

1911 - THE UNITED KINGDOM CORONATION AERIAL POST

by

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The importance of the Coronation Aerial Post is that it was the first sustained air mail service in the world, there being fourteen flights from London to Windsor in which 35 bags of mail were carried and four flights carrying a total of 4 bags of mail from Windsor to London.

The inaugural flight from Hendon aerodrome in North-West London to Windsor Great Park, marking the world's first regular airmail service, took place on Saturday 9th September at 4.55pm when Gustav Hamel bravely took off in a very high wind carrying one bag of privileged mail weighing 23½lbs. It arrived safely just 12½ minutes later. The mail was then taken to the Post Office in Windsor by the cycle Postman, sorted and despatched to London by the 6pm train. The last flight was on 26th September. Four pilots were engaged to operate the Aerial Post service with Gustav Hamel performing most of the 1911 flights in his Bleriot monoplane.

The first return flight from Windsor to London was scheduled for Saturday 16th September, but a very strong wind prevented this and the first flight took place the next day, when Clement Greswell in a Bleriot monoplane carried bag number 1 containing 21 lbs of mail.

WINDSOR FLIGHTS 1911

The invention of a passenger carrying aeroplane by the Wright brothers soon resulted in mail of a souvenir nature often being carried. In 1911 the first official British air mail service operated between Windsor and London. It was organised by Commander Sir Walter Windham who had organised the first official air service in the world, the 1911 Allahabad flights to India. After his return to Britain Commander Windham used his experience to promote the idea of special mail flights established to celebrate the coronation of King George V. He described the events as follows:-

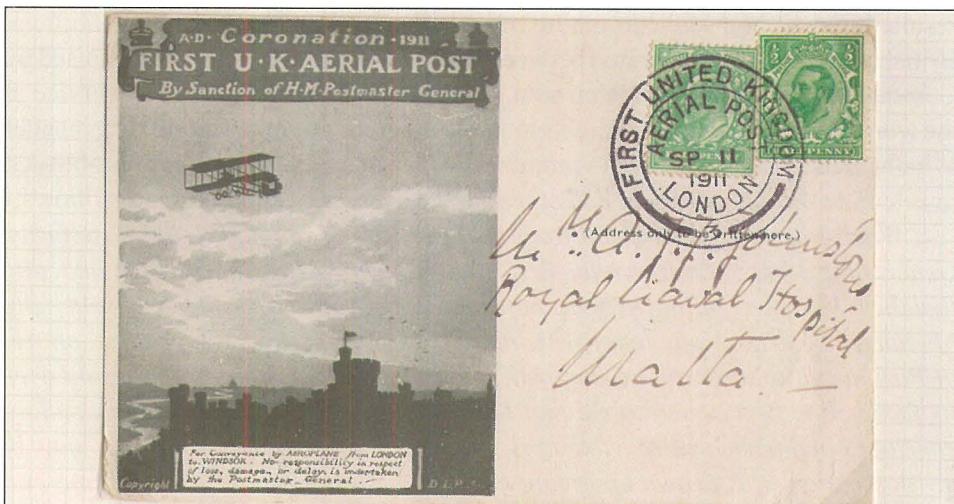
"When I arrived in England from India in 1911, I applied to the Postmaster General for permission to run the first British air mail. I was met with a difficulty that the P.M.G. was willing to agree but could not see how to overcome the difficulty of charging extra on any letter which might be sent, as it would require an Act of Parliament to alter the existing rules and that a stamp could not be sold over its face value. It occurred to me that this difficulty could be overcome by selling envelopes and postcards at a fixed price to which he agreed. A document, now in my possession, was drawn up giving me sole authority to carry the scheme into effect. The purchaser could take these envelopes away, put on what stamps he liked and post them in the special post boxes which were constructed. The G.P.O. could then collect the letters from these boxes and convey them. As they did, to the western Branch of the G.P.O. and there impress them with the postmark "The First Aerial Post". From there they could be taken from the G.P.O. to the flying ground at Hendon and flown to Windsor Castle, where I had permission from His Majesty to land the mails.

The only great hitch that occurred was that the aeroplanes were not fully equipped for carrying letters and the aviators, having had so little experience of flying that when there was the slightest breeze about refused to go up; in consequence, the mails were hung up in thousands of letters, lying in the Post Office and elsewhere waiting to be despatched. The P.M.G. used to ring up every now and then to ask when I would be getting on with my job, which put me into rather a hole. However, all went well and in time the letters arrived at Windsor. Several incidents happened, such as an aeroplane coming down in a field, and one of the pilots breaking both his legs, etc., but on the whole it turned out a great success."

The effect of sending a letter (costing for an envelope 1/- with 1d stamp) or postcard (6½d with ½d stamp) was usually to delay rather than expedite it, clearly the main purpose was to create souvenirs. However it could be mildly interesting for collectors to look for mail addressed to foreign countries, as technically it was the first acceptance of air mail for overseas destinations, even though there was no practical benefit.

A few postcards addressed to Malta were also included on this flight and nowadays they are keenly sought after by collectors, they being extremely rare to come by.

Covers sent to Malta



Card addressed to MALTA franked with ½d x 2 tied by die "3" cancel. of 11th Sept. 1911 with Valletta/Malta/21 SP 11 arrival datestamp.



Souvenir card from U.K addressed to VALLETTA, Malta with the ½d stamp tied by die "2" cancel. 'FIRST UNITED KINGDOM/AERIAL POST/LONDON/SP 12 1911'. On arrival locally taxed 1d and distributed by postman number 14 on 23rd September 1911.