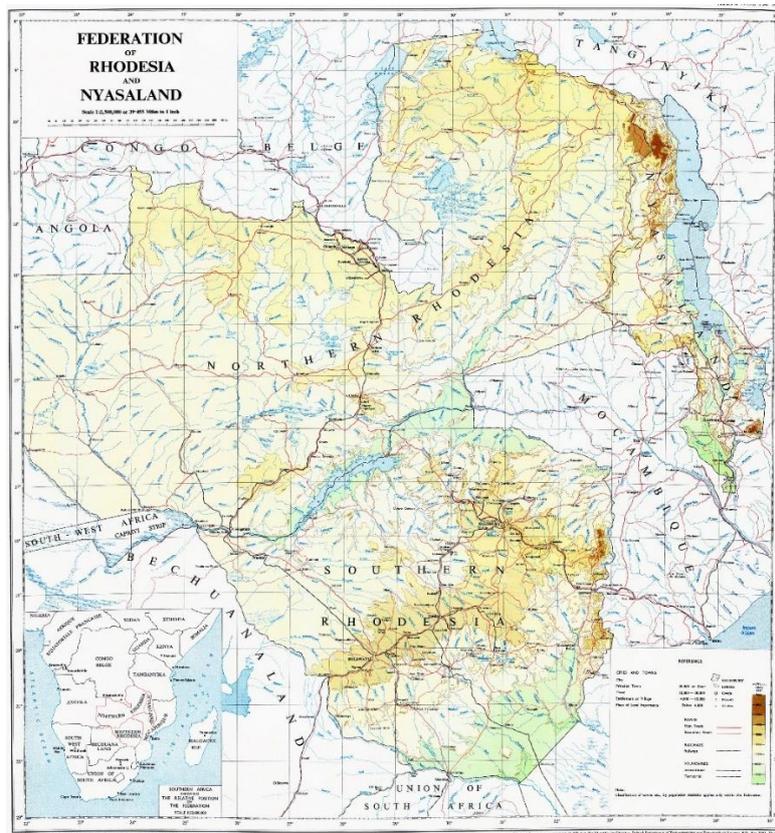


CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

This listing will deal with the special printed forms used in the three countries of British Central Africa as a means of providing an inexpensive air mail service using a custom designed air letter form. It is not confined to postal stationery (that is stationery produced bearing an imprinted valid postage stamp and sold by or on behalf of a postal authority) but will include air letter sheets and aerogrammes issued without an imprinted stamp, provided there is evidence of the use of that form of air letter sheet or aerogrammes in one or more of the countries. As and when new information is received the relevant chapters will be updated and republished. Please note that this could involve the renumbering of the items within a chapter. Be sure to always use the latest update, which will be dated.

British Central Africa consisted of the self-governing colony of Southern Rhodesia, the colony of Northern Rhodesia and the protectorate of Nyasaland. At the start of World War II, in September 1939 each of the countries operated its own postal system. During the War air mail letter sheets were first introduced. In a comparatively short time after the introduction of air mail letter sheets, all the three countries were making extensive use of the new postal service.



Map of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland

The terminology used for this form of communication has changed over the years. The original concept of a private letter form in which the message would be contained within what amounted to an envelope (and was thus private) was far from new. The British South Africa Company produced a letter card as early as 1903 with a 1d Small Arms stamp. This was repeated in 1913 with a 1d Admiral stamp. Further letter cards were issued in Southern Rhodesia in 1924, 1931 and 1937 bearing the then current definitive 1d stamp. But each of these letter cards was produced on a thick board and was clearly unsuitable for conveyance by air in the large quantities needed during the War.

When Southern Rhodesia first produced an air letter in 1941 it was described as being an Active Service Letter Card, following the pattern in South Africa. When civilian air letter sheets were introduced in 1944, they were described as being Air Letters. However, at its Congress in Brussels in July 1952, the Universal Postal Union adopted the term 'aerogramme' to describe the lightweight sealed letter sheets for conveyance by air and which were not permitted to have enclosures. Subsequently, at its Congress in 1969, the UPU fixed the size of aerogrammes to be 110 x 220 mm.

In these listings, therefore, the term aerogramme will be used for all air letter sheets introduced after July 1953. Before that date the Active Service Letters Cards of Southern Rhodesia will be referred to as such, and other items for the concessionary air mail conveyance will be referred to as air mail letter sheets or air letters.

With the exception of the first printing in 1944 and the 1946 emergency printing in Southern Rhodesia, the air letter sheets of Southern Rhodesia bearing a 6d stamp of King George VI and later a 6d stamp of Queen Elizabeth II were on watermarked paper, as were the first two issues of the Federation (the first without a stamp and the second with a 6d stamp).¹ The KENT VALE PARCHMENT watermark² used on these issues had either a number or a letter code indicating the year in which the paper was manufactured. But it is to be noted that this was not necessarily the year of printing. The code numbers W2, 6 and 7 indicate the year of manufacture as 1942, 1946 and 1947. The alphabetic code letters used were A (1948), B (1949), E (1952), F (1953) and G (1954). The letters F and G were used in reverse; this was intentional to avoid confusion with the letters E and C respectively. Because of the method of guillotining used, watermarks are often incomplete, and the code number or letter cannot be identified. Some air mail letter sheets or aerogrammes did not show any part of the watermark and are classified as being unwatermarked. But all these air mail letter sheets and aerogrammes of Southern Rhodesia and the Federation were printed in watermarked paper. The air mail letter sheets and aerogrammes of Northern Rhodesia and those of Nyasaland were produced on unwatermarked paper.

The air letters were usually printed in sheets of eight forms and then outsourced by McCorquodale & Co Limited to be die cut. The King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II air letter sheets of Southern Rhodesia had the 6d stamp impressed on the forms printed by

¹ The watermarked paper was made by Wiggins Teape & Co Limited, probably at their Stowford Paper Mill at Ivybridge: see Kessler: Watermarks – The South African Philatelist November 1960 pages 184-185.

² Copyrighted by Wiggins Teape & Co Limited.

McCorquodale by the security printers Kenrick and Jefferson Limited of West Bromwich, England.

Where the information is available, the size of each air letter sheet or aerogramme is given in millimetres, both unfolded and folded. The gummed flap or flaps used to seal the air letter sheet all the aerogramme are not measured when giving the opened dimensions. In this regard the approach adopted for folded forms is:

When measuring Air Letters to ascertain size, the following standard has been used. If you can imagine the area left after the item has been folded and sealed, i.e. the side where the recipient's name and address appears, this is the area which is to be measured. If folded correctly and neatly a solid blue or dotted border line should be apparent, and, by measuring between the two opposite lines and using outside dimensions the size of the Air Letter can be ascertained.³

Throughout this listing the instruction that the air letter sheet or aerogramme is to be carried by air is referred to as the 'air mail etiquette', or simply 'etiquette' for short. The term 'etiquette' was adopted in 1939 as the appropriate description for this instruction. The term is from the French word 'étiquette' meaning a label or sticker (cognate to stick), from which also comes the use of the same word in English to mean rules of behaviour.

This listing will not deal with wartime airgraphs nor with air mail postal routes. That information can be found elsewhere. Nor will this publication list the commercial overprinting of the inside of standard aerogramme forms for internal use by banks or hotels and similar organisations.⁴

³ Harrop: Air Letter Cards - RSCJ No 127 (September 1984) page 129

⁴ Further reading:

Wheatley: RSC Checklist of Rhodesian Postal Stationery - RSCJ No 153 (July 1990) pages 159, 161-163

Higgins & Gage: World Postal Stationery Catalogue Vol 16

Kessler's Catalogue of Aerograms (1961)

Harrop: Air Letter Cards - RSCJ No 127 (September 1984) pages 129-135; No 128 (December 1984) pages 187-191; No 129 (March 1985) pages 30-35; No 130 (June 1985) pages 73-78; No 131 (September 1985) pages 117-125

Stewart: Zimbabwe Aerogrammes - RSCJ No 132 (December 1985) pages 175-177

Smith: Rhodesia A Postal History (1967) pages 279-301 (The Dissolution of the Federation)

HISTORY OF THE AIR LETTER

Douglas William Gumbley is considered by many to be the inventor of the modern air letter or aerogramme. When he was the Inspector General of Posts and Telegraphs in Iraq in 1933, he designed a lightweight form with a gummed flap which when folded, moistened and sealed served both as a sheet of writing paper and the envelope. At the time Imperial Airways was developing its air routes to the Far East and to Australia, as was the Dutch airline KLM to the Dutch East Indies. The idea of a lightweight form of communication of a standardised size seemed to serve the need for rapid communications along those air mail routes. Gumbley obtained the registered copyright of his design but initially found little interest in his project. The air letter cards were introduced in Iraq on 15 July 1933 and first flown to Europe four days later. Printed on thin paper the air letter cards were 124 x 99 mm in size, greyish in colour, with blue lined framing and with the designation legend on the front. They had a well engraved impressed effigy of King Faisal I of Iraq and were printed by Bradbury Wilkinson in England. Additional postage of 3 fils made up the air mail rate to Europe.



Air letter card designed by Gumbley and used in Iraq in 1933

At the commencement of World War II many men from the then Empire were deployed far from home, especially in North Africa and the Middle East. Air mail correspondence to them, and from them back home, was expensive and heavy. Most troops did not qualify for free postage. There was limited carrying capacity in the aircraft of the day and on many occasions mail had to give way to other essential war supplies on aircraft.

The military authorities recognised the need for a cheaper and more efficient form of communication between the troops and their families. In August 1940 the British Army Personal Directorate of the Middle East drew this problem to the attention of the War Office. The Australian Government and military authorities were particularly anxious to find a more rapid and reliable form of communication between their troops and home. Lieutenant Colonel R. E. Evans, the Assistant Director Army Postal Service Middle East Force (MEF), proposed that a lightweight self-sealing letter card that weighed only 1/10 oz be adopted by the British Army for air mail purposes. He recommended its use to Sir Anthony Eden, the Secretary of

State for War during his visit to the Middle East in late 1940. By January the following year, General Wavell, the Commander-in-Chief, MEF, was told by Eden that “Your Assistant Director Army Postal Services may forthwith introduce an Air Mail Letter Card Service for the Middle East. Use British stamps from all countries, including Egypt”. On 1 March 1941, the air mail service between the Middle East and the UK was started, using a combination of British Overseas Airways Corporation flying boats and military transport. The facility was only available to military personnel serving in Palestine, Cyprus, Cyrenaica, Greece and Crete, and only available back to the UK. From May 1941 the Egyptian Postal Authorities agreed to the use of non-Egyptian stamps by service personnel based in that country and throughout the Middle East. Later the service to and from Australia was introduced and in October 1941 was extended to troops serving in West Africa.

It was decided to use letter cards similar to the design registered by Gumbley. Early air mail letter cards were printed in the Middle East, with no imprinted stamp, and distributed free of charge to military personnel at their pay parades. Air mail postage rates were deliberately kept to a minimum. Later standard form letter sheets prepared and printed in the United Kingdom were later made available to the troops.



Air mail letter card introduced by Australia in 1942



Air mail letter card issued to British Forces in 1942

The first civilian air letter service from the United Kingdom was introduced with a unstamp air mail letter card printed on very thin paper which required a blue overlay to preserve the privacy of the message. That service was available to addressees in Southern Rhodesia. The first mailing (which was undoubtedly philatelic) took place on 7 December 1942, reaching Bulawayo on 23 January 1943.



First civilian air mail letter card service from the UK to Southern Rhodesia

To meet the demand for a return service, the postal authorities in Southern Rhodesia, as well as Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, initially used letter sheets without an impressed stamp obtained from the United Kingdom, see Chapter 7. In Southern Rhodesia the Active Service Letter Card was introduced in November 1941, modelled on a similar card produced in South Africa, see Chapter 2. In October 1944 the postal authorities in Southern Rhodesia introduced pre-paid civilian air letter sheets bearing a 6d stamp with the effigy of King George VI.⁵ This was followed in Northern Rhodesia in June 1949. Nyasaland did not introduce a pre-paid aerogramme until November 1953; the stamp was from the definitive issue of Queen Elizabeth II.

Most other countries during or shortly after World War introduced this form of air mail correspondence. On 29 April 1947 the United States Postal Service introduced its first 10 cent air letter sheet. The use of aerogrammes became widespread and popular. However, with the spread of e-mail through the Internet, fewer and fewer postal authorities now make aerogrammes available to the public. Private productions, often to promote tourism, are however common.

The last issue in the three territories of an aerogramme bearing a printed stamp was the first Federal tourist issue of 23 September 1957. Thereafter the Federal Post Office issued aerogrammes without an imprinted stamp. After the end of the Federation, Rhodesia (and Zimbabwe) did not issue any aerogrammes with imprinted stamps. The postal authorities in Zimbabwe have ceased selling aerogramme forms. In 1970 Malawi issued an aerogramme with an imprinted 9d stamp. More recently both Malawi and Zambia have issued international and

⁵ Postal Notice 88 of 1945, dated 7 November 1945, allowed the 6d air letter card to be registered.

domestic aerogrammes⁶ with an imprinted NVI stamp. The evidence suggests that the use of aerogrammes in the three countries continues to be popular, mainly with visitors, but also with the resident population.

⁶ Although a 'domestic aerogramme' is not strictly speaking an aerogramme as it might not be conveyed by air, the ones issued in Malawi and Zambia will be listed for the sake of completeness.