

India, First Aerial Post 1911

'Private' Picture Postcards and 'Official' United Provinces Exhibition Covers

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THE WORLD'S FIRST OFFICIAL AERIAL POST was organised at the United Provinces (U.P.) Exhibition grounds in Allahabad, India on 18 February 1911. The event was organised by Capt. Walter Windham, an aviation enthusiast, in order to help raise funds for the construction of the Oxford and Cambridge Hostel. A special circular postmark (4 cm in diameter) showing a biplane flying over a mountain range was applied on all the mail carried on this flight. The specially designed postmark was applied in magenta on mail for the common public and in black ink on mail for officials involved with the organising committee of the event (Refs. 1 to 4).

The organiser of the First Aerial Post, Capt. Windham, arrived in India along with two pilots, H. Péquet and K. Davies, in order to showcase the new aeroplanes at the U.P. Exhibition taking place from December 1910 to April 1911 (Ref. 5).

The French pilot, Henri Péquet, was selected to fly the plane carrying two bags of mail on the maiden First Aerial Post. He took off in a biplane at 5.30 pm on 18 February 1911 from the U.P. Exhibition grounds in Allahabad, carrying 6,500 letters, and flew to Naini, which was five miles away.

Amongst the 6500 letters that the pilot carried, it is well known that he also carried a few pilot and bi-plane illustrated picture postcards; these cards have come to be known as 'Péquet' cards. This article will shed light on some previously unreported varieties of 'Péquet' cards. These new varieties of cards, hitherto unknown, will be classified as 'private', as there is no evidence yet to suggest that these postcards were officially sanctioned for the event.

It is widely known that two varieties of 'Péquet' cards officially sanctioned for the event come in the 'long' and 'short' formats. These officially sanctioned pilot illustrated picture postcards were put on sale for the princely sum of one rupee. It is reported that about 40 of these cards are known to exist. The 'short' format or Type 1 cards bear the inscription, 'FIRST "AERIAL POST," FEBRUARY 18, '11'. The 'long' format or Type 2 cards the inscription, 'FIRST "AERIAL POST," ALLAHABAD, FEBRUARY 18, 1911' (Refs. 1 and 2).

Officially sanctioned picture postcards of Types 1 and 2 illustrate the pilot sitting in his bi-plane. These cards were printed on thick white paper (non-glossy photo paper) and measure approximately 15.5 cm by 12.5 cm. These cards were cut very unevenly and differences in dimensions exist by almost 1.5 cm in some cases. The pilot has duly autographed the picture side of the postcard on all known Types 1 and 2 cards.



Figure 1. Type 1 pilot illustrated picture postcard.



Figure 2. Type 2 pilot illustrated picture postcard.

An officially sanctioned picture postcard showing the same illustration as Types 1 and 2 but printed on thick brown paper (non-glossy photo paper) has not been reported previously; this variety will be referred to as Type 3. The author has come across three examples of the Type 3 postcard, of which two bear a stamp that has been cancelled by the special postmark in black ink. The cards belonging to Type 3 measure approximately 15 cm by 11.25 cm. These cards were also cut unevenly, and slight differences in dimensions might exist. The pilot has duly autographed the picture side of the postcard on all the known Type 3 cards (Ref. 6).



Figure 3. Type 3 pilot illustrated picture postcard (signature at bottom right).



Figure 4. Type 4 pilot illustrated picture postcard.

‘Private’ picture postcards illustrating the pilot and his biplane from various angles categorised herein as Types 4 to 8 have not previously been reported. It is not known if these picture postcards were officially authorised for the event and, if so, at what price they were sold to the general public. The picture postcards of Types 4 to 8 were printed on thick white paper and measure 13.5 cm by 8.5 cm. All the known cards appear to be very evenly cut and printed on glossy photo paper (Ref. 6).

The Type 4 ‘private’ picture postcard shows a close up view of the pilot, Henri Péquet, sitting in his biplane. The picture was taken from the front of the aircraft. The author has come across three examples of this type of postcard. All three known examples of Type 4 were duly signed by the pilot on the picture side of the postcard.

The Type 5 ‘private’ picture postcard shows a close up view of the pilot, Henri Péquet, standing at the back of his biplane. The author has come across only one example of this type of postcard. The postcard has been duly autographed by the pilot on the picture side.

The Type 6 ‘private’ picture postcard shows an image of the aeroplane flying over a building at the U.P. Exhibition grounds. The author has come across only one example of this type of postcard. The postcard bears no autograph of the pilot. The postcard bears an imprint, which reads, “J. Burlington Smith, Darjeeling”. The imprint would imply that the famous photographer J. Burlington Smith would have taken this photograph.



Figure 5. Type 5 pilot illustrated picture postcard.

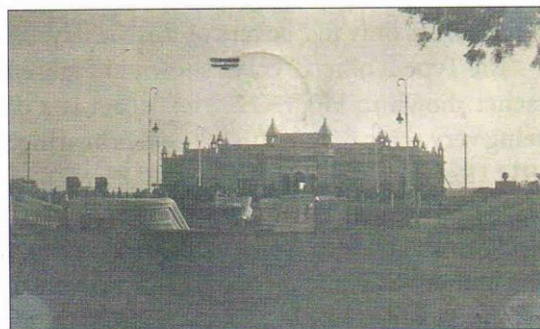


Figure 6. Type 6 pilot illustrated picture postcard.

The Type 7 'private' picture postcard shows an image of the pilot sitting in his biplane while the promoter of the event, Capt. Windham, appears to be standing next to the aeroplane. The author has come across only four examples of this type of postcard, of which only one has been signed by the pilot. The postcard bears the same imprint as Type 6, which reads, "J. Burlington Smith, Darjeeling".

The Type 8 'private' picture postcard shows an image of the pilot sitting in his biplane. The image is shot from the front of the aircraft. The author has come across only one example of this type of 'private' picture postcard.

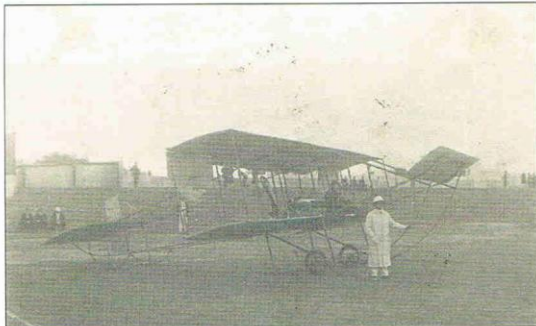


Figure 7. Type 7 pilot illustrated picture postcard.

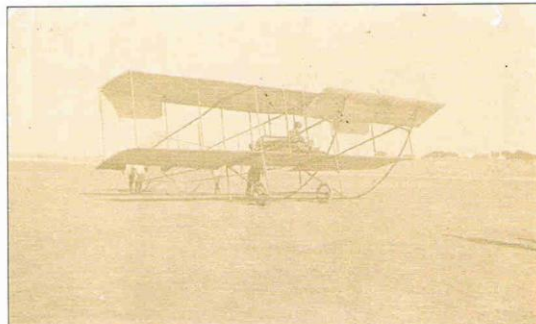


Figure 8. Type 8 pilot illustrated picture postcard.

This article has cast light on five new types of 'private' picture postcards. It would be very interesting to know if any more types exist and if these cards were officially authorised for the event.

This article also aims to shed light on the various types of 'official' U.P. Exhibition covers that were flown on this famous flight. It is documented that a permanent post office was located at the exhibition grounds in Allahabad. It is also recorded that a post office was especially set up at the camps for the duration of the U.P. Exhibition. The permanent post office at the exhibition used registration labels for registered mail while the post office set up at the camps used a special boxed handstamp (Ref. 1).

The author has found evidence of four different kinds of 'official' covers that were put up for sale at the post office set up at the camps. It is not known for how much these covers were sold nor how many were flown. Given the very few covers the author has come across, these covers can be aptly described as being very scarce.

Type 1 'official' covers bear the inscription "United Provinces Exhibition" in black on the back flap. The covers belonging to Type 1 measure approximately 13.5 cm by 10.7 cm. The author has come across only two covers of this particular variety.

The 'official' cover shown in Figure 9 is also accompanied by the original content written on "official" U.P. Exhibition stationery. The letterhead reads "Committee of Management" which suggests that this stationery and the covers described as Types 1 to 4 had been reserved exclusively for the managing committee of the event. The letter is signed by the pilot, H. Péquet, and is dated 18 February 1911, the day of the event. The U.P. Exhibition stationery is shown in Figure 10.

Type 2 'official' covers bear the inscription "United Provinces Exhibition" in blue on the back flap. The covers belonging to Type 2 measure approximately 13.5 cm by 10.7 cm. The author has come across only five covers of this variety.

The Type 2 'official' cover shown in Figure 11 also bears the United Provinces Exhibition Camp cachet shown in Figure 12. The cachet is a delivery mark and has been reported in literature as being very scarce, with only six covers bearing this cachet known and recorded only on 19 February 1911 (Ref. 4).

Type 3 'official' covers bear the inscription "U.P. EXHIBITION, Post Office, ALLAHABAD." in black on the back flap. The covers belonging to Type 3 measure approximately 12 cm by 9.5 cm. The author has come across only two covers of this variety.

The cover illustrated in Figure 13 is a fantastic example of philatelic ingenuity. It appears that someone has affixed a QV One Anna postal stationery cut out over the 'genuine' Allahabad dispatch postmark and then applied a genuine 'First Aerial Post' cancellation over it as shown in Figures 14 and 15.



Figure 9. Type 1 'official' U.P. Exhibition cover.

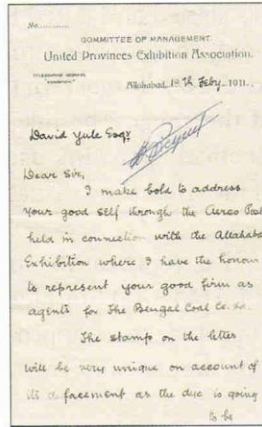


Figure 10. 'official' U.P. Exhibition stationery.



Figure 11. Type 2 'official' U.P. Exhibition cover.

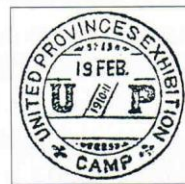


Figure 12. United Provinces Exhibition Camp cachet.



Figure 13. A Type 3 'official' U.P. Exhibition cover (back image).



Figure 14. A Type 3 'official' U.P. Exhibition cover (front image).

Figure 15. A zoomed-in view of the QV Label sitting over the 'genuine' dispatch.



The pilot has signed and dated the cover right next to the postal stationery cut-out, so as to attest to the addition of the cut-out. The pilot then hand-drew a 'forgery' of the Allahabad dispatch postmark on the back of the cover. The ink used to create a 'forgery' of the postmark is identical to the ink used by the pilot to sign his name! The 'forgery' of the Allahabad dispatch postmark is clearly illustrated in Figure 16.

Type 4 'official' covers bear the inscription "U.P. EXHIBITION, Post Office, ALLAHABAD." in blue on the back flap. The covers belonging to Type 4 measure approximately 12 cm by 9.5 cm. The author has come across only two covers of this variety.

The 'official' cover shown in Figure 17 is a twice-redirected cover bearing two clear strikes of the United Provinces Exhibition Camp cachet, dated 21 February 1911 and 22 February 1911. It has so far been reported and illustrated that this special cachet has been found on covers dated 19 February 1911 exclusively (Ref. 4). The existence of a cover bearing this special cachet with a later date shows that the initial assumption about this cachet being used only on 19 February 1911 is wrong.

From the images it can be easily deduced that the lettering on the back flap of the 'official' covers of Types 1 and 2 bears the same format and font size but differs only in the colour of the lettering, while with Types 3 and 4, although the format is the same, the font size and colour of the lettering are clearly different.

The author was fortunate enough to come across another variety of the 'official' covers designated as Type 5. The cover was not mailed on the First Aerial Post but posted by surface mail on 5 April 1911. The cover was mailed locally within Allahabad. The cover is illustrated in Figure 18.

It is still to be determined how many of each of these 'official' covers were flown on the First Aerial Post, 1911, and if any other varieties of these 'official' covers exist. The author after years of hunting was able to find only a handful of these covers from each of the four mentioned varieties that were flown on the First Aerial Post, deeming these 'official' covers to be quite rare and very desirable to possess.

The author in this article has illustrated five novel types of 'private' picture postcards and four types of 'official' U.P. Exhibition covers that were thus far unknown to the philatelic community. The author encourages collectors to look for these and perhaps any new varieties that were not discussed in this article.



Figure 16. The hand-drawn 'forgery' of the Allahabad dispatch postmark.



Figure 17. Type 4 'official' U.P. Exhibition cover.

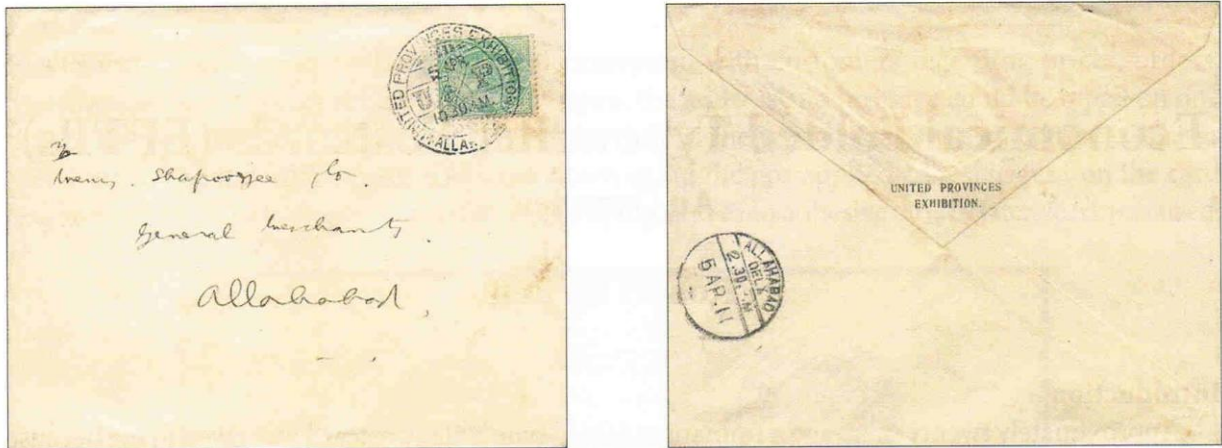


Figure 18. Type 5 'official' U.P. Exhibition cover.

References

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