GSM correspondent Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS, has collected, researched and written about the history and development of the air letter form since the early 1960s. His book *Aerogrammes* was published in 1973. He has compiled this special miscellany to celebrate the 70th Anniversary of the introduction of the first Great Britain air letter form during the dark early days of the Second World War. All the items illustrated on this and the following four pages are from his collection.

**The Great Britain Air Letter, 1941–2011**

**A Miscellany to Celebrate 70 Years**

By Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS

It is worth recalling the background to the introduction of the world’s first air letter form for readers of GSM unfamiliar with the fascinating story that began in Iraq during the early 1930s.

At the time Douglas William Gumbley, a Guernseyman, was Director General of Posts and Telegraphs and Director of Civil Aviation. I had the privilege of interviewing Mr Gumbley at his home on the Isle of Wight on 19 February 1972, when he told me first hand how and why he invented the Iraq Air Letter Form.

Douglas Gumbley died almost a year later on 5 February 1973 aged 92. I was delighted to be invited to write his Obituary for *The Times* newspaper.

**Expensive**

Imperial Airways inaugurated the first airmail service between England and India during March 1927, but letters of varying weight and dimensions were very expensive to send by airmail on the newly developing air services to and from England to Cairo, the Middle East, India and beyond.

Gumbley, a member of the Indian Civil Service, who in 1919 was appointed Director of Posts and Telegraphs in Mesopotamia (renamed Iraq in September 1921) perceived that a lightweight form of specific size, weight and cost, would allow considerably more people to send cards and letters by air.

**Iraq Air Mail Letter Card**

Gumbley invented and designed the Iraq Air Mail Letter Card weighing just four grammes, that he registered at Stationers’ Hall in London on 15 February 1933, under his own copyright. Incidentally, more that 75-years later, during December 2009, I became a Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers.

The Iraq Air Mail Letter Card was printed by Bradbury Wilkinson & Co Ltd of New Malden, Surrey and included a 15 fils impressed stamp, equivalent to about three old pence (3d.). It was first issued in Iraq on 15 July 1933.

Unfortunately, an additional 3 fils adhesive postage stamp had to be added to the Air Mail Letter Card to make up the airmail rate to destinations in Europe and as a result it was never popular with the public. Today used forms with the correct postage are very difficult to find.

**Tribute**

Douglas Gumbley left Iraq during 1934, when he became Director of Civil Aviation in Palestine until 1947. I discovered among his private papers, some of which I had the opportunity to purchase, a cutting from the *The Iraq Times*, Wednesday 13 June 1934. It was a warm tribute to ‘Mr D W Gumbley—A Pioneer Worker for Iraq’.

**Second World War**

The Second World War played a significant part in the development of airmail and the carriage of mail for military personnel in the various theatres of fighting increased tremendously. During the early years of the war the Australian Government contacted Douglas Gumbley in Palestine and asked if he could help provide a cheap and rapid means of communication between Australian troops in the Middle East and their families back home as an aid to maintaining morale.

**Australian adoption**

Gumbley suggested the adaptation and use of his Iraq Air Mail Letter Card. This was readily accepted and implemented by the Australian Command and an ‘AUSTRALIA’ Air Mail Letter card was produced without an impressed stamp, a 5d. adhesive postage stamp had to be added. The introduction of the Air Mail Letter Card to Australian forces in the Middle East—one form per man, per week—proved a great success.

So much so that the British postal authorities and military forces also adopted and adapted the Gumbley Air Mail Letter Card as the most feasible way method of providing troops with a cheap and inexpensive means of communication that was light enough to be carried by the already overtaxed capacity of the military aeroplanes.

**Official recognition**

The air letter was officially recognised at the 13th Universal Postal Union (UPU) Congress held in Brussels during 1932. The GPO in London chose the name ‘AEROGRAMME’ to comply with the UPU ruling. The spelling was first used on an air letter issued by Israel in February 1951.

Left: Cutting from The Iraq Times of 13 June 1934 paying tribute to Gumbley
Development of the GB air letter
Top right: The impressed 6d. stamp, depicting King George VI, is overprinted ‘CANCELLED’
Centre left: 1948 essay of air letter submitted to the CPO on cream paper
Centre right: 1948 die proof of impressed stamp prepared for use on cream paper – my favourite!
Right: 1948 die proofs of ink trials prepared for the change to blue paper

GB 1948 Olympic Games
An air letter form was issued on 29 July 1948 to commemorate the Olympic Games held at the Empire Stadium Wembley. The example shown is uncut. A special Olympic Games cancellation was used. The air letter shown is addressed to the USA

Great Britain introduces Air Letter Card
Top left: The ‘GT BRITAIN’ Air Mail Letter Card found in the Cumberley papers by this correspondent. It is now in his collection of Pioneer Airmails
Top right: The ‘GT BRITAIN’ Air Mail Letter Card sent by a Sgt Bowden, a member of the MEF, to his wife in London during May 1941. Sgt Bowden writes: ‘I have great faith in these letter cards perhaps they will get through to you as quick as your air cards do to me.’
Bottom left: Air Letter sent by Francis J Field from Sutton Coldfield to 2nd Lieut I H C Godfrey, in East Africa on 7 December 1942. Mr Field wrote: ‘We have pleasure to send you greetings for the New Year on the first day of the 6d. air letter mail for the services, as advised separately by airgraph.’
Bottom right: Air letter with a 6d. impressed stamp was sent to L/CPL Grout, BNAF, by his wife in London. It is postmarked North Finchley, 6 July 1943, one of the earliest recorded uses of a GB air letter with an impressed 6d. King George VI stamp
1953 Coronation air letter
Left: Fascinating original letter from the Post Office Supplies Department dated 11 September 1952, to McCorquodale & Co Ltd, Wolverton, about the proposed 1953 GB Coronation air letter form.
Above top: Essays of the ‘ER’ cypher prepared for the GPO.
Above centre: Exceptionally rare 1953 Coronation air letter printed with 6d. impressed stamp but never issued.
Above: Die proofs of the proposed impressed 6d. stamp prepared for the GPO and the stamp on the issued air letter overprinted ‘SPECIMEN’. The air letter form together with a set of four postage stamps was put on sale on 3 June 1953 – all post offices were closed on Coronation Day, 2 June 1953.

1963 pictorial ‘London’ air letters
Original GPO press release about the introduction of the first pictorial British air letter forms on 1 August 1963 and GPO poster advertising them.
1964 unissued Shakespeare air letters
Rare printed but never issued 1964 Shakespeare air letters showing six well-known characters from Shakespeare plays designed by David Gentleman and a photograph of Ann Hathaway’s Cottage, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire.

1965 Christmas air letters
Top right: Design by Richard Negus and Philip Sharland, with 6d. impressed stamp overprinted ‘SPECIMEN’ sent to the press by the GPO for publicity purposes. Happy days!
Bottom right: Michael Goaman’s design
Far right: Original GPO Press Release about the introduction of the first GB pictorial Christmas air letter forms on 1 November 1965

1969 Prince of Wales air letter
A special bilingual air letter was issued on 1 July 1969 to commemorate the Investiture of the Prince of Wales by the Queen at Caernarvon Castle. Designer David Gentleman visited the Castle during the summer of 1968 and after making copious notes and a series of watercolour drawings he decided on the view from across the river.

Rare colour essays of water colour drawing by designer David Gentleman for the 1969 Prince of Wales air letter
Opposite page: Prince of Wales air letter signed by David Gentleman with impressed 9d. stamp overprinted ‘SPECIMEN’
Above: Exceedingly rare 1966 Christmas pictorial air letter by designer Fritz Wegner, printed but never issued because the top of the design was too close to the sealing tab
Right: The issued 1966 Christmas pictorial air letter overprinted 'SPECIMEN' by hand

Postscript
Earlier I quoted a tribute to Mr D W Gumbley, 'Father of the Air Letter Form', published in the *The Iraq Times* on Wednesday 13 June 1934. On the front page is the all too familiar headline: ‘Australia Wins’—‘England beaten by 238 runs’.

This reminded me that the Air Mail Letter Card was invented in Iraq, adapted with the permission of Douglas Gumbley for use by Australian forces in the Middle East during the early year of the Second World War, and adopted for use by British forces and then the public.

I hope that by reading this miscellany, perhaps watching a test match, with a beer in one hand, that you—a reader of G.S.M.—will be inspired to think about starting a collection of the air letters of yesterday—there is still opportunity for original research!