

Flying in a Bristol Superfreighter

"I don't suppose you've ever been to Southend," said my wife, when we had been talking about the difference between the sandy beaches of the Camel estuary in Cornwall, UK and muddy ones. I was about to say, "No," but instantly I stopped. I've been to Southend Airport when I was a boy; we were going to fly to France and take our car with us on holiday.

It was in 1959 when I was 11. I know this because I've just discovered a dated photograph in my old album. We drove from our home in Egmont Road, Sutton through the built up streets of south London towards Westminster Bridge. When you are in the back of a car there are things going on in the front that you know nothing about, especially if you are kids. Eventually, I and my two younger brothers were told that we were turning round and going back home: Mum had left her windjammer (a shower-proof jacket for younger readers!) behind and she needed it for our holiday on the continent. The whispered conversation in the front must have been hasty calculations of journey times and check-in times; the cost of buying a new windjammer in France against the cost of fuel to return home. Who would have been the most stressed, Mum or Dad? Feelings and opinions in the front seat were kept private. The added stress factor was that Mimi (Dad's mother) and Great Auntie Bessie lived at home with us and our surprise appearance would have required an explanation. The worst thing in the world for Mum would have been to look foolish in the eyes of her mother-in-law!

We got to Southend Airport in time and drove out onto the runway. The massive transport plane stood with its nose open with two giant doors into which led a steep ramp for cars to drive up. I don't remember if Dad drove up the ramp with us all in the car, or whether we got out first. I remember sitting inside this cavernous metal tube. The noise from the engines was deafening and we were given barley sugar sweets to suck on at take-off because the cabin was not pressurised. We flew to Calais and I remember discussions about the wings moving up and down. Someone (Dad?) said the time to worry is when they don't flex because they would probably snap off.

It was the first time any of us had flown and must have been quite an adventure because the aeroplane had only been adapted to take cars in 1954: I've checked it out. The plane was a Bristol 'long-nose' Superfreighter MK32, lengthened to carry two or three cars depending on their size, and up to twenty passengers. (I've checked that out too). I thought we had flown with Silver City Airways but the photograph shows we flew with their rival Channel Air Bridge which was set up by Freddie Laker. Laker became famous for budget airlines that undercut the established companies. Later, I bought an Airfix kit of the Bristol Superfreighter in the livery of Silver City Airways, complete with opening doors. I have recently read two quotes about these aeroplanes. One pilot likened it to "Flying a cottage from the upstairs bedroom window." Another reported flying into a North American aerodrome and the air traffic controller said, "Gee, did you build it yourself?"

It is a sad thing that the only thing I remember about the holiday itself, apart from scaling some large sand dunes at Brae Dune, was Mum's agony as we drove along Belgian cobbled streets to find treatment for her sprained ankle.