

To mark the centenary of the Coronation Aerial Post, the world's first scheduled airmail service in September 1911, Royal Mail issued a miniature sheet and a prestige stamp booklet on Friday 9 September 2011. A wide range of special commemorative handstamps was also available for stamp collectors. The illustrations here and later in the article are courtesy of Royal Mail, as the material had not been released when this issue of *GSM* went to press early in September.



## Postage Stamps, Miniature Sheets, Stamp Booklets, Cancellations and Philatelic Souvenirs mark the Centenary of the World's most important Pioneer Airmail Flights in India and UK, 1911–2011

Special report by Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS



The cover of Royal Mail's prestige stamp booklet commemorating the centenary of the first UK Aerial Post

The historic 15-minute flight from Hendon Aerodrome to Windsor Castle by the intrepid English pioneer aviator Gustav Hamel was part of the celebrations to mark the Coronation of King George V in Westminster Abbey on 22 June 1911.

It was the first of 16 aerial post flights carrying specially designed commemorative pre-stamped envelopes and postcards with the King George V 1d. and ½d. stamps, and cancelled with a special handstamp cancellation.

The final bags of mail were flown from Hendon to Windsor on 26 September 1911 by Gustav Hamel flying a Blériot No 1. In all a total of 130,000 pieces of mail were flown in the bags carried on the 20 'London to Windsor' and four 'Windsor to London'

flights. (See my article 'Centenary of the Coronation Aerial Post, September 1911 – The First UK Aerial Post', *GSM* September 2011).

### 1911 India, first official aerial post

Earlier that year, aviation and philatelic history was made when the world's first official Aerial Post flight took off in India during the United Provinces Exhibition at Allahabad in a British built Humber Sommer biplane on Saturday 18 February 1911.

Pioneer aviator Henri Péquet flew across the Jumna River in the direction of Naini Junction about five miles away, where 13 minutes later he handed one sack of mail to

an official from the Indian Post Office. The Frenchman returned immediately to land again on the exhibition grounds, having completed the whole journey in 27 minutes.

### Special cachet

A special postmark was also authorised. Captain Windham drew an outline representing a biplane in flight over the mountains of Asia. The die for this was cast at the postal workshops at Aligarh. The postmark, 4cm in diameter, was applied in the magenta colour on public mail, but in black on privileged items. (See my article 'Centenary of the World's First Official Aerial Post', *GSM* February 2011).

This historic first official aerial post consisted of approximately 6500 letters and postcards including a number of large postcards that depicted the pilot and flying machine.

### Large signed postcards

At quite short notice, the organising committee announced in *The Pioneer Mail and Indian Weekly News* on 17 February 1911 that special postcards would be available bearing a picture of the biplane in which the mail was to be carried. These cards were signed by Henri Péquet, and cancelled with the special postmark. No messages were included.

My fellow aero-philatelist Jeffrey Brown, who has produced an excellent book and

Front and reverse of a Type I large postcard carried on the world's first airmail flight in India and signed by the pilot, Henri Péquet





Front and reverse of a Type II signed large postcard with reworded inscription above the picture

Cover addressed to the 'Officers Camp' at United Provinces Exhibition with the Camp registration handstamp and backstamped with the very rare UPEC delivery mark used only on mail to the Camp

CD, *Indian Air Mails*, has done a considerable amount of original research into the number and provenance of the two types of large-sized postcards. The inscription at the top of type I is: 'FIRST "AERIAL POST", FEBRUARY 18, '11.' And on type II: 'FIRST "AERIAL POST", ALLAHABAD, FEBRUARY 18, 1911.'

Since my article was published in the February 2011 issue of *GSMI* I have had the opportunity to purchase some of the very rare large postcards with the special postmarks from the Jeffrey Brown collection, as illustrated with this article.

The United Provinces Exhibition Camp cachet illustrated here was applied to the back of very few covers. Jeffrey Brown

points out that an article in *India's Stamp Journal* of May 1941 states, 'This cachet is extremely rare and we have not seen more than half a dozen examples of this postmark which leads us to believe that it must have been used extremely sparingly.'

### 1929 Imperial Airways

Imperial Airways produced a special souvenir envelope and enclosure to commemorate the inauguration of the England-India air service in March 1929. Special cachets were also applied to the front of the envelope.

### 1929 India Airmail stamps

In November 1929, Imperial Airways changed its route to an all-air service via Northern Europe. The flight from Karachi to Croydon was via Baghdad, Gaza, Alexandria, Salonika, Uskub (now Skopje in Macedonia), Belgrade, Budapest, Vienna, Nuremberg and Cologne. However, the route was used for two services only, after which the mail were sent by rail between Athens and Cologne.

A set of six striking India Airmail stamps, designed by G Grant, was issued on 22 October 1929 in connection with the flight. Covers dated between 4 and 12 November are found bearing the First Day of Issue cachet.

The India Airmail stamp designed by G Grant was used as an impressed stamp on an item of postal stationery



An Imperial Airways souvenir envelope carried on the inaugural flight of the England to India airmail service in March 1929 together with its enclosed letter



The spectacular cover, with five of the airmail stamps, was flown from Karachi to London by Service IE.32 on 12 November 1929. It is postmarked Park Street Calcutta, 4 November 1929. The stamps are signed by the designer, G Grant, and dated '4 November' 1929



Indian stamps to mark the 50th and 75th anniversaries of the first official airmail flight from Allahabad to Naini

### Commemorative stamps

The Indian Post Office issued a set of three commemorative stamps to mark the Golden Jubilee of the First Official Airmail Flight Allahabad-Naini on 18 February 1961 (434/6). This was followed by a set of two stamps to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of this historic flight on 18 February 1986 (1185/86).

India Post issued an appealing set of four postage stamps and a miniature sheet to commemorate the centenary during Indipex 2011, the successful World Philatelic Exhibition in New Delhi, 12-18 February 2011.

The India Department of Posts colour leaflet about the issue stated that it had attempted to recreate the history of the first Aerial Post flight from Allahabad over the River Jumna on 18 February 1911.

The stamp, first day cover and special handstamp cancellation are based on material provided by distinguished aero-philatelist, Pradip Jain, author of *Indian Airmails - Development And Operations, 1911-1942*, who will be participating in a special airmail cup competition to be held at the Royal Philatelic Society London on Saturday 5 November 2011.



Left and below: The four stamps and miniature sheet marking the centenary of the Allahabad-Naini aerial post flight  
Bottom: Flown souvenir cover signed by the pilots

### 2011 Flown souvenir covers

India Post, together with the Indian Air Force, commemorated the first air postal service on the tarmac of Bamrauli Airport on Saturday 12 February 2011. At 9.45a.m. two pilots, Wing Commander Mukesh Kothari and Squadron leader Anshul Saxena, took off from Bamrauli Air Force Station in a Chetak helicopter. On board were 500 special commemorative first day covers. A small number of these were subsequently signed by the two pilots.

### Royal Mail 1974 UPU set



Sadly, unlike India, Royal Mail did not issue any commemorative stamps to mark the 50th or 75th Anniversary of the historic 1911 British aviation achievement. A 'First official airmail Coronation 1911' 5½p stamp (955) was included in a set of four Royal Mail stamps to mark the Centenary of the Universal Postal Union 1874-1974, issued on 12 June 1974.



## 2011 Centenary miniature sheet

As already mentioned, Royal Mail issued 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 Aerial Post Miniature Sheet features: Hamel Receiving the 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.).

## Enhancement

The special miniature sheet issued by Royal Mail to mark the Centenary of the First United Kingdom Aerial Post would have been enhanced by the inclusion of a stamp depicting the iconic souvenir special violet privileged 'Coronation 1911 First UK Aerial Post' postcard. Signed by Captain Wyndham, this card depicted the biplane flying over Windsor Castle.

Another photograph that would have further enhanced the set of four stamps included in the miniature sheet shows Mr D Lewis-Poole, an architect, and pioneer aviator Gustav Hamel pictured together at a Hendon Aerial Post Box. This picture is included in *Aero Field Handbook No 3* written under the same name by Francis J Field and N C Baldwin, published during 1934 by Francis J Field Limited of Sutton Coldfield.



Above: The souvenir violet privileged postcard for the 1911 Coronation Aerial Post with the signature of Captain Wyndham  
Left: D Lewis-Poole and pioneer aviator Gustav Hamel at an Aerial Post Box, Hendon

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



## 2011 Centenary prestige stamp booklet

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, reissued from the 2005 miniature sheet of high-value definitive stamps and printed by intaglio.

The booklet, which I warmly recommend, tells the fascinating 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.

But why oh why did Royal Mail not issue a set of commemorative postage stamps to mark the centenary of this momentous aviation anniversary and promote a British achievement to the world? It is complete nonsense when looked at in the light of some of the seemingly irrelevant and dull subjects chosen by Royal Mail for its 2011 stamp programme!



The four stamp panes from the Royal Mail prestige stamp booklet



## Postscript:

The British Postal Museum & Archives held a special reception at the Royal Mail Archives Search Room at Freeling House, London, on Thursday 8 September 2011, to celebrate 'The Centenary of the World's First Aerial Post'.

The indomitable philatelic dealer Tony Buckingham has produced a range of reasonably priced and thoughtfully designed philatelic souvenirs to mark the centenary of this historic British aviation anniversary.

The most collectable of these souvenirs will without doubt be the 2011 reproductions of the 1911 covers. By the time you read this issue of GSM these covers, if everything goes to plan, will have been flown by helicopter from Windsor Great Park to the RAF Museum at Hendon in north London. This souvenir mail, cancelled with a special handstamp on Friday 9 September 2011, will re-enact the original flight made by Gustav Hamel on 9 September 1911.

Tony Buckingham has very kindly invited me as a passenger on this helicopter flight and the editor is scheduled to be at Hendon to join in the celebrations! Subject to his approval, my exclusive report and pictures will be published in the November issue of GSM.