

Golden Jubilee of GB Air Letter with Impressed 6d Stamp

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The Golden Jubilee of the first British Air Letter Form with an impressed 6d stamp occurs on 18 June 1993. A Royal Mail International aerogramme with a special 50th anniversary logo, 1943-1993, went on sale at the British Philatelic Bureau, and philatelic counters, on 1 December 1992. The aerogramme is sold singly at 34p, or in packs of six at a discount price of £1.90.

However, one might query the date chosen, because the Air Letter was issued on 18 June 1943, and not 1 December 1942. The first use of the 6d rate on a Great Britain air letter was 7 December 1942. A 6d adhesive stamp had to be affixed to the air letter, which could only be used for corresponding to members of the Forces serving in East Africa. The service was extended to South Africa on 9 April 1943.

Although 18 June 1943 was the official first day of the new air letter with an impressed 6d stamp, the form was not generally available until July. Examples postmarked in late June, do exist.

Big Demand

A letter from the Post Office Controller to the Printers McCorquodale & Co Ltd, at Wolverton, dated 4 September 1942, headed "Air Mail Letter" (Gumbley), gives an insight into GPO thinking at the time: "With reference to previous correspondence and discussions, I have to inform

you that it has been decided to introduce this item within the next few weeks.

"The first supplies are being obtained unstamped through H. M. Stationery Office, but forms printed with a 6d. stamp are to be introduced at the earliest possible moment and their provision is a matter for the Post Office to arrange.

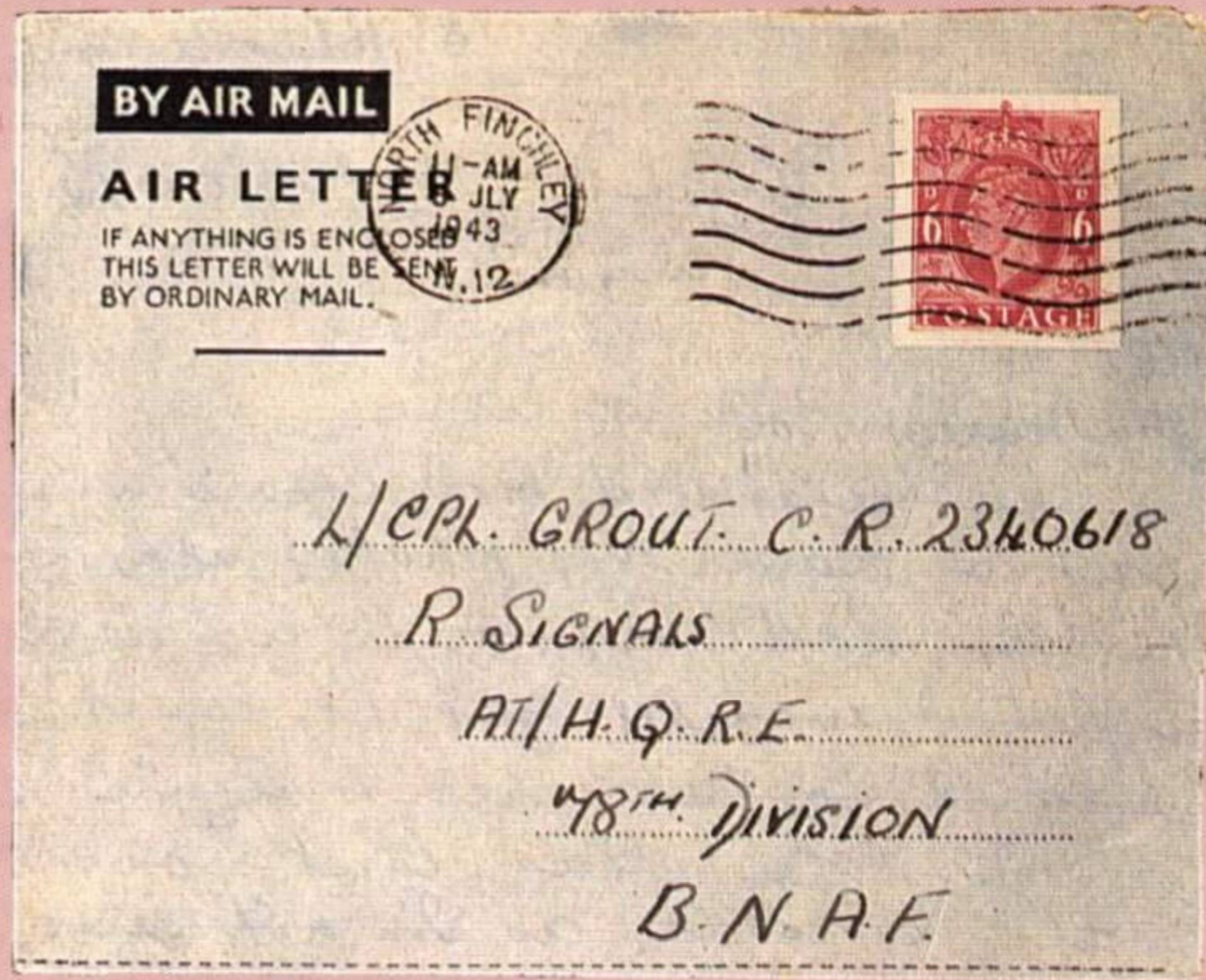
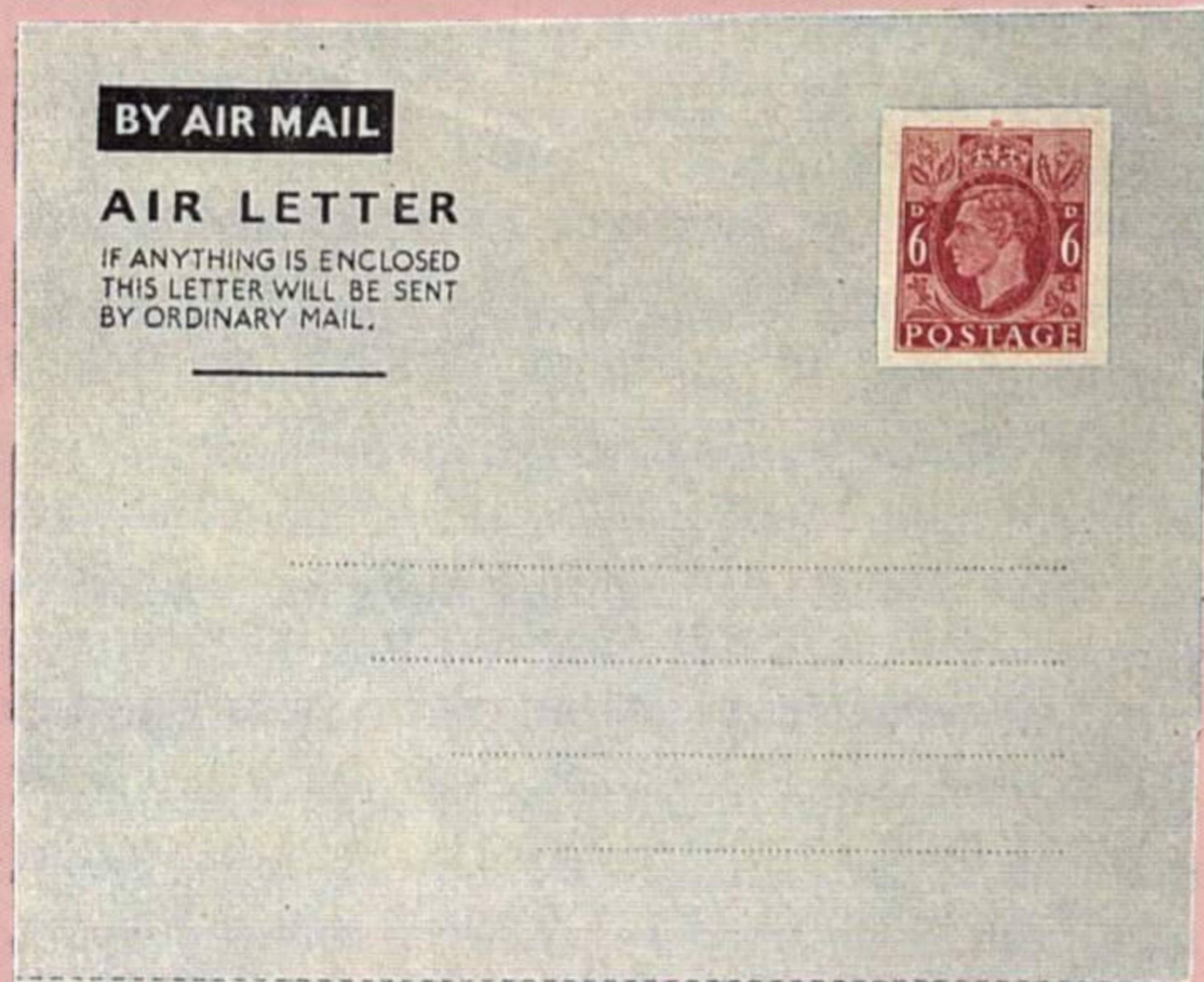
"It is difficult at this stage to estimate the demand for the new form – possibly the initial requirements will be between 1,000,000 – 1,500,000 per week."

The first order on Post Office Warrant for Air Letters, No 163, dated 21 December 1942, was for 500,000 packets of 40 forms. The proofs were approved on 18 January 1943.

The forms were printed by McCorquodales at their Post Office Works in Wolverton, on various letterpress machines, using metal plates, including the sheet fed Wharfedale flatbeds, and reel fed Timsons Rotary, and the old Postal Order machine.

Pure Gum Arabic adhesive was applied to the form before it was cut to shape on a Pellet Gumming machine, originally designed to produce envelope shapes. It was a slow process because the operator had to apply hand pressure to the top of a stack of air letters, and any uneven pressure produced an uneven width of gum.

The Post Office requirements for the new air



letter form soon outstripped the gumming capability of the Post Office Works, which transferred work to McCorquodale's Envelope Factory at Wolverton, and the Newton-le-Willows factory. The impressed 6d stamp was printed at the same time as the form on the reel fed Rotary machines, while on the flatbed machines it was a separate operation.

Early Use

The air letter illustrated in this article was postmarked in London on 6 July 1943. Part of the letter addressed to Lance Corporal C. R. Grout, 2340618, from his wife Jo, (reproduced with her permission), reads "Did you notice the difference in this airgraph? The stamp is now part of the actual letter. It is not stuck on like it used to be. I expect you would like to save this fresh cover." The first civilian use of this form, to South Africa, did not occur until 24 August 1944.

Although this was the first air letter with an impressed 6d stamp, it was not the first time the GPO had issued an air letter bearing an impressed stamp. On 21 July 1941, Great Britain became the first country in Europe to issue a special Prisoner of War Post air letter, with a 2½d impressed stamp, for British prisoners of war in Germany and Italy.

The 6d postage rate on the British air letter remained from 7 December 1942, until 2 October 1966, when it was increased to 9d. During these years, the basic size, shape and design of the form changed very little. However, on 1 July 1968, a new type of aerogramme was put on sale. The impressed 9d stamp designed by David Gentleman and incorporating the profile of The Queen by Arnold Machin, replaced the old stamp showing the Palace of Westminster. The stamp showed representations of two VC-10 aircraft in flight. The blurred effect on the wings was intended to give the sensation of speed. This particular form was often criticized because of its shape.

In order to meet popular demand, the Post Office introduced a new aerogramme on 26 April 1972, which gave nearly one third more writing space than the form of July 1968.

It was an Englishman, Douglas Gumbley, who invented and designed the world's first Air Mail Letter Card with an impressed stamp. His Iraq Air Mail Letter Card issued on 15 July 1933, was adapted for use by British Forces during the War.

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In his next article, Mr Jennings writes on the Diamond Jubilee of the Gumbley Iraq Air Mail Letter. Ed.

Gems from the R M Phillips Collection

209. ¼d Stamp Designs

A farthing was a remarkably small amount of money, even in Victorian times. And yet six and seven designs were produced in 1874 respectively by both Perkins, Bacon and De La Rue for postage stamps of that value, although they never came to fruition. All are in the Phillips collection in the National Postal Museum and all are believed to be unique.



The only documentation known is a note in the Perkins Bacon engraving book on a page headed 20 November 1874 – "Drawg 6 postage stamps ¼d. for trial." No date is recorded for the De La Rue designs, though it can be assumed to be about the same period. Perkins, Bacon's designs were composite. The heads were cut from the contemporary ½d. which they printed and the line-engraved backgrounds were cut from stock proofs. The artist added the corner letters and value in pen (or brush) on paper which was superimposed on the background. Two of the designs have the denomination in the slightly strange phraseology of "Quarter Penny". These were intended for the recess printing process.

These designs can be seen in the open display in the National Postal Museum, King Edward Street, LONDON EC1A 1LP. The Museum is open Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 4.30pm. Admission free.

Douglas N Muir
Curator, Philately, NPM