

The 1953 Coronation air letter form was innovative in a number of respects and designers, Post Office officials and the printers worked hard and ran through a wide variety of options before the end product went on sale. *GSM* correspondent, Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS, owns a number of items from the printer's archive, including correspondence, proofs and original artwork. In this article he looks at the material in his collection, illustrating several items for the first time and reviewing the discussions which took place 60 years ago.

# The Great Britain 1953 Coronation Air Letter Form—The Inside Story

By Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS

Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II acceded to the throne on 6 February 1952 on the death of her father, His Majesty King George VI. Historic and spectacular official celebrations to mark her Diamond Jubilee took place in London during the long bank holiday weekend of 3-6 June this year.

The Queen was crowned in Westminster Abbey on Tuesday 2 June 1953. All post offices were closed for the day and when they reopened the following morning the General Post Office (GPO) released a set of four Coronation stamps and a special commemorative Coronation air letter form.

My feature article *The Great Britain Air Letter, 1941-2011, A Miscellany to Celebrate 70 Years* (*GSM*, August 2011) included some brief information, together with illustrations related to the Coronation air letter. Now, in this Diamond Jubilee Year, it is well worth telling the full inside story of the Great Britain Coronation air letter; the initial ideas, early designs, and the essays and proofs leading up to the final form issued on 3 June 1953 (*Fig 1*).

During August 1952 the GPO considered overprinting the standard Great Britain air letter form with a special Coronation symbol in a two- or three-colour design. However, the following month it was decided not to modify the standard form but instead to produce a Coronation air letter.

## Rough drawing

A letter, together with a very rough pencil drawing (*Fig 2*), was sent by the GPO to McCorquodale & Co Ltd, at Bletchley, Buckinghamshire. The GPO requested:

- (A) A coloured border, either in blue or red and blue.
- (B) A Coronation symbol (design not then settled) in the bottom left-hand corner.
- (C) The Air Mail Label in the top left-hand corner in blue only, the word 'Aerogramme' in brackets below and in similar type to that of the word 'Air Letter' but the same size as: 'If anything is enclosed.....'
- (D) In addition it was suggested that a stamp the same size as that printed by Harrison & Sons for the Olympic Games issue in

Fig 1 The issued Great Britain Coronation air letter signed by Stuart Rose, designer of the Coronation Symbol (Reduced)

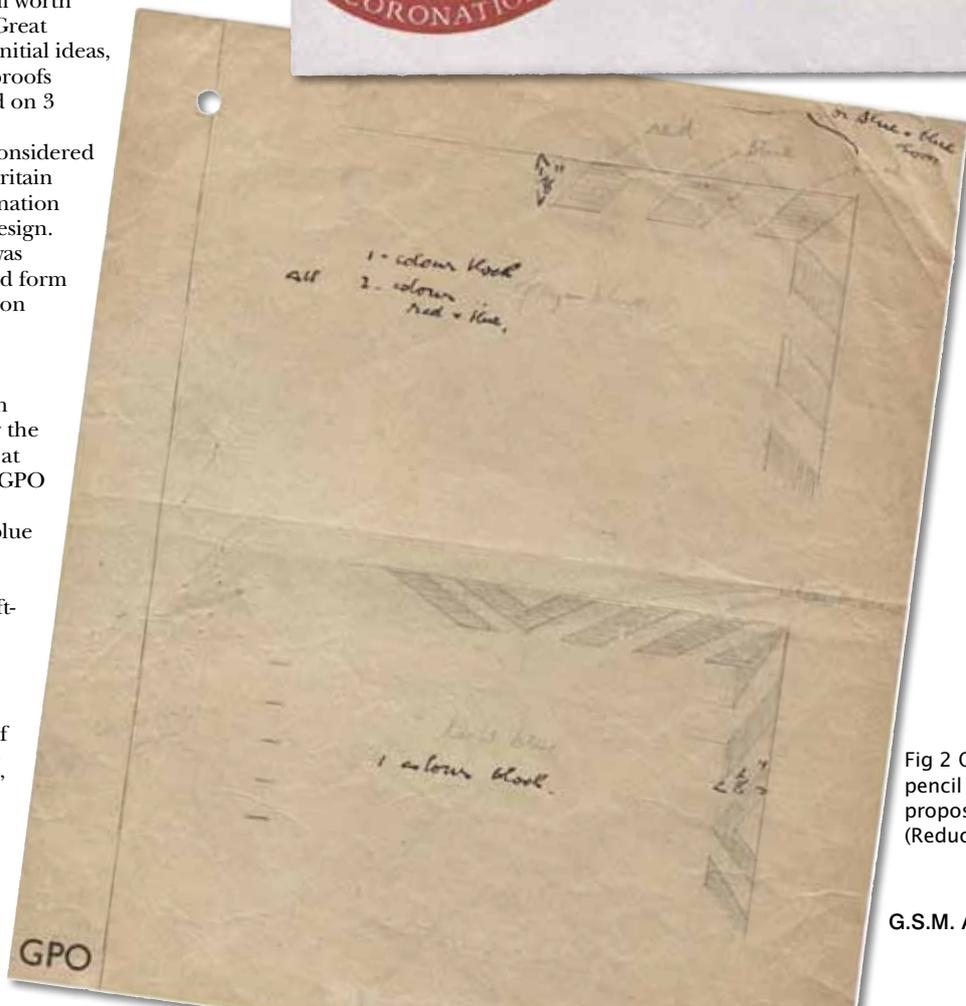


Fig 2 GPO original pencil drawing for proposed border (Reduced)

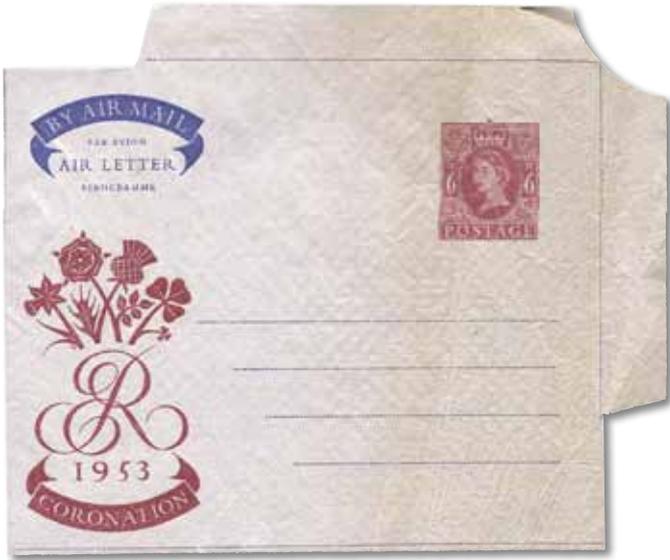


Fig 3 Proof of the Coronation air letter with proposed definitive size impressed stamp - never issued (Reduced)



Fig 4 Proof with 'BY AIR MAIL' motif printed in white and black (Reduced)

1948 be used—no details were then available, as that question depended on the values of postage stamps that would be chosen for the Coronation issue, something that had not been decided at that stage.

Because of the delay in regard to the stamp design, proofs were submitted to the Post Office without stamps and at this stage without the Coronation symbol but with red and blue coloured borders as requested.

Later the coloured borders were omitted and the artwork of the Coronation symbol designed by Stuart Rose (later Design Director at the Post Office) incorporating the National emblems and 'ER' cypher, was produced.

Proofs were submitted to the Post Office, complete apart from the stamp, which at that stage was a small standard size definitive 6d. value showing the Queen (Fig 3).

This followed a correspondence between the Controller, Post Office Supplies Department, based at 91-99 Pentonville Road in London, and McCorquodale & Co Ltd.

I have a number of the original letters sent from the Post Office Supplies Department and original copies of replies from McCorquodale, in my collection, *The History and Development of the Air Letter 1932-1970*. They are reproduced here in full for the first time, together with original drawings and proofs. Not only do they tell the story of what actually happened but they give an insight into the thinking of the GPO at the time when production costs and time were governing factors in the final choice of design.

### Borders for air letter

Original copy of letter dated 9 August 1952, from McCorquodale & Co Ltd, to the Controller, Post Office Supplies Dept. (The letter and copies are reproduced in italics): *We enclose proofs of five different borders for Air Letter forms.*

*Those numbered 1, 4 and 5 would not present any difficulty but it would very difficult to register the black printing on the 'Par Avion' label on a Rotary machine, as on those numbered 2 and 3 (Fig 4), and we could not print the black ink if it were decided to have a red and blue border as on No.5. With reference to the other points raised in your letter of the 12th June there should not be any*

Fig 5 Proof of the Coronation Air Letter form with proposed red and blue borders – note space marked for a commemorative sized impressed stamp (Reduced)



*difficulty in getting a slightly thicker paper but we have nothing suitable in stock on which we could proof.*

*There would be no difficulty in lengthening the sealing flaps.*

Original copy of letter dated 14 August 1952, from McCorquodale & Co Ltd, to the Controller, Post Office Supplies Dept.:

#### AIR LETTER FORMS

*With reference to your letter of the 13th inst.*

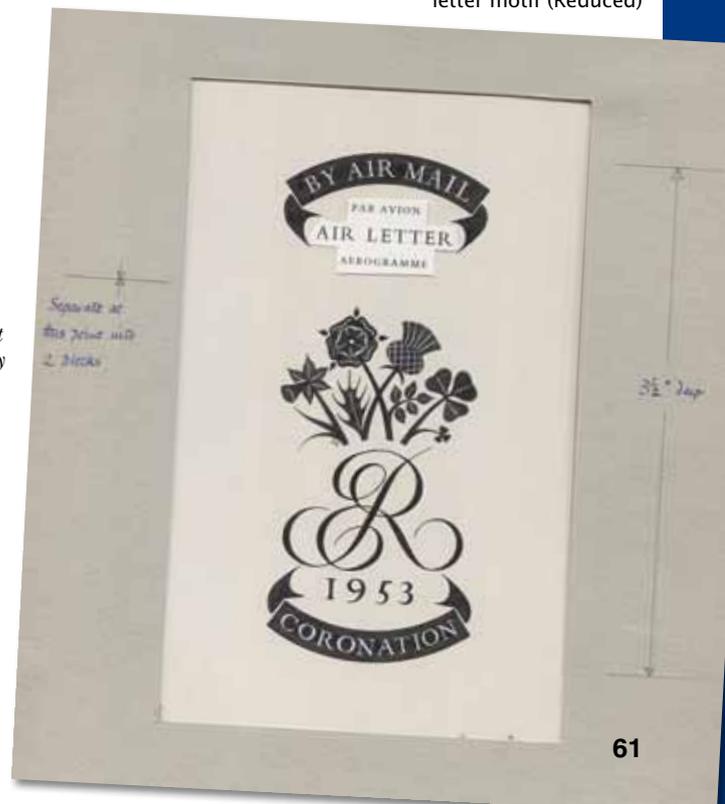
*(1) There should not be any extra cost if Types 1, or 4 are adopted. If type 5 is adopted there may be a small increase in printing cost but this this cannot be stated definitely until we commence running.*

*(2) If a 10% thicker paper was used the increase in cost would be 1s. 6d. per 1000 forms.*

*(3) The border designs were made to follow the patterns left here by Mr Pratt and which we understand were supplied by your Headquarters.*

*(4) If the inside of the forms are white and the outside blue we shall have to revert to the printing of a screen on the outside. It was proved by tests*

Fig 6 Original artwork for the symbol and air letter motif (Reduced)



made by the Department in August 1949 that a white paper of the correct weight could not be made opaque by the addition of a screen and the idea was ruled out.

(5) We have allowed an extra line on the proofs. If a sixth line is added it would be suitable for a typewriter but there would not be much room for the average hand-writing.

## Coronation symbol

Original letter dated 29 August 1952, on behalf of the Controller, Post Office Supplies Department, to McCorquodale & Co Ltd: AIR LETTER FORMS

With reference to the recent telephone conversations on the subject of the proposed overprinting of Air Letters with a Post Office Coronation symbol in a 3-colour design, your comments on the following aspects of the matter would be appreciated:-

- (a) It is understood that there would be no difficulty in printing in one colour and very little additional cost.
- (b) Similarly, there would be no difficulty or loss of production if two colours were used so long as there was no question of close registration of the columns. Additional costs would, however, be involved.
- (c) Printing in three colours would present a problem. This could be done by
- (i) using a third cylinder on the present rotary machine. The increase in cost would be small and there would be only slight loss of production.
- (ii) cutting to sheets after two colours had been printed by rotary and by adding the third colour on 2 or 3 flat-bed machines. Production costs would rise considerably and it might be difficult to maintain sufficient output.

It is fully appreciated that there would be considerable difficulty with close registration, either with 2 or 3 colours, and this point will be stressed in replying to Post Office Headquarters but, as the design has not yet been decided upon, you will perhaps give some idea of what additional costs would be entailed with each class of work under paragraphs (a), (b), (c) (i) and (c) (ii). This is particularly desirable in the case of the additional flat-bed printing with which the cost of production would tend to soar.

Your early comments would be much appreciated as the matter is of some urgency.

Original copy of letter dated 1 September 1952 from the Manager (no name included), McCorquodale & Co Ltd, to the Controller, Post Office Supplies Department: AIR LETTER FORMS

With reference to your letter on the 29th August regarding the proposed Coronation Symbol on Air Letters:-

- (a) There would be no difficulty in printing this in one colour on our Rotary machine. The only extra cost would be for the additional plates and make ready which would not exceed £15.
- (b) If two colours were used there would be extra cost for plates and it is probable that the running costs would increase by about 2d. per 1000 forms, but this would of course depend largely on the type of symbol.
- (c)
- (i) Printing a three colour symbol on our present machine is not possible as there are not enough cylinders on the machine.
- (ii) It would be possible to add the third colour on flat-bed machines provided the register is not too close. No definite statement that the job would be satisfactory could be made until the type of symbol is seen but we estimate that the extra cost, including additional waste, would be round about 1s.6d. per 1000 forms.
- The question of output is again dependent on the

type of symbol as this will govern the speed at which machines can be run.

## Special Coronation issue

Original letter dated 11 September 1952 on behalf of Controller, Post Office Supplies Department, to McCorquodale & Co Ltd: AIR LETTER FORMS

The latest developments regarding the proposed modifications to the existing form are these:-

- (1) It has now been decided not to modify the stock air letter form at present, but to make a special Coronation issue which would be put on sale on 2nd June, 1953, for three months in place of the ordinary form.
- (2) The variations desired for the special issue are:-
- (a) A coloured border, either blue as in your specimen No. 1 (enclosed with your letter), or, red and blue, as in your specimen No. 5.
- (b) A coronation symbol (design not yet settled) in the bottom left corner, in one, two or three colours. As the result of your previous comments, two colours only are being recommended.
- (c) The Air Mail label in the left top corner in blue only as in your specimens Nos. 1, 4 and 5. Owing to the difficulty of ensuring exact registration of the right-hand wing and the near illegibility of the words 'Par Avion', it has been decided to exclude any question of black printing.

(d) The word (AEROGRAMME) in brackets, below and in similar type to that of the words AIR LETTER, but of the size of the matter commencing 'If anything is enclosed.....'.

(e) In addition, it is suggested that a double-sized stamp similar to that printed by Messrs. Harrison & Sons on the Olympic Games issue in 1948, should be used. This aspect of the matter may however be disregarded at present as it is involved with the question of what values of postage stamps are likely to be concerned in the Coronation issue. One specimen each of your Nos. 1 and 5 are attached showing the modifications required (Fig 5).

The question of costs has already been covered in your letter of 1st September, but it is now desired to know as soon as possible by what date you would require firm details of the symbol (and perhaps stamp) in order to produce supplies of the Coronation form in time for distribution to post offices. This Department would need to have about a month's supply, on say (2nd March) 3½ million forms, four weeks before 2 June 1953.

The total quantity of forms required will be about 10 million.

Following this letter the artwork for the Coronation symbol and air letter motif was approved (Fig 6) and proofs were produced showing the symbol in red and blue (Fig 7) and red only (Fig 8). A further proof (Fig 9)



Fig 7 Above: Proof with Symbol printed in red and blue (Reduced)

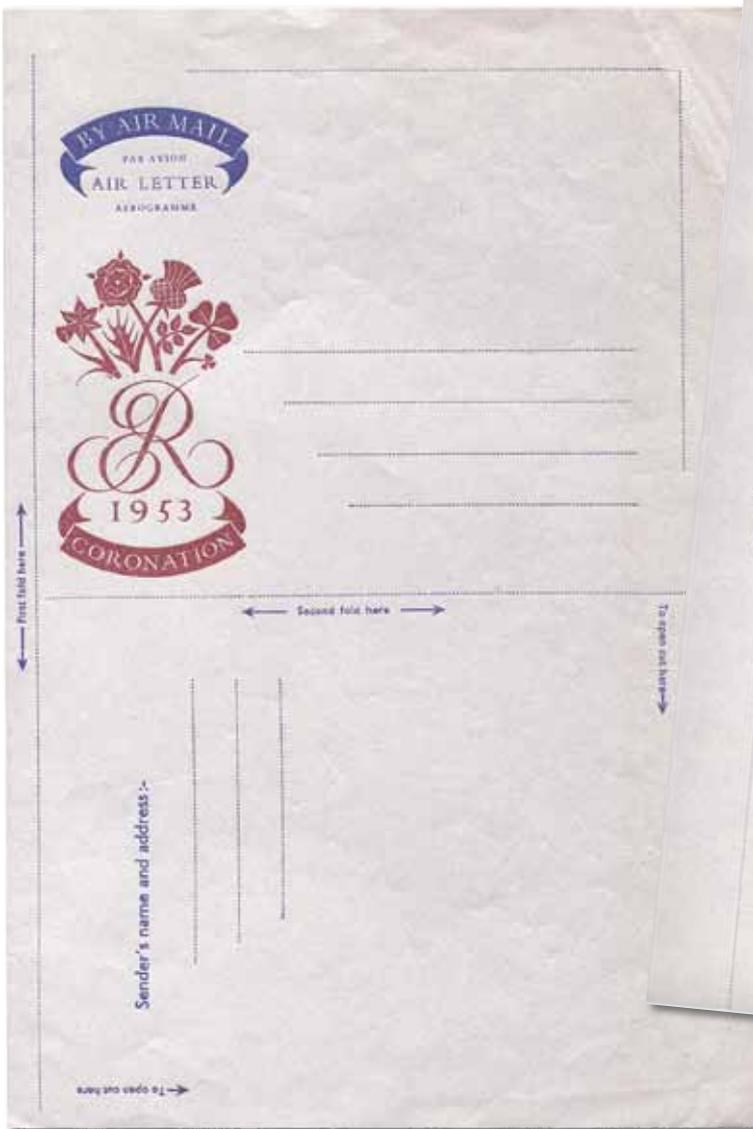


Fig 8 Proof showing vertical instructions on back of air letter (Reduced)

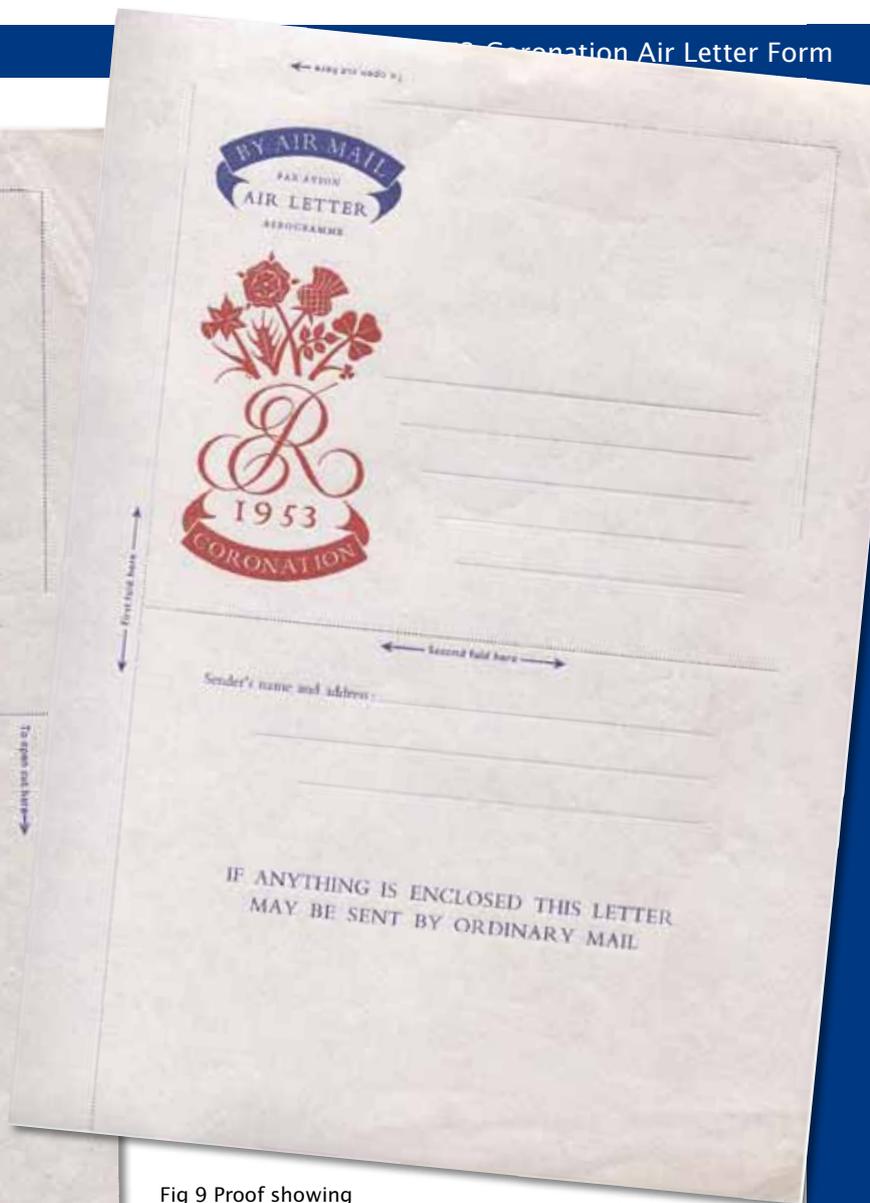


Fig 9 Proof showing instructions changed to horizontal format (Reduced)

shows the senders' name and address panel altered from vertical to horizontal format.

### Final instructions

The next original letter in my collection is dated 20 February 1953 and signed in ink by T H Bowes, Post Office Supplies Department. It addressed to K D Carter, McCorquodale & Co Ltd, Wolverton:

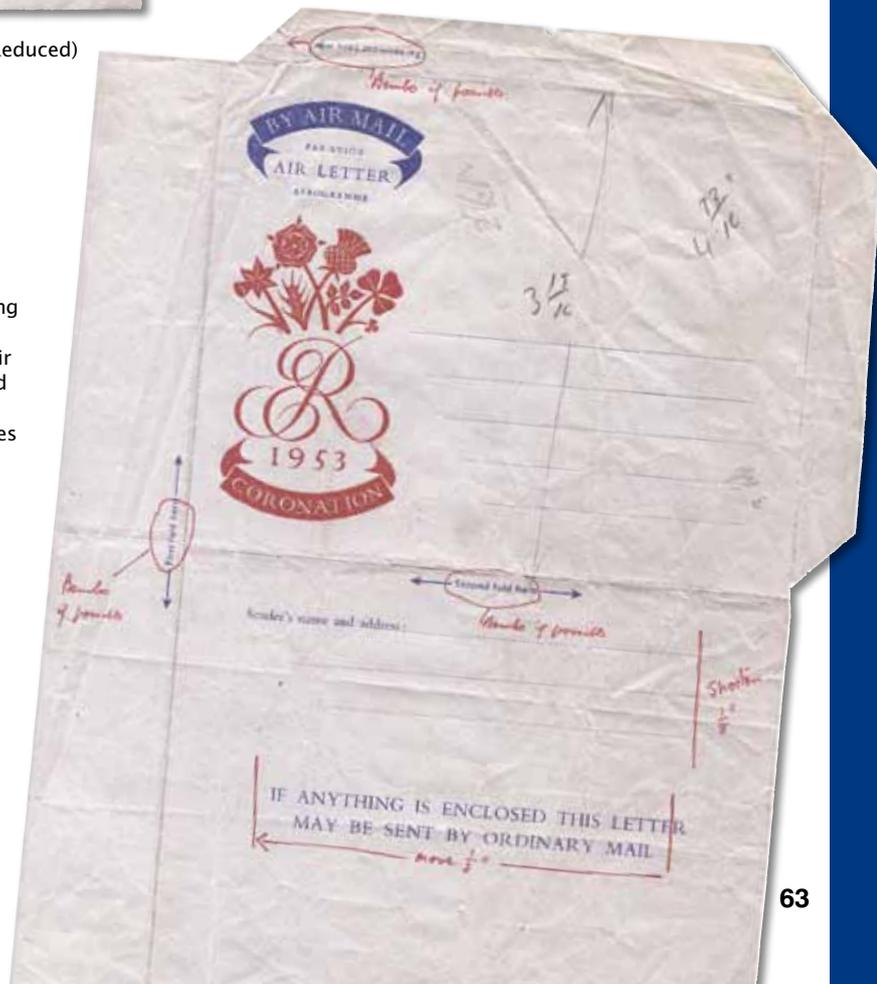
#### CORONATION AIR LETTER

*Thank you for your letter of the 18th instant and for the prompt production of the further proofs. I think we really have reached finality in this matter now and I append the answers to the specific questions you raised in your letter:-*

- (a) Your proposal to shorten the flaps by 1/8th inch from the total length and depth to allow for variation in cutting and stretch of paper is agreed.*
- (b) The present cut may be retained if obtaining new knives would delay production.*
- (c) It is agreed that the lettering in both "BY AIR MAIL" and "CORONATION" should be opened up.*
- (d) The dotted lines should be continued to the ends of the flaps.*

*The latest proofs have shown the desirability of a few minor modifications which I list below and which are indicated on the attached specimen (Fig 10). No doubt you will be able to make these slight*

Fig 10 Working proof of the Coronation air letter, marked (by the Post Office Supplies Department) with the proposed alterations



amendments and bulk manufacturing instructions will follow.

(i) The wording 'If anything is enclosed this letter may be sent by ordinary mail' should be moved over to the left 1/8th inch to centralise.

(ii) The dotted lines for 'Sender's name and address' should be shortened by 1/8th of an inch (to avoid too close proximity to the sealed flap).

(iii) If possible the same type printing should be used for the folding and cutting instructions; as for other lettering.

(iv) The instruction 'To open cut here' should be removed 1/4 of an inch nearer to the end of the flap.

Original copy of letter dated 23 February 1953, from McCorquodale & Co Ltd to T H Bowes, Post Office Supplies Department: **CORONATION AIR LETTER**

*I am enclosing further proofs of the Blue letterpress on the above, embodying the minor alterations suggested in your letter of the 20th inst.*

*The new knives for the flaps have been ordered and it is noted that we can retain the present cut if there is any delay in delivering them.*

*The lettering in 'By Air Mail' and 'Coronation' is being opened up and it is expected that we shall have the new plate in about ten days time.*

### Warrant to print

Warrant No 494 was issued to McCorquodale and Co Ltd on 27 February 1953 to print ten million unstamped Coronation Air Letters. At the same time a warrant was issued to Harrison & Sons Ltd for the stamping of the forms with the special 6d. impressed Coronation stamp.

In total, McCorquodale & Co Ltd printed 21,500,000 Great Britain Coronation air letter forms at Wolverton, on light blue paper, using the old rotary letterpress Postal Order machines. After printing, the forms were sent to Harrisons at High Wycombe, in uncut sheets of eight, where the impressed stamp was printed using the photogravure process. They were returned to McCorquodale for cutting and gumming.

### Impressed Coronation stamp

The impressed Coronation stamp used was a modification of MC Farrar-Bell's design for the 1s.6d. Coronation commemorative issue, incorporating the Dorothy Wilding photograph of Her Majesty The Queen.

It was pointed out to the GPO that the mitre corner of the 'Gumbley' air letter form, first introduced in Great Britain during June 1943, was covered by a patent and a suitable alternative—a 'curved cut corner'—might have to be used on all Great Britain air letter forms.

A decision was taken to modify the corner on the 1953 Coronation Air Letter and new cutters were ordered in February 1953, but rather than hold up production, the old cutters with curved corner were used on the very early deliveries.

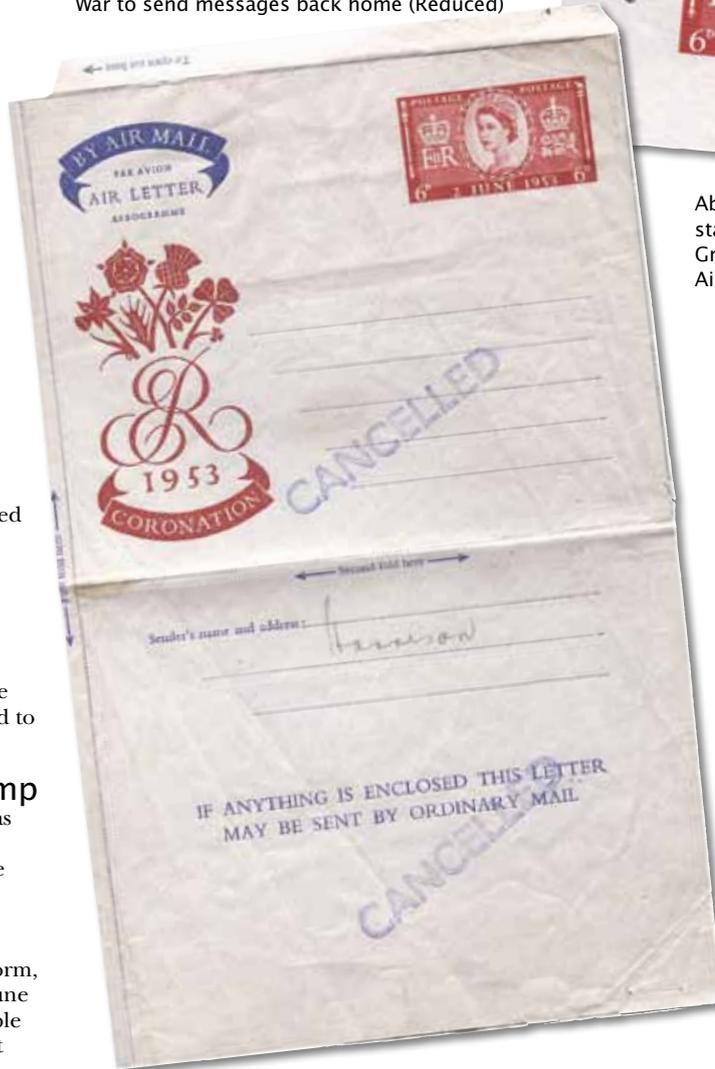
The Coronation air letter was put on sale at all post offices together with four commemorative Coronation stamps on Wednesday, 3 June 1953. It was popular with the public and it remained on sale at post



Above: Adaptation of the Gumbley 1933 Iraq Air Mail Letter Card used by British Forces during the early years of the Second World War to send messages back home (Reduced)



Above: Final proofs of stamp imprint for 1953 Great Britain Coronation Air Letter form



Left: Printed Coronation Air Letter form CANCELLED and sent by Harrison to McCorquodale & Co Ltd (Reduced)

offices until 31 December that year.

These particularly elegant air letter forms are very collectable and make an excellent side-line to a thematic collection about royalty or royal events. They are still available today from some stamp dealers at a very reasonable price.

### Diamond Jubilee Air Letter

What a shame then that Royal Mail has now discounted issuing pictorial aerogrammes. A Diamond Jubilee of the Coronation air

letter issued on 2 June 2013 would have been welcomed by collectors to mark an historic event in the life of the British Monarchy. Perhaps some enterprising stamp dealer will arrange to overprint a limited number of the original 1953 Great Britain Coronation air letter.

This correspondent would be pleased to hear from any GSM reader (via the Editor) who is able to add new or further information to that contained in this article.