

SHIP CACHETS OF THE ROYAL MAIL STEAM PACKET COMPANY

By Mike Dovey

Mike Dovey of the TPO & Seapost Society talks us through the evolution of the various and often rare ship cachets used by the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, and highlights a newly found discovery that proves that maritime postal history should never be taken for granted.

Probably one of the most popular shipping lines to collect in maritime philatelic circles is the Royal Mail Steam Packet Co (RMSP), which was originally conceived in 1839 by a Mr James MacQueen and eventually ended in its demise in 1972 when it was absorbed into the Furness Withy fleet. At the turn of the century in 1900, postcards were becoming a popular method of communication, especially at sea where passengers on board various ships would buy picture postcards featuring the ship on which they were sailing. The RMSP decided that all of the postcards and letters posted on board would benefit from the use of a ship cachet to further advertise the ship and the line.

At some point after 1900 the company issued to a number of ships the first oval cachet, which was always applied in purple ink (Fig 1). The design carries the inscription 'THE ROYAL MAIL STEAM PACKET COMPANY' and in the centre was the message 'Posted on High Seas' to show that all mail with the cachet was in fact posted at sea. This cachet, together with the use of a ship picture postcard (see Fig 3), would be a great advertisement for the line.

The original ship cachet design was very elaborate and needed to be handled carefully to create the correct impression. By around 1913 new generic ship cachets, similar to the example used on RMS *Magdalena* shown at Figure 2, which omitted naming the RMSP, were added to a ship's supply as they were much easier to use.

To augment the ship cachet the RMSP issued a series of postcards depicting their ships in various ports of call. Postcards for smaller ships were produced in black and white, while the bigger A class vessels (such as the SS *Trent* and RMS *Amazon*) had colour postcards created for use on board (Fig 3). Passengers would buy a number of these cards (all different) to send to friends and family – and anyone else they wanted to maybe impress.



Fig 1 The first RMSP oval cachets used on board RMS *Nile* (left) and RMS *Danube*



Fig 2 Generic ship cachets without reference to the RMSP were later adopted as they were much easier to use

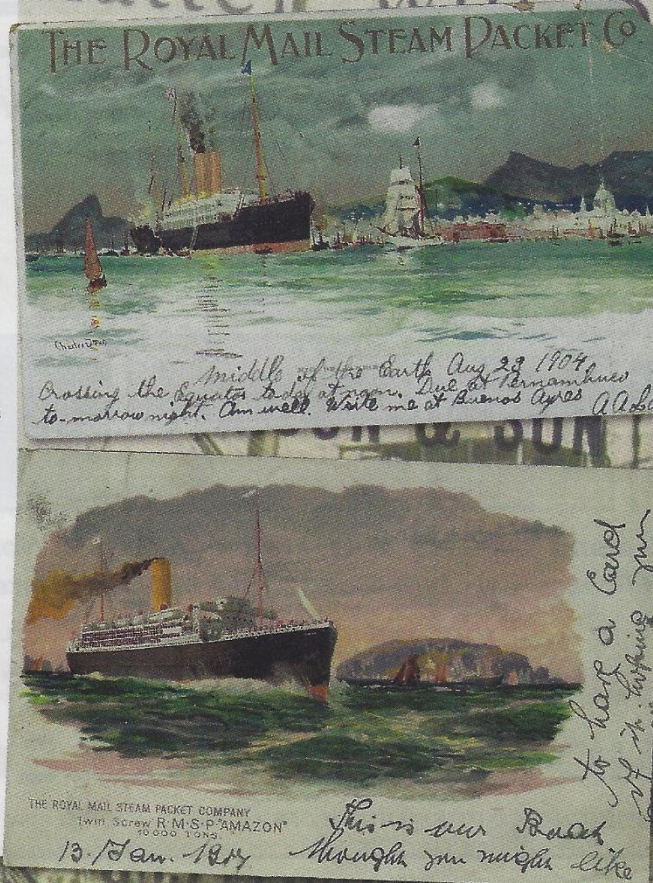
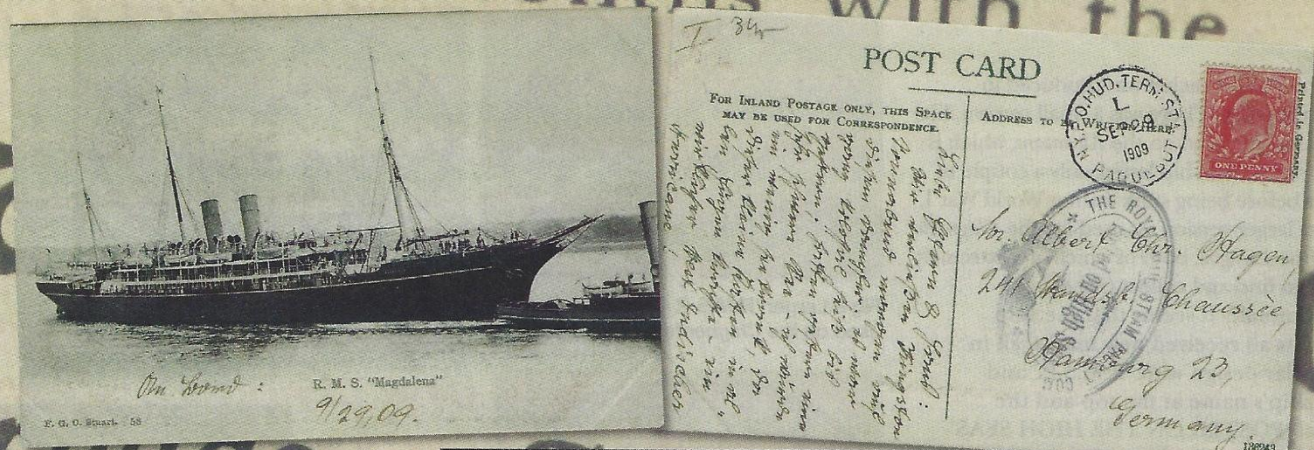


Fig 3 Picture postcards, such as these examples showing SS *Trent* and RMS *Amazon*, were popular with passengers wanting to send messages home

All covers shown reduced



All covers shown reduced

Fig 4 A picture postcard featuring RMS Magdalena with a New York paquebot postmark. It has an index L which means it was the 12th ship to dock in the port that day



Fig 5 Generic ship cachets were eventually replaced with oval cachets featuring 'R.M.S.P.' at the top and the ship's name at the bottom

Postage and the ship's cachet would be added on board. As a ship sailing on the high seas was its own sovereign territory it could use stamps of the country where the vessel was registered, which in this case was Great Britain, as many of the vessels were registered in Liverpool. The mail would then be deposited at the next port where a paquebot postmark would be added to show that the items had been posted while at sea (Fig 4).

The generic ship cachets were eventually discarded in favour of ship cachets which actually showed the ship's name. This opened up a whole new range of designs for use on each ship. One of the first designs to be adopted with a ship's name added used an oval design in purple with 'R.M.S.P.' at the top and the name of the ship at the bottom (Fig 5). RMS Magnolia is known to have used a cachet similar to the Trent example shown, while a number of ships used cancels similar to the Danube and Amazon.

All of these ship cachets were missing the phrase 'POSTED ON THE HIGH SEAS'. However, later versions included the phrase along with the ship name in various positions while omitting 'R.M.S.P.' (Fig 6).

Another variation of ship cachet included the inscription 'THE R.M.S.P. COY', with the ship name in a single line underneath and 'POSTED ON THE HIGH SEAS' across the base (Fig 7).

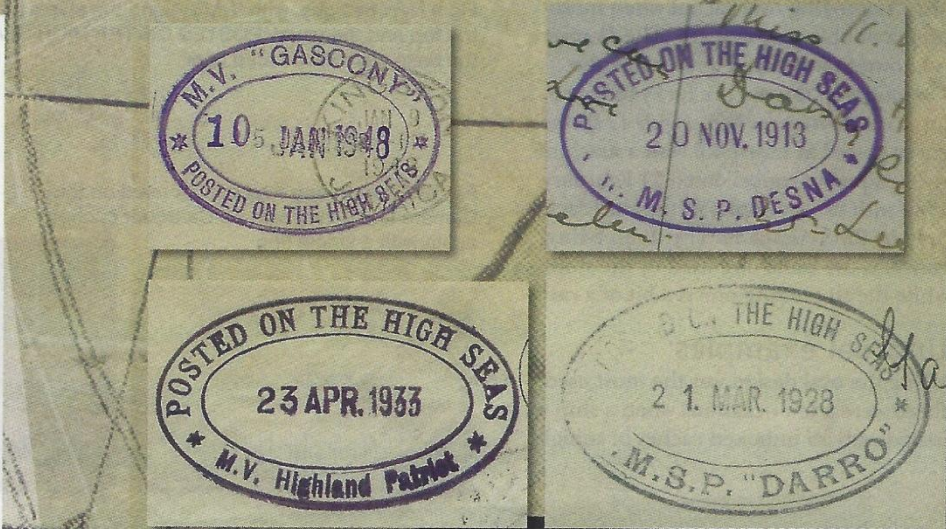
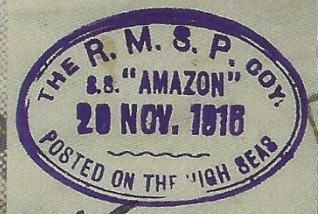


Fig 6 Later cachets featured the ship name and the phrase 'POSTED ON THE HIGH SEAS'



Fig 7 Small format cachets with the inscription 'THE R.M.S.P. COY' at the top, the ship name in a single line underneath and 'POSTED ON THE HIGH SEAS' across the base



magazine. Ronnie. Passenger ship Alagon built in 1905 by Harland and Wolff for Royal Mail Steam Packet Co

This type of cachet was produced in different sizes. There was a small version, like the example used on the *Alcantara*, which is very rare as the ship lasted only a couple of years before being sunk during World War I, and a larger version, as used for the *Chignecto* and the *Lochgail*, both of which are extremely hard to find and collect (Fig 8).

Eventually it seems that the ship cachets all received new marks, all in a similar design with 'R.M.S.P.' and the ship's name at the top and the usual 'POSTED ON THE HIGH SEAS' inscription at the base (Fig 9). This design was used on many of the ships of the line and is probably the most used design of all of the marks used. However, there are a few little idiosyncrasies to make collectors always end up on the lookout for something different.

It should be noted that for some reason the *Navasota* has the 'P' missing from 'R.M.S.P.' and we will never know why. Also, unusually crew members of the *Ohio* struck their ship cachet in red. In all my years of collecting this is the only ship to do so, but then someone reading this might have examples of others.

Other unusual examples of ship cachets are a single-ring oval cachet when most used a double ring (Fig 10). The *Demerara* is known to have used both, while the *Caraquet* is so rare we are lucky to have just a single-ring version. Figure 11 shows a cover posted at Liverpool with a machine style paquebot cancel dated 21 February 1949 with two examples of the ship cachets held by RMS *Alcantara*. The double-ring cancel is the usual one used by the ship while the single-ring one is a bit of a rarity.

Unusual examples

While the oval design was the most used there were a few occasions when a ship was issued with an unboxed cachet in straight



Fig 8 Larger 'R.M.S.P. COY.' cachets were also produced, such as these examples used on the *Chignecto* and *Lochgail*



Fig 9 New designs, with 'RMSP' and the ship's name at the top and the usual 'POSTED ON THE HIGH SEAS' at the base were introduced later

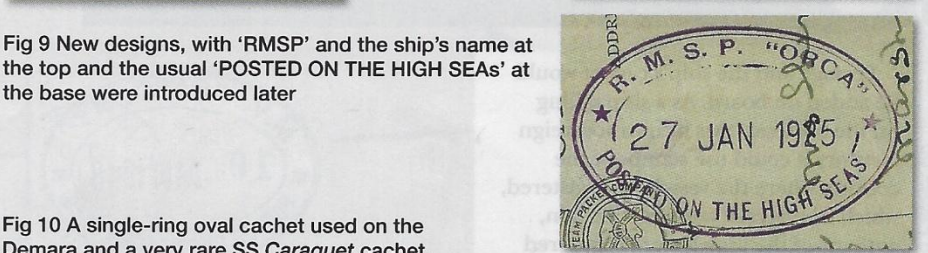


Fig 10 A single-ring oval cachet used on the *Demerara* and a very rare SS *Caraquet* cachet, again with a single ring

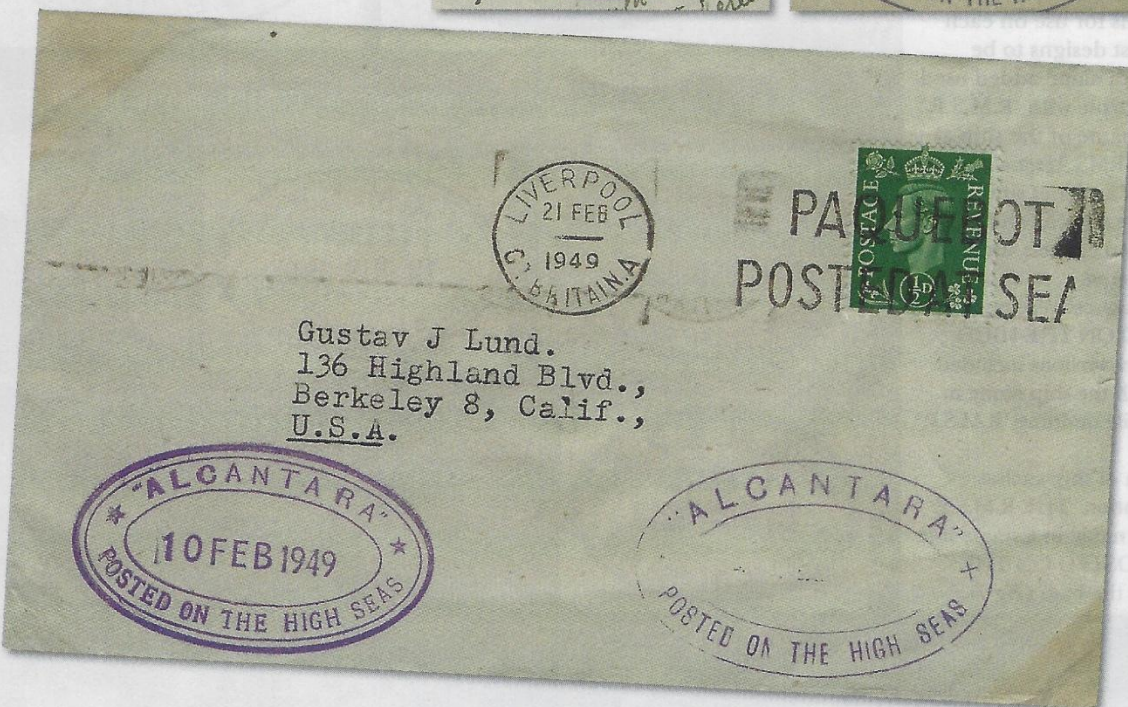
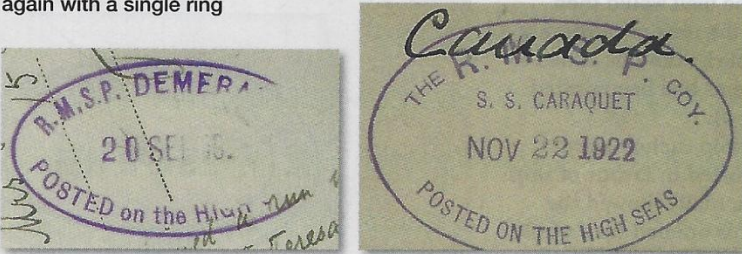


Fig 11 A cover posted at Liverpool on 21 February 1949 with the double-ring and single-ring cachets used by RMS *Alcantara*

lines (Fig 12). These are very rare with the 'POSTED ON THE HIGH SEAS' slogan, and are not to be confused with the boxed registry details used in great quantities after the 1930s.

Now every good story has a twist in the tail and this offering is no exception. It is fair to say that every ship cachet issued to all of the RMSP fleet over a period of some 70-plus years will have either the initials 'R.M.S.P.' for the company, the name of the ship in some form and the date the mail was sorted on board the ship. In my collecting lifetime of some 50 years I have seen maybe around a 1000 items in one shape or another, so it was a bit of a shock when this next item turned up out of the blue.

Found recently on the internet and purchased for a very small sum was a postcard featuring a new type of cachet that has thrown the proverbial spanner in the works. While it does have the usual 'R.M.S.P.' and also the name of the ship, which in this case it is SS *Orotava*, there is no date in the cachet. Instead the words 'SEA POST' are placed in the centre (Fig 13).

Is this the only ship to have such a cancel and, if there are others, then why has it taken so long for this style of cancel to come to light. Of course the big question is why the deviation from the normal cachets issued by the company? It just goes to show

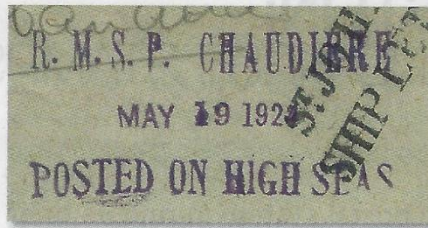


Fig 12 Unboxed straight-line cachets for the *Chaudiere*, *Darro* and *Drina*



Fig 13 The newly discovered RMSP cachet with no date line used on SS *Orotava*

that maritime postal history should never be taken for granted as there is always something new for a collector to find.

Further reading

More information on these post marks can be found in an addenda to the 2010 Paquebot book, which is available by emailing the TPO & Seapost Society at tpo_seapost@hotmail.com. The 2010 4th edition is long out of print but is now available on a DVD disc for £25 plus postage.

