

# AMERICA-EUROPE

VIA NORTH ATLANTIC AIRWAYS OVER  
THE ARMSTRONG SEADROME SYSTEM  
OF COMMERCIAL OCEAN TRANSIT

BY AIRPLANE



## Mr ARMSTRONG'S STEPPING STONES

### PART ONE: EDWARD ARMSTRONG & THE LURE OF THE ATLANTIC

With the help of contemporary brochures and official documentation, **RALPH PEGRAM** opens a two-part series on the ambitious inter-war plans of Canadian-born engineer and inventor Edward Armstrong: to develop and build a string of "Seadromes" stretching across the Atlantic, on which aircraft of high passenger capacity but limited range could alight and refuel



**I**N THE SUMMER of 1979 I was sitting in a helicopter at Aberdeen Airport, somewhat excited but playing it cool, preparing to be flown out some 120 miles (190km) eastwards over the North Sea. Wearing a slightly oversized survival suit and carrying a set of embarrassingly clean brand-new safety gear, I was on my way to one of the many drilling rigs then under contract to the oil industry in the area. The rig was of the semi-submersible type designed to operate in water depths beyond the capability of jack-ups — rigs that stood on support legs with their feet planted on the sea floor — and to provide a stable deck essentially free from wave-induced pitch, roll and heave. "Semi-sub" rigs had first appeared in the early 1960s but, although I was unaware of it at the time, the origin of the technology upon which they were based dated back to just after the First World War, when an engineer working in the USA was seeking a means by which to provide offshore landing platforms for aircraft. These he named "Seadromes", and it was an idea he pursued with considerable vigour over many years through numerous patents, scale-model experiments, contacts within the US government and approaches to aircraft manufacturers and airlines.

Newspapers and popular magazines in the USA, although less so in Britain, were keen to provide coverage of the idea, and for a while several businesses showed genuine interest, some even providing a little seed-funding; yet no full-size platform was ever built. Was the concept flawed, or was it a lost opportunity to open up long-distance transoceanic air routes decades before they became a reality?

### THE ATLANTIC DREAM

So, transatlantic flight. Perhaps we should blame the *Daily Mail*, the British newspaper that in its early years did so much to promote pioneering aviation through a series of competitions and prizes. In 1913 came its most challenging: £10,000 for the first direct crossing of the Atlantic by air, a

**OPPOSITE PAGE** Some of the documentation about Armstrong's Seadrome concept used for this article is seen here, including the cover of his 1927 brochure and a blueprint of the 1929 Seadrome. **THIS PAGE, TOP** Armstrong proved to be adept at self-promotion, wading up to his waist in a pond — while wearing a business suit — to demonstrate a scale model of his Seadrome Langley in 1928.