

## Twentieth century postal stationery Part 6: Elizabeth II decimal issues by Colin Baker

The 1970s saw not just the conversion to decimal currency, but also a radical change in the range and availability of postal stationery. Although some items such as stamped envelopes and aerogrammes continue to be sold to this day, others have disappeared after more than a century of use, to be replaced by new products and ideas designed for today's postal needs.

Decimal currency fully came into use on 15 February 1971, along with yet another increase in postal rates. There was a 12 month transition period during which pre-decimal stationery remained valid, uprated as necessary with adhesive stamps. From 1 March 1972 these were demonetised and stationery impressed with pre-decimal stamps could no longer be used for postal purposes.

The use of phosphor bands in the handling of mail is as important today as it was nearly 30 years ago when they were first printed onto stationery. All items of stationery which can be handled automatically continue to carry one or two phosphor bands according to the class of service chosen.

**The ever popular envelope** From the beginning of this period the use of both 1st and 2nd class stationery envelopes remained popular with the public, the only headache facing the PO being the almost annual rise in postage rates requiring the uprating of existing stocks and the production of new issues in revised values. This eventually led the PO to introduce Non Value Indicator (NVI) stamps, which merely showed that postage had been prepaid rather than bearing a stamp of a specific value. This system avoided uprating or unnecessary wastage. Any loss of revenue following a rate increase, when items purchased at the old price were used at the new rate, was more than offset by other savings.

In 1971 the new decimal envelopes issued by the PO used the same octagonal stamp developed in the late 1960s. This incorporated The Queen's portrait based on the bust by Arnold Machin, framed on each side by the word POSTAGE, with the value in figures set at the bottom of the design. With the increase in postage rates in June 1974, the PO ceased printing embossed stamps, the hand-engraved dies taking too long to produce. From then on the aniline printing process was used.

**Aerogrammes** Following the introduction of decimal currency, the PO continued to use both the international word 'aerogramme' as well as their original term 'air letter' to describe this type of stationery. It was not until 1982, that the term 'air letter' was finally dropped in favour of 'aerogramme'. In keeping with this development, aerogramme will be used for this final section on 20th century stationery.

The advent of decimal currency required little change to be made to the layout of aerogrammes. Even the standard issue retained the same stamp design proudly displaying Britain's VC10 airliner, but revised to show

**Opposite** The registered envelope (far left) issued with the international title 'Recommandé' for overseas use. Illustrated aerogramme (right) for the centenary of Rowland Hill's death in 1879. Subsequent commemorative aerogrammes followed the A4 format. The much larger post-note (top) replaced the lettercard in 1982 and was the first item of stationery to carry a non value indicator stamp.



**Above** The embossed stamp used for envelopes between 1971 and 1974, and (below) the letterpress version used on postcards and lettercards.

the postage rate in decimal currency.

As the early years of decimal currency passed, so more commemorative issues began to appear. The annual Christmas aerogrammes settled into a familiar routine, with their stamps complementing the aerogramme's main theme, often reflecting the design of the adhesive issues but always different from them. Other issues appeared at other times of the year promoting events and anniversaries in Scotland and Wales. In addition there were special issues for Royal occasions and other, such as the centenary of the death of Sir Rowland Hill (1979).

But it is the Scottish issues that have provided a wealth of material over the years, with more than 40 different designs. In 1989 the rest of the country started to catch up when sets of different pictorial aerogrammes were put on sale in packs of six. All these issues, amounting to more than 100 in total, provide a worthwhile area for specialist study.

The aerogramme has always been a popular medium for high speed correspondence overseas and looks set to remain so for the foreseeable future.

**Some losses, some gains** The stationery postcard, which started life as a cheap and easy message carrier, ended its days as a drab item which was not heavily used, but which seemed reluctant to leave the scene. In the early decimal period the PO continued to issue postcards for both 1st and 2nd class mail, changing stamp values and phosphor bands almost every year. However 2nd class postcards were not popular and from 1974 only 1st class cards were sold. For the 1979 rate rise, no cards were issued, but suddenly in 1980 a 1st class postcard appeared again. However, this was the final issue and with the next postage rate increase in 1981 the stamped inland postcard finally passed into history.

Over the same period the PO also issued lettercards which had to be impressed with 14 different values of stamps, four of which were also printed with either one or two phosphor bands for both 1st and 2nd class mail. The need to issue such a large number of different values, coupled with the lack of demand for lettercards, led to their demise.

Following a further increase in rates in on 1 February 1982, they were discontinued, to be replaced by the Postnote.

The Postnote was made from a heavyweight paper, A4 in size, which was folded into three and sealed with gummed flaps. It was larger than the lettercard and gave much more space for correspondence. The PO avoided previous problems of rate increase by the use of a 1st class indicator stamp, the first items of stationery to carry this type of stamp. Therefore these, and all stationery which is similarly impressed with NV1 stamps, are as equally valid for sending through the post today as when they were originally issued.

**Changes to registered envelopes** The first decimal currency registered envelopes gave rise to the only combination of stamps of both currencies printed on the same item. The issue of the 3s 5d plus 'EXTRA 6p PAID'

envelope was made to uprate old pre-decimal stock and to avoid unnecessary waste. In later years registered envelopes in decimal currency were also printed with the 'EXTRA PAID' device for similar reasons.

Eventually, keeping up with the ever increasing rises in registration fees and postage rates forced the PO to extend the NV1 stamp system to this range of stationery in 1986. However, in 1993 these envelopes were replaced by Priority Service and Registered Plus envelopes which now provide a guaranteed 'next day' delivery with the added bonus that they can be tracked across the country by a simple bar code system.

From their introduction in 1878, registered envelopes had always been manufactured with a scrim lining for extra strength. By 1974 a new stronger paper had been developed allowing the PO to change to this new material while at the same time effecting a saving in manufacturing costs of about £50,000 a year.

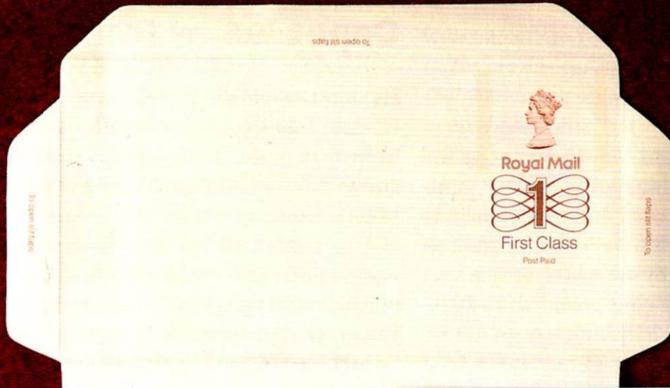
In addition to ending some of stationery's old favourites, the PO have also introduced entirely new products. Air Cards were first put on sale in March 1993. Intended mainly for the tourist trade, they carry the International Indicator stamp and airmail etiquette and are suitable for posting to anywhere in the world. Later in the same year two further sets of prepaid Air Cards were issued, five showing London scenes and five Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick Castle.

Specially prepared Air Packs for sending small packages overseas by airmail went on sale in 1990. They were initially released in two trial areas, but later, having proved popular, became available countrywide. Swift Packs were first released in 1987 to provide an express airmail service to overseas destinations. The latest addition to the range the International Priority Service envelope, manufactured in a 'plastic' material, as are the latest issues of Swift Packs, and the large size Air Packs.

**The future** Over the last 150 years postal stationery has developed and adapted to the needs of the day. Although not nearly so popular now as in the past, it continues to provide an essential service. The future is always difficult to predict, but no doubt postal stationery will continue to fill that important gap between commercial mail posted in bulk and other mail prepaid by adhesive and franked stamps. No doubt it will continue to develop and cater for special services as the need arises.

From a philatelic point of view, collecting postal stationery has steadily been gaining in popularity over the years, with all indications pointing to it becoming more popular in the future. Let us hope this is the case, for it was intended right from the beginning in 1840 that postal stationery be the public's chosen method of prepaying postage. It is only fitting that it should also be the philatelists' first choice today ●

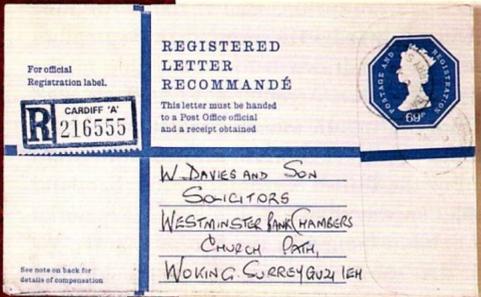
This completes this present series of articles by Mr Baker. A new series on non-post office postal stationery begins later in the year. Ed



Name and address of sender

Postcode

UK Postage payable to 613g



FIRST FOLD HERE

Sender's name, address and post code



An air letter should not contain any enclosure; if it does it may be surcharged or sent by ordinary mail

Designed by Clive Abbot  
Printed by McCroneQuade Printers Limited for the British Post Office

**Come to London for the 1980 Philatelic Exhibition**

SECOND FOLD HERE

BY AIR MAIL AIR LETTER  
PAR AVION AEROGamme

**SIR ROWLAND HILL  
CENTENARY 1979**



Creator of the Uniform Penny Post

TO OPEN SLIT HERE

