

## British air letters Part 2: Colin Baker looks at the history of commemorative issues

In this second of four articles on British air letters, I will look at the commemorative issues that were introduced for distribution throughout the UK. The Regional, or country air letters, will be dealt with in part three of this series.

THE British Post Office had introduced the world to the idea of the postage stamp, but even as late as the 1960s they believed that commemorative stamps should be restricted to important events.

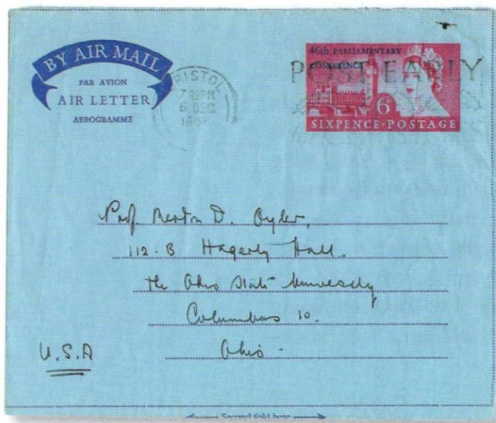
As far as postal stationery was concerned, special issues had only been created twice since the introduction of stamps in 1840. The first time was in 1890 when 1d postcards and 1d envelopes were sold celebrating the Jubilee of the Uniform Penny Post. The other occasion was in 1924/25 when postcards, lettercards and envelopes were issued for the British Empire Exhibition. One set of stationery was created with the date of 1924 incorporated into the stamp design, and a second set with the date of 1925. No other commemorative postal stationery had been issued, even for events such as Coronations or the Silver Jubilee.

**The Wembley Olympic Games** It was surprising therefore that, for the 1948 Olympic Games to be held at Wembley in London, not only would a set of four commemorative stamps be issued, but a commemorative air letter would also be on sale. The air letter utilised the 6d stamp from the set of Olympic postage stamps. It was released one day earlier than the stamps, on 28 July 1948. It was a popular air letter and many were used in the summer of that year, both on a commercial and philatelic basis. This means there are plenty of these available for collectors to buy at reasonable prices.

It would be another five years before the second commemorative air letter appeared. This was issued to celebrate the Coronation of our present Queen on 2 June 1953. It was released the next day, 3 June, and remained as the definitive issue for the remainder of that year. Once again the design of one of the four adhesive stamps, also issued for this event, was used for the air letter. The 1s 6d stamp from the set was chosen, with its value being changed to 6d. The day of the Coronation was declared a public holiday, and nearly all post offices were closed. For this reason both the stamps and the air letter were not released until the next day.

The next commemorative air letter to be released by the Post Office was a very low key affair. It appeared in 1957, when the 46th Inter-Parliamentary Union Conference was held in London. To honour this event the stamp on the standard air letter showing Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament was overprinted '46th Parliamentary Conference' in blue. The lettering was very small and it can be obscured when used air letters are cancelled by heavy lines or a slogan postmark. Like so many other ideas tried out by the Post Office, this was one that was never repeated.

The only overprinted air letter for sale in Britain, issued for the 46th Inter-Parliamentary Union Conference in London in 1957. The overprint is very small and is easily obscured.



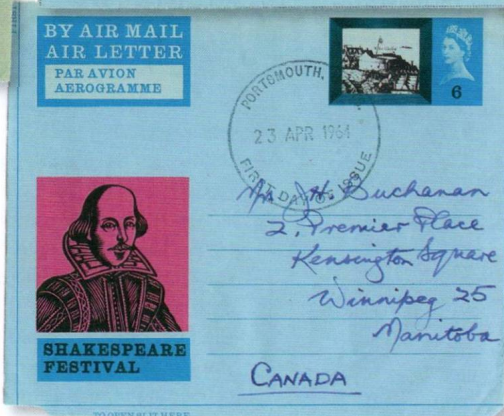


**Tourist issues** In 1963 two further commemorative air letters were released, based on the definitive stamps of the time. These were printed with two London scenes on a part of the air letter normally reserved for the correspondence. One view showed Tower Bridge, and the other the Houses of Parliament. They were intended mainly to be used by visiting tourists, but nearly all of the examples I have seen have been used philatelically. Once again this was an idea that the Post Office never repeated.

None of the air letters that had been released since the Olympic Games issue can be said to be truly commemorative. The Coronation issue was the only air letter on sale for seven months, and the other three were the standard issues with additional printing. The first true commemorative air letter to be released in the reign of Queen Elizabeth II was in 1964 when two air letters were created for the Shakespeare Festival and quatercentenary of his birth. One of these showed scenes from the Bard's plays, and the other the theatre in Stratford on Avon, with differently coloured vignettes of Shakespeare, set next to the address panel. Unfortunately in the second of these air letters, the theatre was incorrectly labelled as the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, instead of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. This error was not noticed in time and a new printing had to be made with the title corrected, giving philatelists three Shakespeare air letters to collect.

Five years later, in 1969, collectors were treated to another Royal subject, this time the investiture of the Prince of Wales at Caernarfon Castle. Although a set of three special stamps was issued for the investiture, the air letter carried the standard 9d VC10 stamp, which was also used for all the definitive issues.

No further commemorative air letters were to be issued for the next eight years, until 1977, the year of the Queen's Silver Jubilee. However, collectors had not been left in a vacuum. ►



From top left: the first special air letter to be issued by Great Britain, for the 1948 Olympic Games; the special air letter for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, which remained on sale for the second half of 1953; and one of a pair of air letters for the tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth.



From 1965 Christmas air letters had been issued annually, each with their own individually designed stamps and colourful decorations on the left side of the address panel. Further decorations were sometimes printed on the back panel and on part of the area normally reserved for the message. For 1965, 1967 and 1968 two Christmas air letters were issued, with alternative decorations. In 1965 and 1968 the two air letters even carried different stamp designs. Christmas air letters were so popular that new designs were created every year up to 2004, although from 1990 no special Christmas stamps were prepared and the standard NV1 air letter stamp was used.

**The end of commemorative air letters** With the increasing popularity of the internet and the falling cost of international phone calls, the use of air letters gradually declined. In 2005 the Christmas air letter issued in 2004 was put back on sale. This does not appear to have been a reprint, but the reissue of existing stocks. Although a new design of Christmas air letter was released in 2006, no new air letters have been issued since then. Just as before, the 2006 air letter was re-released in 2007, 2008 and 2009. We shall have to wait and see what happens for Christmas 2010 and beyond.

Apart from the annual Christmas issues, few other commemorative air letters have gone on sale across the UK. I have mentioned the one issued for the Queen's Silver Jubilee; two years later, 1979 saw the centenary of the death of the 'father of the postage stamp', Rowland Hill. Quite rightly the Post Office marked this with a special air letter, as well as a set of four stamps and a miniature sheet. The air letter had images on all three panels of one side illustrating the stamps and postal stationery that Rowland Hill fought so hard to introduce. Two years later, the wedding of the Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer also gave rise to another special air letter. Other commemorative air letters followed at irregular intervals, with issues for the Pen Pal Club, garden birds, the Youth Olympics, and the journey of a replica of Captain Cook's ship the *Endeavour* in 1997.

In 1989 the Post Office released a set of six air letters showing views of the landscape of Britain. These were sold in discounted packs of six, in a similar way to the packs of the standard issue of air letters released the year before. Five years later in 1994 the same idea was tried again, with British Birds being the subject this time. Railway locomotives were also used to create a third set of air letters. This is always a popular subject, and one that the Post Office had not used on an air letter previously.

Finally, in looking at commemorative air letters available throughout the country, we should not forget the special issue of 1992. This celebrated 50 years of British air letters. It was a significant anniversary, for the air letter had given the average family the chance to correspond with dear ones far away, in war time or in peace. It is a shame that the subject was treated so poorly, with a rather simple overprint on the standard issue of the time. So many special air letters had already been produced by the Post Office that many philatelists felt cheated at this low key item. The air letter may not be around when the centenary arrives in 2042, but perhaps the 75th anniversary in 2017 can be treated with a more appropriate design ●



From top: the two 1965 Christmas air letters, each with its own stamp and images; the 1998 Christmas issue featuring angels; a colourful air letter issued in 1997, when a replica of Captain Cook's ship the *Endeavour* followed his original route around the world; and the special issue of 1979 marking the centenary of the death of Rowland Hill.

