

Low flying BOAC Argonaut incident 1958

My junior school (Worple Road, Isleworth) was located under the approach to Heathrow's runway 28L (as it was then designated), about 5 miles distant, which meant that airliners passing overhead were flying approximately 1500 feet above ground level. Most of the children paid no attention to the machines droning over the school – they made little noise apart from the very occasional jet, such as the RAF's Comet 2s (BOAC's Mk 4s were not yet in service), Air France's prototype Caravelles and Aeroflot's Tu104s. The 707 had yet to scream through British skies.

We plane-spotters watched them all, noting down registrations of course. Even indoors we could identify aircraft types by the timbre of their engines. The crackle of Wright Turbo-Compounds was the signature of Super Connies, while Merlins meant Argonaut or York. Very common was the whine of Dart-engined BEA Viscounts.

One spring morning in 1958, during break, we spotters in the playground identified a distant approaching aircraft as either DC4 or Argonaut (the airframes were virtually identical). Unusually it was flying much lower than normal. As it got closer the narrow frontal area of its engine nacelles told us 'Argonaut' and soon the growl of Merlins confirmed the identity. By now, other children were taking interest. The noise of kids at play gradually subsided as one by one they stopped their games and stood rooted to the spot watching the BOAC aircraft roar past, the eyes of a couple of hundred temporarily silent and motionless children following its progress. I later estimated that its height was about 500 feet. The aircraft did not appear to be in trouble. All four props were turning and it was not descending. I noted the registration, of course, but sadly this snippet of data has since escaped my memory. We all watched as the aircraft sedately flew on towards Heathrow and gradually the other children lost interest and resumed their playground activities.

There was no subsequent reference to the incident in any of the media and I wonder if perhaps the crew of the Argo were just having a bit of fun. In those days Captains had more latitude about how they flew their aircraft. A repeat performance today would probably result in a no-biscuit interview of the crew by their managers.