

# Private stationery stamped to order part 3 Registered envelopes and other stationery, by Colin Baker



DURING QUEEN VICTORIA'S REIGN no privately stamped registered envelopes were made which were officially approved for sending coin through the post, the use of scrim as a strengthening aid to the inside of envelopes being used solely by the Post Office. But many privately stamped envelopes were used as registered letters to carry papers, some being purposely printed with the necessary blue lines and markings while others had the crossed lines and registration symbols added by hand.

Privately printed registered envelopes were usually stamped to cover both the postage and registration fee, although in Victoria's reign only dies for the embossed postage stamps were used. The official Victorian 2d registration dies were never impressed on private material.

From 1935, however, until the end of George VI's reign, permission was given for the various values of combined postage and registration dies to be used on private envelopes, although much of the material produced in this way was for philatelic rather than true commercial purposes.

**Lettersheets** The general public never really took to lettersheets, possibly because gummed envelopes which quickly became available in the 1840s were much more convenient and most people could not be bothered folding single sheets of paper and sealing them with wax. However, some private lettersheets were produced which were stamped at Somerset House at the basic letter rate. From the latter half of Victoria's reign continuing into the 20th century, it became the practice to use lettersheets rather than envelopes for items such as questionnaires, company financial results or dividend statements, the latter including tear off dividend payment cheques. These all make interesting reading, particularly the dividend payments with their contemporary interest rates and levels of income tax.

In addition to these lettersheets, which were prepared by businesses for their own use, some plain stamped sheets were also manufactured for sale to the public. Victorian items can easily be distinguished from the PO issues of 1840/50 as the latter were all printed on paper with silk threads and private lettersheets were printed on plain paper. Although early lettersheets were manufactured for commercial reasons, many of those produced in later years were philatelically inspired, with few having any commercial purpose.

**Letter cards** Few privately printed letter cards were produced, although surprisingly the earliest known private item predates to PO version by five years. Until the late 1930s, embossed stamps of the appropriate value were impressed on these letter cards, but in the last few years of George V's reign and during that of George VI letterpress stamps were employed. Some items were printed on their fronts with the wording 'LETTER CARD' rather like the PO versions. Since all letter cards were charged at the letter rate of postage, this was not an official requirement and many items omitted the heading.

**Certificates of posting** The PO first produced stamped certificates of posting in 1877, but these were not frequently used and only four years later, they were withdrawn from sale. All future PO certificates were issued unstamped and required the addition of an adhesive stamp of the correct value prior to being used. Since 1982, by EEC ruling, no charge has been made.

**Opposite** Lettersheet (top left and right) with dividend cheque (removed), showing income tax at 4s6d (22½p) in the pound; private lettersheet (lower left) used from Pall Mall, London, probably philatelically inspired; letter card (lower right) in a similar size and format to Post Office issues, but without the standard heading.

1d certificate of posting with additional 1d adhesive (making 1p). The format closely followed that of the unstamped PO issue and was approved by them.

**CERTIFICATE OF POSTING**  
Unregistered Postal Packets (except Parcels)

Sender to enter below the name and address as written on the letter or packet. (See also OVERLEAF).

*John T. Brown*  
*Home Shopping Service*  
*PO BOX 50*  
*BOLTON BL3 5YX*

A postage stamp or stamps to the value of 1d. to be affixed in the space above by the sender.

A *letter*, not for registration or recorded delivery, addressed as above, has been posted here this day.

Accepting Officer's Initials \_\_\_\_\_

Some privately produced certificates of posting are known with Queen Elizabeth II letterpress stationery stamps, all of these being prepared with the agreement of the PO. Like their Victorian counterparts, they were not used in large numbers and copies are not often seen today. Some of these were also philatelically inspired.



The earliest private stationery air letter (top) and typical forces airletter (stamped at the inland rate for forces use).

**Airletters** The postal stationery airletter was a gradual development from the simple sheet of paper, then known as an 'air mail letter card', which was issued to British forces in the Middle East in 1941. This in turn had been based on a similar air mail letter card used in Iraq from 1933 onwards. The British items either went post free for personnel on active service, or carried the 3d adhesive stamp where this concession was not applicable.

In 1942, an unstamped civilian airletter was introduced in Great Britain, pending the introduction of a postal stationery version in 1943. These quickly became very popular, being valid to many countries throughout the world. Following the cessation of hostilities in 1945, the use of the airletter eventually became world-wide, its name being changed to aerogramme by international agreement in 1952.

No private postal stationery airletters were prepared from the time the civilian airletter was first issued in 1943 until 1957 when one was submitted to Somerset House and stamped with the George VI embossed stationery stamp, five years into the reign of Queen Elizabeth, but prior to the equivalent QEII 6d stamp being available. Subsequently many of the Forces series of airletters, which were originally distributed without stamps, were printed with a variety of Elizabeth II stationery stamps. All these issues were philatelically inspired, many carrying commemorative handstamps. The reason for the lack of commercially produced airletters is simple. During this period, all standard PO airletters were sold at their face value and there was no incentive for businesses to produce their own stamped airletters since these would have been more expensive than buying the same item at a post office.

**The end of an important era** This insight into the history of stamped to order stationery shows that its story is as fascinating as its counterpart concerning the development of PO issues. New ideas for stationery design and campaigns by the trade for the relaxation of a variety of regulations lead to a constantly changing system of payment for many different postal applications. The 118 years of stamping private material, which came to an end in 1973, was an important stage in the constantly developing and changing postal system in this country, now replaced by high-tech prepayment methods, which no doubt will themselves be superseded by other systems in the future ●