

THE FIRST UNDERPAID LETTER TO TRAVEL BY AIR

THAT TOO ON THE FIRST AIRMAIL FLIGHT IN HISTORY!

THE ONLY KNOWN COVER

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The intent of this article is to record and describe this very interesting underpaid cover and not get into much detail about the First Aerial Post which in itself is an historic occasion. Information on this flight is available in various books and articles, some of which I have referenced at the end of this article. I have merely provided an overview of the flight by way of introduction.

About the flight

The first powered flight in history was undertaken by the Wright brothers in 1903, and very quickly followed by much development in aircraft design and production across the world. An exhibition was organized in Allahabad (now Prayagraj) in the United Provinces, India (Dec 1910-Feb 1911) and some aircraft were brought in for exhibition and demonstration flights were organized. The Oxford & Cambridge Hostel in Allahabad was in need of funds for a new building and the Postal Authorities permitted a flight from Allahabad to Naini across the Jamuna River with mail. An additional fee of 6 annas (6d in Britain) was to be paid by postal order directly to the hostel for all mail on this flight, which would then proceed to its onward destination by regular mail service and postage rates. A special postal cancellation mark was produced (Figure 1) and all postal arrangements were handled by the Exhibition Camp Post Office. This was the first postally sanctioned official air mail flight in the world and about 6,500 postal articles were flown.



Figure 1. The special cachet.

The flight occurred on 18th February 1911. Capt. Walter Windham of the Humber Motor Car Company was the organizer and M. Henri Pequet was the pilot on a Humber-Sommers bi-plane (Figure 2). Estimates vary on the distance and duration of the flight and I am inclined to go with 7 miles (about 11 kms) covered in about 15 minutes. The flight started from the Exhibition grounds at Allahabad and landed near the Naini railway station, and history was made. Air Mail was born!

About the underpaid cover

The cover (Figures 3a/b) is franked with KEVII 1a postage and cancelled with the big magenta postmark prepared for this flight. There was a 6a fee for carriage by air which did not require franking on the cover but was collected by the post office using postal orders. It was originally addressed to W.R. Stevenson Esq., c/o Thomas Cook & Sons, Paris, France. The cover flew on the 1st Aerial Mail between Allahabad & Naini and then received the **ALLAHABAD / 18 FE 11** cachet on the reverse. It then went by rail to Bombay and arrival mark **BOMBAY / 20 FE 11** was applied there.



Figure 2. Pilot Henri Pequet seated with Capt. Windham in the foreground.

Onward by sea on the S.S. *Arabia* of Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O S.N.C.), following the Bombay (25th February) – Aden (2nd March) – Port Said (6th March) – Brindisi (8th March) route. S.S. *Arabia* was a 7,903 ton steamer fitted with triple-expansion steam engine, built by Caird & Co. Ltd, Greenock, Scotland at the cost of £250,000 and employed in the Bombay–Brindisi line of P&O S.N.C. in 1888. It was sunk by a torpedo from the *Kaiserliche Marine* (Imperial German Navy) submarine SM *UB-43*, 180km S.W. off Cabo Matapan, Ellada on 11th November 1916.



Figure 3a. The First underpaid cover to travel by air (Front).

Thence by rail through Bari–Termoli–Vasto–Pescara–San Benedetto del Tronto–Ancona–Bologna–Piacenza–Torino–Modane–Ambérieux–Bourg-en-Bresse–Mâcon–Paris route, obtaining a **PARIS / 10 3 11** postmark on arrival.

The cover seems to have been detained at Paris post office for a while which is apparent from the T.C.&S. **PARIS / Rec'd 4 APR 1911** boxed violet cachet on the reverse. The front address was then overlaid with a cream-colour label and redirected to Glenhurst, Manor Farm Road, Bitterne Park, Southampton, England and has a **SOUTHAMPTON / 6 AP 11** postmark which marks the end of its postal journey.



Figure 3b. The First underpaid cover to travel by air (Reverse).

Postage Due

The cover was franked 1a which was the prevailing Imperial letter rate from India to Britain for mail up to 1oz. The U.P.U. rate (applicable for mail to France) was $2\frac{1}{2}$ a per oz, making the letter underpaid by $1\frac{1}{2}$ a.

The Paris U.P.U. convention of 1878 had fixed the standard rate for a letter at 25 gold centimes per 15 grams which was permitted to be considered as $\frac{1}{2}$ oz in countries (like India) not using the metric system. This continued until the Rome U.P.U. convention in 1906 where the unit of weight was increased from 15 to 20 grams and in non-metric countries it could be converted to 1 oz. There was also a reduction in the charge for each additional unit to 15 gold centimes.

The tax in gold centimes was calculated by the Bombay post office using the formula $1\frac{1}{2}$ a (deficiency) x 2 (doubled) x 25 (U.P.U. rate in gold centimes) (divided by) $2\frac{1}{2}$ (U.P.U. letter rate in annas) = 30 gold centimes. The postage due was indicated on the cover with a **T** (in a circle) cachet with 30c in blue pencil applied in Bombay.

The French U.P.U. letter rate was at parity with the U.P.U. rate so, upon arrival in Paris, this was simply converted into 30 French centimes. Thus the 3 x 10 centimes French Tax labels were applied. These were later annulled with black triangular cachets because the postage due was not paid by Thomas Cook & Sons, Paris, who re-directed the letter promptly to Southampton, England.

Since the letter was correctly franked for England, no postage due was collected upon delivery there.

Rarity and Importance

This is the only known underpaid letter to travel on the first airmail flight in history. This gives it a very special place in any collection where a collector is about both Indian air mails as well as underpaid air mail. This cover marks the birth of both events and is the start of any philatelic study or collection in any of these areas.

Acknowledgements

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Further Reading

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2. Centenary of the World's First Official Aerial Post. Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS. *Gibbons Stamp Monthly*, February 2011.
3. Remembering Henri Pequet on the Centenary of the World's First Airmail. 18 Feb. 2011. *India Post*, January-March 2011
4. *International Postage Rates 1890s-1957*. Michael Furfie. Published by the author, 2010. ISBN 978-0-9522208-2-4

Editor's Note

This article is also being submitted to the Editor of the *India Post*, journal of the India Study Circle, for publication.

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