

Twentieth Century Postal Stationery

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Part 4. George VI

King George VI's reign began in a time of peace and hope, but just like his father's period before him, it took only a few short years before war once again ravaged Europe, pushing up postage rates and creating difficulties of supply and distribution. This time British Forces were scattered over the whole world and the Post Office was forced to review both the cost and the means of sending mail overseas.

New Stamps for a New King George

At the beginning of George VI's reign it seemed that only redesigned stationery stamps were needed, incorporating the new King's head for the same values as those used for George V. Embossed stamps in ½d and 1½d values were prepared for PO envelopes with 1d and 1½d letterpress stamps produced for postcards and lettercards. Newspaper wrappers were never issued as the rapidly reducing demand for these did not merit their continued production. When supplies of stamped wrappers from the George V

period ran out, the public were expected to use plain wrappers with adhesive stamps.

The embossed stamps prepared for the range of envelopes produced by the PO were very similar in design to the previous issue, the laurel branches being replaced by doves of peace, reminiscent of the 2d value of the earlier reign, only the 2½d stamp varying from this theme and the only embossed stamp in the whole range to have no embellishments at all.

George VI envelopes in ½d and 1½d values were released early in 1939. The design of the new impressed stamps used the same head as that prepared for their adhesive counterparts issued in 1937. Once again the designs for the impressed stamps had to be modified to suit the letterpress process. The King's head, which had been drawn by Edmund Dulac (1882-1953), was set in an oval frame designed by Eric Gill (1882-1940). Unlike the previous George V issues, the value of these new stamps was only given in figures, with the single word POSTAGE set at the bottom of the frame.

The outbreak of War in September 1939 forced up postage rates and on 6 May 1940, exactly 100 years after the introduction of adhesive stamps and postal stationery, the letter rate was raised to 2½d, printed papers to 1d, and *The 1939 envelope for printed papers. This had a short life, being superseded about a year later following the postage rate increases of May 1940.*



postcards to 2d.

As in the George V period of rising postage rates, dies in the new values of 1d and 2½d were already available, having been used for privately stamped stationery. Envelopes in these new values were soon on sale, although due to wartime conditions, those for the printed paper rate had a short life. The letter rate envelope also suffered, with both the quality and weight of the paper becoming progressively worse as the war dragged on.

Yet again the colour of the 2½d letter rate stamp failed to meet the UPU agreed colour scheme, this time being printed in blue, the colour reserved for the overseas letter rate. It was not until 1957 with the issue of revised colours that British stationery fell into line again when envelopes and lettercards carried a 2½d crimson stamp and unsealed envelopes a green 1½d stamp.

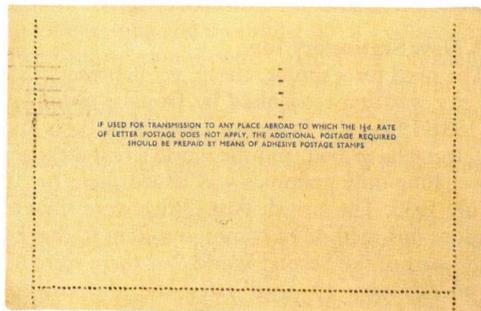
Problems with impressed Stamps

In May 1940 the George VI 2d letterpress stamp was not yet available for printing onto postcards. The PO considered using the 2d George V die, but rejected the idea of employing stamps prepared for a King who had been dead for four years. Although a new 2d die was in the making, there was a shortage of inland postcards and a supply impressed with two 1d stamps was issued. These two stamps had to be printed in separate runs, adding to the difficulties of preparing the cards and also to production costs, a fact that did not please the PO.

Fortunately the new 2d dies were ready shortly after the postage rate increase, enabling postcards with a single 2d stamp, as well as reply cards, to be available from July 1940 onwards.

Early in 1940 the delays in preparing stamp dies for printing on lettercards reflected the same problems which the 2d dies for postcard stamps were experiencing. Finally in March 1940 the lettercard with a 1½d stamp was issued, but in a few short weeks this was made redundant by the rate increases of May 1940. Rather like the 2d postcard stamp, the 2½d letter rate stamp was not ready and a provisional issue of lettercards printed with both the 1½d and 1d stamps was produced.

When at long last the correct value die was ready, lettercards with the new 2½d stamps were issued in such a hurry that the instructions on the reverse still referred to the old postage rate of 1½d. Although similar errors have occurred on other stationery products issued by the PO, this



The 2½d lettercard issued July 1940. Below: the instructions on the first printing which still showed the old rate of 1½d.

is the only occasion when the incorrect postage rate has been printed on the back of a lettercard. Subsequent issues had this error corrected.

In March 1944 and April 1945 special airmail postcards for transmission to Far East Prisoners of War went on sale at 3d and 1½d respectively. By the use of a postcard with its open message, censorship was made easier and it was hoped this would help in their safe delivery. Despite the deliberate use of a postcard, most were not delivered to Prisoners of War although many were safely delivered to refugee and internee camps in the region.

Changes to Registered Envelopes

During the Second World War and in the years that followed the PO faced enormous difficulties in supplying sufficient quantities of registered envelopes. Contracts for the production of these special envelopes were placed with several printers resulting in a large number of different printings and print settings.

During George VI's reign the registered envelope was not only affected by the postage rate increase of 1940, but also by an increase in the basic registration fee from 3d to 4d in 1949

and again to 6d in 1952, each time requiring new combined postage and registration stamps.

In 1940 the PO started to print the envelope selling prices in the box reserved for the registration label. But once again, wartime conditions intervened, and with ever increasing production costs and selling prices, this practice was quickly discontinued.

In May 1949 the PO still held large stocks of the popular G size envelope. The effects of the War continued to be felt and to avoid unnecessary wastage, 1d embossed stamps were added to the flaps of these envelopes to bring them into line with the current postage rates.

A New Stationery Idea

The need for a simple, cheap, yet lightweight air letter was first recognised by Douglas Gumbley (1881-1973), the Inspector General of Posts and Telegraphs in Iraq, and the world's first air letter weighing only grammes was issued there on 15 July 1933. The British Post Office were slow to adopt this method of communication, so that by the start of the Second World War there were no concessionary air mail rates and the cost of sending letters by air was still expensive.

Large numbers of service personnel who were stationed in the Middle and Far East at this time had the choice when writing to their families at home, either to wait months for surface mail to arrive, or to make use of the speedy but expensive airmail service. They naturally clamoured for a much cheaper method of sending letters and the idea of adapting Gumbley's air letter was considered. However, its introduction was slow and spasmodic.



The first stationery air letter for general use. This example has been stamped at the 1s 3d rate since it contained an enclosure.

Initially only limited supplies of unstamped air letters were distributed to forces serving overseas, although generally postage was free. Supplies of air letters gradually increased and their use was extended to other areas, but not to the UK. Plans were made to allow a similar air letter to be sent from this country but at a rate of 6d. Delays occurred in preparing the printing plates and in the meantime an unstamped air letter was released in December 1942. Finally, the postal stationery version was available in the middle of 1943. There was no first day of issue for these air letters, the earliest recorded date of use is 30 June 1943 (see *Bulletin* May 1993, page 221).

The 6d air letter had been preceded in 1941 by an earlier version, but this had only been valid for writing to internees and prisoners of war held in Europe. At 2½d it matched the inland letter rate but was unsealed to allow the contents to be censored on both sides of the channel. The "Prisoner of War Air Mail Lettercard", as it was called by the PO, was ungummed but was provided with a tongue which slipped into a slot in the back of the folded sheet. To prevent any enclosures being included within the air letter it had no sides and could be inspected without being opened out.

By contrast the normal issue 6d air letter issued in 1943 was folded into quarters and sealed by pregummed fold-over flaps, thus ensuring privacy for the writer. These air letters were printed on a blue/grey paper that was so light and thin that an additional overlay was required to prevent the writing showing through to the outside. The 6d rate for air letters was maintained for the remainder of George VI's reign.

In 1948 the Olympic Games were held at Wembley and the opportunity was taken to prepare Britain's first commemorative air letter. This was released on 28 July 1948, and although the only indication of its special significance was the stamp taken from the commemorative set of four adhesive stamps, it is still considered to be the first of a long line of special issues which has continued to this day.

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For further information on early air letters and air mail lettercards see articles by Peter Jennings in the *Bulletin* of June and August 1993, July 1994, and April 1995, also the letter from Tony Edwards in July 1993. Ed.