

THE FIRST COMPLETE HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN AIRMAIL

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After a great number of years I have at last completed a four volume history of Australian Airmail.

We in Australia have been very fortunate to have had, since October 1937, the Australian Air Mail Catalogue which lists mail and other items carried by air in Australia. This is a very valuable listing to which I have constantly referred whilst I was writing this history.

A catalogue, however, is not a history. Some years ago, talking to Charles Leski he suggested that what was needed, to complement the airmail catalogue, was a history – well illustrated with route maps. Illustrations of covers and photographs of aircraft.

Writing a history has had some surprises. It has exposed some myths we have all accepted as fact. I found too it was necessary to consider the items carried by air as either mail or non mail items rather than 'official' and 'non official' mail. By doing this I was able to identify some early airmail items which had previously been overlooked.

Writing about mail it was necessary to ensure that I fully understood what was 'mail'. Contemporary dictionaries define mail as, . . . "letters carried by a postal service". Letters are defined as, . . . "written messages". Clearly, today, there are two elements that define 'mail' – how mail is carried and that mail is a message.

Studying the history of mail it is evident that in the past mail has been carried by a variety of methods. The one constant element of mail was that it was a message.

The first mail carried in 3,000 BC in Persia consisted of messages which were invoices and information about trading. They were carried between towns by runners. Over the years the distribution of mail has been managed by kings, high officials and important families. These mail services became known as the 'official' mail services.

Not all mail, however, was sent on the 'official services'. In England, for example, shortly before the introduction of postage stamps and the establishment of a countrywide mail service, much mail was sent outside the 'official service'. Hornung, the well known European postal historian, records that in 1836 one English merchant received 2,068 letters by the official postal service and 5,861 letters by other services.

Thus I have concluded that mail was about sending messages and was not defined by how it was carried. This became important as I wrote the Australian airmail story as the first airmail to Australia from overseas consisted of messages carried before the establishment of airmail services. I defined this as 'Opportunity Airmail', i.e., mail sent by aircraft when the opportunity presented itself when no airmail service was available.



FIGURE 1 : Opportunity airmail sent 'per favour' of Ross and Keith Smith by a fellow guest at the Raffles Hotel, Singapore.

Ross and Keith Smith, on their flight from England to Australia, carried a few items of 'opportunity airmail'. These items, sent to communicate, are very different from the majority of items sent only to commemorate the flight. The items I have seen in this category were from members of the AIF based near Baghdad, the Calcutta Post Office and from a guest staying at the Raffles Hotel in Singapore. All these items were sent in the hope that the mail would reach Australia quicker than by the normal sea service.

The letter, (Figure 1, above), given to Ross Smith by a fellow guest at the Raffles Hotel begins, ... "I am writing on the chance of getting this through by aeroplane by Captain Ross Smith who leaves tomorrow ...". The souvenirs

and items of mail carried on the flight to Australia did not require postage as there was no mail service. This three page letter, carried free to Australia, is franked one penny to pay Australian postage to Orange, NSW. This raises the interesting question as to whether the flight souvenirs, some of which had no postage added, would have been charged postage due if the Government had not made special arrangements to distribute them in Australia?

Many letter like items have been carried by air outside the postal service, not to communicate but to commemorate. Based on earlier writings by Ed Wolf I have designated these items as 'Flight Souvenirs'. Thus Ross and Keith Smith carried 'flight souvenirs' and 'opportunity

airmail'. As the story unfolds there are many examples of flight souvenirs sent to commemorate a flight. Identifying items as 'flight souvenirs' does not make them any less important in the history of Australian airmail. They are an integral part of the story – being important forerunners to the airmail services eventually established.

Understanding what is 'mail' is important in correctly assessing any item (Figure 2). This item was carried to Australia on the first section of its journey as a 'flight souvenir'. The item had been franked, not at an airmail rate, but at the lowest denomination stamp available to obtain a per favour cancellation at the local post office.

It was then carried by Scott and Black on their flight to Australia as participants in the Centenary Air Race from England to Australia – outside any mail service.

On arrival in Australia the item, correctly franked for the sea/air route to London via Karachi, was carried back to London as an item of mail on a scheduled mail service.

When airmail arrived in England, being a small country with an extensive and efficient rail service, it was distributed by rail. In Australia when airmail arrived in Darwin there were long distances to the major towns and cities and to a large extent no rail service.



FIGURE 2 : A flight souvenir carried on the England Australia Air Race in 1934. A halfpence British stamp was applied in England before departure to obtain a 'per favour' cancellation. Correct postage was added in Australia for return on the sea/air service via Karachi to England.

The planners of the new air service from London to Australia not only had to plan trunk air routes within Australia to distribute the mail but had to consider how to get the mail to these cities at approximately the same time. The routes of distribution to the capital cities make sense when we understand this system enabled the mail to be delivered to the various state capitals at about the same time.

Just imagine the agitation in Melbourne if Brisbane mail arrived much earlier! The development of these trunk routes in Australia is very much part of the airmail story.

Routes and rates are incredibly important but other information may be necessary to fully evaluate a cover. This is clear when we examine the items carried by Guillaux between Melbourne and Sydney which is generally considered to be the first airmail in Australia.

A knowledge of history shows that the general public and the Post Office at that time saw no advantage in sending mail by air.

The aeroplane was seen only as the plaything of the rich and foolish.

We now know this event was not planned and managed by the Post Office but by a Sydney entrepreneur who even supplied the canceller. This was not a mail service open to the public but a promotion for aviation.

The Australian airmail story is extremely interesting. Knowing more about covers in one's collection adds considerable interest.

