

## British air letters

In the first part of his new series, Colin Baker looks at definitive issues

In this four-part article I will look at the history of the air letter, its development and over the last few years its declining popularity. Of course air letters are still available at all post offices, but there have been no new issues for several years. Even the popular Christmas air letter has not been redesigned, the 2006 version being re-issued in 2007 and 2008.

THE NAME 'AIR LETTER' describes the item quite well, but they have not always been called that. The world's first air letter was called an 'air mail letter sheet', a name that Britain adopted for its first unstamped issue in 1941. However, with the issue of a postal stationery air letter in 1943, the

name was changed to 'air letter'. The revision to the design of air letters at the start of our present Queen's reign saw 'aerogramme' added beneath the 'air mail' etiquette. The etiquette is the design on the left-hand side, showing that the item is to go by air, and not by surface transport. In 1986, with a further change to the layout of the air letter, its name was altered for the fourth time, to 'aerogramme'. No mention was made of the term 'air letter'. But in 2000 Royal Mail had a change of heart, and reinstated 'air letter' as the accepted name for the item, 'aerogramme' being dropped altogether. This revision has remained unchanged up to the present day.

Air mail routes were gradually developed around the world, both for internal mails and for those crossing borders and continents. Although much faster than surface mail, air mail was an expensive way to send a letter, and was not for the average correspondent.

**The need for air mail** Throughout history, civilisations have wanted to speed up the carrying of messages. At first, teams of runners would carry letters in stages, passing it from one messenger to another along the chain, rather like passing the baton in relay races of today. Later, horses were utilised to operate in relays in much the same fashion. They were much faster, and able to cover longer distances, which speeded up the delivery of mail. The most famous route served by such teams of horses and expert riders was the American Pony Express, operating from California in the 1860s. But despite this increase in speed, it was still not fast enough.

Birds could fly long distances, in a straight line and at a much faster rate than man or beasts. One problem with using them was that they could not be trained or controlled, except in the case of homing pigeons. Useful as these birds were, they could only be relied upon to return to their home base and had to be taken out to the mail despatch point before every trip. The other problem was the little weight they could carry. Messages would be stored in a tube attached to their legs. Flimsy, lightweight paper was used for the messages at first, until microfilming was developed in the late 1860s and used to great effect during the siege of Paris in 1870.

With these problems before him, man realised he needed to be able to carry the mails himself. Balloons were tried, but were only partly successful when the wind was in the right direction, and the weather was good enough for the pilot to see where he was going. Many a balloon was lost, or ended up in totally the wrong place, making the mail even slower to reach its destination.



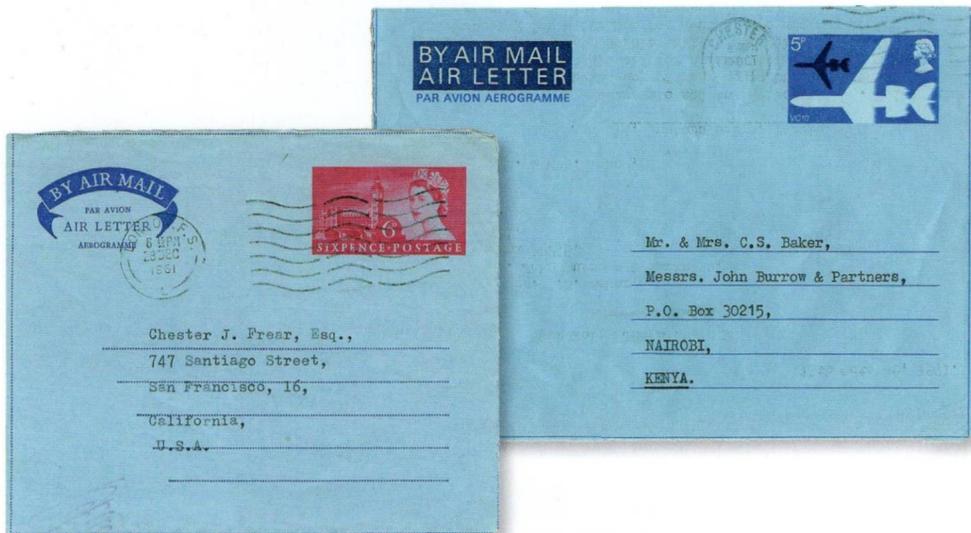


It was not until powered flight was developed at the beginning of the 20th century that sending letters by air became a real possibility. Early aircraft were fragile and unreliable, and could travel only relatively short distances. Despite these drawbacks, the first air mail flight took place in India, on 18 February 1911 near the city of Allahabad when a Humber Sommer biplane carried 6,500 letters and cards. Later that year on 9 September the first UK air mail service was run between Hendon and Windsor. Over the next few days thousands of special cards were carried, and King George V gave permission for the aircraft to land in the grounds of Windsor Castle.

**The first air letter** The idea of providing a much cheaper method of sending letters by air did not come from one of the large postal administrations in Europe, or from a country where distances were a problem. It was Iraq that pioneered cheap air mail. Their Inspector-General of Posts and Telegraphs was Douglas W Gumbley, who was born in Guernsey in 1880. He saw that the way to lower the cost of air mail post was to make letters much lighter, so that many more items of mail could be carried on each flight. He designed a sheet of paper weighing only 4 grams that could be folded into four and sealed with gummed flaps. It was printed with a 15 fils stamp that paid the air mail postage and was issued on 15 July 1933. Even though they were printed on thin paper, he called them air mail letter cards, the name used by the British Post Office for their first issue of air letters.

Great Britain was slow to adopt this design of air letter. It was not until families separated during the Second World War demanded cheap, rapid communication, that a British air mail letter card was introduced. At first they were available only to service personnel in North Africa and the Middle East, and were issued unstamped. Those in Britain had to pay full air mail postage, or allow several weeks for letters to be delivered by surface mail. Eventually the air mail letter card was made available in Britain, an

From left: the world's first air letter, issued by Iraq in 1933; the unstamped British air mail letter card used by our forces in the Middle East from 1941; and the first civilian air letter which could be used to many countries around the world, issued in 1943.



Left: the new stamp design introduced for air letters in 1957, featuring Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. Right: an air letter bearing a new stamp featuring Britain's VC10 aeroplane, introduced in 1968, and continued after decimalisation in 1971.

unstamped version being released in December 1942. The postage on these was 6d. The stamped version followed the next year in June 1943, with the name being changed to air letter. It became the first of many different types of postal stationery air letters to be issued in Great Britain.

Air letters followed a simple format. In the beginning they were approximately 201 × 246mm excluding their sealing flaps, folded into four to give 1½ sides to write a message. The paper used for the first issues was very thin and the two exposed sides were printed with a blue-grey overlay to prevent the ink from showing through. By 1950 better quality paper was available and the printed overlay was no longer needed.

The first Queen Elizabeth issues were very similar to those of her father's reign, but in 1968 a new layout was used incorporating a 9d stamp with a design based on Britain's VC10 airliner. These air letters were folded into three rather than four and appeared larger. In fact they were 150 × 316mm and had about 15% less writing area than the first issues.

**New layouts and sizes** This revised layout continued for about seven years with only minor changes to the text and layout but with price increases due to the steady rise in inflation. In 1972 a new stamp design was introduced featuring the Machin head, with a value set near the base of the neck. This was very similar in design to the definitive adhesive stamps. The new air letter was larger than the 1968 issue, at 209 × 296mm, and had an increased writing area of about 14% compared with the very first air letters.

Both sizes of air letter were available from 1972 to 1980, the larger size costing an extra ½p. With the next price increase in 1981 only the larger size was issued. At the same time a red and blue diagonally banded border was added making it easy in the sorting offices to identify them as mail to go by air. However from 2004 only the left-hand edge of the address side has been printed with this identifying strip.

I agor, torrer yma/To open, slit here

I agor, torrer yma/To open, slit here

POST AWYR  
*par awion*  
Post BrenhinolLlythyr Awyr  
AirletterGreat  
Britain  
Postage  
PaidPOST AWYR  
*par awion*  
Post BrenhinolLlythyr Awyr  
AirletterGreat  
Britain  
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From the 1970s there were many changes to the postage rates for air letters. This meant they had to be reprinted every other year simply because of price rises. It was a wasteful process and it finally prompted the Post Office to introduce air letters in 1986 that carried a non value indicator (NVI) stamp. These never go out of date, and although they were sold at the rate applicable at the time of their sale, they can still be used to anywhere in the world today.

Other changes have taken place in the last few years. From 1998 separate air letters, including those produced for Christmas, have been issued for sale in Wales, with text in both English and Welsh. However, no bilingual definitive air letters have been issued for Scotland. In 2006 a change was made in the colour of the paper used for air letters. Following a trend set by commemorative issues a few years earlier, all definitive issues of air letters from 2006 to the present day have been printed on white paper.

There have also been many changes to the air mail etiquette over the years. These are the designs in the top left corner of the address panels that show the item should be despatched by air. They have changed from the simple 'By Air Mail' boxes of 1943 to the bilingual versions used today. Various Royal Mail logos have also been added to the front panels on the left of the address lines. These have changed over the years, and at times have also included bilingual versions.

Finally, in this overview of the definitive air letter, it is worth looking for a small star, which from 1988 has been printed on one of the sealing flaps. This indicates that the air letters have come from discounted packs of five or six. It is there as a deterrent to PO staff not to break up discounted packs and sell them at their full face value.

I doubt that this is the end of the story of the definitive air letter, as I am sure it will continue for many years, despite the email and texting facilities we all use. It will be interesting to see what is the next development ●

Air letters with English and Welsh text were introduced in 1998. Since 2006 all definitive issues of air letters have been printed on white paper.