

1928 — *MAILS ON WINGS*

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On March 30, 1978 AIR MALTA, the national airline celebrates the fifth anniversary of its establishment. Two days later, on April 1, Malta celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the first Air Mails.

Aviation history in the Maltese Islands had its origin in 1916 when the Admiralty decided to set up the seaplane base at Kalafrana. In 1918, RAF Malta was formed and established a base at Fort Spinola (now the site of the Malta Hilton).⁽¹⁾ In December 1918, the first air mails were in transit through Malta when an RAF plane carried some mail from England, via Malta and Egypt to Karachi.⁽²⁾ Following the devastations of World War I, Malta seems to have served as a transit station for a few experimental flights between England, India and Australia as well as the African Continent.

SIR ALAN J. COBHAM

Late in 1927, Sir Alan Cobham, in his efforts to establish a route linking the United Kingdom to the African Continent, set off from Rochester in an RAF-loaned flying boat and in spite of damage and delays at Malta, reached Capetown.⁽²⁾

While in Malta, Sir Alan Cobham gave an "illuminating speech" to members of the Legislative Assembly in the Tapestry Chamber on December 1, 1927 on the possibility of establishing an air base for civil aviation at Malta. He also presented a report on the same matter to the Government. On February 17, 1928 the Minister for Industry and Commerce, Waiter J. Salamone, presented a memorandum on the subject of the "Establishment of a Regular System of Imperial Air Communications".⁽³⁾

From this memorandum, one learns that on a Map printed in the British Air Ministry book "The Approach towards a System of Imperial Air Communications", Malta was singled out as a possible stopping place for two proposed routes for the England-India route. A sum of £1,000 was tentatively voted in the Draft General Estimates for that year, to be given as a subsidy to an air mail line regularly calling in Malta. It also appears that there was some sort of correspondence on the setting up of an air base in Malta, as the Minister concerned refers in his memorandum to "the Secretary of State despatch of the 8th December, 1927" as "very encouraging in this direction".

Sir Alan Cobham had assured the Minister of Industry and Commerce, that St. Paul's Bay was an ideal sea port for seaplanes. The Minister suggested in his report the construction of an aerodrome on the plain between Salini and Bur Marrat, with a common Customs Clearing House for both air ports.

FIRST OFFICIAL AIR MAILS

A G.P.O. notice of the 20th March, 1928 notified that air mails from Malta were to be made up for Iraq, Persia, North East Arabia and North West India. What had actually happened was that arrangements were made so that air mails from Malta, would link up at Cairo, (through the RAF Seaplane Station at Kalafrana?) with the fortnightly service between England and India, run by Imperial Airways and maintained by the British Postal Administration. The RAF had as early as 1921, established a regular air mail service between Cairo and Baghdad.

Air mails from Malta, connected with the Cairo-Iraq Air Mail Service could be despatched to Gaza, Baghdad and Basra. The same G.P.O. notice gave details of the gain in time as well as the days and time of the despatch of mails. The air mail postage fee was fixed at 6d. No reference was made then of the special air mail stamp, which provokes the suggestion that the decision to overprint a stamp was made during the ensuing week, following the date of the G.P.O. notice.

THE AIR MAIL STAMP OVERPRINT

A brief Government Notice, dated March 28, 1928 informed the general public that "the prepayment of the Air Mail Fee of 6d... will be denoted by means of a special stamp *only*" (my italics). The air mail stamp was created by overprinting the 6d violet and scarlet value of the 1926-1927 series (S.G. 165), with the words "AIR MAIL" in black in two lines. The stamp has been designed by John Harrison, chief portrait engraver to Messrs. Waterlow who printed the stamp, and the whole series, in typography.

The reasons behind the decision to overprint the stamp in question remain a mystery, but after examining the postal rates then current, it becomes evident that the 6d stamp satisfied no actual postage fee, and this leads us to presume that the G.P.O., for economic reasons, resorted to overprinting the substantial stocks of the unsold and dormant 6d value of the 1926-27 series.

The 6d air mail stamp was not used extensively on air mail because during the early days of air travel, people were still sceptical about the safety of the new service. The stamp remained in use and on sale up to 1940.(4)

Very few varieties are known to exist on the air mail stamp of 1928, mostly involving variations in the position of the overprint. Mint copies of the stamp are extremely rare in block form as most stocks were broken up into singles to satisfy collector demand. For reasons specified in the preceding paragraph, used copies are even more scarcer, and it is my opinion that the stamp in both conditions is still undervalued.

In the 1973 edition of the "Said Stamp Catalogue", the 1928 air mail stamp was valued at £1.75 mint, £2.00 used. Five years later, in the current 1978 edition of the same catalogue, it is priced at £4.25 mint, £5.00 used; an increase over a period of five years of approximately 150%.

The original G.P.O. notice announcing the introduction of the air mails of the 20th March, 1928 contained a flaw, which was subsequently amended in another G.P.O. notice dated 25th May, 1928 when it was clearly established that 'the Air Mail Fee of 6d is levied as per ounce and not as a flat rate irrespective of the weight of an Air Mail Packet'.



1928 — 6d AIR MAIL STAMP

The 34mm
rubber stamp
applied in
violet ink.



The issue of the air mail stamp and the establishment of air mails ushered into use at the Mail Room of the General Post Office a special postmark reserved for air mails only. This postmark took the form of a large double ring circular cancel, inscribed "AIR MAIL, MALTA", with the date in a single line, and applied always in violet ink. The postmark, (illustrated), remained in use into the 1930's when it was replaced by a smaller double ring cancel applied in black.

1928 was only the first step in the development of the air mail service of the Malta Post Office. In subsequent years, direct routes were opened and air mails from and to Malta gained in time. The Post-War period saw further improvements in air transport and consequently in the air mail service, the opening of the Luqa Branch Post Office, and the establishment of Malta's national airline, which further developed air communications, and provided direct air links with a dozen points.

REFERENCES:

- (1) Capt. Noble Philip Manduca, "Early History of the Air Base and RAF in Malta", in "The Armed Forces of Malta Journal", No. 27, April, 1977.
- (2) A.G. Rigo de Righi, F.R.P.S.L., "Britain's Airmails", published by the National Postal Museum, London.
- (3) Malta Government Gazette Supplement N. L, 6th July, 1928.
- (4) M.E. Jetten, "The 'Airmail' Stamp of 1928", in "Stamp Collecting", June 27th, 1968.