

With the London 2012 Olympic Games almost upon us, Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGA, looks back at the Air Letter produced for the 'Austerity Games' of 1948, the country's first commemorative Air Letter. As well as an unused Air Letter, he illustrates an uncut example from the printer's archive and one sent to New York, cancelled with the special 'Olympic Games' first day postmark.

The Great Britain 1948 Olympic Games Air Letter

By Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS

The opening Ceremony of the 2012 London Olympic Games on Friday 27 July is now less than two weeks away and Royal Mail has already deluged collectors with new stamp issues and related products with much more still to come!

Stamp collectors still have an opportunity of finding both mint and used copies of the special Great Britain commemorative 1948 London Olympic Games Air Letter form at a reasonable price from dealers and online.

Impressed 6d. stamp

The 1948 Olympic Air Letter form, with a special 6d. impressed stamp, was issued by the General Post Office (GPO) on Thursday, 29 July 1948, together with four attractive commemorative postage stamps: 2½d., 3d., 6d. and 1s. (SG495-498).

The 1948 Summer Olympics, officially known as the Games of the XIV Olympiad, were declared open by King George VI at 4p.m. on 29 July, the time shown on Big Ben, symbol of the London Games. The Empire Stadium Wembley was packed for the occasion on a gloriously sunny summer day.

Because of the Second World War, they were the first Summer Olympics since the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. The 1940 Olympic Games had been scheduled for Tokyo, and then Helsinki. The 1944 Olympic Games had been planned for London.

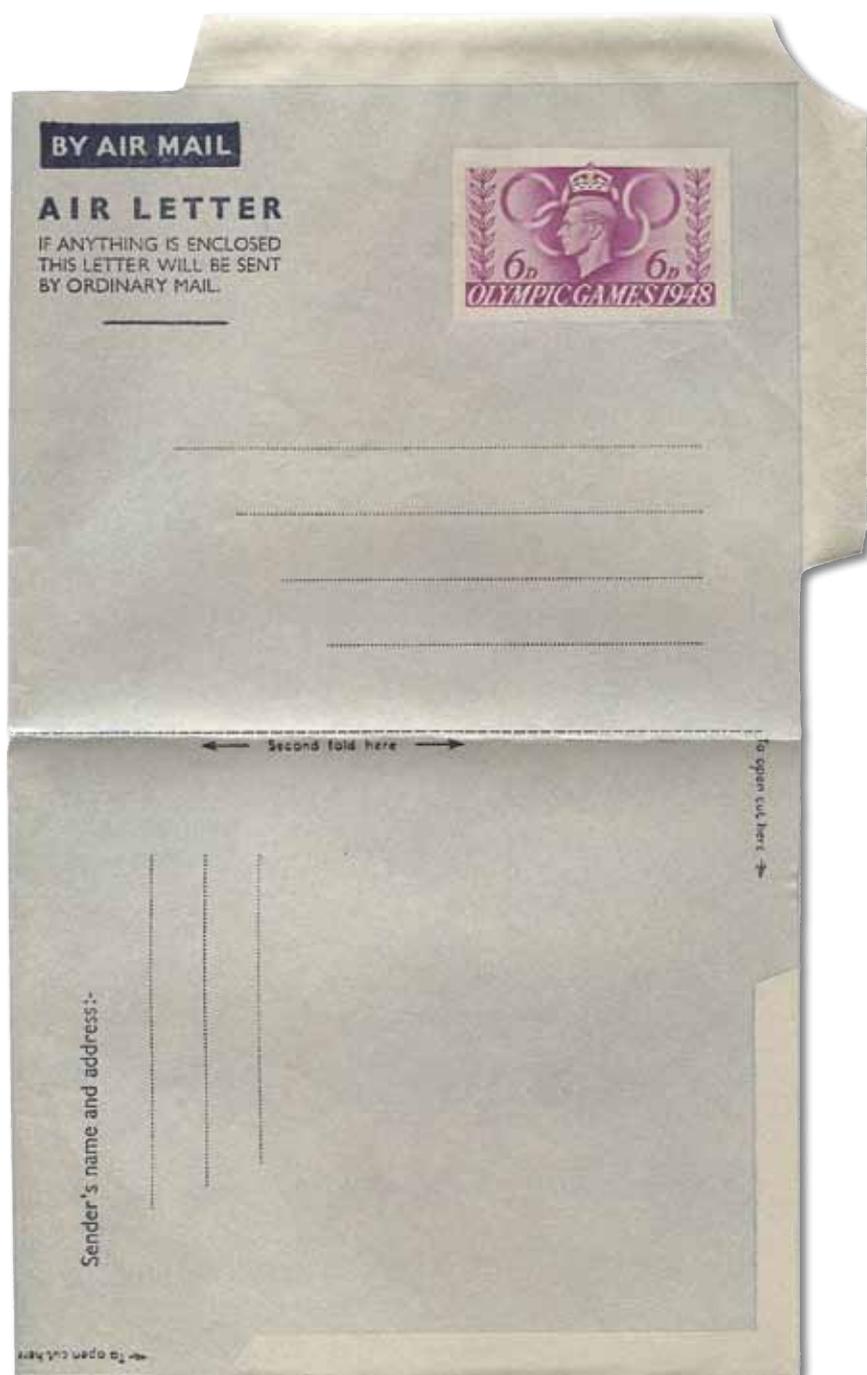
The 1948 London Olympic Games (29 July-14 August) came to be known as the 'Austerity Games' due to the economic climate and post-war rationing. No new venues were built and athletes were housed in existing accommodation rather than an Olympic Village.

Printing

This special commemorative air letter form, the first issued by Great Britain, was printed by McCorquodale & Co Ltd, at Bletchley, Buckinghamshire, on grey-azure paper.

In total, four million of these Olympic air letter forms were printed on an American reel-fed rotary letterpress machine that had been used for the production of postal orders.

After printing, the forms were sent to Harrison & Sons Limited, at High Wycombe, in uncut sheets of eight (two down and four across) where the impressed 6d. stamp, depicting His Majesty King George VI and the



The 1948 Great Britain Olympic Air Letter form issued on 27 July 1948 (Reduced)

iconic five-ring Olympic symbol, was printed, using the photogravure process.

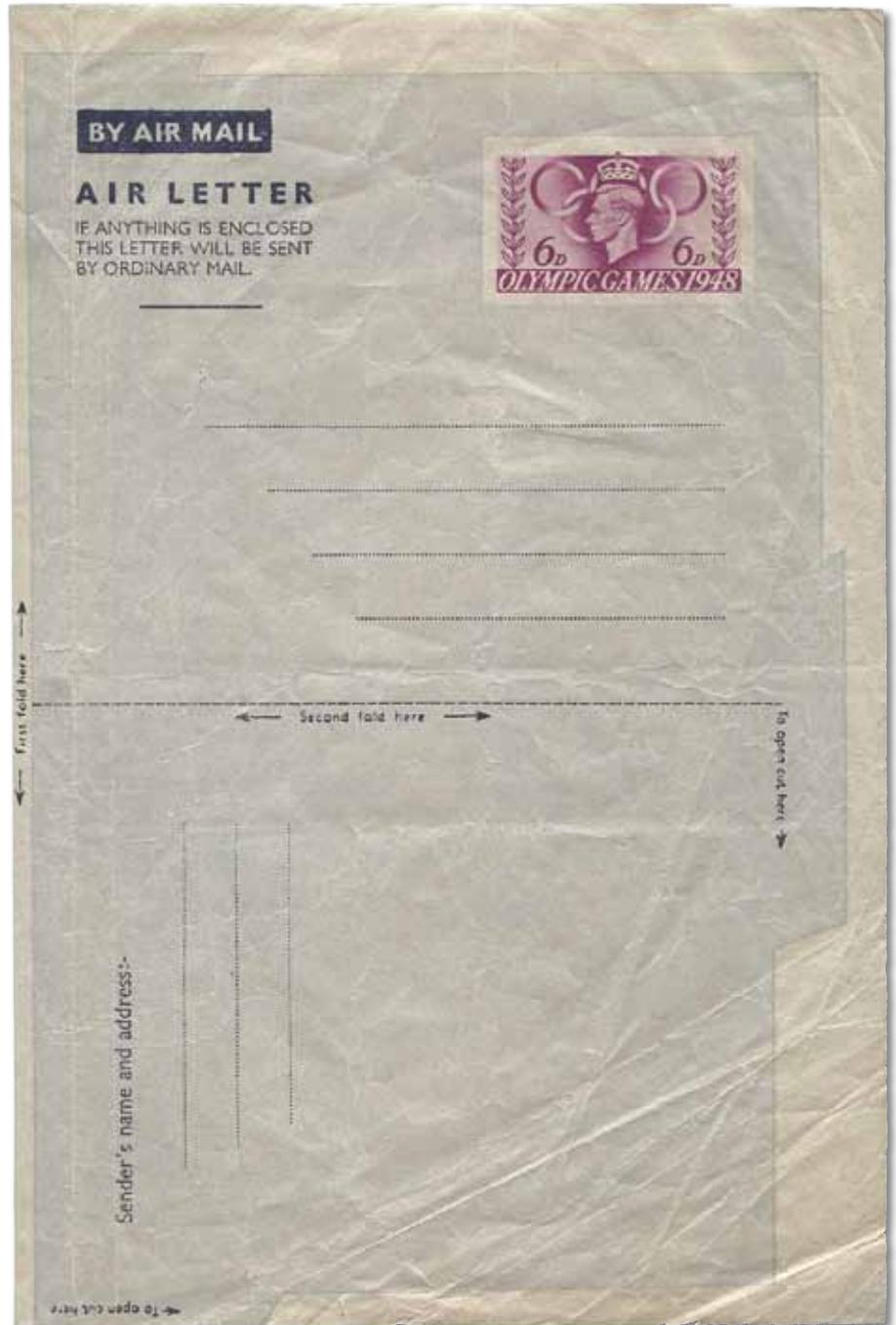
The special Olympic stamp on the air letter form was designed by Stanley D Scott. The white margin around the stamp was similar in depth to the margin around the stamp on the non-commemorative form on sale at the time.

The air letters were returned to Bletchley for cutting into 'one up' (a single rectangle not cut to shape) and gumming with gum arabic. The forms remained on sale at post offices until supplies had been exhausted.

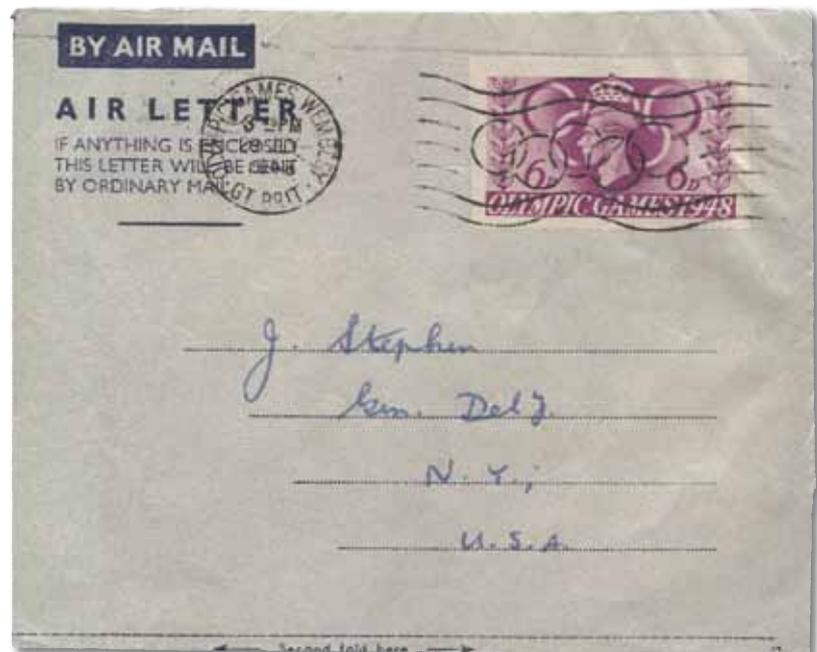
Olympic air letter forms with the stamp printed in aniline ink do exist, although they were never officially ordered by the GPO.

Worth collecting

Without doubt Great Britain 1948 Olympic Games Air Letter forms are well worth collecting as an important addition to the Olympic story. Importantly the majority of them have been sent through the post to countries throughout the world!



Extremely rare uncut 1948 Olympic Air Letter form (Reduced)



The Great Britain Olympic Air Letter addressed to New York with special Wembley, 29 July 1948, first day of issue cancellation. It was back-stamped on arrival in New York, 2 August 1948 (Reduced)