

TODAY'S PROJECT, TOMORROW'S ACHIEVEMENT..?

CUNLIFFE-OWEN AIRCRAFT & OCEAN AIRWAYS

Mention of British aircraft manufacturer Cunliffe-Owen inevitably brings to mind the oddball pre-war OA-1 twin-engined transport and the post-war Concordia airliner. However, as **RALPH PEGRAM** reveals, the company also explored a wartime design of a four-engined transatlantic airliner for use in a joint venture with shipping company Cunard-White Star

TYPE "CUNLIFFE-OWEN Aircraft" into your favourite online image search engine and the majority of the results will be photographs of just two aeroplanes — the OA-1 of 1939 and the Concordia of 1947.

As the only indigenous designs by the company that reached the hardware stage, these two neatly bracket the firm's short lifespan. Yet in between you may note a few advertisements from 1943 that featured concept artwork of an unnamed four-engined airliner, included as little more than "window dressing" for the promotion of the company, and not so different in presentation style from other speculative schemes and visions of the future that were a common feature of British aviation industry adverts throughout the war. This was a genuine project, however, studied in detail and presented to possible investors and the Brabazon Committee as a prospective transatlantic airliner. So, what was the background to Cunliffe-Owen Aircraft, how and why did it design the aircraft, and what was the result?

As the British aircraft industry revitalised in the mid-1930s in response to the RAF Expansion Schemes and growth in the airline business,

several new companies were established to exploit the opportunities this would present. Among them were the Scottish Aircraft and Engineering Co Ltd (SAE) and associate venture Clyde Aero Engines (CAE), with the aim of establishing a major aviation business in and around Glasgow. Both, it was reported in the press, were backed by a newly launched investment group called the Aircraft Research and Development Co Ltd. SAE was a well-financed outfit with experienced staff, high-profile advisers and a licensing deal to construct lifting-fuselage aircraft based on the patents of American designer Vincent Burnelli.

THE CLYDE CLIPPER

Before facilities became available in Scotland, work commenced in Wembley to build an aircraft — the Clyde Clipper — funded by Sir Hugo Cunliffe-Owen to compete in the New York—Paris air race scheduled for 1937. Advertisements showing progress with construction appeared regularly until around mid-1937, by which time it was evident that the Clipper would not be completed in time for the race. In the event, the race was cancelled in June that year, owing to concerns around the level of risk involved.

MAIN PICTURE *Emphasising the unusual lifting-body centre-section configuration of the Cunliffe-Owen OA-1 — also known as the British Burnelli OA-1 — this photograph shows the Bristol Perseus-engined machine at Eastleigh circa the time of its first flight in early 1939. BELOW* *One of the intriguing Cunliffe-Owen Aircraft advertisements showing an artist's impression of an advanced four-engined twin-finned transatlantic airliner.*

MAIN PICTURE TAH ARCHIVE / BELOW VIA AUTHOR

