

Twentieth Century Postal Stationery

COLIN BAKER

Part 5. Elizabeth II Pre-Decimal issues

During the first two decades of Queen Elizabeth II's reign, up to the introduction of decimal currency, the postal service continued to develop, mechanisation gradually taking over the handling of mail. This period also saw a steady rise in postage rates, ending with the longest strike in the history of the PO and covering the transition into decimalisation with its associated issues of new stamps and postal stationery.

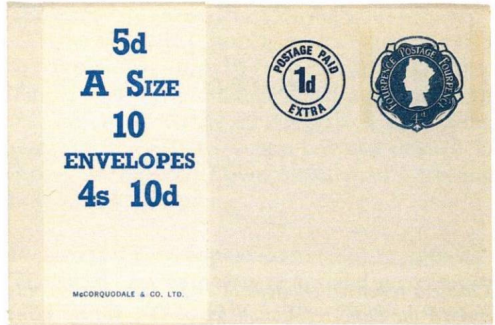
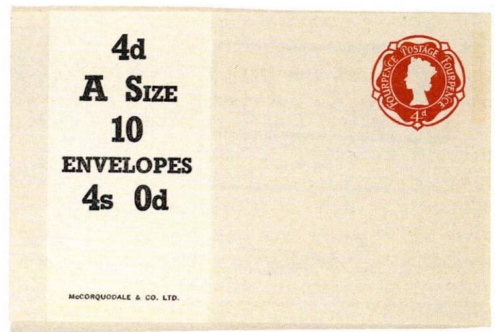
In 1968 the printed paper and postcard rates, which had survived for nearly a century, were replaced by a two-tier system in which mail was given priority treatment according to the service chosen. Postal stationery had to change to keep pace with this development and phosphor bands began to appear on most items of stationery to enable them to be faced and sorted into 1st and 2nd class mail.

Stationery envelopes with the new QEII 2½d embossed stamp first went on sale at the end of November 1954. The bust of Her Majesty, based on the Dorothy Wilding portrait, was encircled by the word POSTAGE and the value in both words and figures, all set within a Tudor rose border. Although this stamp was pleasing to the eye, it did not match the plain design of the letterpress stamp used for postcards and lettercards.

In the late 1960s the stamp for use on envelopes was redesigned by Stuart Rose (1912-93) to incorporate the bust of The Queen by Arnold Machin, set in an octagonal frame. The new stamp was intended to complement the adhesive Machin series, then being issued, but with its eight sided border and the word POSTAGE repeated on each side, it failed to match the simplicity of its adhesive counterpart.

A Simple Stamp Design

The letterpress stamp for postcards and lettercards was designed by John Brinkley using The Queen's profile based on the Dorothy Wilding photograph which was also used in the design of the adhesive stamps. Brinkley's design was graceful and clean omitting the four country emblems, although there was still a simple



The 1969 issue of 1st and 2nd class envelopes in revised colours including wrappings printed with details of selling prices, etc.

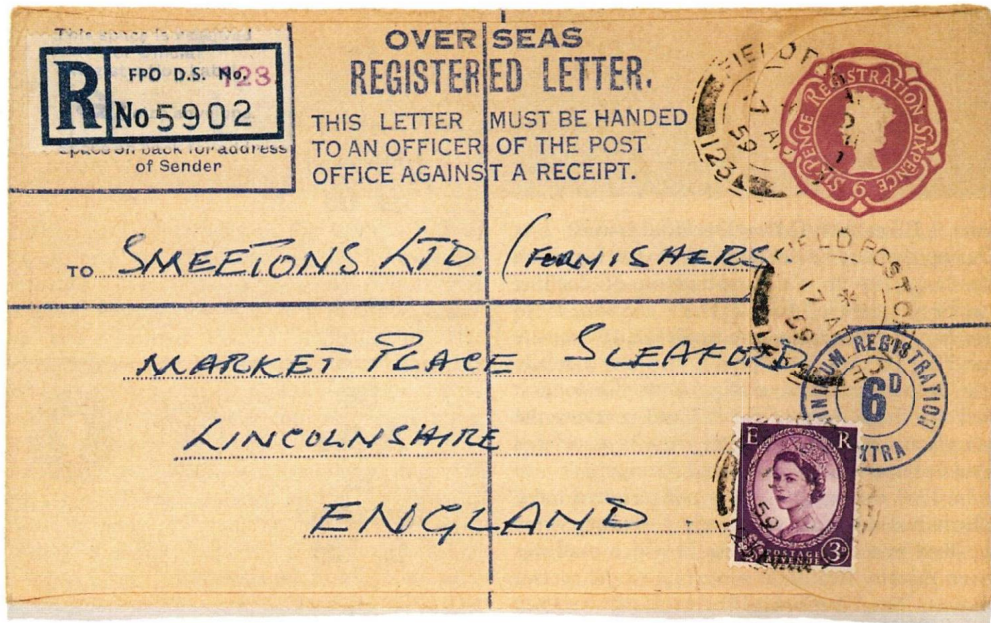
border around three sides of the stamp.

The postcard started this reign with the same Garter arms designed by Garth Jones that had been used for both George V and VI issues before. However, in 1957 the arms were completely redesigned and from then on postcards carried the now familiar arms of our present Queen. When the Post Office became a public corporation rather than a government department, the use of the Royal Arms was no longer applicable and they were gradually removed from all items of postal stationery.

In 1968 Brinkley's design was replaced by a stamp with the words POSTAGE and the stamp's value set away from the new Machin head. This design was prepared so that the value of the stamp could be changed with the least possible effort, although visually, without the restraint of a border, it appeared to spread out from the corner of the card.

Commemorative Air Letters Take Off

Britain's second commemorative air letter was issued to celebrate The Queen's Coronation and was the first item of postal stationery to bear a stamp of her reign. It closely followed the same



Overseas registered envelope of 1957. The stamps only covered the basic registration fee of 1/-, postage being paid by adhesive stamps

format as the George VI air letters, although the airmail device was redesigned and it included the Coronation symbol printed on the face. This large Coronation design, surmounted by the four country emblems, took up most of the front, leaving just enough room for the stamp and address lines.

The 1s. 6d adhesive Coronation stamp by Michael Farrar-Bell (1911-93) was selected for these air letters but inscribed with the new value 6d. The original words POSTAGE-REVENUE across the top had to be changed to POSTAGE-POSTAGE at the insistence of the Inland Revenue, since the

stamp could only be used for postal purposes.

These air letters were printed by McCorquodale and then sent to Harrison and Sons who added the stamp, finally being returned to McCorquodale for cutting and gumming. They were released on 3 June 1953, the previous day having been a public holiday with all post offices being shut. Over the next 18 months the Coronation airmail stamp was used for the normal issue of air letters, although the date of the Coronation was replaced by the value Sixpence and the Coronation symbol on the front was omitted, from January 1955 onwards.

With the Coronation issue came the first faltering step towards accepting the international word "Aerogramme" instead of "Air Letter" for this type of stationery. But for the next 29 years both words were used until 1982 when the term Air Letter was finally dropped.

To mark the 46th Interparliamentary Conference in September 1957 an entirely new stamp appeared on air letters. This was designed by Lynton Lamb (1907-77) and showed the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben. Subsequently the air letters were re-issued without the commemorative overprint. In October 1966, along with other postage increases, the cost of an air letter became 9d and the same stamp was revalued accordingly. This design was retained until July 1968 when it was replaced by David Gentleman's outline of the VC10, a tribute to aircraft design in this country.



Inland postcard with Brinkley's clean design based on the Wilding portrait of HM The Queen. Private overprint for Shakespeare anniversary

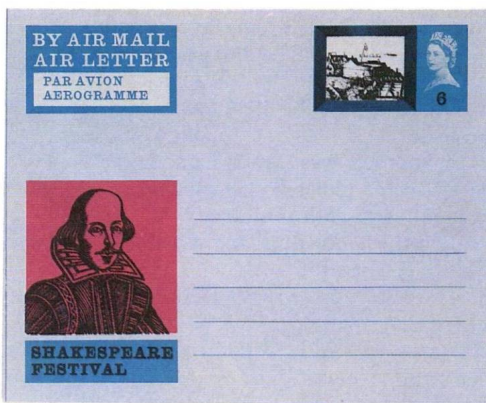


1953 commemorative Air Letter – the first item of stationery to be issued for the present reign

After a gap of six years the PO re-introduced commemorative issues, starting in 1963 when views of Tower Bridge and the Houses of Parliament were printed on otherwise standard 6d air letters. Put on sale at 10d each, this was the first time that air letters had been sold above their face value, a policy subsequently adopted for all subsequent commemorative issues.

Shakespeare errors

The 1964 Shakespeare Festival air letters contained two errors. The Royal Shakespeare Theatre was incorrectly captioned as the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; this was spotted halfway through the print run and the text revised accordingly. The second error appeared in the 6d stamp designed by David Gentleman. It was based on a 17th century engraving of



1964 Air Letter celebrating the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth. The stamp shows the Hope theatre and not the Globe as labelled

London by Hollar in which he transposed the names of the Globe and Hope theatres. The PO did not attempt to correct this error since they considered that the engraving was so well known that a subsequent issue was not justified.

The first Christmas air letters appeared in 1965. The first design included a snowflake in the stamp, complemented by a nativity scene, the second featured stylized snowflakes which were also included in the stamp design. Even though these cost more than the normal air letters, they were still very popular. Christmas air letters have become regular favourites ever since, with different stamp designs appearing until recently.

In 1969 a third special issue commemorated the Investiture of HRH The Prince of Wales. This was Britain's first bilingual air letter, with inscriptions in Welsh and English. It carried the standard 9d air letter stamp but was printed in the top panel with David Gentleman's drawing of Caernavon Castle.

Registered Envelopes

The steady rise in postage rates and increases in registration fees over this period created numerous changes to registered envelopes to the extent that new stamp dies were not always available to meet pending price increases. On several occasions envelopes had to be printed with an additional plain impression reading "Minimum Registration Extra" or "Minimum Extra Postage".

Between 1953 and 1970 the stamp design used for registered envelopes closely followed that impressed on plain envelopes, but with the stamp value and words Registration and Postage crammed around the bust of The Queen within the Tudor rose outline.

In 1970 the same octagonal stamp developed for use on other stationery was redesigned to suit registered envelopes, with new wording and values arranged around the Arnold Machin bust of Her Majesty, all contained within the same octagonal border. However, with more space available in this design, the stamp did not have the same cramped appearance of its predecessor.

The numerous increases in both registration fees and compensation rates gave rise to a number of errors in which information printed on the backs of these envelopes failed to keep pace with the value of stamps on the front. Examples of these errors are not often seen as the mistakes were quickly rectified.

© Colin Baker 1996