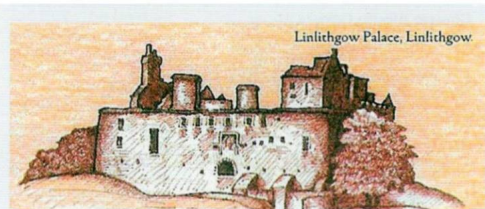


British air letters Part 3: the history of the



In this third part of my brief history of air letters, I will look at those issues that went on sale in only one of the four countries of the United Kingdom.

ALTHOUGH their issue was restricted to only one country, the regional air letters were still postally valid throughout the UK. For those living outside the country of issue, they were available from the Philatelic Bureau in Edinburgh, and from other philatelic outlets.

The issue of the first of the regional air letters was rather strange. In 1972 the 31st World Congress of the International Federation for Housing and Planning (IFHP) was staged in Liverpool.

The standard 6½p definitive air letter was printed with the IFHP logo for the event, and was sold at a special post office set up at the Congress. The only other places they could be purchased were at the Liverpool head post office and the Philatelic Bureau in Edinburgh. This last point of sale gave the item official credence, making it more than just a private overprint.

The first regional air letter The first true regional air letter was produced in 1973 for use in Wales. It was based on the definitive 5p air letter, but included a vignette of a woman in Welsh national costume alongside the address panel. All the printing was in both English and Welsh, and the third panel on the reverse carried a stylised image of Snowdonia. The postage increase in September of that year gave rise to a second issue of the same air letter, this time using the 6p VC10 stamp, the only occasion when two air letters were released for one commemorative issue. Wales produced two more air letters in the same style, one printed with a Welsh harp, and the other showing the Victorian Penygarneg Dam in the Elan Valley. It would be over 20 years before another Welsh regional air letter appeared.

Meanwhile, 1974 saw Scotland issue the first of many special air letters. Like the first Welsh issue, Scottish issues were based on the definitive air letter, with vignettes to the left of the address lines. All three of the panels making up one side of the air letter carried images appropriate to the subject – from festivals and anniversaries to buildings and tourist attractions. All the instructions were in both English and Gaelic. Altogether thirteen different air letters were produced in this style, a lucky number for collectors, as many more of these special air letters followed.

New Scottish air letters The 1981 issue celebrating Scottish flora and fauna was the first of many that were very different from those of previous years. No longer were they based on the definitive issue of the day. The air letter used the larger A4 format and was printed on white paper, which helped the images stand out. All three panels were used for the design, and often large images carried over from one panel to the next (see page 85).

Altogether 36 of this new type of air letters were issued. Since 1999 no further issues have appeared, and with the decreasing use of air letters in general it is very unlikely we will see any further issues in the future. ▶

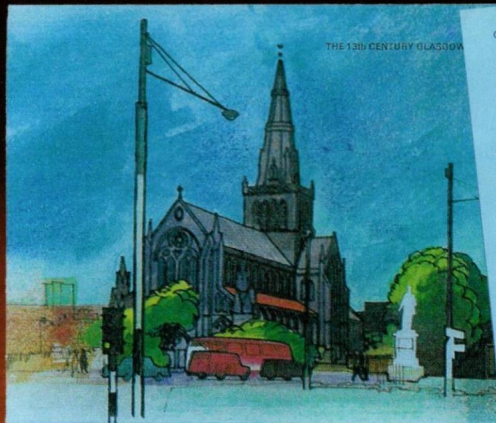
Opposite page Early regional issues had a separate image on each panel, as on the 1975 Glasgow issue at far left.

The 1973 Welsh special issue, top right, featured a woman in traditional costume on the front panel.

The Scottish special issue of 1975 (middle right) celebrated Robert Burns, and featured extracts from his poems.

The Scottish issue at bottom right featured the Kildalton Cross, with the instructions in both English and Gaelic.

once-popular regional issues, by Colin Baker



THE 13th CENTURY GLASGOW

FIRST FOLD HERE



PROVAND'S LORDSHIP, 1471

Sender's name and address
(please show postcode)

An Air Letter should not contain any enclos-
ure if it does, it may be surcharged or sent by
air mail.

DESIGNED BY JAMES SMITH MSIA

McCorquodale Printers Ltd.

SECOND FOLD HERE

Gyda'r Post Awyr/Llythyr Awyr
**BY AIR MAIL
AIR LETTER**
PAR AVION AEROGRAMME



"Man to man, the world o'er"
**BY AIR MAIL
AIR LETTER**
PAR AVION AEROGRAMME



**BY AIR MAIL
AIR LETTER**

PAR AVION AEROGRAMME

1175-1975



Let Glasgow Flourish

TO OPEN, SLIT HERE



By Air Mail - Air Letter
Par Avion - Aerogramme
Troimh'n phost-adhair/Litir-Adhair

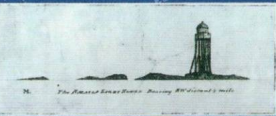


The Kildalton Cross, Islay
Cros Chill Daltain, Ila



TRYCHINEB YNG NGOLEUDY SMALLS

Cedwyd y goleudy cyntaf o ben yn hwyr yf5770au gan ddefnyddio dyluniad arloesol. Roedd yn wythonglog, safai ar naw coes a defnyddid ysgol raff i gyrraedd llety'r teidwad. Digwyddodd trychineb yn ystod y blynyddoedd cyntaf y defnyddiwyd y goleudy: bu farw un o'r ddau geidwad. Gan ofni y byddai rhywun yn amau ei fod wedi cyllawni llofruddiaeth pe bai'n gollwng y corff i'r môr, gosododd ei bartner y corff marw mewn bocsa i'w gylmu wrth reilen y llusern y tu allan. Dim ond pan gyrraeddodd y llong gyfnewid o'r diwedd y daeth profiad annymuhol y geidwad i ben. Wedi hyn, apwyntwyd tri cheidwad i'r goleudy ar y braig.



A 1998 set of three air letters related stories of lighthouses. The Welsh letter featured the Smalls Lighthouse (above).

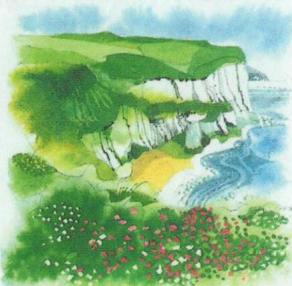
POST AWYR
par avion
Post International



Great
Britain
Postage
Paid

Aerogram
Aerogramme

White Rocks, County Antrim, Northern Ireland



No regional air letters were issued for Northern Ireland, but views of the Irish countryside were included in the 1989 Landscapes of Britain set (below).

Sender's name and address
(please show postcode)

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

One in a series of six aerogrammes illustrated by Ronald Maddox
Printed at The House of Quesita Limited for the British Post Office



FIRST FOLD HERE

Sets of regional air letters In 1998 a new Welsh air letter appeared, one of a set of three issued that year for three of the four countries making up the United Kingdom. It told the story of the Smalls Lighthouse tragedy, which occurred towards the end of the 18th century. One of two lighthouse keepers died, and the other, fearing he might be accused of murder, kept the body of his colleague with him until the relief boat arrived and he could prove his innocence. This incident led the authorities to require that from then on three lighthouse keepers were always on duty at any one time.

This unfortunate incident was told in both English and Welsh, but only English was used on the Scottish air letter of the set. That story told of the mystery that surrounded the Flannan Lighthouse in 1900, when all three lighthouse men disappeared without a trace. It was believed the men must have been swept away by a giant wave, but with only a silent lighthouse as a witness, we will never know.

The third air letter in the set recounted the heroic story of Grace Darling. In 1838 she and her father rescued nine shipwrecked sailors sheltering on Big Harker, a rock a short way from the Longstone Lighthouse. The illustration on the air letter shows them rowing through mountainous seas towards the rock on the first stage of their epic mission.

Two other Welsh issues were made, each one forming part of a set of three. The first air letter featured *The Snow Spider*, a book by Jenny Nimmo. It was issued in 1998 as part of a set interpreting three different children's books. The Scottish air letter of this set focused on *The Boggart*, written by Susan Cooper, while the English version featured the book *Northern Lights*, by Philip Pullman.

The following year a set of three air letters was issued illustrating traditional country crafts. The Welsh air letter showed the skills of woodworking, harp making and Jacquard weaving. The second of the set looked at basket, crook and chair making in Scotland, while the third concentrated on the English crafts of glasswork, pottery and weaving.

QUATERCENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF MARY STUART + QUEEN OF SCOTS

By air mail
Par avion
Aerogramme
Trombin prose-adress/Lettre-adresse



BRITISH AIR LETTERS

Below: one of many regional issues for Scotland, this one from 1991.



Born at Linlithgow in 1542, Mary was sent for safety to France. Where she married the Dauphin. On his death she returned to rule her traitor's country, successfully until her second husband, James VI, was murdered. When she married Bothwell, the man accused of the crime, her lords imprisoned her, forcing her to abdicate. She escaped, was defeated, fled to England and after eighteen years of imprisonment, was executed at Fotheringhay.



Palace of Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh, from an engraving dated 1647



The ruins of Fotheringhay Castle, near Kettering, from an engraving dated 1824

Hemscote Castle, near Hawick, home of the Earl of Bothwell



Lindisfarne Palace, Lindisfarne



Loch Leven Castle, near Kinross, based on a reconstruction drawn in 1887

Scottish Rugby XV
Triple Crown and
GRAND SLAM 1990

Free Nations Championship 1990

Ireland	10	Scotland	13
Scotland	21	France	0
Wales	9	Scotland	13
Scotland	13	England	7

Murrayfield, home of Scottish Rugby since 1925, and venue for Scotland's final match against England securing the Triple Crown and Grand Slam.

Na cùr fùid' 's'ean b'annach a' sìgh-dhòig air seo.

Designed and illustrated by Aileen Paterson in collaboration with Fionn Sludnos Linwood. Printed at The House of Quarts for the British Post Office.

FIRST FOLD HERE/AN DARA FILLIADH AN SEO

By air mail
Par avion
Aerogramme
Trombin prose-adress/Lettre-adresse



Great Britain
Postage
Paid

SECOND FOLD HERE/AN DARA FILLIADH AN SEO

This 1987 issue for the 400th anniversary of the death of Mary, Queen of Scots, is an example of the new type of air letter introduced in Scotland in 1981. It demonstrates how the design could flow across all three panels of the letter.

The last regional air letter The last Welsh air letter celebrated the opening of the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff in 1999. It was the very last regional air letter to be issued, and only Christmas air letters have appeared since.

Many commemorative air letters were issued to celebrate Scottish and Welsh events and activities. Originally based on the standard air letter, they ended with issues that were beautifully designed, well illustrated and full of facts and information. As for England, few commemorative air letters have been issued to celebrate specific events. The only ones that we have seen are those in the sets for lighthouses, children's books and traditional crafts. Northern Ireland has issued none at all, although views of Irish scenes did feature in the Landscapes of Britain set. I think this is probably the end of the road for the once-popular commemorative air letter, and it is very unlikely that we will see any more regional air letters in the future ●

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