



Postcard depicting the organisers, pilots, postal and other officials at Hendon on 9 September 1911

No Royal Mail postage stamps, only a miniature sheet and prestige stamp booklet to mark the centenary of an important British aviation achievement!

# Centenary of the Coronation Aerial Post, September 1911 – The First UK Aerial Post

Special report by Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS

The Centenary of the Coronation Aerial Post 1911 is an historic event in the record of pioneer aviation in Great Britain and the co-operation of the Postmaster General and the British Post Office.

The First United Kingdom Aerial Post owed its existence to the foresight and

initiative of Captain (later Sir) Walter Windham, RN. It was Capt Windham who successfully organised the world's first Official Aerial Post in India during February 1911 at Allahabad, in connection with the United Provinces Exhibition (see my article 'Centenary of the World's First Official Aerial Post', GSM February 2011).

On his return to England soon afterwards, it occurred to Capt Windham that a similar project might be an appropriate and novel addition to the celebrations in London to mark the Coronation of His Majesty King George V in Westminster Abbey on 22 June, that same year, 1911.

## Well received

His idea was well received and the Postmaster General, the Rt Hon (later Sir) Herbert L Samuel, and the British Post Office gave whole-hearted support and co-operation. An honorary organising committee was formed, among whom were: Capt Windham, Chairman; Mr D Lewis-Poole, an architect by profession, a pupil of the late Welby Pugin, who practised successfully for a number of years; Sir J C Lamb; Mr R C Tombs and Mr John Ardron.

The aerial post project also received enthusiastic support

from the principal newspapers of the day and every opportunity was afforded the public for obtaining and despatching souvenir cards or envelopes, which were already franked with adhesive ½d. or 1d. stamps respectively. Detailed information about the Coronation Aerial Post 1911 may be found in the excellent *Aero Field Handbook* No 3 written under the same name by Francis J Field and N C Baldwin, published by Francis J Field Limited of Sutton Coldfield.

I have in my philatelic library a copy of the 'Special Edition' produced with more than 20 black and white illustrations, for the Apex International Air Post Exhibition, London, 7-12 May 1934.

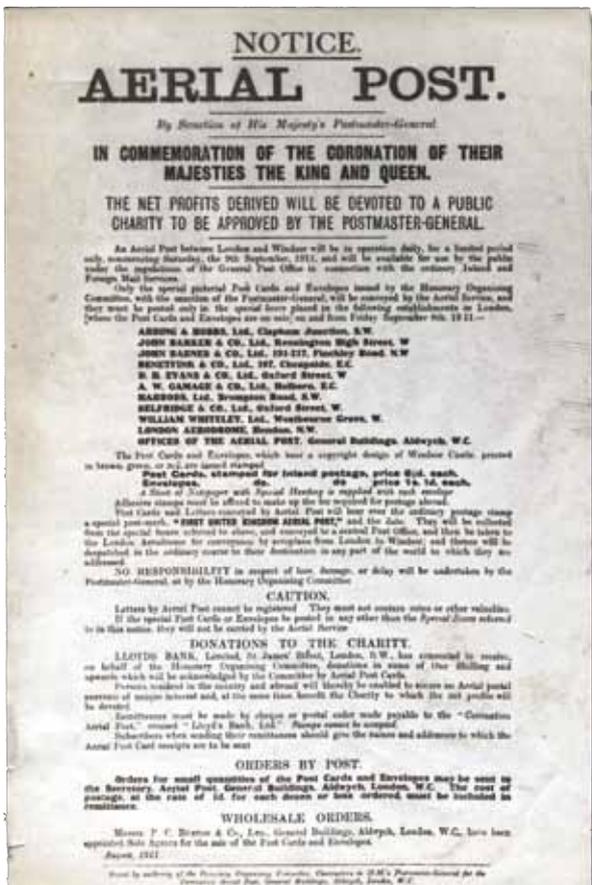
## Aerial Post notice

Special pillar boxes were provided at stores where the souvenir postal stationery was on sale and at Hendon Aerodrome. The official publicity, headed: 'Notice. Aerial Post. By Sanction of His Majesty's Postmaster-General. In Commemoration of the Coronation of their Majesties the King and Queen', makes interesting reading.

## The Aviators

The Committee contracted with the Grahame White Aviation Co for the aerial transit of the mails from Hendon Aerodrome to Windsor; and the pilots engaged to operate the service were Clement Greswell, Gustav Hamel, E F Driver and Charles Hubert.

The four machines prepared for use were two Farman biplanes and two Blériot monoplanes. The lower surfaces of the wings were painted 'Aerial Mail'. Only three pilots and three machines operated the service owing to one of the Farman biplanes, piloted by Charles Hubert, crashing when taking off. The pilot broke both legs and the machine was badly damaged.



Official notice giving details of the Coronation Aerial Post



A violet 'privileged' card carried by Gustav Hamel on the first flight



bicycle and accompanied by Cyclist Postman Kersley, rode off to find him. They soon returned accompanied by the aviator; and to great surprise when it was discovered that the aviator was Hamel and not Greswell.

Hamel handed over the mail bag to the Postmaster of Windsor and said: 'Will you please sign my waybill and duplicate, as I want to get back.' He was immediately besieged by questioners and photographers, while the mail bag was hurriedly opened and letters and postcards for some of the spectators on the spot were delivered to them at once.

The mail bag was then closed and rushed off to the post office at Windsor by the same cyclist postman, where its contents were sorted and despatched in time to catch the 6 p.m. train to London!

After a very brief stay, Hamel flew back to Hendon where he was the recipient of many congratulations.

## First flight

The historic first flight of the First UK Aerial Post, from London to Windsor, took place on Saturday 9 September 1911.

The *Aero Field* handbook recorded the event: 'On Saturday, 9 September, twenty-three sacks of aerial mails were delivered at Hendon. It was estimated that these contained about 75,000 postcards and letters, the total weight being over 600lbs.

'Although it had been hoped to carry all the mails collected on the first day, the sudden change in the weather from mild to boisterous, made any flying doubtful. It had been intended that Clement Greswell (the senior pilot) should carry the first bag, which contained the special privileged mail, (printed in violet) but the wind was rising and it was not considered safe for flying.'

'Intrepid pioneer aviator Gustav Hamel undertook to make the first flight to Windsor. Preparations were speedily made, and at 4.50 p.m. he was ready to mount a Blériot racing monoplane.

'The mail bag (Bag No 1) weighing 23½lb was attached to the machine by the attendants

and a postman handed to Hamel his way-bill and time sheets. Mr W G Kirkwood, of the Post Office secretarial staff, who represented the Postmaster General, and representatives of the Comptroller's office of the London Postal Service witnessed these formalities.'

## Violet 'privileged'

The special bag carried by Hamel contained the violet 'privileged' letters and postcards (not available to members of the public), among which were letters to King George V.

A huge crowd was waiting at Windsor for the arrival of the first mail, and at 5.11 p.m. the aviator could be seen approaching, but instead of landing on the East Lawn as had been arranged, he flew beyond the Castle and landed in the Shaw Farm meadow, near the Frogmore Mausoleum.

Lieut Fairfax (one of the directors of the London Aerodrome) mounted a post office

## First Windsor-London

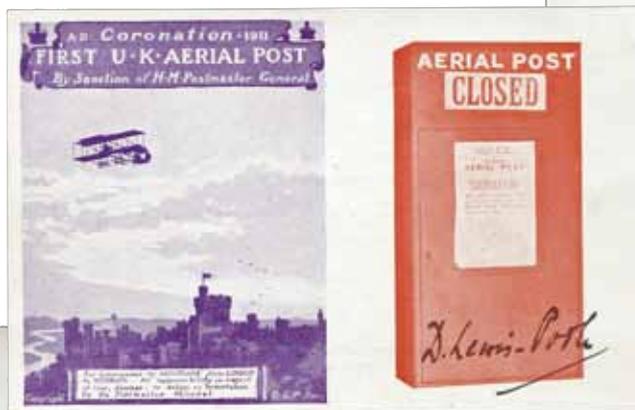
The flight carrying the first mails from Windsor to London was scheduled for Saturday 16 September 1911, but flying conditions were not favourable. Much to the disappointment of the crowds it was decided reluctantly to postpone the Windsor to London flight until the next day. The bag of mail was carried by aviator Clement Greswell flying a Blériot No 1.

## Concluding flights

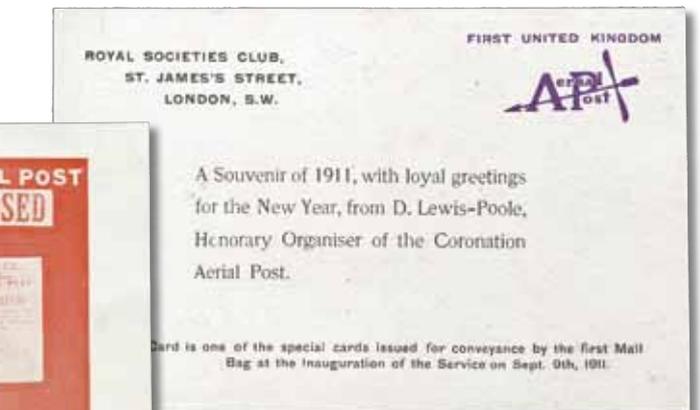
The concluding flights took place on Monday 25 September and the last bags of mail were flown from Hendon to Windsor on Tuesday 26 September 1911 by Gustav Hamel flying a Blériot No 1.

The *Aero Field Handbook* recorded: 'London to Windsor, No of flights 16. Total 37 bags, 926lbs.' and 'Windsor to London, No of flights 4. Total 4 bags, 89½lbs.'

Souvenir card marking the closure of the Aerial Post signed by D Lewis-Poole, a member of the organising committee

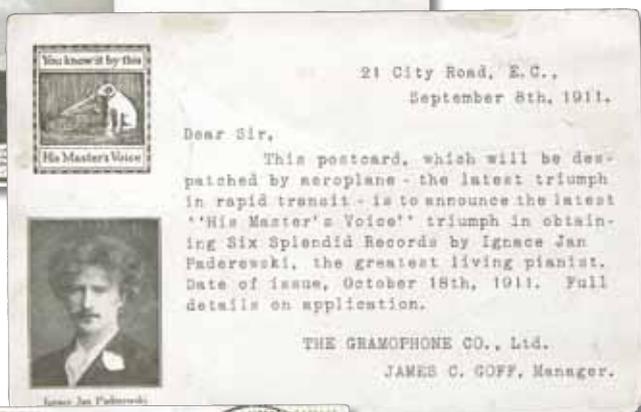


Postcards showing Hamel in flight and in his Blériot monoplane

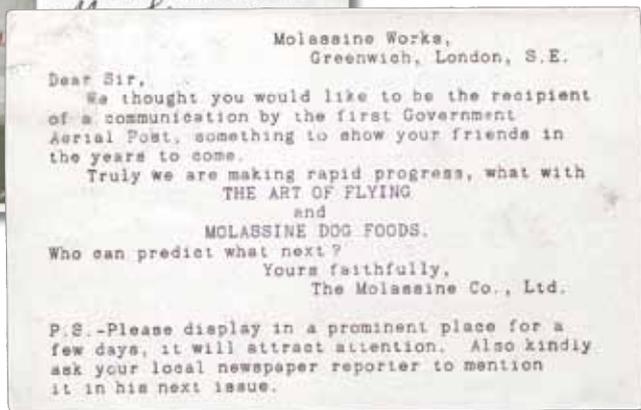
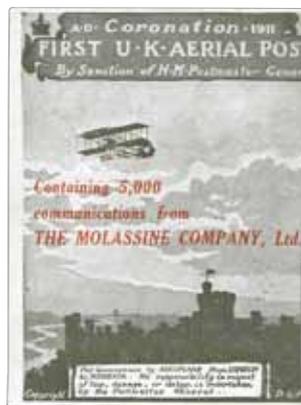
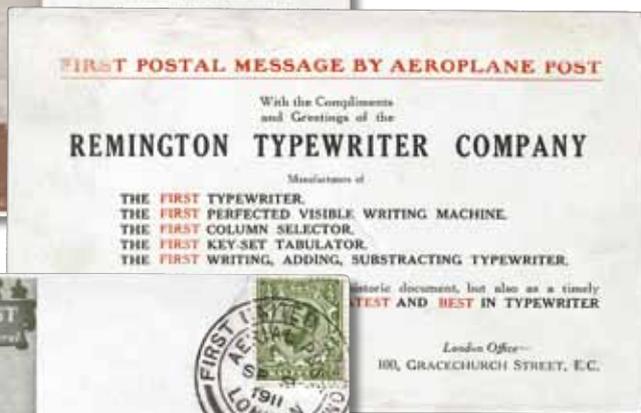




A selection of flown souvenir cards bearing trade advertisements: Zog paint cleaner, The Gramophone Company Ltd (with portrait of Ignace Paderewski) ...



... Remington Typewriter Company and The Molassine Company



## Trade advertisements

A number of well-known firms took the opportunity of the First UK Aerial Mail to print advertisement copy on the front and reverse of the souvenir postcards. A few examples are illustrated here.

In their Introduction to the *Aero Field Handbook* No 3, Francis Field and Norman Baldwin—both of whom helped me a great deal as a young aero-philatelist collecting, researching and writing about the history and development of the air letter, emphasised that: 'This (the Coronation Aerial Post) was the only British official service for the flight of public mails between the advent of the aeroplane in 1903 and the termination of the Great War (1914–1918).'

Towards the end of the Foreword the authors wrote: 'No other early mail service attracted the public so successfully as to require emergency stationery.'

## Centenary 2011

To mark the Centenary of the First UK Aerial Post, 9 September 1911 to 25 September 1911, Royal Mail is issuing a miniature sheet and prestige stamp booklet on the day of the actual anniversary.

A Royal Mail press release dated 22 June 2011 stated: 'Now exactly 100 years on, Royal Mail marks the event with a miniature sheet, featuring a border that replicates the design of an original publicity poster for the inaugural flight.'

The four-pane prestige stamp booklet written by Peter Lister, President of the British Air Mail Society, includes a pane comprising four 50p Windsor Castle stamps, re-issued from the 2005 set of high-value definitive stamps printed by intaglio.

## Miniature sheet

The Aerial Post Miniature Sheet features: Hamel Receives First Mail Bag (1st—First Class inland letter rate); Hamel Ready to Leave Hendon (68p—Europe up to 20g.); Greswell's Blériot at Windsor (£1—Europe up to 40g.); Airmail Delivered at Windsor (£1.10—Rest of World airmail up to 20g.)

The Aerial Post Miniature Sheet was designed by Robert Maude and Sarah Davies and printed by Cartor on PVA gummed paper using the lithography process.

The Prestige Stamp Book, price £9.97, features four unique panes of stamps. It tells the story of the origins and extensive organisation behind the First UK Aerial Post and the events from the first flight on 9 September 1911 to the last on 26 September 1911.

Printed envelopes addressed to India and carried on the London to Windsor flight of 15 September 1911 (right) and the Windsor to London flight postmarked 16 September 1911; the first mail flight from Windsor took place on 17 September (below)



## Almost unnoticed

The Royal Mail miniature sheet and prestige stamp book to be issued on 9 September 2011 will undoubtedly be bought by GB collectors and specialists, but will sadly remain almost unnoticed by the public.

The Centenary of the First UK Aerial in September 2011 is a particularly significant and important anniversary and one worthy of a set of individual postage stamps. It is a noteworthy occasion to promote great British aviation achievements of the past to the world of today—and it has been lost.

## Underestimated

As those responsible at Royal Mail for selecting and commissioning special stamps have clearly underestimated the importance of the First UK Aerial Post in September 1911, the last word should go to His Majesty's Postmaster of the time.

The Rt Hon Sir Herbert L. Samuel, His Majesty's Postmaster General, 1910–1914, wrote in the Foreword to the *Aero Field*



Souvenir to mark the 50th anniversary of the first UK Aerial Mail, signed by Warwick Lendon who produced the design of a Farman biplane in flight over Windsor Castle used on the UK Aerial Post envelopes and cards

*Handbook* No 3, from London on 12 March 1934: 'I wonder whether, when that flimsy, open-seated aero-plane took off from Hendon one afternoon in September, 1911, to carry a 23lb. bag of mails to Windsor in connection with King George's coronation festivities, anyone had the vision to foresee that within twenty years His Majesty's

mails would be carried regularly through the air to the most distant parts of the Empire.

'I wonder whether anyone foresaw that in less than a generation a British Airways Service would be sending its aeroplanes three million miles in the course of a single year, and that in most of the civilised countries of the world air-mail services would be regarded as a matter of course. I must confess that the Postmaster General of that day did not fully foresee such eventualities.

## Great promise

'Yet, holding that office, I was anxious to encourage in every way in my power an invention, then in its infancy, which was clearly of great promise. It needed publicity in order to gather support for its development. The coronation furnished the occasion; Sir Walter Windham and his coadjutors suggested this demonstration; the General Post Office was glad to give the fullest facilities; the public responded to the opportunity; and the thing was done.

'It was the first air-post to be flown in the United Kingdom, and that was an event worthy to be commemorated in the history of the world's communications.'

Royal Mail miniature sheet to be issued on 9 September to commemorate the centenary of the First UK Aerial Post

