

# THE EARLY YEARS OF THE HOLYHEAD TO KINGSTOWN PACKET MAIL

By Ken Mitchell

In 1860, four new steam ships, complete with on board post offices, came into service between Holyhead and Kingstown to provide an earlier delivery of the Dublin mails. Ken Mitchell of the TPO & Seapost Society provides a study of the early datestamps linked to the packet service.

The relationship between Ireland and the rest of the British mainland has varied in importance throughout the centuries but has always been a political hotbed requiring the maintenance of speedy communications between the two kingdoms. The geographical position of Holyhead on the Isle of Anglesey as the closest point to the UK mainland from the principal city of Dublin meant that it developed as the main port of the shipment of mail to Ireland, thus ensuring as quick a sea passage as possible. However, it was not until the reign of Charles I that a regular postal service was organised to carry mails from London to Holyhead, the first post commencing in October 1635. Even then, it would not be until the Act of Union on 1 January 1801 that the importance of the route from Holyhead to Dublin was fully realised.

Initially, the roads between Shrewsbury and Anglesey were improved – the works including new bridges, track improvements and a brand new road across Anglesey to Holyhead. Once there, the mail was carried across the Irish Sea by privately owned sailing ships, which were often beset by bad weather and the vagaries of the tide leading to many delays, up to 52 hours being recorded.

Later in the 18th century, the Post Office set up its own sailing packets between Holyhead and Pigeon House Quay in Dublin. However, it was realised that harbour facilities there were unsatisfactory, due mainly to the depth of water at some stages of the tide. As a consequence, the mail service was moved to a brand new harbour at Howth, north-east of Dublin City, despite many objectors deriding this choice. Three years later in 1821, steam-driven paddle wheelers were used on the service for the first time, initially defined by the PO as auxiliaries to the sailing



Fig 1 A map of the maritime area of Dublin made in 1853, showing the location of the three packet stations: Pigeon House Quay, Howth and Kingstown

All covers shown reduced



Fig 2 A cover sent from Chamonix to Bray on 9 September 1860 via three French t.p.o. services – 'Montcenis A Macon', 'Lyons A Paris', and 'Paris A Calais'. It shows a faint Holyhead and Kingstown experimental sorting stamp dated 11 September 1860

ships – a position that was soon reversed when steam power proved its worth until, in 1824, three new 100HP steam packets were built for the route.

The shortcomings of Howth as a packet station were becoming more concerning due to the variable depth of water, its situation and its susceptibility to easterly gales, which created a dangerous swell at the harbour entrance. As a result, again despite opposition from those who had put up the finances for the building of the harbour at Howth, common sense prevailed and the packets were transferred to Kingstown on 22 January 1834 and Howth was left largely to the fishing and leisure sailing industries. The map at *Figure 1* shows the location of all three packet stations.

Two years after the move to Kingstown, the financial losses being incurred by the Post Office at the Holyhead station were placed on record and a suggestion was made that the ships be transferred to the Admiralty. The Treasury agreed and six ships were transferred to run the service.

## Revised rail routes

On 24 January 1839, the opening of the London and Birmingham Railway provided a through rail connection between London and Liverpool, resulting in the mail for Ireland being re-routed there. A new contract was agreed for the night mail to be operated by the City of Dublin Steam Packet Company, with the Admiralty retaining the Day Mail sailings. However, the route via Liverpool was slow and the PO always



intended to return to Holyhead as soon as the Chester to Holyhead Railway opened, which it did in 1848 (except for the bridge over the Menai Straits, which opened in March, 1850). The Night Mail returned to Holyhead on 1 August 1848, for which four new more powerful packets of 350 HP were built. The financial advantage to the PO of using a contract service was duly noted and the Admiralty subsequently withdrew its service, selling or lending their new boats to the City of Dublin Steam Packet Company (CofDSPCo).

Until the new mail contract in 1859, any philatelic content is very small, as all letters in each direction were merely datestamped at source and maybe again at the place of delivery. However, all this was about to change. The mail contract came up for renewal in 1859 and a new service was agreed with the CofDSPCo, requiring four new steamers to be built with provision for, 'A large sorting office for the sorting of mails during the voyage across the Irish Sea', thus providing an earlier delivery of the Dublin mails.

The service officially began on 1 October 1860, the ships being named after the four Irish Provinces *Connaught, Leinster, Munster* and *Ulster*. Sorting of mail on board required the provision of datestamps for cancelling and backstamping mail brought on board in sealed bags or posted on board by passengers. And so began that period of datestamps linked to the Holyhead and Kingstown Packet.

## The early years

RMS *Leinster* was built in a different yard to the other three boats and was completed sooner. Because of this, it was allowed to come on service under the old contract a month earlier in September 1860.

The sorting office on board was classed as a floating branch of the Dublin Office and letters sorted on board during this monthly period bear backstamps of the normal Dublin 'broken-circle' type, which can be identified by the inclusion of a sideways, or recumbent 'H' and the letter 'E' (thought to indicate 'experimental') placed above the date. Only four covers have been recorded with this mark (Fig 2).

The full service using the entire new fleet began officially on 1 October 1860 and the 'E' in the datestamp was removed. After this date, the mark still utilised the recumbent 'H', either on its own or with an additional 'A' next to it. The inclusion of the 'A' indicated the morning sailing in each direction – the afternoon sailing having no such letter

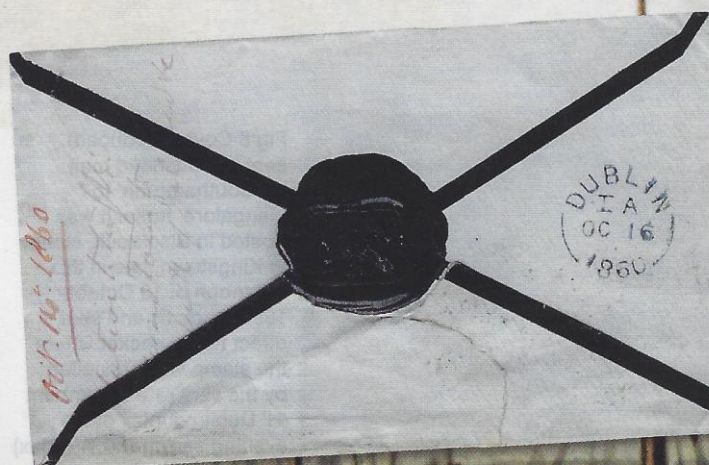


Fig 3 Cover from the Duke of Cambridge to Sir George Brown, 'Commander in Chief, Ireland', sent from London to Dublin and sorted on the morning boat on 16 October 1860. The mark shows a narrow type of recumbent 'H'

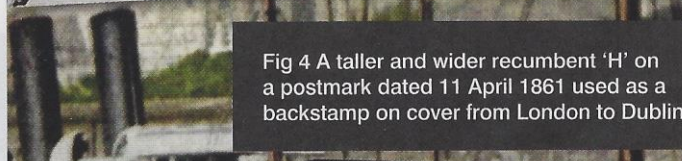


Fig 4 A taller and wider recumbent 'H' on a postmark dated 11 April 1861 used as a backstamp on cover from London to Dublin

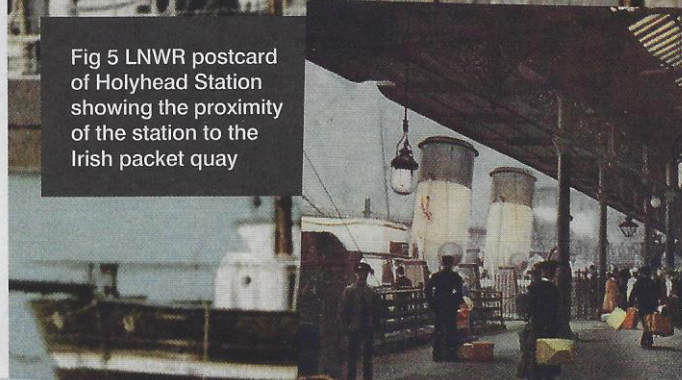


Fig 5 LNWR postcard of Holyhead Station showing the proximity of the station to the Irish packet quay



Fig 6 A cover from Leeds destined for the Isle of Skye mistakenly sent on the London and Holyhead t.p.o. It features the 'Lon. & Holyhead R.P.O./Irish Mail Night' postmark, which was the first mark issued to the London and Holyhead t.p.o.

in that space. This feature continued to be found in the marks of the Holyhead and Kingstown packet mail service (described later) until 1894.

The recumbent 'H' in these marks varies slightly in size suggesting that more than one stamp was used (Fig 3 and Fig 4).

## The London and Holyhead t.p.o.

Concurrent with the acceleration of the Irish mails with the start of the new contract on 1 October 1860, railway post offices were established by the London and North Western Railway Company between London and Holyhead for both Day and Night mails. The timetable for this was based on the need to ensure as quick a passage to Dublin as possible, linking the arrival of the trains with the departure of the packet boats. Crewe was the main hub for the collection of mails from the north, west and east destined for Ireland and were transferred at Holyhead Station, together with the mails from and through London, to the Holyhead Packet boats, which were berthed adjacent to the platforms (Fig 5).

The first mark issued to the London and Holyhead t.p.o. on 17 July 1860 was the explanatory mark reading 'Lon. & Holyhead R.P.O./Irish Mail Night' and used on items missent to the train (Fig 6). The first London and Holyhead t.p.o. datestamp was issued on 5 February 1870 (Fig 7).



Fig 7 The first London & Holyhead t.p.o. datestamp was issued on 5 February 1870. This example is dated 13 December 1880



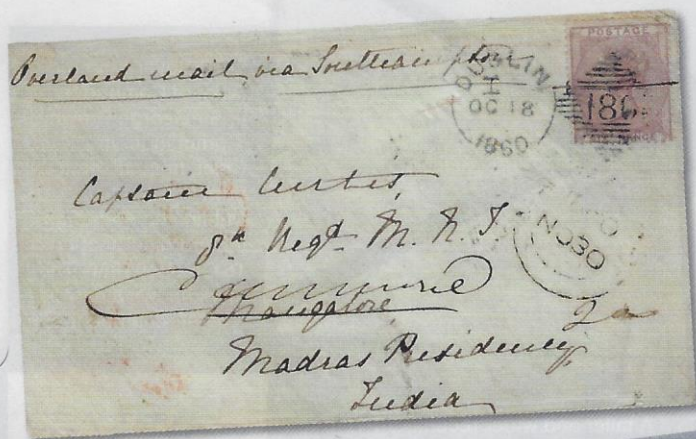


Fig 8 Cover (Reduced) sent by 'Overland mail' via Southampton to Mangalore, India. It was posted in Blackrock, close to Kingstown, late in the afternoon of 18 October 1860 (code D) and sent direct to the packet where the stamp was cancelled by the very rare recumbent 'H' Dublin duplex of the evening sailing (no 'A' index)



Fig 9 The recumbent 'H' Dublin duplex on piece dated 25 April 1861

Fig 10 Covers backstamped with the dedicated 'H&K PACT' marks. The upper cover was sent from Dundee to Dublin and was backstamped on the evening boat on 2 December 1861. The lower cover, sent from Dundee to Dublin, is backstamped on the morning boat, 6 January 1863



## Processing the mail

Most mail taken aboard the train had already been provisionally sorted and cancelled at their place of origin and came aboard in sealed bags. As a consequence of this arrangement, the postal workers on the packet had minimal cancellation of stamps to carry out on the Irish mails flowing in the westbound or 'down' direction, i.e. away from London. Their main task was to sort mail for Dublin and Dublin County in order to enable an earlier delivery there. The datestamps were used primarily as receivers for backstamping the sorted mails using the Dublin 'broken circle' handstamps indicated previously.

Mail flowing in the opposite, eastbound direction is difficult to find as English mail was processed in the Dublin Office before being taken to the packet. However, letters posted in the vicinity of Kingstown, at places such as Blackrock, Dalkey, Monkston, etc. and arriving too late to be sent to the Dublin Office for inclusion in the English mail bags, were sent direct to the floating post office on the packet to be dealt with. Such mail required the stamp to be cancelled on board. The canceller was of the duplex type using a Dublin 'broken circle' c.d.s. with a recumbent 'H' in the index position, combined with a Dublin '186' squat diamond obliterator (Fig 8).

Only three covers are recorded with this duplex and index combination dated 2, 18 and 26 October 1860 – two to Mangalore and one to Edinburgh. The same mark on piece dated 25 April 1861 extends the dates of use (Fig 9).

The packets also carried passengers and the on-board post office could carry out all the tasks a land-based post office would undertake. Writing paper and stamps could be purchased and mail posted on board was serviced with the duplex stamp shown above. A 3d. late fee was imposed on such mail.

## The dedicated packet handstamps

The recumbent 'H' in the handstamps rendered these marks rather anonymous in relation to their use on board the packet. In July 1861, the packet service was finally issued with their own dedicated handstamps, all being identified by the abbreviated title 'H&K PACT' set around the upper rim of the 'broken circle' datestamp (Fig 10). The earliest date recorded is 8 July 1861, after which date the recumbent 'H' in the handstamps was rendered redundant after a nine-month life span.

The working practices continued as before with westbound mail obtaining their packet mark as a receiver or backstamp, while those received uncanceled or posted on board (normally in the eastbound direction) having the stamps cancelled by a duplex type stamp.

### H&K PACT Down marks

A number of handstamps of the H&K Pact 'broken circle' type were in use as backstamps, having minor variations in punctuation and lettering. These stamps were in use from 8 July 1861 through to mid-1864, when a new set was issued containing numbers 1 to 12 set between the month/day line and the year slug at the base.

### H&K PACT Up marks

As stated previously, most mail flowing in the eastbound, or 'Up' direction (towards London), did not require on-board sorting and the boats only processed mail sent direct to the packet from offices close to Kingstown or mail that had been posted on board. All



were stamped using 'H&K PACT' duplex type stamps of which three different styles have been recorded

(Table 1). All three can be found with or without the 'A' index above the date and normally carry a backstamp of the receiving office in the locality of Kingstown.

### The 'squat' Dublin numeral

The 'H&K PACT' duplex with '186' obliterator was withdrawn during 1863 and replaced by a distinctively squat '186' diamond-shaped obliterator and used until 1870. This consisted of five bars above and five below the date and is often notoriously badly struck. Its use, however, can generally be confirmed by the placing of an even numbered example of a 'H&K PACT' 'broken circle' stamp on the rear (Fig 11 and Fig 12). (The numbered 'broken circle' marks had been introduced in mid-1864 when the early un-numbered types were withdrawn).

After the withdrawal of the 'squat' 186 obliterator in 1870, the use of H&K Packet marks became standardised with the numbered 'broken circle' type being used as both receivers and cancellers, although cancellations on stamps continued to be much scarcer than the former.

This subject will be continued at a later date when the later history of the London to Holyhead Railway and the link with the H&K Packet will be described.

Fig 11 A rather scruffy postal stationery cover posted at Dundrum, about three miles west of Kingstown, addressed to Grasmere and sent direct to the packet to be dealt with. The stamp impression was cancelled by the 22mm wide, 5x5-lined, squat 186 obliterator of Dublin and backstamped by a packet 'broken circle' number 10 postmark dated 29 September 1865

Table 1: The three types of 'H&K PACT' duplex handstamps

#### Type 1

20mm 'broken circle' datestamp paired with a 186 'squared' Dublin Diamond obliterator with six lines above and six below the numeral.



#### Type 2

20mm 'broken circle' datestamp paired with a 186 'squared' Dublin diamond obliterator with six lines above and seven lines below the numeral.



#### Type 3

20mm 'broken circle' datestamp with a wider gap between 'K' and 'P' paired with a 186 'squared' Dublin numeral with four thick lines above and four below the numeral.

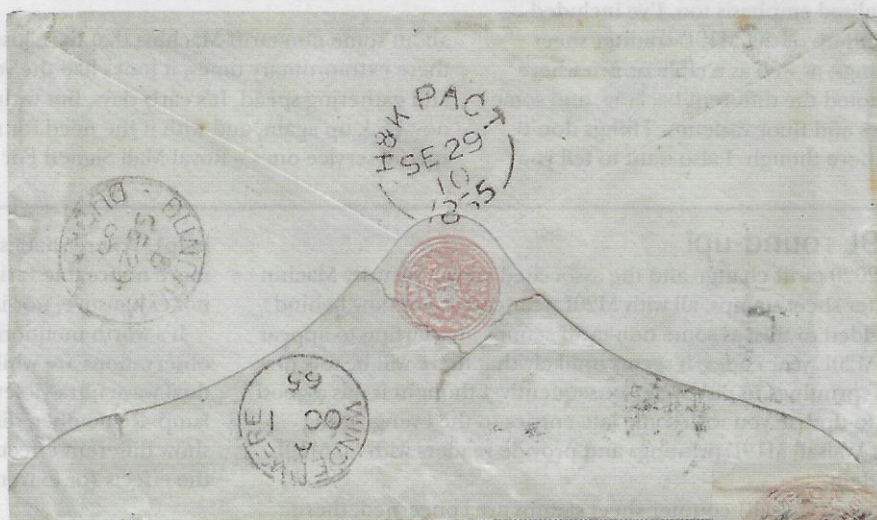


Fig 12 Cover posted at Blackrock – almost three miles along the coast from Kingstown – sent directly to the packet for servicing. It is backstamped with the same H&K 'broken circle' mark with code 10 as seen in Fig 11 but dated 10 February 1868



#### The TPO & Seapost Society

Ken Mitchell is a member of the TPO & Seapost Society. You may email the society at: [tpo\\_seapost@hotmail.com](mailto: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 published a book on the Holyhead to Kingstown Packet Mail. For details of how to obtain a copy please contact the Society at the above address.