

Berwick-upon-Tweed – An Enigma!

By Mike Dovey

Research into five ordinary looking Paquebot covers originating from Berwick-upon-Tweed in the 1980s has revealed an extraordinary philatelic oddity that dates back to around the first half of the 19th century. Mike Dovey recounts the full story and asks *GSM's* readers for help with further research.

It is a thought much held by collectors of ship letters that the collecting of the much later Paquebot postmarks was a Cinderella of maritime collecting and not worthy of consideration. However, for all those who maybe had such thoughts and for anyone with an interest in maritime postal history, please read on.

Usually, collecting most postal history is reasonably simple, you get the item, you find the book, you look up the chapter and then write the verse, all in a day's work. Once written up on the page for a display, all is good. But what happens when something comes along that really does not fit into any criteria at all and your page is near empty. What happens when the subject is turned on its head and defeats all logic once thought of as reality? I will start near the end and then go back to the beginning.

Post-World War II (i.e. 1945 onwards), there were a number of collectors who specialised in Paquebot postmarks. In the main, the majority were based in the USA, while the rest were all European based, including a good number from the UK. By the 1970s and 1980s, there were around ten collectors who posted covers in large quantities to a vast array of vessels and shipping lines, while other collectors posted as and when they wanted to or felt like it. It was one of those ten who started the ball rolling in this little story of intrigue.

Towards the end of 1985, a USA collector, Martin Longseth, had organised a number of covers to be posted from MS *Thurø Sund* at various ports around the North Sea. While Martin had no idea where the covers would be posted, the Master of the vessel addressed a request for two covers to be treated as Paquebot mail at Berwick-upon-Tweed. On receipt of the request, an employee at the post office, who knew of no actual Paquebot mark

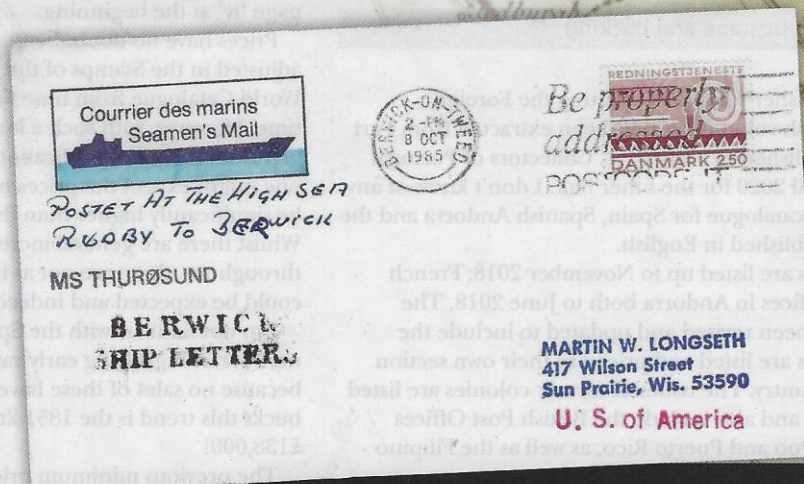


Fig 1 The first known use of the 'BERWICK/SHIP LETTERS' handstamp was on a cover sent from MS *Thurø Sund* in October 1985



Fig 2 The Longseth cover sent from MV *Sival* in December 1985, which also received the 'BERWICK/SHIP LETTERS' 'paquebot'

All covers shown reduced

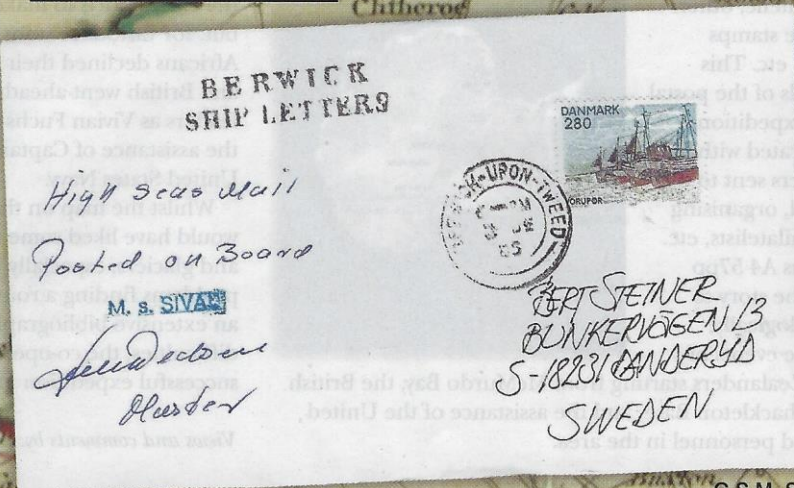


Fig 3 One of the Steiner covers also posted from the MV *Sival*

for the port, searched around the drawers (and/or cupboards) and found what he thought could be used as a Paquebot mark. It was the 'BERWICK/SHIP LETTERS' cancellation issued to the Post Office some 150 years before. With the addition of the cancellation, the pair of covers were sent back to the address in Wisconsin (Fig 1), Martin kept one cover, while the second cover was forwarded on to his great friend and another avid collector, Gus Lund.

A few weeks later, another vessel, the MV *Sival*, carrying covers from both Martin Longseth (a single item) and Bert Steiner from Sweden (it is thought a pair) requested the paquebot cancellation again at Berwick-upon-Tweed. The Longseth cover was a typed item done with a little care, while the Steiner cover must have arrived later hence the more scribbled version of 'High Seas Mail'. Whatever the timeline, Captain Pedersen did indeed ask for the Paquebot mark and again the 'BERWICK/SHIP LETTERS' cancel was used (Fig 2 and Fig 3).

The servicing of these five covers caused a bit of a stir in collecting circles due to the fact that such an old cancellation was being used and no one could really understand why. However, having managed to obtain such items who was going to complain? I am sure that the race was on to find another vessel going to Berwick-upon-Tweed with a Master willing to help. (Alas, it was never to happen again, making these five covers somewhat unique.)

In February 1986, the cancel had come to the attention of maybe the most famous of the UK collectors, Roger Hosking, who in order to maintain the research and information for his series of Paquebot books wrote to the Postmaster in Berwick-upon-Tweed and got the answer shown in Figure 4. The text of the letter is as follows:

Thank you for your letter of 2 Feb 1986 regarding the Berwick Ship Letter stamp. The stamp is in fact a museum piece which was used inadvertently on a few covers because the Paquebot stamp could not be located. It has

Post Office
21-25 NOLMARINET
BERWICK UPON-TWEED
TD15 1AA

Dear Mr Hosking

Thank you for your letter of 2 Feb 86 regarding the Berwick Ship Letter stamp. The stamp is in fact a museum piece which was used inadvertently on a few covers because the Paquebot stamp could not be located. It has been withdrawn and is hoped will be acceptable for Post Office museum. No one currently employed at Berwick can recall stamp being in regular use but that the amount of wear indicates use over a long period, even as you suggest, in the last century. It is a simple stamp of brass construction with a wooden handle and has no other distinguishing feature but has however created some interest as yours is the 3rd enquiry I have received. I trust this information will help to clarify the situation and I would add that there is no intention of re-introducing the stamp for ship's mail accepted at this office.

Yours sincerely
D Lund

POSTMASTER
BERWICK-UPON-TWEED

Fig 4 The letter sent by the Berwick-upon-Tweed postmaster explaining the history of the 'BERWICK/SHIP LETTERS' handstamp



Fig 5 This cover postmarked 31 May 1986 could be the first cover to receive the official Berwick-upon-Tweed Paquebot mark

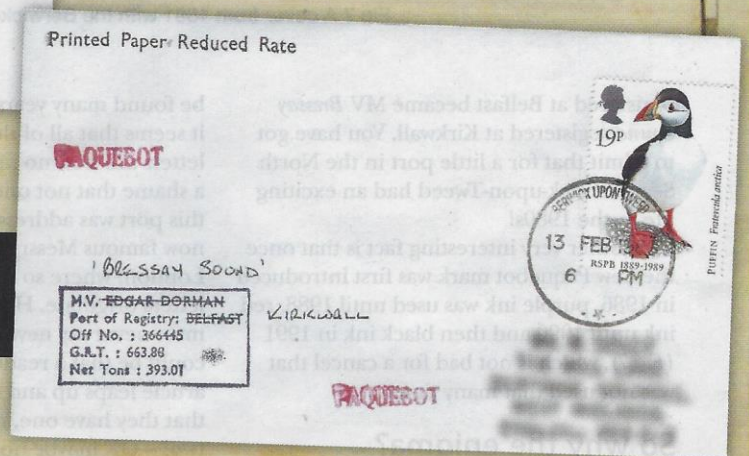


Fig 6 A later cover with the Paquebot mark in red

been withdrawn and it is hoped will be acceptable for the Post Office Museum. No one currently employed at Berwick can recall the stamp being in regular use but I feel that the amount of wear indicates some use over a long period, perhaps even as you suggest, in the last century. It is a simple stamp of brass construction with a wooden handle and has no other distinguishing feature. It has however created some interest as yours is the 3rd enquiry I have received.

I trust the information will help to clarify the situation and I would add that there is no intention of re-introducing the stamp for ship's mail at this office.'

The letter to Roger proves that it was in fact a very old cancellation mark and that it has never been used since, making the five known covers very rare.

The Postmaster stated that they could not find the current Paquebot cancel, which is not a surprise as any such mark had never been used, and it was in 1986, following these covers, that a Paquebot was either found or introduced for any mail posted on the high seas and deposited at Berwick-Upon-Tweed.

Figures 1, 2 and 3 show three of the five known covers with the 'BERWICK/SHIP LETTERS' cancellation (of the five known covers, three are in my possession, or known to me, while a fourth has been located and the ownership of the fifth is unknown). Figure 5 is a cover posted with the new mark first used in 1986, presumably after the letter to Roger Hosking in the February, which could make this cover maybe the first one posted after the use of the ship letters cancel. The cover was posted from the Netherlands registered vessel MV *Elvis Paesens* in May 1986 and addressed to another very well-known GB collector, Charles West.

While the West cover has the new mark in purple, the cover shown in Figure 6 was posted in 1989 and used in red. A feature of this cover is that while in port the ship was sold by Shamrock Shipping to Dennison Shipping and the name of MV *Edgar Dorman*



Fig 7 A cover from 1991 with the Berwick-upon-Tweed Paquebot mark in black ink

registered at Belfast became *MV Bressay Sound* registered at Kirkwall. You have got to admit that for a little port in the North Sea, Berwick-upon-Tweed had an exciting life in the 1980s!

Another very interesting fact is that once the new Paquebot mark was first introduced in 1986, purple ink was used until 1988, red ink until 1990 and then black ink in 1991 (Fig 7), which is not bad for a cancel that was not used that many times.

So why the enigma?

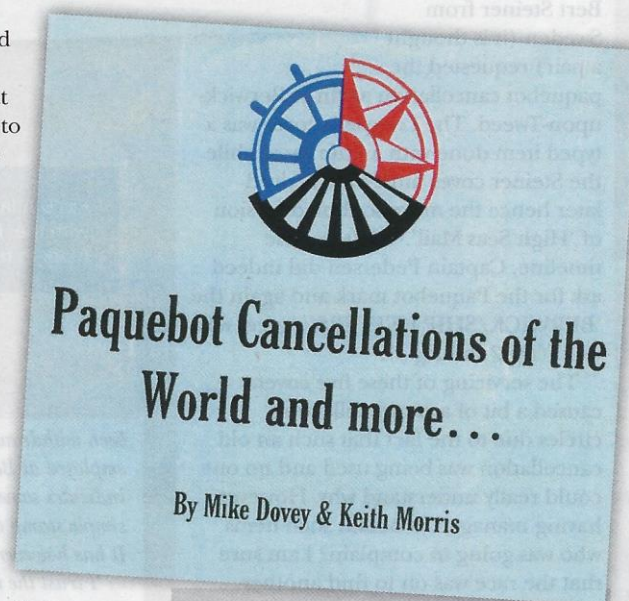
Alan Robertson's magnificent book on ship letters, *The Ship Letters of Great Britain*, has never been bettered for content because it truly delves into all known cancellations known at the time of printing. It was followed up with Colin Tabcart's *Robertson Revisited* book, which added anything found since the first publication and they both have one thing in common. There is *no known usage* of the 'Berwick/Ship Letters' cancellation at any time in the period that it should have been used (i.e. in and around 1830–40); the only known usage of the well-used canceller are the five mentioned in this article.

The letter from the Berwick-upon-Tweed postmaster clearly states what the canceller looked like and that it had been used many times because it was 'well used'. Therefore, at some point in the 1800s, the mark was used a number of times on mail coming into Berwick-upon-Tweed to be forwarded on to the recipients. It is a sad fact that maybe not one of these letters was sent to a solicitor and never filed away to

be found many years later, and it seems that all of the known letters are now no more. What a shame that not one letter into this port was addressed to the now famous Messrs Huth in London, where so many ship letters originate. However, we must never say never, and it could be that a reader of this article leaps up and shouts that they have one, maybe two! – OK maybe not – but this is the whole point of collecting maritime postal history. We must always live in hope that at some point something will come to light.

In the meantime, we do have five covers posted using the Berwick-upon-Tweed cancellation, although they are 150 years later than expected. The enigma is that there are no known covers in the dateline when there should be and five covers at a time when the cancel should have been long since lost or disposed of.

To all collectors of ship letters, may I venture to say that collecting Paquebot covers does indeed have merit. If it wasn't for this small band of avid senders of covers to various vessels, we would certainly have no knowledge of this mark. While a cover shown in this article may not sit too well in any Victorian collection of ship letters if such a gap is to be filled then these five very modern items will sit very strangely in such a collection.



Mike Dovey is a member of the TPO & SEAPOST Society. You may email the society at: TPO Seapost@Hotmail.com

For a free copy of the society's journal and membership application form, please contact: Keith Morris, TPO & Seapost Society, 1 St Mary's Drive, Fairford GL7 4LQ or phone 01285 713 075.

The Society has produced a DVD which is a true copy of the long out of print *Paquebot Cancellations of the World and More...* by Mike Dovey and Keith Morris. For details of how to obtain a copy, please contact the Society at the above address.