

In the Early Hours of the Morning

The 'AM' Postmark

A Travelling Post Office (TPO) which begins its journey before midnight and finishes after midnight does not alter its datestamp during the journey, consequently mail posted into these trains after midnight was cancelled with the previous day's date. This has curious consequences when new stamps are issued.

New issue stamps were on sale immediately after midnight at the 24 hour post office in Trafalgar Square, London, the only post office in the country open at this time of night. Thus it is quite possible for a collector to purchase new stamps and post them into various TPOs, so as to receive the datestamp of the previous day, hence pre-dating a new issue by one day, or so it would seem!

This in fact was the situation until about 1953 when the post office decided to cease pre-dating under these circumstances by using an additional and quite distinctive datestamp bearing the actual date and the letters 'AM'. These additional datestamps were only issued on the night of a new stamp issue and were intended for use only on the new stamps. The letters 'AM' on these special datestamps were necessary to distinguish them from the normal datestamps used the following evening since both show the same date.



The above cover shows what should have happened and what did happen.

The special 'AM' datestamps were only available on certain TPOs, the rule adopted by the post office would seem to be that any TPO which can be reached, by leaving London at midnight and travelling at about 70 mph, has one, it should however, only be used from the theoretical interception point onwards, not over the whole journey.

Although the above cover bears differently dated cancellations it is an example of exactly what should have happened on a first day of a new stamp issue. The new 4p definitive's are correctly cancelled with the 'AM' datestamp showing 30th January 1980 whilst the existing 2p stamp was cancelled with the normal datestamp for the journey dated 29th January 1980.



The above cover was prepared for posting into the Great Western TPO Up, on the same occasion as the previous cover. On this particular night all TPO activities were being closely watched by a group of visiting Post Office Inspectors. For some totally inexplicable reason these gentlemen were quite happy to allow covers bearing the new stamp to be posted into the Great Western TPO Down but not into the Great Western TPO Up. Later in the day the unused covers were posted into the First Day Cover boxes in Bath and Bristol, the Bath one is displayed here.

Whilst the 4p definitive's are correctly cancelled 'First Day of Issue', the use of the same cancellation on the 2p stamp is incorrect, the 2p definitive was first issued on the 15th February 1971.

Christmas 1979

The 1979 Christmas Booklet contained vertically se-tenant pairs of 10p and 8p stamps, the first time this combination had been used. The Post Office did not operate a first day of issue service either for phosphor changes or new se-tenant arrangements (except for the Wedgewood booklets), so that the 'AM' datestamps were not issued to the TPOs on the night of the 13th/14th November 1979. Covers posted on to the TPOs in the early hours of Wednesday the 14th were therefore dated 13th November 1979 thus pre-dating the new se-tenant pair by one day. The following covers show this predating.



