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EDITOR
MAURICE A. SMITH, D.F.C.
and Bar

ASSISTANT EDITOR
H. F. KING, M.B.E.

ART EDITOR
JOHN YOXALL

Editorial, Advertising and
Publishing Offices:

DORSET HOUSE,
STAMFORD STREET,
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Adversity—and Recompense

WHEN the future brings 1954 into perspective it may come to be regarded as less of a black year for British aviation than it appears today. Its passing, unlamented, seven days ago, left memories of disaster and destruction, of delay and disappointment. Unfortunately, it is not just the careless or complacent who have to learn the hard and bitter way; almost all progress, and certainly all the real pioneering work, is achieved in the face of great trials and difficulties. Of one thing there is no doubt: that technical experience and knowledge has been accumulated to an unprecedented degree during the past year. In particular the Comet investigation, taken together with the considerable previous airline experience with this type of aircraft, has provided deeper and wider knowledge of jet transports, their construction and their operation than could possibly have been acquired in any other way. This at least guarantees a firm new foundation upon which to build.

Even the year's severe losses of prototype aircraft, large and smaller—and Great Britain has not suffered alone in this respect—have not in every case been wholly in vain. The price of progress paid in life and material has nevertheless been too great.

But it is neither natural nor desirable at the beginning of a new year to dwell for long upon setbacks and other sombre matters; and to express now both hope and confidence in events and achievements foreseen for the coming months is not to be unduly optimistic, for the promise is great. Throughout 1954 the progress and sales of the Viscount were a constant source of encouragement, and it will be during the coming months when these aircraft are being completed in increasing numbers and are seeing service in North America and Australia that the full measure of this success story will be revealed.

For reasons of security, and of commendable reserve on the part of the makers, the English-Electric P.1 has so far remained in the background. Yet the more the overall picture is examined the more the conclusion is brought home that this machine shows much above average promise; its characteristics seem in every way to add up to the right answer. There is good reason to assume that the name of the P.1 (no doubt it will have a name by then) will have figured largely in our pages twelve months hence.

Another subject over which there is good cause for elation is in the nature of a hardy perennial. We refer to the progress and promise among the products of the aero engine manufacturers. Production of the powerful current marks of Avon and Sapphire, and of the civil Dart, are, according to all information, most gratifying. Progress reports on the development of the Olympus, Gyron, Conway, Eland, Soar and Oryx suggest that these units are well up to their various programmes. For a little later—and indicative of the lively and enterprising outlook of design teams—there are, just around the corner, the new turboprops B.E.25 and R.B.109, the Orpheus and the Canadian Waconda—if that is in fact to be the name accepted for the advanced new engine—not to mention the small Turmo and Twin Turmo and rocket motors, hot and cold.

We would not feel ready to claim that the limit of enterprise and energy has been reached in the aircraft industry; it is scarcely possible to have too much of either. If some people are to be believed, the aircraft industry lacks both, and is feather-bedstedded or otherwise buoyed up by military contracts and the coverage of development costs by the State. This can hardly be reconciled with the facts in any class of product; where else, for example, are four new civil aircraft such as the Herald, Twin Pioneer, Accountant and Folland transport being designed and developed specifically to suit operators and take over world-wide duties which the so long omni-competent DC-3 must progressively relinquish. Money will continue to be found by manufacturers and operators for the design and construction of new civil aircraft and for their purchase. No one, on the other hand, underestimates the difficulties which smaller operators face when for the first time they must buy brand-new aircraft, even of the modest proportions of the types named above.

The enormous costs of developing, testing on the ground and in the air and proving large airliners, particularly in view of the experiences and new knowledge which have been gained during the past year, are another matter, and one which may well have to be met directly or indirectly on a national scale in all countries.