

The History of the Aerogramme and the Start of Commercial Air Mail — Part Two

The First Air Mail Letter Card

Sir Samuel Hoare, told the Imperial Conference of 1926 that 'No one can fail to be impressed with the great future which awaits civil aviation in the British Empire and with the benefits, both political and commercial, which should follow on the development of a complete system of Imperial air routes'.

Imperial Airways quickly followed this lead by turning towards the Empire-linking routes and it was fully committed in this direction by 1928. The Eastwards routes towards India, Malaya and, ultimately, Australia and New Zealand was certainly the most significant in terms of both trade and defence.

In 1926, Imperial Airways had completed preparations for an extension of their air service from Baghdad to Basra and from there down the Persian Gulf to India.

Letters were accepted for airmail transmission to Basra at 3d per oz, and to India at 6d per oz, as from 6 January 1927. Mail had to proceed by steamer from Basra onwards until 1929, when permission was obtained to fly along the southern coast of Persia.

30 March 1929, was the day Imperial Airways inaugurated the first through air mail service between London and Karachi. The route was London-Basle by air. Mussolini would not allow aircraft to enter Italy from France and as airliners of the time could not manage the alternative flight over the Alps, there was a rail link from Basle to Genoa. From there by air to Athens, Tobruk, Alexandria, Gaza, Baghdad, Basra, Jask, Gwadar and Karachi, where the first mail from England arrived on 6 April.

The air fees varied from 2½d per half oz for letters destined for Egypt and Palestine to 6d per half oz for the Gulf Ports and India.

From the start it was essential, if a maximum number of communications were to be carried by aircraft which had marginal payload on long-range flights, that a small, lightweight letter form should be provided.

On 29 June, 1930, Guatemala issued the world's first 'philatelic' Air Letter Sheet. This Official Air Letter was issued by the Post

Office Department to announce a new interior air mail service. On the back panel is an outline drawing of a high wing monoplane and the whole of the interior (correspondence) side describes in Spanish the reason for the introduction of the Air Letter and its postal rates to various parts of the world, for which six simulated air mail stamps pictured on the front were contemplated. Only the 6c value was ever issued and the Air Letter had no franking value.

During 1932 Air Orient performed experimental flights to discover the feasibility of changing their Far East terminal from Saigon to Hanoi. At the same time the Aerial Transport Company of Siam was planning to operate an air service from Rangoon to Hong Kong, in conjunction with the Far Eastern Aviation Co Limited. The Siamese company was to be responsible for the Rangoon-Hanoi sector, and the Far Eastern for that from Hanoi to Hong Kong.

In August 1932, a lightweight form bearing the name 'Air O Gram' was devised by Mr R B Jackson of the Aerial Transport Company of Siam, for use on the Air Orient services between the Far East and Europe. Adhesive postage stamps had to be added to these forms which did not come into general use until early the following year.

In August 1933, Air Orient was merged with other French airlines into a state-controlled group, which later became known as Air France.

We are so familiar with services we use that we seldom wonder how or why they originated in their present form.

Under the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, Turkey renounced its sovereignty over Iraq (Mesopotamia); a Mandate for the territory had been awarded to Britain by the Supreme Allied Council at San Remo in April 1920; consequently, British personnel were in key positions. This explains why the Inspector General of Posts and Telegraphs, and the Director of Civil Aviation was a Britisher.

Mr Douglas William Gumbley, CBE, ISO

(1880-1973), was employed by the Iraq Government as their Inspector General of Posts and Telegraphs. Normal letters, carried overland, being of varying weight and dimensions, seemed likely to be much too expensive in those days for mass use by newly developing air services in the Middle East. Mr Gumbley realized the need for a light-weight form of specific size and weight.

For this purpose he designed and had printed by Bradbury Wilkinson & Co Limited, an Air Mail Letter Card. The British Air Letter form commonly in use until 1968, was almost identical in format and size.

The Air Mail Letter Card, weighing just under four grammes was registered at Stationer's Hall in London on 15 February 1933 under Mr Gumbley's own copyright.

The impressed 15 Fils stamp (3d) on the world's first printed Air Mail Letter Card issued on 15 June 1933, shows King Faisal, who had been elected King of Iraq in August 1921.

PETER JENNINGS

Book Reviews

Catalogue of RAF Museum and RAF Escaping Society Flown Covers— 1975 Edition

The Royal Air Force Museum Series of Flown Covers was born from ideas conceived by two serving Officers at the Ministry of Defence during the last half of 1968 as a project to raise money for the planned Museum at Hendon. The original forerunner, commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the first Regular Passenger and Cargo Service between London and Paris, was flown on 10 January 1969 and since that date no fewer than 154 Flown Covers have been produced.

The aircraft depicted and the events commemorated have spanned the whole history of the Royal Air Force and some notable Civil Aviation milestones—Covers have featured the DH4, Bristol Boxkite and Maurice Farman Shorthorn among the 'earlies' to the Harrier, Jaguar and MRCA of the 'moderns'; events commemorated have

ranged from the epic Atlantic 'first' by Alcock and Brown to the 10th Anniversary of the Red Arrow. Covers have been flown in Spitfires and Hurricanes and also in Concorde: they have become Rocket Mail and have been dropped by Parachute, and in one case the mailbag in which they were being returned to England fell off the German Post Office sling and dropped into Bremerhaven harbour. Philatelic 'firsts' were achieved when Covers were carried on the maiden flights of both MRCA and Hawk.

All these Covers have been photographed and the events described in the *Reference Book and Catalogue of Royal Air Force Museums and Royal Air Forces Escaping Society Flown Covers* published by the Museum. The Book has been produced to meet the large demand, from a growing number of Private and Service collectors, for an authentic reference book of the Covers. The layout has been standardised in an easy format, the top half of each page being a photographic reproduction of the 'Standard' Cover. Below is information on the Backstamps, Number Issued, Approved Varieties and Catalogue Values together with some interesting background notes.

The Covers appear in three basic formats, although some have additional variations. The Standard Cover, making up the greater part of the Issue numbers, has a cachet giving details of the Special Flight on which it was carried. A proportion are then signed by the Pilot or Captain of the aircraft, and a Variety is produced in limited numbers which may have had special handling and will be signed by an eminent personality connected with the event. Such signatories have included His Majesty King Hussein of Jordan, Rt Hon Roy Mason MP and Service Chiefs such as Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, Viscount Montgomery, Earl Mountbatten and Lord Portal.

A glance through the pages will show that the stamps used have included many of the definitives, commemoratives and regionals issued in the period, with a bias towards