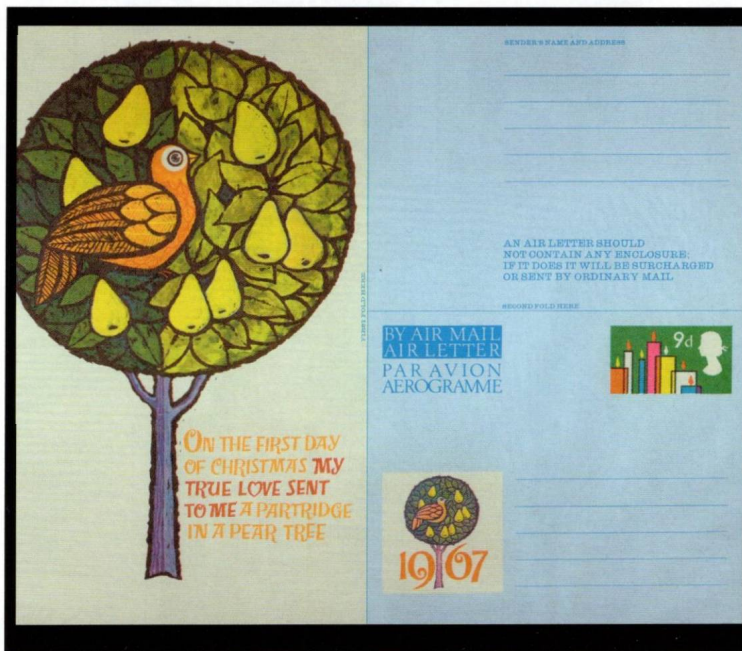


Christmas aerogrammes James Mackay

Clive Abbott's design for the secular aerogramme of 1967, based on a popular carol.



It is almost 40 years since Britain released its first Christmas aerogrammes (or air letters as they were then officially styled). They made their debut on 1 November 1965 and remained on sale until Christmas Eve. They bore a printed stamp with a face value of 6d but sold for 10d each.

There were two different air letters. Michael Goaman designed one with a stamp featuring a snowflake and Star of Bethlehem; a stylised angel appeared in the lower left-hand side of the address panel while a Nativity scene graced the back of the sheet. Richard Negus and Philip Sharland designed the air letter whose stamp showed a geometric representation of a snow crystal; the front panel bore a stylised tree and snowflake while the back panel had a snowflake motif. The reason for issuing two aerogrammes was to accommodate the wishes of people who wanted a sacred or secular subject. The aerogrammes were lithographed by Charles Skipper and East, a firm better known for printing cheques.

The inaugural series incorporated the Wilding portrait of The Queen, but in subsequent years the silhouette profile based on Mary Gillick's coinage effigy was substituted.

In 1966 there was only one aerogramme, now bearing a 9d stamp showing a Christmas rose, designed by Michael and Sylvia Goaman. Clive Abbott designed the pictorial panel showing a whimsical view of Santa Claus weaving in and out of the trees. Interestingly, although the postage had risen by 50 per cent, the actual selling price of the aerogramme remained fixed at 10d.

describes a tradition now nearly 40 years old



The religious version of the 1967 aerogramme, designed by Eric Fraser. Both versions bore the same 9d stamp, by Michael and Sylvia Goaman.

Secular and sacred In 1967 the Post Office reverted to its original dual policy of secular and sacred subjects. The first of these was designed by Clive Abbott and illustrated the partridge in a pear tree from the traditional carol 'The Twelve Days of Christmas'. The sacred version, designed by Eric Fraser, showed the Magi bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the infant Jesus. Both aerogrammes had the same 9d impressed stamp, designed by the Goamans and showing stylised candles.

Two aerogrammes appeared in 1968, the secular version, by Geoffrey Treneman showing Santa Claus in a dirigible (back panel) and Santa firing off greetings in a cannon (address side). He also designed the stamp showing three Christmas lights. The religious aerogramme was the work of Peter Gauld and showed an angel blowing a trumpet and a chorister on the back and front respectively, with a Star of Bethlehem in the stamp.

The 1969 Christmas stamps were designed by Fritz Wegner in the style of medieval illuminated manuscripts, and this theme was continued in the sole aerogramme whose 9d stamp illustrated the flight into Egypt. Similar motifs appeared on the left side of the address panel and also the back which, for the first time, provided space for the sender's name and address.

In 1970, the Post Office reverted to separate designers for the stamps and air letter. The former featured miniatures from the De Lisle Psalter by Sally Stiff, and the aerogramme was designed by Peter Gauld who derived the stamp and panel images from stained glass windows in Great Malvern Priory Church and the Church of St Peter and St Paul, East Harling.

Opposite, from top left: the 1969 issue, by Fritz Wegner, 1979 by Peter Gauld, and 2003 by Andy Goldsworthy.

With the advent of decimalisation in February 1971, the aerogramme that Christmas was priced at 5p (a shilling in old money), representing the first price increase since 1966. Julian Gibb designed the aerogramme showing stylised representations of peace doves and globes, with doves and copperplate script in a spiral pattern on the left side. Laurence Scarfe designed the 1972 aerogramme with the theme of Christmas tree decorations on both stamp and side panels.

Gift wrapping paper was the theme of the motif for stamp and side panels designed by the Hulme Chadwick partnership for the 1973 aerogramme. The stamp, now priced at 6p, repeated the motif. Peter Gauld designed the Christmas carols sheet for 1974 which revived the Partridge in a Pear Tree for the front panel, with the Three Kings (stamp) and the herald angel and shepherds (back panel).


Revised format The layout of the 1975 sheet was altered in order to provide a continuous vertical decorative panel extending from the front and the whole left side of the back. Marjorie Saynor illustrated the Nativity, the Shepherds and the Wise Men after the manner of a medieval illuminated manuscript. The stamp, now 10½p, showed the Annunciation.

This set the pattern for later aerogrammes, with stamp to match. Nina Klein's theme for 1976 was carol-singers and party games. In 1977 Peter Gauld produced a robin stamp and a tree stacked high with gifts in the side panels, while Graham Percy reverted to the theme of festive scenes in the 1978 issue. The snowflake 12p stamp by Peter Gauld was matched by stylised trees and bells in 1979. In 1980 the stamp rose to 14½p but the area of the aerogramme was greatly increased. Carol Walklin designed the housetop stamp with panels showing the Magi presenting their gifts and angelic musicians. By 1981 the price of the stamp had jumped to 20p and Carol Walklin's stamp and panels illustrated dancing under the mistletoe and other seasonal jollity. In 1982 the stamp rose to 24p, when Angels were the theme. A year later, with the stamp now at 26p, Harry Titcombe's Christmas fauna and flora was a remarkable tour de force.

Undenominated stamp The price of the stamp was pegged at 26p for several years, during which we had Victorian coaching scenes (1984), pantomimes (1985), evergreens (1986) and winter sleigh scenes (1987). In 1988 the price went up to 27p for the sheet illustrating 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing', but since then an undenominated stamp of a standard design with the Machin portrait of The Queen alongside has been used.

In more recent years the aerogrammes have featured Ely Cathedral (1989), children's Nativity plays (1990), angels (1991), Father Christmas (1992), Christmas cards marking their 150th anniversary (1993), the Three Kings again (1994), Christmas robins (1995), angels (1996) and Christmas crackers by John Gorham, following the theme of the stamps that year (1997). The most recent development has been the introduction of a Welsh version in 2001. Today, the cost of the aerogramme has risen to 52p – a far cry from the 10d (4p) of 1965 •

This year's airletter, on sale from 2 November, was shown here in September, page 18.




SENDER'S NAME AND ADDRESS

AN AIR LETTER SHOULD NOT CONTAIN ANY ENCLOSURE. IF IT DOES IT WILL BE SURCHARGED OR SENT BY ORDINARY MAIL.

SECOND FOLD HERE

Designed by Fritz Wagner MFA
Printed by MFCCompendio and Co. Ltd





Sender's name and address (please show post code)

An air letter should not contain any enclosure: if it does, it may be surcharged or sent by ordinary mail.

Designed by Peter Gauld FBAD
Printed by MFCCompendio Printers Limited for the British Post Office

SECOND FOLD HERE

AIR LETTER
BY AIR MAIL
PAR AVION AEROGRAMME

SENDER'S NAME AND ADDRESS

By Air Mail Air Letter
Par Avion Aérogramme




SENDER'S NAME AND ADDRESS



BY AIR MAIL
par avion
Royal Mail



Great Britain Postage Paid

Airletter

SENDER'S NAME AND ADDRESS (PLEASE SHOW POSTCODE)

Postcode

An airletter should not contain any enclosure: if it does, it may be surcharged or sent by ordinary mail.

Sculptures/Photography by Andy Goldsworthy
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