

Stamped to order Part 2, by Colin Baker

Registration Collectors of postal stationery see many registered envelopes impressed with one or more of the normal stationery stamps. Much less common are those envelopes carrying the proper registration stamp. No such STO envelopes were created in the reigns of Victoria or Edward VII, but a few are known carrying either George V or George VI stamps. In the present reign philatelic dealers began to create registration envelopes, as completely new items or by adding stamps to PO envelopes. It's worth looking out for these in dealers' boxes. You never know what might turn up.



Parcel post labels The introduction of the parcel post in 1883 gave rise to a new type of STO stationery, the parcel post label. Some firms found it more convenient to have their own labels printed and stamped. It also made the theft of postage stamps by their staff much more difficult. However, these were not that popular since most firms would have needed at least half a dozen different value labels to satisfy the various parcel post rates. As with newspaper wrappers, parcel labels tended to be discarded along with the wrappings, and relatively few have survived.

An example of the registration die used on a STO registration envelope. (Actual-size detail from the envelope shown on page 57.)

Lettercards By the early 20th century, lettercards had been added to the stationery range available to the public. At first there seemed little demand for private lettercards. After all, these cost the same to post as a letter, yet provided a limited writing area. However, in George V's reign they proved ideal for simple questionnaires and colourful advertisements. By the time that George VI stationery stamps were ready, the country was involved in the Second World War, and STO lettercards fell from favour once again.

Airletters The PO prepaid airletter was introduced in 1943 and was very popular with the public, with its 6d postage rate but ample writing area. It cost roughly half that of the cheapest rate for ordinary letters sent by air, yet it was large enough for all but the most prolific correspondent.

No George VI STO airletters are known, and it was not until 1957 that the first privately produced airletter appeared. The reason for this long delay was that PO airletters cost only 6d to buy, and they would have cost more to produce privately. That is until the philatelic world realized that private airletters could be sold at an inflated price to collectors. The first of these was produced in 1957 and was impressed with the George VI 6d die as the corresponding Queen Elizabeth die was not then available. From then on a huge range of prepaid private airletters appeared, using privately manufactured unstamped sheets or unstamped Forces Air Letter sheets, or being created from scratch. There were even a few commemorative airletters. All were then submitted for impressing with stationery stamps.

Articles by Colin Baker about illustrated postal stationery were published in the *Bulletin* in October and November 2004 and January 2005.

Opposite page From top: a private airletter, designed by Jennifer Toombs for the Royal Wedding; a parcel post label used by the philatelic dealers Whitfield King; a registered envelope showing the special registration die used on a STO registration envelope – almost certainly a philatelic item; a GV reply card, stamped only for the outward journey; and a printed matter card, as used extensively in the 1950s and 60s to advise that a company representative would call.

Collectors should be aware that some producers created 'rarities' by marking a small number of air letters as specimens, or by varying the printing layout. Air letters are one of the items of postal stationery that have not seen a rebirth from the 1990s onwards. No doubt the minimum order of 10,000 and lack of a STO stamp has not encouraged any philatelic dealer to take the plunge.

A rebirth of the STO scheme During the first half of the 20th century the use of stamped to order stationery by commercial organisations gradually declined. Franking machines had been introduced which meant there was no longer the need to guess which pre-stamped envelope should be used and plain envelopes could now be stamped once they were sealed. The business reply service started in April 1932 allowing firms to pay the return postage for orders and enquires without the need to send out pre-stamped stationery. By 1952 much of the STO work undertaken by the PO was entirely of a philatelic nature, with dealers and collectors striving to create more and more obscure items. The PO decided that enough was enough, and the service ended on 31 October 1973. Or did it?

Although the STO scheme was supposed to have come to an end in 1973, a few STO envelopes are known from 1979 onwards using the octagonal Machin design. These can be distinguished from the PO issues by their size and colour. There may be more out there that have simply not been identified to date, so it's worth looking in dealers' 'junk boxes' just in case.

Having restarted the scheme in 1987 the PO announced that it would allow business users to have their own style and size of envelopes pre-stamped with either the 1st or 2nd class Machin postage paid device. This could be printed in several colours, as the user required. The PO did not announce that the Welsh language for 'Post Paid' could also be incorporated into the symbol, but there are examples of these in existence today.

The STO scheme for business users continued in 1995 with the introduction of the new postage paid symbol with the words 'Postage Paid' (twice) in a circle around the Machin head. This could also be printed in several colours depending on the requirements of the user, and once again a Welsh version was available.

The facility to have STO items prepared was not just restricted to envelopes, for a few postcards and lettercards are also known with the 1995 postage paid device. Considering that the normal minimum STO order is now 10,000 I ask myself the question of where all the examples have disappeared to, as relatively few seem to come into the hands of collectors!

So this is the story of the first 150 years of stamped to order stationery. No doubt it will continue for many years to come.

Finally, collectors can sometimes find it is difficult to differentiate between the many STO and PO items, although with practice the two can usually be identified. The colour of the paper or card used, size of the finished items and the shape of the flaps are all tell-tale signs indicating whether an item is a PO or private issue. However, the subject is too extensive to go into in detail in a general article like this ●

Postal Stationery Society

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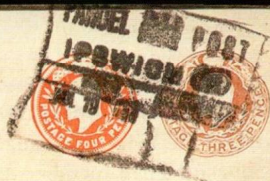
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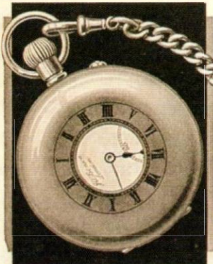


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