

THE BOMBAY-ADEN SEA POST OFFICE

By Mike Dovey

The Bombay-Aden Sea Post Office played a crucial role in the efficient handling of mail between Britain and India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this article, Mike Dovey presents a detailed timeline from 1851 to 1918, charting the sea post's origins, operations, challenges and eventual demise, highlighting key contracts, logistical innovations and the impact of changing transport systems on global postal services.

In 1840 the Peninsular and Oriental Line (P&O) agreed with the British Government a contract to carry mail from Britain to Egypt at a fee of £34,200 per annum, luckily for P&O this being the lowest tender of the four interested companies. The contract was offered on the basis that P&O would begin a service east of Egypt through to India, and this was duly created when the *Hindustan* sailed via the Cape of Good Hope to Suez to commence this second part of the contract.

In 1841 Arthur Anderson of P&O had visited Egypt and had arranged with the Pasha of Egypt a way of joining the east and west voyages together. The agreement covering passengers, cargoes and most importantly mail, provided for the following:

- A 48-mile passage along the Mahmoudieh Canal, constructed with forced labour in 1819-21, that linked Alexandria and Atfeh – a port on the Nile. The boat was in fact pulled by horses and the journey took some 12 hours.
- A river steamer voyage of some 240 miles from Atfeh to Bouliac – the port for Cairo. This journey took another 15 hours.
- A 36-hour ride from Cairo to Suez in a horse drawn buggy, the route was 84 miles and passengers travelled in open trucks with a canvas roof, and although it included up to 12 hours to stop for refreshments etc, the whole episode was not for the faint-hearted. Luggage, cargo and the mail was carried by up to 4000 camels which always travelled faster than the passengers and the ship at Suez was invariably held up pending the passengers catching up.

This was the beginning of the mail contract that would eventually grow into the Bombay-Aden Sea Post Office (SPO). Originally known as the



Fig 1 An entire from Mauritius to Bordeaux dated 7 December 1854 with a 'PACKET LETTER' cancel. It was carried on the SS Bombay prior to the introduction of the Bombay-Suez SPO (Reduced)



Fig 2 A small envelope from London to Tasmania dated 7 July 1860 with a 'SHIPLETTER INWARDS FREE' cancel, carried on the vessels SS Ceylon and SS Behar

Bombay – Suez SPO, the name was changed to Bombay – Aden SPO when Aden began to appear in the datestamps (Fig 1 and Fig 2).

1851

It was hoped that times could be vastly improved with the construction of the new railways, including routes that would link Alexandria and Suez, alas, Cairo wasn't reached until 1856 and Suez in 1859. When the railways were eventually finished then the linking of the two steamers was vastly improved.

1859

The Postmaster General in Great Britain announced a determination to sort mails on the homeward bound steamers from Alexandria to both Marseille and Southampton, with a view to a partial or a complete sorting. The question was asked of the Government of India as to whether they would bear the cost of part of the scheme and

this was declined, as it was felt that British sorters would not understand how many of the duplicated names in India could be sorted.

1860

The Indian Government in Bombay reported that on P&O steamers, postal clerks were employed to sort mail on vessels leaving Marseille. Upon arrival at Valletta in Malta they would transfer to a homeward bound vessel and continue sorting mail on the way back to Southampton. If this was the case, it was suggested that mail could be sorted on P&O vessels travelling from Suez to Bombay. While all believed it to be a good idea, nothing could be done due to the poor state of Indian finances at the time, and so the idea was not pursued.

In 1864, Lord Lawrence revived the idea of sorting mail. After discussions between the Director General and the Government in Bombay, while the idea of sorting mail seemed a good one, again all talks came to nothing and any plans were dropped.

1867

The plans were revived, as by now there was a weekly communication between Great Britain and India, and in a new experimental contract with the P&O, provision was made for a postal sorting office and for free accommodation for sorters east of Suez. The Government of India, maybe seeing the very low cost of such an accommodation, authorised and arranged for six sets of sorters to work on 52 voyages a year between Bombay and Suez, each set comprising a head sorter, a sorter and two packers. The calculation was based on a voyage of 15 days in each direction, with between two to six days in port at each end.

The 1867 Postal Contract between the British Government and P&O was effective from 1 February 1868. The contract for the mails was signed between the British Post Office and P&O for mails between Great Britain and Bombay. British personnel were used from Southampton to Alexandria, while Indian staff from the Indian Post Office were contracted for the voyages from Suez to Bombay. The first steamer involved in the contract was the SS *Sumatra* which left Bombay (now Mumbai) on 29 February 1868. From 1868 until 1872, only the mail on

Fig 3 The reverse of a small envelope from Reading to India dated 2 July 1872 with a Type 2 'SEA POST OFFICE' Indice D, cancel, carried on the SS *Behar*

the eastward bound vessels was sorted, while any westbound mail was guarded only. Eventually mail going westbound was also sorted.

1869

The Suez Canal was opened. Built and engineered by the Frenchman Ferdinand de Lesseps, it paved the way for a much easier linking of steamers and cut transit times, so that everything including the mail could travel through Egypt much faster.

The opening of the canal did pose problems for P&O and its contract with the British Post Office. For the first five years, until 1874, the Post Office insisted that all mail be carried overland as per the contract, and not by the new cheaper route through the canal. This was solved in 1874 when a new contract was drawn up with a £20,000 reduction in contract fees.

The whole episode had become a farce, with a steamer dropping the mail at Alexandria, continuing through the canal, then, on arrival at Suez, picking up the same mail, which had arrived by train. While the Post Office were not against the transit of mail by steamer through the canal, they were intent on reducing the value of the contract, which by 1874 they had succeeded in doing.

1870

The experiment was made permanent, as the whole episode had been so successful. Mail arriving in Bombay could be placed with ticket holders for overland mail to the interior within ten minutes, instead of maybe having to wait until the following day. Otherwise, it would be a minimum of six hours before the same mail could be available.

The Indian sea sorting office sorted mails for Britain, although the General Post Office did not reciprocate by sorting the mail for India, the latter being done at sea, which enabled London to dispense with the high cost Naval Agents. The new revised contract still provided for sorting accommodation east of Suez, but there was no such provision for anything going west of Suez. Therefore, it was deemed that the Master of the vessel should take charge of all mail west of Suez, based on the fact that the Indian sea sorting was so good that, by the time it arrived in the Mediterranean, there was nothing to sort (*Fig 3 to Fig 5*)

1873

The six sets of staff were collectively known as the 'Marine Postal Service, Suez and Bombay' and comprised of six mail officers, six assistant mail officers, six supernumerary assistant mail officers and 12 packers, meaning that each set had a staff of five personnel.

1890

The amount of work involved had grown to such an extent that, with the number of men required to operate the system, there was not enough accommodation on board the vessels or the supervision needed to improve the service (Fig 6).

The voyage, which had originally been from Bombay to Suez, was altered to Bombay to Aden due to the fact that P&O had decided to tranship mails between outward and homeward vessels in the port of Aden, including vessels en route from Australia. It should also be pointed out that, while the volume of mail was on the increase, P&O were always having the value of any contract reduced as the voyage times improved. The value of the mail contracts from China and India to Great Britain, in the ten years up to 1888, reduced from around a total of £450,000 to £285,000 per annum.

When the service was reduced to Bombay to Aden, and the sets were reduced to three, the number in each set was steadily increased. By 1908, each set had 29 workers, comprising an assistant mail officer, 15 sorters and 13 packers.

1899

Following a question asked in Parliament, a special inquiry was set up to find out the effect of the Imperial penny postage and the workings of the sea post office staff. It came to the conclusion that the work involved, and carried out by the staff, was very exacting, and there was a consideration as to whether it would be better to sort the mails either in Bombay or on the Railway Mail Service. While it was decided that sorting mail at sea was to carry on, there would have to be a number of changes (Fig 7 to Fig 10).

Another inquiry followed in 1905 following a representation to the Secretary of State for India by an MP. Once again, it was stated that the working conditions inflicted on the staff were not acceptable and were of a 'peculiarly trying nature'. With mail for sorting expanding at a minimum of 10 per cent per annum, it was felt that this could not carry on in its present form and something must be done to solve the problem. The increase in volumes of mail was not reflected and the accommodation available was very limited on each of the steamers (Fig 8).

1907

The subject of abolishing the Sea Post Office altogether, or at least restricting it to very small proportions, was again



Fig 4 A postcard from India to London dated 21 February 1880 with a Type 3 'SEA/POST OFFICE', Indice A, cancel, carried on the SS Bokhara



Fig 5 An envelope from Hammersmith to India dated 14 May 1890 with a very rare intaglio 'SEA POST OFFICE' cancel, carried on the SS Assam (maybe only five copies known)

raised, as it had become apparent that the workload of mail could not be covered with the restricted accommodation on board each vessel. There was a strong opinion that the time had come to radically alter the work and move sorting ashore, as the amounts of mail to be processed could not be covered.

Within a year, in 1908, it was eventually decided that something had to be done, and that there had to be a radical rethink as to working practices. The Postmaster General in Bombay had the task of examining what could be done (Fig 9).

At this point in 1908, the situation was, that mail from Great Britain consisted of 60 per cent sorted for various parts of India, and 40 per cent unsorted, due to mail arriving in London for India on a Friday night not being sorted but transferred straight to the steamer. Any mail received from other countries was also unsorted.

All unsorted mail, with the exception of trade circulars and price lists, was sorted between Aden and Bombay. An average voyage would consist of around 150,000 items to be sorted, 7000 registered items to be specially dealt with and another 6000 items which were either unpaid or underpaid and were to be taxed with postage dues. With this kind of input and workload, and the severe lack of accommodation for such sorting, a breaking point had been reached.

There was a suggestion that the sorting voyage could be extended beyond Aden as far as either Suez or Port Said. However, this was not a viable proposition, as the Australian steamers arrived at Aden every fortnight to tranship mails, etc. Another big reason for not extending the voyage, apart from the cost involved, was the fact that close supervision

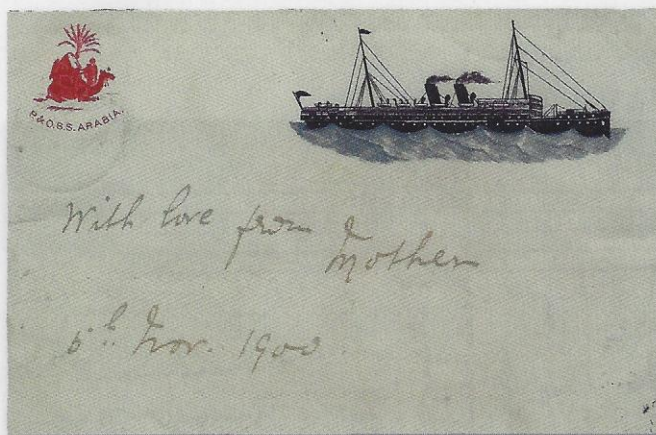


Fig 7 Front and back of a postcard sent from India to the USA, dated 17 January 1903, showing the SS Arabia. This design is maybe the first one ever attempted by P&O to illustrate one of their ships and is extremely rare. Posted on board, the reverse includes a Type 7A 'SEA POST OFFICE' cancel, Index C (Reduced)

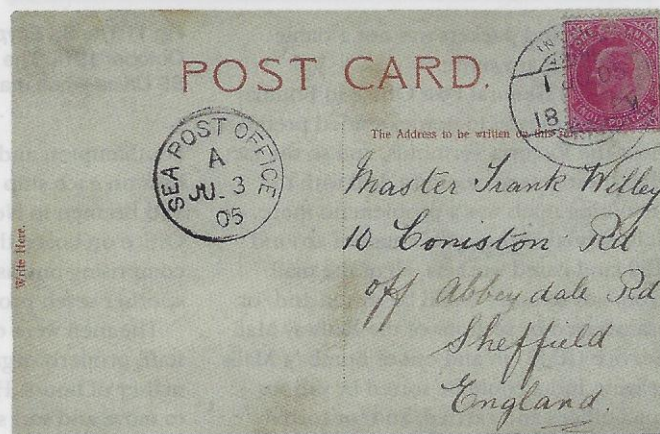
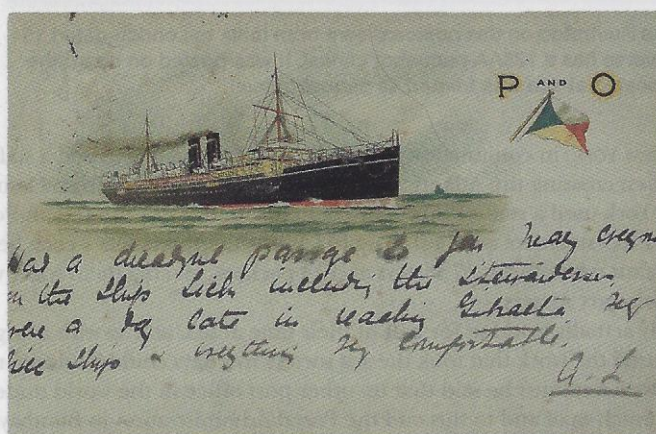


Fig 8 A postcard showing SS Arcadia sent from India to Sheffield. It has a postmark 3 July 1905 and has a Type 7B 'SEA POST OFFICE' cancel, Index A, and was posted on board (Reduced)

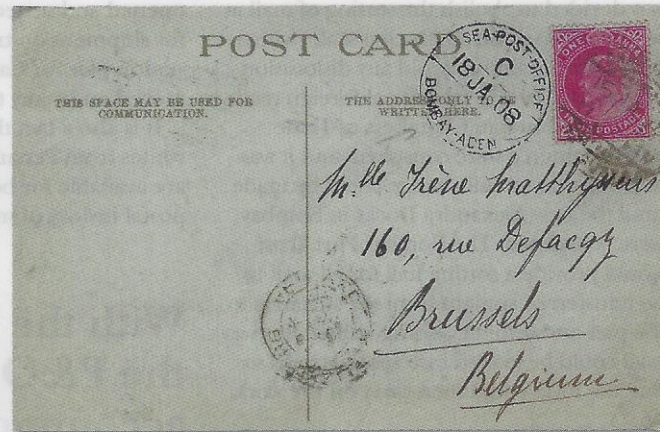


Fig 9 A postcard from India to Belgium showing the SS Oceana. The reverse, postmarked 18 January 1908, with a Type 9 'SEA POST OFFICE' cancel, Index C, posted on board the SS Oceana (Reduced)

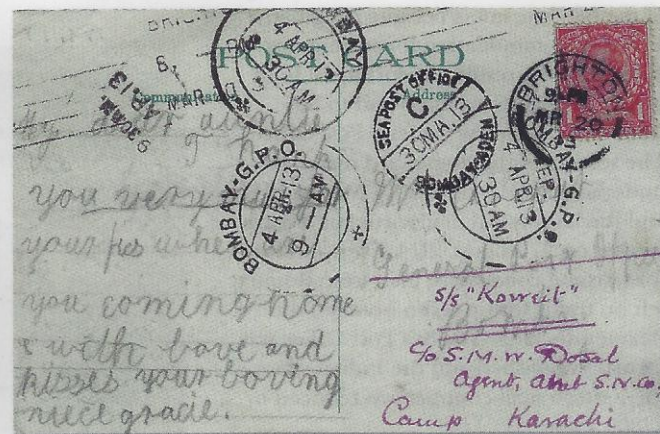


Fig 10 This postcard from Brighton to Karachi, dated 20 March 1913, illustrates SS China. The reverse includes a Type 9 'SEA POST OFFICE' cancel, Index C (Reduced)

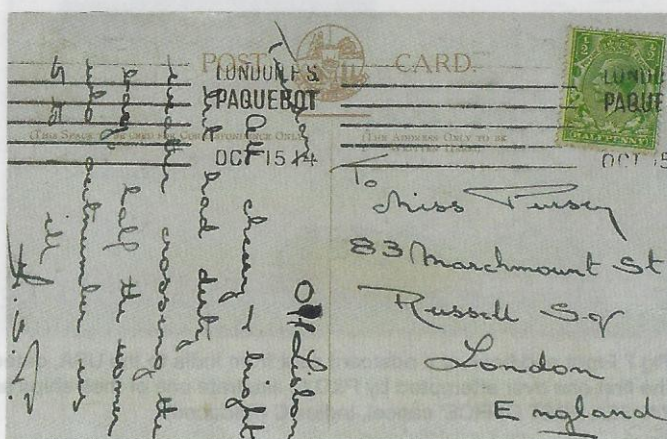
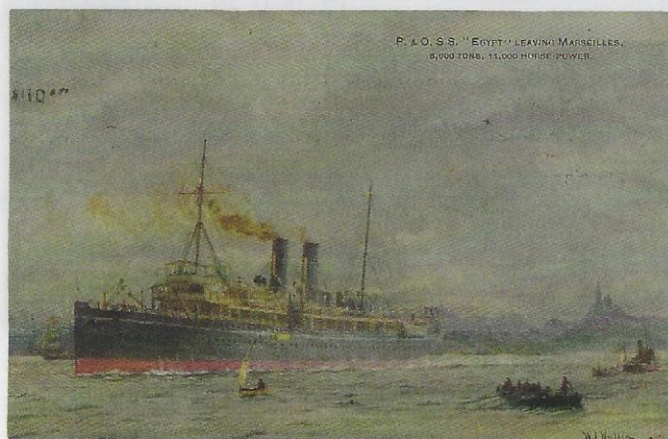


Fig 11 The SS *Egypt* is illustrated on this postcard sent from India to London dated 15 October 1914. The reverse has a 128AA paquebot cancel. It was posted on board the SS *China* when mail posted at sea was treated as paquebot mail

of sorters and packers was not a viable proposition any more.

The old General Post Office in Bombay had been moved to new extended premises near the Victoria Terminus, and so the fact that there was no room to deal with the incoming mails was a problem no more. It is estimated that with a staff of around 150 land-based workers, all of the mail from any steamer could be sorted and/or transferred by sections of the Railway Mail Service (RMS) in and out of Bombay. Mails leaving India could be sorted by various mail offices and carried, and/or sorted, again by the RMS.

With the conditions at sea becoming even more untenable, and the lack of security, it was decided to abolish the sorting of mail at sea but to do so on a reducing scale, with a gradual reduction to avoid any dislocation in the disposal and transfer of foreign mails. The various Indian Chambers of Trade and Commerce were consulted, and it was decided that no full change could be made until the new Alexandra Docks in Bombay were completed. The Bombay Port Trust would provide a sorting hall for all mail to be transferred straight from the steamers to the pier and into the sorting hall, in this way mail could be loaded into special trains so that the RMS could then carry on the work.

1914

The whole question was finally resolved with the outbreak of the War. The sailings of the P&O steamers became irregular, and all accommodation for sorting was removed. As a result, the sorting of both inward and outward mails had to be done at the Bombay General Post Office. The sorting of the homeward mail was undertaken on land from 14 August 1914, and the last inward mail sorted on board arrived on 27 August 1914. Even allowing for wartime conditions, mail from Bombay left on trains within seven hours of the steamer docking. The Sea Post Office was formally abolished and the Indian share of the Eastern mail contract was reduced by £8800 a year (Fig 11).

In other parts of the world, the White Star Line, sailing between Liverpool,

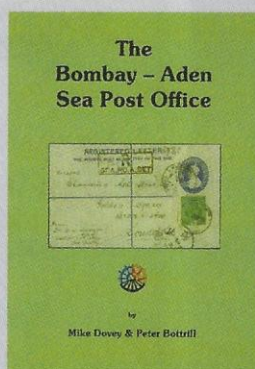
Southampton and New York, in conjunction with American Line sailings, used a staff of four on each ship when crossing the Atlantic, while the German steamers from Hamburg and Bremen to New York used a staff of three. By comparison, by 1914 the Indian Post Office on board the P&O steamers used a staff of 103 across the three Sets – each Set comprising one assistant mail officer, 17 sorters and 14 packers, making 96 in total, with another seven probationary sorters.

The men were only actually working for half of their time at sea, and so with a larger staff, properly organised the work that took the sea sorters five days could be done in a matter of hours. However, it must be said that no other post office in the world undertook to move and sort so much mail and to this end the Postal Administration in Bombay are to be commended.

Following the end of hostilities in 1918, and the Sea Post Office long since finished, mail was landed direct into the Foreign Mail Sorting Office on the Ballard Pier. It was opened and sorted by a team of 150 workers, and within three hours, the mail was ready for shipment on travelling post offices (special trains). These trains would leave the station pier for Calcutta, Lucknow, Madras, and the Punjab, where it would be sorted as it moved on its way to its final destination.

It is also a fact that P&O steamers sailing onwards to China had sorters working on the routes from Penang to Singapore and also from Hong Kong to Shanghai. Cancellations are available for both of these routes. However, while they are an integral part of the postal history of mails shipped by the P&O Line, they are not covered in this article.

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The *Bombay – Aden Sea Post Office* book is the most comprehensive and definitive work on the subject, bringing together all known information. It remains unmatched and is unlikely to be surpassed in the future.

The *Bombay – Aden Sea Post Office Timetables* is an essential resource for anyone with a postcard bearing an SPO date, providing ship names and sailing dates for easy reference.

For details please contact the TPO & Seapost Society by contacting them by email: mikedovey@btinternet.com for details of offers etc

