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de Havilland Comet ^{running!}

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*This article is about the **de Havilland Comet** jet airliner. For the [1930s](#) racing aircraft, see [de Havilland DH.88](#).*

DH.106 Comet



A Royal Air Force Comet C.2 in flight.

Type [Airliner](#)

Manufacturer [de Havilland](#)

Designed by Ronald Bishop

Maiden flight [27 July 1949](#)

Introduced [22 January 1952](#) with [BOAC](#)

Status In military service only

Primary users [BOAC](#)
See Operators

Unit cost [£250,000](#) in 1952

Variants [Hawker Siddeley Nimrod](#)

The [British de Havilland Comet](#) first flew in [1949](#) and is noted as the world's first commercial [jet airliner](#). Early models suffered from catastrophic [metal fatigue](#) and the aircraft was redesigned. The [Comet 4](#) series subsequently enjoyed a long and productive career of over 30 years. The [Hawker Siddeley Nimrod](#), the military derivative of the Comet airliner, is still in service. In [2007](#), the original decades-old airframes were being rebuilt with new wings and engines to produce the [Nimrod MRA 4](#), expected to serve with Britain's [Royal Air Force](#) until the 2020s, more than 70 years after the Comet's first flight.

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[\[edit\]](#) Design and development

During the [Second World War](#), the [Brabazon Committee](#) studied Britain's postwar airliner needs. Sir [Geoffrey de Havilland](#), (head of the de Havilland company) was a committee member and used his influence and the company's expertise with jets to include mention of the need for a transatlantic jet mailplane called the Type IV or DH.106.^[1] [British Overseas Airways Corporation \(BOAC\)](#) found the Type IV's specifications attractive and in December [1945](#) agreed to buy ten aircraft.

Design work began in [1946](#) under Ronald Bishop, who had been responsible for the [Mosquito](#) fighter-bomber. Several configurations were considered, including twin booms and a swept-wing, tailless design but a more conventional design was eventually chosen and announced as the *Comet* in December [1947](#). First deliveries were expected by [1952](#).

The first flight of a prototype DH.106 Comet lasted 31 minutes on [27 July 1949](#). The pilot was de Havilland Chief Test Pilot [John Cunningham](#), a famous wartime night-fighter pilot. The aircraft was publicly displayed at the [1949 Farnborough Air Show](#) and then began flight trials. A year later the second prototype made its maiden flight. On [2 April 1951](#) this aircraft was delivered to the BOAC Comet Unit at [Hurn](#) under the registration *G-ALZK* and carried out 500 flying hours of crew training and a route proving programme.

[\[edit\]](#) Technical description

The Comet was a low wing, all metal, four-engine jet aircraft, approximately the length of a small [Boeing 737](#), carrying fewer people in greater comfort. The earliest Comets had 11 rows of seats with four seats to a row in the 1A configuration used by [Air France](#). BOAC used an even roomier arrangement of 36 seats (each with its own ashtray). The galley could serve hot and cold food and drinks and there was a bar. Other amenities included separate men's and women's washrooms. The passenger cabin was quieter than those of propeller driven airliners. The Comet's four-crew member [cockpit](#) held two pilots, a flight engineer and a navigator.

The clean, low-drag design featured many unique or innovative design elements, including a swept leading edge, integral wing fuel tanks and four-wheel bogie main undercarriage units designed by de Havilland. The Comet was also designed as one of the first pressurized commercial aircraft.^[2] For emergencies, life rafts were stored in the wings near the engines and a life vest was stowed under each seat bottom.

Two pairs of [de Havilland Ghost](#) 50 Mk1 [turbojet](#) engines were buried in the wings close to the fuselage. British aircraft designers chose this configuration because it avoided the drag of podded engines and allowed a smaller fin and rudder, since the hazards of asymmetric thrust were reduced. The engines' higher mounting in the wings also reduced the risk of ingestion damage, a major problem for turbine engines. However, these benefits were compromised by increased structural weight and general complexity, including armour for the engine cells and a more complicated wing structure.

The Comet was originally intended to have two [hydrogen peroxide](#) powered [de Havilland Sprite](#) booster rockets for take-off under hot and high conditions from airports such as [Khartoum](#) and [Nairobi](#). These were tested on thirty flights, but the Ghosts were apparently powerful enough without them. The later Comet 4 was highly rated for its [takeoff](#) performance from high altitude locations such as Mexico City. Its newer Avon engines, low weight (compared to the [Boeing 707](#) and [Douglas DC-8](#)) and exceptionally clean design all contributed to its high performance. The Comet wing was a classic design which has been in near-continuous civil and military service for over half a century, an achievement matched only by the Boeing 707/C-137/E-3. Early model Comets required about five or six man-hours of maintenance labour per flight hour, fewer than the propeller-driven planes it replaced.

The Comet's thin metal skin was composed of advanced new alloys (DTD 564/L.73 and DTD 746C/

L90)* and was both chemically bonded using the [adhesive Redux](#), and riveted, which saved weight and reduced the risk of fatigue cracks spreading from the rivets. When it went into service with [BOAC](#) on [2 May 1952](#) the Comet was the most exhaustively tested commercial airliner in history. For example, a water tank was used to test the entire forward fuselage section for metal fatigue by repeatedly pressurising to 2.75 psi overpressure (11 psi) and depressurising through more than 16,000 cycles, which was equivalent to about 40,000 hours of airline service.^[3] The windows were tested under a pressure of 12 psi, 4.75 psi above the normal service ceiling of 36,000'.^[4] One window frame survived a massive 100 psi, about 1,250% greater than the maximum pressure it would encounter in airline service.^[5]

* DTD = *Directorate of Technical Development*

[\[edit\]](#) Operational history



The de Havilland Comet 1, *G-ALYP* - The first production Comet. 

This aircraft also flew the world's first commercial jet passenger flight and was later [lost off Elba](#).

The first production aircraft (*G-ALYP*) flew in January [1951](#). On [22 January 1952](#) *G-ALYS* was the first Comet to receive a certificate of airworthiness. On [2 May 1952](#) *G-ALYP* took off on the world's first all-jet flight with fare-paying passengers, beginning scheduled service to Johannesburg. The last plane from the initial order (*G-ALYZ*) began flying in September [1952](#), carrying freight along South American routes while simulating passenger schedules.

The Comet was a hit with passengers and commercial success was widely anticipated. [Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother](#) was an early passenger on a special flight, becoming the first member of the British Royal Family to fly by jet. The Comet flew about 50% faster than advanced piston-engined types like the [Douglas DC-6](#) (490 mph for the Comet compared to 315 mph for the DC-6B). The Comet's rate of climb was also far higher, which could cut flight times in half. The Ghost engine was smooth, relatively simple, fuel efficient above 30,000 ft, had low maintenance costs, little vibration and could fly above weather which the competition had to fly through. 30,000 passengers were carried during the first year of service and over 50 Comets were ordered.

[[edit](#)] Early accidents and incidents

On [26 October 1952](#), a [BOAC](#) flight at [Ciampino](#) airport near [Rome, Italy](#) failed to become airborne and several passengers sustained minor injuries. The following March a new [Canadian Pacific Airlines](#) Comet 1A (*CF-CUN*) was being delivered and on takeoff from [Karachi, Pakistan](#) collided with a bridge, killing 11 crew and others on board. Both of these accidents were originally attributed to pilot error: Over-rotation had led to a loss of lift from the leading edge of the plane's wing. However it was later determined that the wing profile led to a loss of lift at high [angle of attack](#), and the engine inlets suffered from a lack a pressure recovery in these conditions as well. The wing leading edge was re-profiled, and a wing fence was added, apparently to control spanwise flow.

The first fatal accident involving passengers was on [2 May 1953](#) when a BOAC Comet 1 (*G-ALYV*) crashed in a severe tropical storm six minutes after taking off from Calcutta Dum Dum (now [Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose International Airport](#)), [India](#).^[6] The break-up sequence began with a stabiliser and may have been exacerbated by over-manipulation of the fully powered flight controls. The [*[citation needed](#)*] Comet 1 and 1A have been criticised for a lack of "feel" in their controls.

[[edit](#)] Comet disasters of 1954

Main article: [South African Airways Flight 201](#)

Main article: [BOAC Flight 781](#)

G-ALYP crashed off the Italian island of [Elba](#) ([BOAC Flight 781](#), 10 January 1954) with the loss of everyone on board. There was no obvious reason for the crash, and the fleet was grounded while the Abell Committee formed to determine potential causes for the crash. The committee focused on six potential problems; control flutter (which had led to the loss of [de Havilland Swallow](#)), structural failure due to high loads or metal fatigue of the wing structure, failure of the powered flight controls, failure of the window panels leading to explosive decompression, or fire and other engine problems. They concluded fire was the most likely cause of the problem, and a number of changes were made to the aircraft to protect the engines and wings from damage which might lead to another fire.^[7]

During this investigation the [Royal Navy](#) conducted recovery operations, including the first use of underwater television cameras. The first wreckage was discovered on 12 January and the search continued until August, by which time 70 percent of the main structure, 80 percent of the power section and 50 percent of the equipment had been recovered. The forensic reconstruction effort was only lately underway when the Abell Committee reported their findings. On 4 April [Lord Brabazon](#) wrote to the Minister of Transport, "Although no definite reason for the accident has been established, modifications are being embodied to cover every possibility that imagination has suggested as a likely cause of the disaster. When these modifications are completed and have been satisfactorily flight tested, the Board sees no reason why passenger services should not be resumed." Comet flights resumed on 23 March 1954.

On 8 April 1954, Comet *G-ALYY*, on charter to South African Airways and on a flight from Rome to Cairo, crashed near Naples. The fleet was immediately grounded once again and a large investigation board was formed under the direction of the [Royal Aircraft Establishment](#).

Engineers subjected an identical airframe (*G-ALYU*) to repeated repressurisation and overpressurisation and after 3057 flight cycles (1221 actual and 1836 simulated) *G-ALYU* failed due to metal fatigue near the front port-side escape hatch.^[8] Investigators began considering fatigue as the most likely cause of both accidents and further research into measurable strain on the skin began. Stress around the window corners was found to be much higher than expected, "probably over 40,000 psi," and stresses on the skin were generally more than previously expected or tested. The principal investigator concluded, "In the light of known properties of the aluminium alloy D.T.D. 546 or 746 of which the skin was made and in accordance with the advice I received from my Assessors, I accept the conclusion of R.A.E. that this is a sufficient explanation of the failure of the cabin skin of Yoke Uncle by fatigue after a small number, namely, 3.060 cycles of pressurisation."^[9]

Before the Elba accident, *G-ALYP* had made 1,290 pressurised flights and at the time of the Naples accident *G-ALYY* had made 900 pressurised flights. Walker said he was not surprised by this, noting that the difference was about 3 to 1 and previous experience with metal fatigue suggested that a total range of 9 to 1 between experiment and outcome in the field could result in failure. Thus, if the tank test result was "typical," aircraft failures could be expected at anywhere from 1000 to 9000 cycles. By then the RAE had reconstructed about two-thirds of *G-ALYP* at [Farnborough](#) and found fatigue crack growth from a rivet hole at the low-drag [fiberglass](#) forward "window" around the [Automatic Direction Finder](#), which had caused a catastrophic breakup of the aircraft in high altitude flight.

The square windows of the Comet 1 were redesigned as oval for the Comet 2, which first flew in 1953. The skin sheeting was thickened slightly. The remaining Comet 1s and 1As were either scrapped or modified with oval window rip-stop doublers and a program to produce a Comet 2 with more powerful [Rolls-Royce Avon](#) engines was delayed. All production Comet 2s were modified to alleviate the fatigue problems and most of these served with the [RAF](#) as the Comet C2. The Comet did not resume commercial airline service until 1958, when the much improved Comet 4 was introduced and became the first jet airliner to enter transatlantic service. The Comet nose section was also used on the Sud-Aviation Caravelle. As is often the case in aeronautical engineering, other aircraft manufacturers learned from and profited by de Havilland's hard-learned lessons.^[*citation needed*]

[\[edit\]](#) Variants

[\[edit\]](#) Comet 1

The square-windowed **Comet 1** was the first model produced. An updated **Comet 1A** was offered and in the wake of the 1954 disasters, some of these were modified as Comet 1XBs with strengthened fuselages and oval windows.

[\[edit\]](#) Comet 2

The Comet 2 had a slightly larger wing, higher fuel capacity and more powerful [Rolls-Royce Avon](#) engines which all improved the aircraft's range and performance. Following the Comet 1 disasters these models were rebuilt with heavier gauge skin and rounded openings. 12 of the 44-seat Comet 2s were ordered by [BOAC](#) for the South Atlantic route and the first production aircraft (*G-AMXA*) flew on [27 August 1953](#). Although these aircraft performed well on the South Atlantic routes, their range was still not suitable for the North Atlantic. All but four Comet 2s were allocated to the RAF. Eight **Comet C2** transport aircraft and two **Comet T2** crew trainers were delivered to the RAF beginning in [1955](#).


- **Comet 2X**: Limited to a single Comet Mk 1 powered by four Rolls-Royce Avon 502 turbojet engines and used as a development aircraft for the Comet 2.
- **Comet 2E**: Two Comet 2 airliners were fitted with Rolls-Royce Avon 504 turbojets in the inner nacelles and Rolls-Royce Avon 524 turbojets in the outer ones. They were used by [BOAC](#) for proving flights during 1957-1958.

[\[edit\]](#) Comet 3

The **Comet 3** was a lengthened Comet 2 with greater capacity and range. After the fatigue accidents orders dwindled and only two Comet 3s were built. One flew and the other was used for structural and technology testing during development of the similarly sized Comet 4. Nine further airframes were not completed and their construction was abandoned at [Hatfield](#).

[\[edit\]](#) Comet 4



Comet 4c showing the  engines built into the wing, and

the safer round windows of these later models

The **Comet 4** was a further improvement on the stretched Comet 3 with even greater fuel capacity. This design had come a long way from the original Comet 1. The aircraft had grown by 5.64 m (18 ft 6 in) and typically seated 74 to 81 passengers compared to the Comet 1's 36 to 44. It had a longer range, higher cruising speed and higher maximum takeoff weight. These improvements were possible largely because of [Rolls-Royce Avon](#) engines with twice the thrust of the Comet 1's [de Havilland Ghosts](#).

BOAC ordered 19 Comet 4s in March 1955 and a Comet 4 (*G-APDA*) first flew on [27 April 1958](#). Deliveries to BOAC began on [30 September 1958](#) with two aircraft. BOAC aircraft *G-APDC* initiated the first trans-atlantic Comet 4 service and the first scheduled trans-Atlantic passenger jet service in history, flying from London to New York with a stopover at [Gander](#) on [4 October 1958](#). Rival [Pan Am](#)'s inaugural 707 service began three weeks later.

[American](#) operator [Capital Airlines](#) ordered four Comet 4s and 4As in July [1956](#). The **Comet 4A** was designed for short-range operations and had a stretched fuselage with short wings (lacking the pinion fuel tanks of the Comet 4). This order was cancelled but the aircraft were built for [British European Airways \(BEA\)](#) as the **Comet 4B** with a further fuselage stretch of 38 inches and seating for 99 passengers. The first Comet 4B (*G-APMA*) flew on [27 June 1959](#) and BEA aircraft *G-APMB* began service on [1 April 1960](#) from Tel Aviv to London-Heathrow.

The last Comet 4 variant was the **Comet 4C** with the same longer fuselage as the Comet 4B coupled with the larger wings and fuel tanks of the original Comet 4, which gave it a longer range than the 4B. The first Comet 4C flew on [31 October 1959](#) and [Mexicana](#) began scheduled Comet 4C flights in 1960. The last two Comet 4C fuselages were used to build prototypes of the [Hawker Siddeley Nimrod](#) maritime patrol aircraft.

[\[edit\]](#) Comet 5 design

The Comet 5 was proposed as an improvement over previous models, including a wider fuselage with five-abreast seating, a wing with greater sweep and pod mounted [Rolls-Royce Conway](#) engines. All of these changes would have led to a configuration similar to the American [Boeing 707](#) and [Douglas DC-8](#). Without support from the [Ministry of Transport](#), none were ever built. The MoT subsequently backed BOAC's order of Conway-powered Boeing 707s.

[\[edit\]](#) Hawker Siddeley Nimrod

Main article: [Hawker Siddeley Nimrod](#)

The last two Comet 4 fuselages produced were modified as protoypes to meet a [British](#) requirement

for a maritime patrol aircraft for the [Royal Air Force](#) designated the HS.801. The aircraft became the [Hawker Siddeley Nimrod](#) and was built at the [Hawker Siddeley](#) factory at [Woodford Aerodrome](#). Entering service in [1969](#) five variants of the Nimrod have been produced with two still in-service and the re-winged re-engined [Nimrod MRA 4](#) due to enter service in [2007](#).

[\[edit\]](#) Production and service summary

The Comet was built at two different de Havilland factories at [Hatfield Aerodrome](#) and [Hawarden Aerodrome](#).

- Comet 1 - 12 built
- Comet 1A - 10 built
- Comet 2 - 15 completed
- Comet 3 - 1 completed
- Comet 4 - 76 built (two as the HS.801)

114 aircraft were completed and flown.

Thirteen aircraft were lost in fatal accidents and of these, five were considered to have been brought about by aircraft design or fatigue problems. The last fatal accident involving the Comet was at [Tripoli, Libya](#) on the [2 January 1971](#), caused by pilot error.

A total of 76 Comet 4 family aircraft were delivered from 1958 to 1964. BOAC retired its Comet 4s from revenue service in 1965 but other operators continued flying Comets in commercial passenger service until 1981. [Dan-Air](#) played a significant role in the fleet's later history and at one time owned all 49 remaining airworthy civil Comets. In 1997 a Comet 4C which had been owned by the British government made the last documented Comet flight.

Although the Comet was the first [jet airliner](#) in regularly scheduled passenger service, the damage done to the aircraft's reputation by the Comet 1 disasters contributed to Boeing's domination of the jetliner market. The first prototype [707](#) was flown in 1954 and [Douglas](#) launched the [DC-8](#) program in 1955. For a brief period the Soviet Union's [Tupolev Tu-104](#) was the only jet airliner flying commercially.

Both the 707 and DC-8 had more marketable ranges and passenger accommodations than the Comet. American manufacturers also benefited from a very large domestic airline market and US aircraft manufacturers have enjoyed a large share of the commercial jetliner market for half a century. Their only significant competition came later from the [Airbus](#) consortium although [Tupolev](#) still nominally manufactures jet airliners, namely the [Tu-204](#).

Twenty-four airlines flew the Comet and it remained in passenger service for almost three decades, until [1981](#). Designed over 50 years earlier at the beginning of the jet age, a variant of the Comet flying with modern avionics is still in service with the [Royal Air Force](#).

[\[edit\]](#) Preserved aircraft

Comet 1

- The only complete surviving Comet 1 is a Comet 1XB on display at the [RAF Museum Cosford](#), painted in [BOAC](#) colours with the registration [G-APAS](#), although it never flew for that airline, having been delivered to [Air France](#) and then to the [Ministry of Supply](#) after conversion to 1XB standard.
- The nose of BOAC Comet 1A [G-ANAV](#) is displayed at London's [Science Museum](#), while the fuselage of Air France Comet 1A *F-BGNX* is preserved at the [De Havilland Aircraft Heritage Centre](#) in [Hertfordshire](#).

Comet 2

- Comet C2 "Sagittarius" (serial *XK699*, later maintenance serial *7971M*) is displayed at the gate of [RAF Lyneham](#) in [Wiltshire](#). Lyneham was previously the operational base for all RAF operated Comets.

Comet 4

- Comet 4B (Registration [G-APYD](#)) is stored at the [Science Museum](#) facility at [Wroughton, Wiltshire](#).
- Comet 4C (Registration [N888WA](#)) is being restored and on display in [Mexicana](#) livery at the restoration facility of the [Museum of Flight](#) at Paine Field next to Boeing's Everett WA widebody plant.
- Comet 4C (Registration [N777WA](#)) is on display at the [Parque Zoológico Irapuato](#) in Mexico.
- Comet 4 (Registration [G-APDB](#)) is on display at the [Imperial War Museum](#) in Duxford, England. The plane is in [Dan-Air](#) colours as part of the Flight Line Display and is available for touring inside at specific times.
- Comet 4C (Registration [G-BDIW](#)) is on display at the [Flugausstellung Leo Junior](#) at [Hermeskeil](#), Germany in Dan-Air colours.
- Comet 4C (Registration [G-BDIX](#)) is on display at the [Museum of Flight](#) at East Fortune near [Edinburgh, Scotland](#) in Dan-Air livery.
- The last Comet to fly was *Canopus* (Serial XS235) which is kept in running condition at [Bruntingthorpe Aerodrome](#) where it regularly conducts fast taxi runs. There is a campaign to return *Canopus* to flight, with the current goal to have it in the air by the 50th anniversary of the first regular transatlantic jet service which started on [4 October 1958](#).

[\[edit\]](#) Operators

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- [BEA Airtours](#)
- [British European Airways \(BEA\)](#)
- [British Overseas Airways Corporation \(BOAC\)](#)
- [Channel Airways](#)
- [Dan Air](#)

[United States](#)

- [Capital Airlines](#) (Ordered but none actually operated by CA)

[\[edit\]](#) **Military operators**

[Canada](#)

- [Royal Canadian Air Force](#)
 - [412 Squadron](#) (1953-1963) Comet 1A (later retrofitted to 1XB)

[United Kingdom](#)

- [Royal Air Force](#)
 - [51 Squadron](#) (1958-1975) Comet C2 (RC)
 - [192 Squadron](#) (1957-1958) Comet C2 (RC)
 - [216 Squadron](#) (1956-1975) Comet C2 and C4
- [Royal Aircraft Establishment](#)

[\[edit\]](#) Specifications (Comet 4)

General characteristics

- **Crew:** 4
- **Capacity:** 56-109 passengers
- **Length:** 34 m (112 ft)
- **[Wingspan](#):** 35 m (115 ft)
- **Height:** 9 m (30 ft)
- **Wing area:** 2,120 ft² (197 m²)
- **[Airfoil](#):** [NACA 63A116 mod](#) root, NACA 63A112 mod tip
- **Empty weight:** 75,400 lb (34,200 kg)
- **Loaded weight:** 162,000 lb (73,470 kg)
- **Powerplant:** 4× [Rolls-Royce Avon](#) Mk 524 [turbojets](#), 10,500 lbf (46.8 kN) each

Performance

- **[Maximum speed](#):** 500 mph (430 knots, 810 km/h)
- **[Range](#):** 2,800 nm (3,225 mi, 5,190 km)
- **[Service ceiling](#):** 40,000 ft (12,000 m)

[\[edit\]](#) References

- [^] Jackson 1988
- [^] Winchester 2004, p. 109. Note: The limited production Boeing 307 Stratoliner and later Model 377 Stratocruiser were pressurized propeller-driven airliners.
- [^] Davies and Birtles 1999, p. 30.
- [^] Davies and Birtles, p. 30.

5. [^] [Davies and Birtles](#), p. 30.
 6. [^] [Darling 2005](#), p.36.
 7. [^] [Report of the Public Inquiry into the causes and circumstances of the accident which occurred on the 10 January, 1954, to the Comet aircraft G-ALYP, Part IX \(d\)](#)
 8. [^] [RAF Museum](#)
 9. [^] [Report of the Public Inquiry into the causes and circumstances of the accident which occurred on the 10 January, 1954, to the Comet aircraft G-ALYP, Part XI \(a. 69\)](#)
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- [Terrible accidents involving De Havilland Comet](#)
- [Marc Schaeffer's Comet Website](#)
- [David Young's Comet Website](#)
- [Campaign to return Canopus to flight](#)
- [Report on test Comet G-ALYR fatigue failures](#)

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- [•Norsk \(bokmål\)•](#)



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