to captain. "There were no commands until then because of the economic situation. The deal was normally you go back to a smaller fleet, but BOAC's policy was to have a seat swap, because that's more efficient. It was agreed industrially that 36 of us would get our commands direct on the 747."

By then, of course, BOAC and BEA had merged into the new British Airways. As Hugh describes, though, there remained a good deal of internal separation even then. From 1975-78 he became technical manager and deputy flight manager on BA's Lockheed TriStar fleet, which had been ordered by BEA, and delivered two of them direct from Palmdale. Returning to the remaining 707 fleet, he was flight training and technical manager, with BA crews also flying 11 707s for other operators. In 1983 he went back to 747s as a management pilot, ending up as the fleet's technical manager when in 1989 he was seconded from BA to introduce the short-fuselage 747SP to the UAE royal flight for two years as chief pilot and director operations.

This was when the new 747-400 was being introduced. Dibley says, "I was perceived to be 'too BOAC', so they didn't want me anywhere near it. Actually, I think I was too old as I had to retire in 1992". Not too old, though, to see out his flying career on a variety of worldwide adventures, from flight management in Air Hong Kong and Air Mauritius to being a flight instructor and technical pilot at Airbus Training flying the A320, A330 and A340. It was the coda to a fascinating life in commercial aviation, one that took him through a golden era for Britain's global flag-carrier along the way.

A

“As an aeroplane, the 747 was super. There was the challenge of landing it, just because your height judgment was different. As I've said many times, it was like landing a block of flats from the second floor”