Into the modern age

Julia Lee continues her voyage through the history of the mail, as seen on UK stamps

Three 1961 stamps mark the Centenary of the formation of the Post Office Savings Bank issue. Right: the 1963 Paris Conference Centenary stamp

THE POST OFFICE SAVINGS BANK was established in 1861, to give ordinary people somewhere to save or, as its first director George Chetwynd put it, in a somewhat patriarchal tone: 'to encourage the working classes in provident habits'. The 1961 stamp issue (1, 2 and 3) marked the Bank's centenary with images related to the principles of savings and wise spending – thrift plants, a squirrel in a money tree, acorns and a wise owl.

Worldwide uniformity In 1863 the Post Office took part in the Paris Conference which was convened by American Postmaster General Montgomery Blair. At that time a huge and confusing network of bilateral agreements was in force, and Blair was justified in describing the international mail system as 'extremely loose and defective'. The aim of the Paris Conference was to consider ways of improving international postage and it set out some important objectives, such as cheaper and uniform postal rates, an end to transit fees for mail moving through one country on its way to a destination in another, and uniform rules for the exchange of correspondence between countries. These ideas were not put in place immediately, but the Conference achieved a huge step towards the Universal Postal Union (UPU), which was established in Berne in 1874. The centenary of the Paris Conference was marked by a special stamp in 1963 (4).

The UPU's 75th anniversary in 1949 was celebrated with a commemorative set which showed symbols of the organisation and its aims: the 2½d (5) shows two hemispheres, the 3d (6) bears the UPU monument that still sits outside its Berne Headquarters, the goddess *Concordia* – symbolic of the agreement between the different countries brought together in the Union – is on the 6d (7), and a posthorn surrounds a globe on the 1s stamp.

Below: the 1949 issue to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the foundation of the UPU

On the high seas The earliest packet ships began transporting mail and freight during Tudor times, but the ships we are more familiar with are those governed by the Admiralty from 1823. Brunel's *SS Great Western*, shown in the Ocean Liners set of 2004 (9), had carried transatlantic mail in 1838, and it wasn't until 1850 that the Post Office took over and contracted mail on to scheduled ships. Sitting alongside the *SS Great Western* in 2004 were three Royal Mail Ships spanning the century: the 1907 *RMS Mauretania* (10, and also on the 1969 British Ships set), the *RMS Queen Mary* (11) of 1936 and the *RMS Queen Mary 2* (12) in 2004.

The issue for the UPU's centenary in 1974 looked at the development of postal services since the organisation's foundation. The 3½p value (13) shows the steamer *Peninsular*, a P&O ship that was launched in 1888 and carried mail to the Far East. A Southampton Packet Letter mark also features on the stamp, alongside the ship.
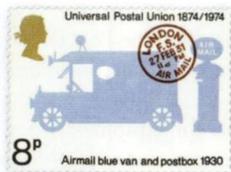
The Transport and Mail Services set of 1988 showed 1930s transport, including the *Queen Elizabeth* being loaded with transatlantic mail on the 26p value (14).

Above: Ocean Liners issue of 2004 (9, 10, 11 and 12); 1974 stamp featuring a packet ship (13); and a 1988 stamp showing mail being loaded onto the *Queen Elizabeth*

Taking to the air The next major development in mail transport after the age of the steamships was – of course – airmail. The UK, the US and India all lay claims to having instigated airmail, and all in 1911. But the first scheduled airmail service, running from 9 to 15 September of that year, was to mark King George V's coronation with a flight from Hendon to Windsor, commemorated in the 1974 UPU set (15) and this year's Aerial Post issue (16).

Two airmail innovations complete the 1974 UPU set of four stamps. The 8p stamp shows a blue Air Mail box (17) of the type introduced in 1930 to keep airmail separate from regular mail. This service ran successfully until it was suspended at the outbreak of war in 1939. When airmail re-commenced after the War, the postboxes and vehicles were no longer distinguished by the colour blue, as airmail items could now be sorted at a later stage. The 10p stamp of the 1974 UPU set (18) shows *Maia*, an Imperial Airways flying boat which was part of The Empire Air Mail Scheme of ▶

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Above: the British Philatelic Bureau's Edinburgh home on the 1990 stamp

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1937, which aimed to open up transatlantic airmail. The flying boats despatched letters across the Empire for 1½d per half ounce. The smaller flying boat *Mercury* sat on top of *Maia* and was launched from there, thereby saving fuel. *Mercury* made the first commercial non-stop transatlantic crossing in 1938. The top value (34p) in the 1988 Transport and Mail 30s-style set also shows an Imperial Airways plane, *Horatius* (19), and one of the special blue Air Mail vans.

The rise of Europe The Conference of European Postal & Telecommunications Administrations (CEPT) was formed in 1959, as the European counterpart to the UPU. Its first anniversary was saluted in 1960 (20 and 21) with stamps that use the common 'Europa' design of a spoked wheel in place of the letter 'O'. This design, by Finn Pentti Rahikainen, harked back to perhaps the very first mail movement in this country, as the wheels resemble those of a Roman mail chariot. In 1961, the CEPT conference was in Torquay, and the Post Office issued a set of stamps for the organisation. They bear the CEPT posthorn logo (23) and the shape of a dove made from other smaller doves (24 and 25), designed by Theo Kurpershoek. In the late 1960s, by which time anniversary sets were highly popular, the tenth anniversary of CEPT (22) was marked in a set that also commemorated the first non-stop Atlantic flight and first Australia to England flight, NATO and the International Labour Organisation. Its central design – a temple surrounded with the words 'Europa' and 'Cept' by Italians Luigi Gasbarra and Georgio Belli – owed little to the history of the post.

The Philatelic Bureau was set up in 1963 in London and appears on one of the stamps in another Europa set, of 1990 (also known as the Europa and Glasgow 1990 European City of Culture). The stamp shows the building in Brandon Street, Edinburgh, which was the Bureau's 'home' from 1981 to 2000 (26). A 25th anniversary Europa set, of 1984, includes a pair showing a viaduct, symbolic of CEPT's communications links (27 and 28), with the Europa inscription above it. The letter 'O' is replaced by CEPT's four post horns symbol. These stamps were issued alongside two featuring the Abduction of Europa, – a bizarre choice for a symbol of pan-Europeanism – in celebration of the second election of members to the European Parliament.

Technological innovation In 1969 the Post Office Technology issue focused on telecommunications developments, including the National Giro bank (29). (Whereas the Post Office Savings Bank was concerned only with providing savings accounts for customers, the National Giro Bank had provided a full banking service since 1968). Alongside the National Giro logo in the 1969 set were three other stamps with illustrations representing

the Post Office International Subscriber Dialling (30); Pulse Code Modulation (31); and automatic mail sorting (32).

Automatic sorting had started with the Transorma machine in 1935 – postal items were presented one at a time for up to five operators to read the address, select a routing code which was typed onto the front of the letter, and then send it off to be automatically sorted according to the typed code into one of up to 300 chutes. More complex machines had been introduced in 1956, but it was in 1959 that the first 'coding' machines were trialled. Still 'told what to do' by an operator, they printed a phosphor code on the envelope, which was then automatically sorted.

Above: the 1969 Post Office Technology issue

Royal Mail's last major snapshot of its own activities was a stamp issue in 1985 (33), to mark 350 years since Charles I opened up his mail to the public. On the 17p, a Datapost, which began in 1971 and promised next-day delivery, is depicted by a Datapost motorbike zipping through the City of London. A rural post bus features on the 22p, showing the service which began operating in 1967 and still exists in a scaled-back fashion, mostly in Scotland. The other two stamps show standard modern Royal Mail services: parcel delivery and delivery in towns.

The communications revolution Looking back over the history of UK mail on stamps, beginning in last month's *Bulletin* with the 17th Century General Letter Office, the collector might note a number of themes. The special stamps of each decade of the late 20th-century reflected the different axis of change and progress in communications in general and the postal service in particular. For example, in the 1960s special issues tended to celebrate large organisations, such as the UPU and CEPT. And only towards the end of the decade did the Post Office Technology issue hint at the life-changing potential of computers. Airmail has been covered well – as it makes the world seem a smaller place, it has a special appeal to stamp collectors.

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It is interesting to consider the role of the Post Office, in all its guises, in our changing world – adapting new technologies, inventing its own and facilitating local and global communcations. And it's all there on the stamps themselves ! ●

Left: 1985 History of the Post office issue