To commemorate the centenary of the first United Kingdom Aerial Post, the world’s first scheduled airmail service on Saturday 9 September 1911, Tony Buckingham, the doyen of first day and commemorative covers dealers, masterminded an ambitious centenary flight.

This centenary flight by helicopter from Hendon in north London to the grounds of Windsor Castle, and return, over the same route taken by the great English pioneer aviator Gustav Hamel, took place on Friday 9 September 2011. Tony and his delightful wife Cath—Buckingham Covers—produced a superb set of four replica cards each bearing one of the special Royal Mail Aerial Post Centenary stamps and one of four carriage labels, stamped with a special cachet in violet to certify that it had been flown on 9 September 2011.

One of the replica cards flown on the centenary helicopter flight

Helicopter Flight from London to Windsor Castle to Mark the Centenary of the First UK Aerial Post, September 2011

Exclusive report by Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS

First UK Aerial Post, 9 September 1911; also flown London to Windsor Castle with this correspondent on 9 September 2011

First flight London to Windsor 1911

On Saturday 9 September 1911 Gustav Hamel (1889–1914) in his Blériot XI monoplane, took off from Hendon Aerodrome, in north London at 4.58p.m., escaped being overturned there by strong winds and landed safely in the grounds of Windsor Castle at about 5.13p.m. The intrepid aviator had flown a distance of about 21 miles as part of celebrations to mark the Coronation of King George V in June that year. It was the first of 16 Coronation Aerial Post Flights carrying specially designed commemorative, pre-stamped envelopes and postcards.

Hamel had carried one bag of mail weighing 23½lb. The card shown, signed by Sir Walter Windham who initiated the aerial post, was one of the few carried. This card was also carried by me on the centenary helicopter flight on Friday 9 September 2011.

RAF Museum Hendon

10.30a.m.: After a short taxi drive, we arrived at the Royal Air Force Museum in Hendon where we were directed to the Grahame White Hangar. I was met by Sister Anthony O’Rourke, a Roman Catholic Nun and a friend of mine, who has lived in a convent at Hendon for most of the past 65 years.

The East India Club

9 a.m.: The Club Secretary Alex Bray shook hands and wished me well as I stepped out into St James’ Square at the start of an enjoyable, eventful and emotional Centenary Day.

Trafalgar Square Post Office

9.20a.m.: The philatelic counter, as such, is sadly no more, but there is still a place where special stamp issues and related products are sold by the same knowledgeable counter clerk. I purchased the Royal Mail presentation pack and prestige stamp booklet.

I then walked the short distance to Charing Cross Underground Station where I boarded a Northern Line tube to Hendon Central. I was met by Sister Anthony O’Rourke, a Roman Catholic Nun and a friend of mine, who has lived in a convent at Hendon for most of the past 65 years.

Time was short and I only had the opportunity to look briefly at some of the old photographs and the early aeroplanes on the ground floor of the Grahame White Hangar that helped to create pioneer and aviation history. It was fascinating and I should definitely like to return one day.

11.00a.m.: Tony Buckingham welcomed the distinguished guests. Then it was time for Tony and me to make our way to the Eurocopter EC135 P2+/Twin Engine Gas Turbine helicopter G-KLNK, supplied by, Andrew Pickervance, Group Operations Manager at G.S.M. November 2011

Hugh Jefferies FRPSL, Editor G.S.M., holding the Royal Mail Centenary Prestige Stamp Booklet, pictured at the RAF Museum Hendon, 9 September 2011

Buckingham to show a few frames of material from his magnificent collection of the 1911 Coronation Aerial Post. It was a great pleasure to meet and talk to him about some of the wonderful items he had selected.

Among the guests present were Andrew Hammond, Royal Mail, and Tony Devine, Head of Royal Mail Key Accounts based in Edinburgh; Guy Thomas, Editor of Stamp Magazine, and Graham Phillips, Editor of the Philatelic Exporter.

I chatted to Hugh Jefferies FRPSL, Editor of Gibbons Stamp Monthly, and took a picture of him on the balcony holding the prestige stamp booklet which I had purchased earlier.

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Hugh Jefferies FRPSL, Editor G.S.M., holding the Royal Mail Centenary Prestige Stamp Booklet, pictured at the RAF Museum Hendon, 9 September 2011
UK Aerial Post centenary flight

Manager, Patriot Aerospace, based at Redhill Aerodrome in Surrey.

The helicopter was standing on the grass near the main entrance to the RAF Museum. The sealed packages containing the special replica cards and covers (weight 47kg) prepared by Buckingham Covers had already been put aboard.

The helicopter

There were five of us aboard the helicopter: Captain Dougie Reid, Pilot, Managing Director and Chief Pilot, Avanti Helicopters Limited; Air Marshal Ian Macfadyen CB, OBE, in the front. Tony Buckingham sat directly behind the pilot, next to me. Peter Leach, a friendly cameraman with ITV sat opposite us. Tony Buckingham understood that Meridian planned to include a report about the event on the evening news. Unfortunately it was not included either on the day or the following Monday.

Take-off

Before we took off Captain Dougie Reid was in contact, via his mobile, with air traffic controllers at Heathrow Airport, as we needed special permission and clearance for the helicopter to be in Heathrow Airport airspace.

11.30a.m.: The helicopter with the centenary mail took-off from the grass at the RAF Museum, Hendon, on the 18-mile journey to Windsor Castle, as we replicated the flight made by Gustav Hamel exactly 100 years ago.

It was a clear but dull day as we flew over London and then passed close to Heathrow Airport with the busy main runways clearly visible below.

Windsor Castle

11.45a.m.: The helicopter touched down on the car park of the cricket pitch at Windsor Castle, close to where Gustav Hamel had landed his Blériot XI monoplane, on Saturday 9 September 1911.

The local constabulary and fire-brigade were on-hand as the helicopter made its approach. We disembarked and were warmly greeted by the Mayor of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, Councillor Asghar Majeed. The moment was captured by a number of photographers.

Among the photographs taken at Windsor Castle was one of Air Marshal Macfadyen and I holding my First UK Aerial Post card carried by Gustav Hamel on 9 September 1911, proving that I had this pioneer aviation item with me on the Centenary helicopter flight. It was the only original 1911 card flown and is now a unique item in my collection of ‘Pioneer Air Mails, 1902–1936’.

Spectacular panoramic views taken from the helicopter during the return flight from Windsor showing Windsor Castle with St George’s Chapel to the left, on Friday 9 September 2011
As we emerged from the helicopter at the end of the successful mission we were met by a number of photographers and other guests. Tony Buckingham then helped to unload the packages of souvenir covers from the back of the helicopter.

We were then met by the Edwardian postman (for the day) Jon Iles, and his colleagues from the Museum at Windsor who had all dressed in Edwardian costume. It made for some superb pictures with Windsor Castle in the background.

We then walked to the nearby Windsor Museum where the Mayor kindly entertained us to coffee and soft drinks. Time for the return flight was pressing and the Air Marshal warmly thanked the Mayor and those from the Museum who had given us such a warm and Edwardian welcome in Windsor Great Park.

The return flight to Hendon

12.50p.m.: The helicopter took off on the return stage to RAF Hendon. The views of Windsor Castle, St George’s Chapel and Eton College were stunning as the Captain flew close by, heading for the RAF Museum at Hendon.

1.05p.m.: After a return flight lasting 15 minutes the helicopter touched down on the grass near the main entrance to the RAF Museum in Hendon. It was the end of a tremendous adventure and for an aero-philatelist like me, who collects Great Britain pioneer airmails, it was a dream come true!

As we emerged from the helicopter at the end of the successful mission we were met by a number of photographers and other guests. Tony Buckingham then helped to unload the packages of souvenir covers from the back of the helicopter.

Right: Tony and Cath Buckingham pictured with Darryl Newman, Page of the Presence, at the Privy Purse Door at Buckingham Palace Centre: Sister Anthony O’Rourke with one of the flown replica cards at the RAF Museum Far right: Donald Brydon, OBE, Chairman of the Royal Mail Group, holding the Royal Mail First United Kingdom Aerial Post special first day cover

Unless otherwise stated pictures are by Peter Jennings FRPSL, FRGS

G.S.M. November 2011
We then walked back to the Grahame White Watch Tower where we enjoyed a buffet lunch at the invitation of Tony and Cath Buckingham.

2.15p.m.: It was time to say our farewells to Captain Dougie Reid and the friendly and helpful RAF personnel who work at the RAF Museum at Hendon. Tony Buckingham then drove Cath and me in his Jaguar to the West End of London where we enjoyed a cup of Earl Grey tea at Fortnum and Mason in Piccadilly.

Buckingham Palace
We got back into the car and drove down Piccadilly to Piccadilly Circus and along Haymarket and Pall Mall to St James’s Palace, and then along The Mall to Buckingham Palace.

4.25p.m.: We arrived at the gate manned by the police to the right-hand side of the front of the Palace where we were expected.

4.30p.m: We arrived at the Privy Purse Door where we were greeted by Mr Darryl Newman, Page of the Presence. Tony Buckingham handed him the presentation set of the four replica cards which had been flown on the Centenary helicopter from Hendon to Windsor and Windsor to London a few hours earlier. Each card was addressed on the back to HM The Queen, Buckingham Palace; they will now find a home in the Royal Philatelic Collection—personally owned by The Queen.

The Keeper of the Royal Philatelic Collection, Mr Michael Sefi FRPSL, was unable to be present, but I should like to place on record my grateful thanks to him, and to Colette Saunders Assistant Press Secretary to The Queen, for making the arrangements for us to present the flown Centenary cards at Buckingham Palace on 9 September 2011.

The Goring Hotel
4.45 p.m.: Now it was time to celebrate. At my suggestion Tony Buckingham drove Cath and I to the nearby Goring Hotel—the one used by HRH the Duchess of Cambridge and her family the night before her wedding to HRH Prince William on 29 April 2011.

At the Goring I entertained Tony and Cath Buckingham to some excellent champagne and drank a toast to warmly congratulate them on masterminding this innovative and most unusual philatelic project.

6.30p.m.: I waved them off and returned to the East India Club where I rounded off a memorable day with an excellent dinner.

Sister Anthony O’Rourke added: ‘My two presentation packs of stamps I will treasure and now I look forward to sharing my experience with the school children next door.’

Postscript
On Thursday 8 September 2011, David Beech FRPSL, Head of the British Library Philatelic Collections, and I attended a most convivial reception hosted by the British Postal Museum & Archive, based at Freeling House, part of the Royal Mail Mount Pleasant Sorting Office complex. We were made welcome by Douglas Muir FRPSL, Curator of Philately.

During the evening Peter Lister FRPSL, gave an interesting and informative address about the UK Coronation Aerial Post 1911 and the very short but memorable Pathe News film of Gustav Hamel taking off at Hendon and arriving at Windsor Castle was shown. Stills from this film are included in the excellent Royal Mail presentation pack.

Guests had the opportunity to look at a small but fascinating display of the First United Kingdom Aerial Post that included one of the attractive original posters advertising the First United Kingdom Aerial Post flight to the general public.

The evening concluded with a lantern show of 12 black and white photographs taken during the 1911 Coronation Aerial Post.

As he was leaving I asked Donald Brydon, OBE, Chairman of the Royal Mail Group, a stamp collector—in particular of Great Britain—if I might have a picture of him holding the cover outside the building. He kindly obliged.

Royal Mail Aerial Post First Day Cover and miniature sheet with special 9 September 2011 cancellation, signed by participants in the Centenary London to Windsor helicopter flight.