

INSTRUCTIONAL MARKS OF THE TRAVELLING POST OFFICE & RAILWAY MAIL SERVICE OF INDIA

Christopher J S Bartlett



TPO & Seapost Society
2026

INSTRUCTIONAL MARKS OF THE TRAVELLING POST OFFICE & RAILWAY MAIL SERVICE

The instructional marks which were used by the Travelling Post Office and the Railway Mail Service in order to expedite the sorting of the mails (and to inform the public of the reason for delays in delivery) form an interesting group which preys detailed study. I have described them as 'marks' rather than 'stamps' in order to minimise confusion with 'postage stamps'; note however that the Postal Manual described them as 'stamps'.

A number of related articles have appeared in *India Post* but it is many years since the most recent ones, that of Vispi Dastur in vol. 12 no. 2 of Apr-Jun 1978 and of Col. L.G. Sheno in vol. 21 no.2 of Apr-Jun 1987. Dastur's article was followed by a series by Sheno published in *Ind Dak* in 1989/90 (the latter are available in the India Study Circle (ISC) Archive). Only Sheno's 1987 article included illustrations of actual marks; technology has moved on and the purpose of this paper is to provide updated information covering overcarried and missent items, those posted in the wrong train and those detained by reason of non-payment of a late fee, with illustrations (mainly from scans of actual marks) of the different marks and slips (labels) used, wherever possible in date order.

Missent marks and slips were in general use by the Indian Post Office but in this paper only those are described which were specifically used by the Travelling Post Office (TPO) and the Railway Mail Service (RMS). Posted in wrong train and detained marks were however used exclusively by TPO and RMS offices. However, a few marks have been included owing to their historical significance which were used before the formation of the Travelling Post Office department in March 1873.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to a number of ISC members who have shared scans from their collections and have drawn my attention to facts that I have missed; any remaining errors are my own.

Definitions

Missent articles:- the *missent stamp* is impressed on covers received in a post office to which it should not have come either for delivery or in transit.
(1873 Postal Manual chap. VIII para. 47 no. 11)

Treatment of missent articles:- Articles received missent to the set should be stamped and placed in the return-train sorting hole. A missent slip should be affixed to each article received missent to the set, except missent post-cards, parcel mail articles, articles for foreign countries, or articles which cannot be disposed of by the set owing to the addresses being illegible or incomplete. The missent slip should be affixed on the back of the article, care being taken not to paste the slip over any stamp impressions there may be on the cover. The date stamp of the set should, for the purpose of identification, be impressed on the lower left-hand corner of the missent slip, and the name of the Post Office or RMS Section from which the article was received missent should be

written, with blue pencil, by the head sorter, immediately above the slip. The articles should then be sorted according to the addresses borne by them.

(1887 Railway Mail Service Handbook, 2nd edition para 151)

Missent slips:- are supplied in the stationery box of travelling and stationary sorting sections.

(1887 Railway Mail Service Handbook, 2nd edition paras 88 and 111)

Wrongly posted articles:- Articles which are posted in the letter-box of the van or in portable letter-boxes cleared by a travelling section, and which are intended for places in the opposite direction to that in which the section is proceeding, are termed *wrongly posted articles*.

Wrongly posted articles are impressed on the back with the wrong-train stamp.

Each set (of a travelling sorting section) is supplied with a wrong-train stamp, bearing the words 'Posted in wrong train.'

(1887 Railway Mail Service Handbook, 2nd edition paras 45, 65(b) and 84)

Missent, overcarried, transfer and wrongly posted articles are impressed on the back with the date stamp by both the receiving and the despatching sections.

(1887 Railway Mail Service Handbook, 2nd edition para 65(c))

All articles on which a late-fee should have been, but has not been, prepaid will be stamped 'Detained: late-fee not paid' and will be made over loose to the first mail office passed by the section to be disposed of by a later mail as if posted in that mail office.

(1911 Railway Mail Service Handbook, 6th edition para 69 no. iv)

Overcarried marks

There is no mention of an overcarried mark in the list of stamps and seals supplied to a travelling office in chap. VIII of the 1873 Postal Manual. Nevertheless, two copies of the same overcarried mark have been reported and an example is shown below at actual size. Unless a further example is found it would seem that this usage by the Central Provinces Frontier TPO is unique.

OVER.CARRIED
FRONTIER T.P.O.

Date

C.P. N^o 3

April 1872 – February 1873



Missent marks – Travelling Post Office

The examples shown in this section are at their actual size.

Serpentine boxed format

Missent marks of serpentine (or snake-like) format were in general use in the late 1860s; there are however very few known examples of their use by a travelling post office. The example shown reads MISSENT. TO TRAVELLING. P.O.N.W.P.

September 1867



A further example reads MISSENT.TO.RAIL.SORTING.OFFICE.C.P. but it should be noted that this was a stationary office and not a travelling one.

January 1870



By 1873 the Postal Manual included a rule that ‘the form, size, etc, of the stamps and seals will be uniform throughout the department’ (chap. VIII para. 29), and the MISSENT stamp was depicted as follows:



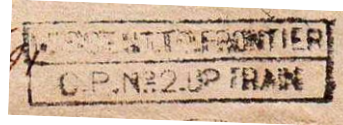
From 1873 the marks used by the Travelling Post Office conformed to this format but included considerable information regarding the travelling office to which the missent item was directed.

I have attempted to show only the main types of these boxed marks; many variations in wording have been reported.

Rectangular boxed format in two compartments MISSENT TO

A rectangle divided horizontally into two equal compartments. A distinguishing feature of these marks is that they include the direction of travel of the train, either DOWN or UP (down from or up to the headquarters office), and differentiate between mail and passenger (slow) trains. The period of use is within the 'no year' period, approximately 1873 to 1883.

MISSENT. TO. FRONTIER/
C.P.N^o 2.UP TRAIN



MISSENT. TO. FRONTIER
BENGAL. N^o 1. UP TRAIN



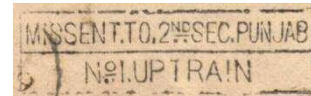
MISSENT TO FIRST SLOW
SEC. N^o 1 DOWN TRAIN



MISSENT. TO.PUNJAB
SLOW SEC N^o 5 UP TRAIN



MISSENT TO 2ND SEC. PUNJAB
N^o 1 UP TRAIN

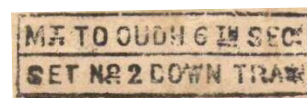


MISSENT TO
F- B. 2



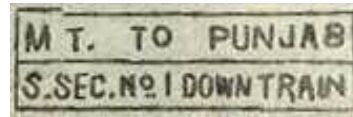
Rectangular boxed format in two compartments M^T TO

M^T TO OUDH 6TH SEC.
SET N^o 2 DOWN TRAIN
December 1876



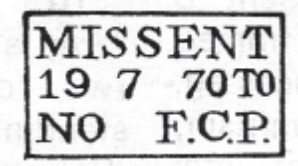
Rectangular boxed format in two compartments, M. T. TO

M.T. TO PUNJAB
S.SEC.N^o1 DOWN TRAIN
late 1870s



Rectangle without compartments, 3 lines, MISSENT TO

MISSENT
19-7-70 TO
NO F.C.P.
July 1870

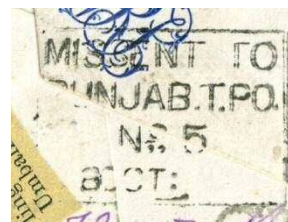


Rectangle without compartments, 4 lines, MISSENT TO

MISSENT TO
LOCAL T.P.O.
Date
N.W.P. N^o 2
1873



MISSENT TO
PUNJAB. T.P.O.
N^o 5
Date?



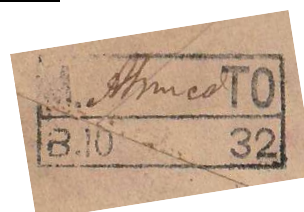
Rectangle without compartments, M.T. TO

M.T. TO DOWN
LOOP N^o 1



Rectangular boxed format in two compartments, M. TO

M. TO
B.10 32
J. 1 2, 1 3, 3 7 and 3 9 also seen



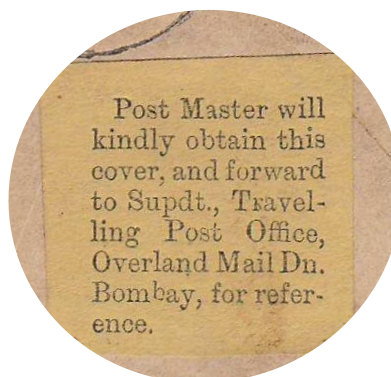
Missent slips – Travelling Post Office & Railway Mail Service

Although named by the Post Office as ‘missent slips’ these items have for many years been familiarly known as ‘yellow labels’ by postal historians. There are many different types of these slips; those shown here were issued by the Travelling Post Office and the Railway Mail Service and used over a period of some 30 years commencing in the mid-1870s whilst the Missent marks (described above) were still in use. Images are shown here at 150% for clarity. Virk (Indian Postal History 1873 – 1923) reported that the use of missent slips was discontinued in the period from 1881 to 1884 and no slips are reported here from this period. Virk also recorded that form numbers were allotted to these slips, DEP-4 in 1884, DEP-3 in 1888 and DEP-4 again in 1892. Although not stated by Virk, it is assumed that these were issued by the Deposit department of the Post Office which was responsible for treatment of returned items. Examples are shown where the form number appears at the top left of the slip. (I have not had access to the Post Office Circulars referred to by Virk which give further details.)

TRAVELLING POST OFFICE

General use – no division, section or set

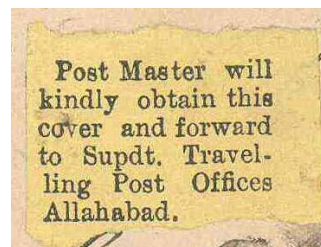
Post Master will
kindly obtain this
cover, and forward
to Supdt., Travel-
ling Post Office,
Overland Mail Dn.
Bombay, for refer-
ence.



Post Master will
kindly obtain this
cover and forward
to Supdt. Travel-
ling Post Offices
Bombay.

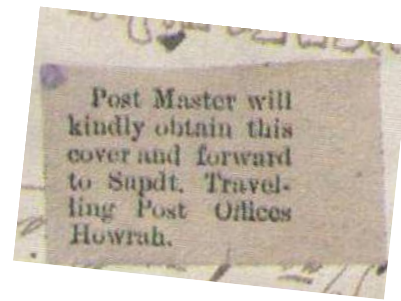


Post Master will
kindly obtain this
cover and forward
to Supdt. Travel-
ling Post Offices
Allahabad.



October 1875 – September 1876

Post Master will kindly obtain this cover and forward to Supdt. Traveling Post Offices Howrah.



Post Master will kindly obtain this cover and forward to Supdt. Traveling Post Offices Lucknow.

December 1875



Post Master will obtain this cover and forward to Supdt., Travelling Post Offices, Lucknow.

The only known example where the word 'kindly' is missing.

December 1876



Post Master will kindly obtain this cover and forward to Supdt, Traveling Post Offices Umballa.

October 1874 – February 1878



Umballa

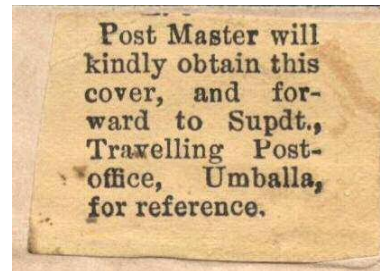
Post Master will kindly obtain this cover and forward to Supdt, Traveling Post Offices Amballa.

Amballa



Post Master will kindly obtain this cover, and forward to Supdt., Travelling Post-Office, Umballa, for reference.

December 1879



Post Master will kindly obtain this cover and forward to Supdt., Travelling Post Offices, Agra.

February 1875



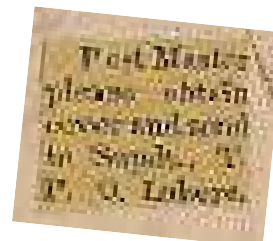
Postmaster will kindly obtain this cover and forward to Supdt., Travelling Post Offices, Madras.

A unique example on violet coloured paper.



Post Master please obtain cover and send to Supdt., T. P. O. Lahore

A unique example with a simple message

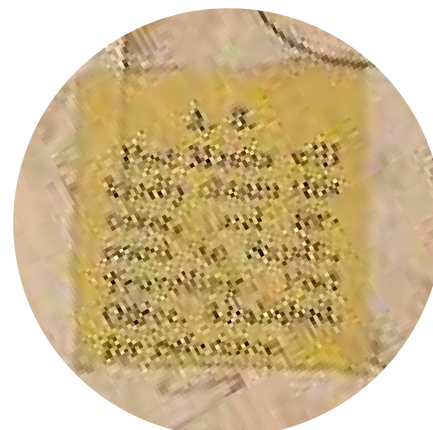


A Division, Allahabad

Division & section

Post Master will kindly obtain this cover, and forward to Supdt., Travelling Post Office, Allahabad, for reference.

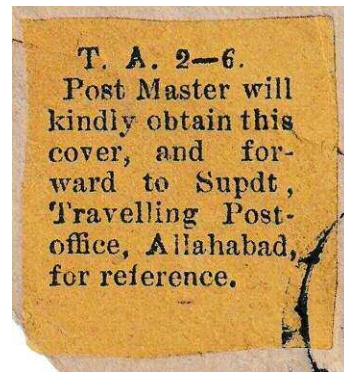
May 1879



Travelling, division, section & set

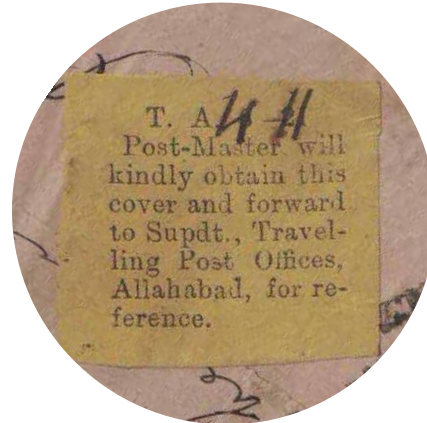
Post Master will kindly obtain this cover, and forward to Supdt., Travelling Post-Office, Allahabad, for reference.

November 1877



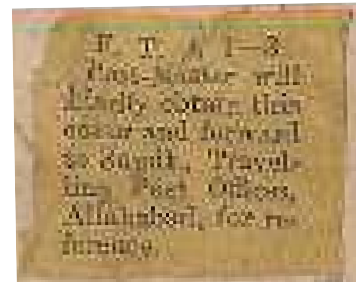
Travelling, division, section & set

Post-Master will kindly obtain this cover and forward to Supdt., Travelling Post Offices, Allahabad, for reference.



Frontier Travelling, division, section & set

Post-Master will kindly obtain this cover and forward to Supdt., Travelling Post Offices, Allahabad, for reference.

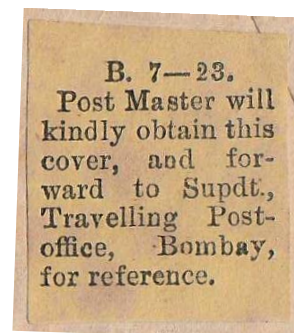


B Division, Bombay

Division, section & set

Post Master will kindly obtain this cover, and forward to Supdt., Travelling Post-office, Bombay, for reference.

March 1878 – March 1880



J Division, Agra

Division, section & set

Post Master will kindly obtain this cover, and forward to Supdt., Travelling Post-offices, Agra.



L Division, Umballa

Division, section & set

Post Master will kindly obtain this cover, and forward to Supdt., Travelling Post office, Umballa, for reference.



M Division, Madras

Division, section & set

Post Master will kindly obtain this cover, and forward to Supdt., Travelling Post office, Madras, for reference.

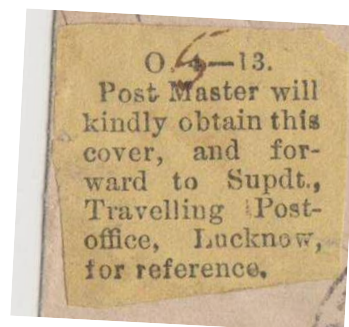


O Division, Lucknow

Division, section & set

Post Master will kindly obtain this cover, and forward to Supdt., Travelling Post-office, Lucknow, for reference.

April 1879 – March 1880



RAILWAY MAIL SERVICE

The Railway Mail Service (RMS) was created on 1st August 1880, with headquarters at Calcutta.

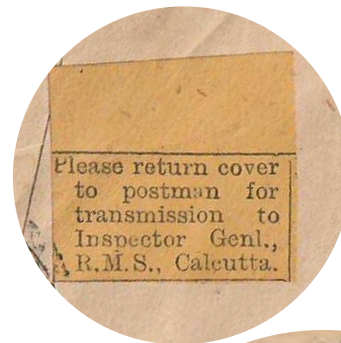
Please return cover to Postman
for transmission to Inspector
General R. M. S., Calcutta.

February 1885 – January 1890

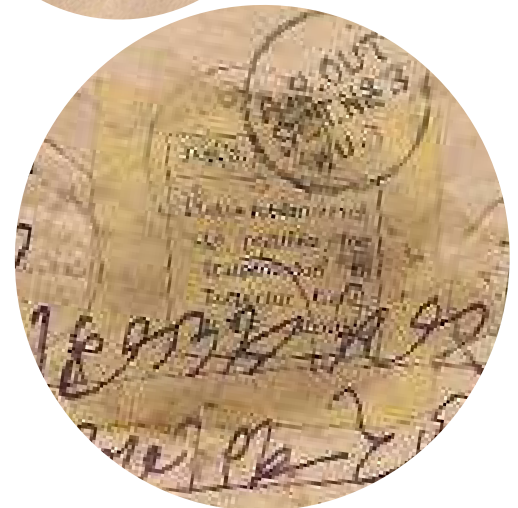


Please return cover
to postman for
transmission to
Inspector Genl ,
R. M. S., Calcutta.

February 1886 – February 1895

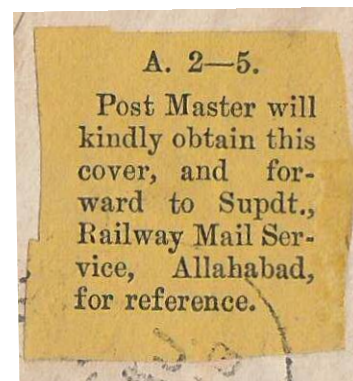


Dep. – 3?
Please return cover
to postman for
transmission to
Inspector Genl.,
R.M.S. Calcutta.



The Railway Mail Service headquarters moved from Calcutta to Allahabad by 1892 at the latest.

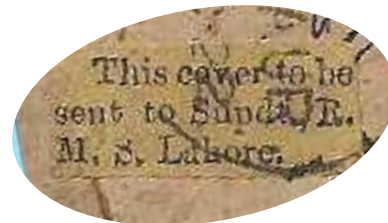
A. 2 – 5
Post Master will
kindly obtain this
cover, and for-
ward to Supdt.,
Railway Mail Ser-
vice, Allahabad,
for reference.



Please return cover
to postman for
transmission to
Inspector Genl.,
R. M. S. in India.
June 1893 - December 1902



This cover to be
sent to Supdt., R.
M. S, Lahore



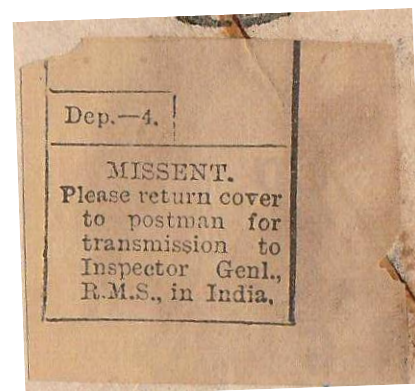
MISSENT.
Please return cover
to postman for
transmission to
Inspector Genl.,
R.M.S. in India.
Large letters, gap between MISSENT and top line
April 1894 – April 1895



MISSENT.
Please return cover
to postman for
transmission to
Inspector Genl.,
R.M.S., in India.
Small letters, no gap between MISSENT and top line
October 1898 - May 1906



Dep. – 4
MISSENT
Please return cover
to postman for
transmission to
Inspector Genl.,
R.M.S., in India.
January 1904 - May 1905



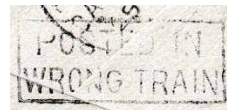
More general types of missent slips which did not make reference to the RMS were used as alternatives by RMS sections and stationary sorting offices from 1890 to 1906, when the use of these labels ceased. They are not listed here.

‘POSTED IN WRONG TRAIN’

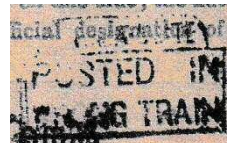
Virk (Indian Postal History 1873 – 1923) included two drawings of the triangular ‘posted in wrong train’ mark. There are two main varieties of the triangular stamp, the smaller of which has the word ‘IN’ parallel to one of the sides, whereas the larger one has the word ‘IN’ across one corner of the triangle; however both of Virk’s drawings refer to the larger stamp. In the second of his drawings Virk says that the mark was in use ‘By 1887’. This is undoubtedly a reference to the 1887 RMS Handbook which he had seen in the Central Post Office Library. Unfortunately no copy of the 1st edition of the RMS Handbook which was issued in July 1882 seems to have survived, thus it is not known when the ‘posted in wrong train’ stamp was introduced; the first recorded use in this survey is July 1886.

There are in fact five versions of the ‘posted in wrong train’ stamp, which for the sake of convenience and known period of use I have labelled types A to E as follows. The known period of use covers some 25 years from 1886 to 1911. The use of the five types is consecutive with some degree of overlap between the different types. The marks are shown here at their actual size.

Type A A rectangle 27 x 10.5 mm. This is a genuine mark with 19 dated copies seen, although fakes have been reported (see below). There is an even distribution of dates, the earliest being July 1886, the latest May 1893.



The postal convention state of Patiala issued a unique series of marks with a ‘hooded’ PATIALA STATE style including a posted in wrong train rectangle. Only two copies of this mark have been seen, used respectively in March and November 1900 i.e considerably later than the standard rectangle.



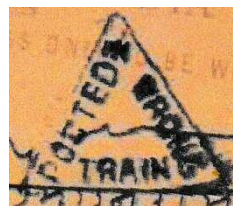
Type B An equilateral triangle, side 19 mm, 'IN' parallel to one side, reading 'IN WRONG'. This is a genuine mark with 16 dated copies seen. There is an even distribution of dates from September 1892 to October 1905, with a single outlier used in May 1909.



Type C An isosceles triangle, base (TRAIN) c.25 mm, other two sides c.27 mm, reading 'POSTED IN', strike in purple ink. Only one example of this mark has been reported, used in November 1892, and it is possible that it is a fake. However it is shown on a travelling post office cover leading one to suggest that it is possibly genuine.



Type D An equilateral triangle, side c.23 to 25 mm, 'IN' across one corner. This is a larger version of Type B; it is a genuine mark with 8 dated copies seen. There is an even distribution of dates from March 1903 to October 1907, with two outliers used in February and August 1911.



Type E An equilateral triangle, side c. 29 mm, 'IN' across one corner. Only one example of this mark has been reported, used in December 1910, but it is on a travelling post office cover and has every appearance of being genuine.



In a series of correction slips pasted into the British Library copy of the 1911 RMS Handbook and dated 1st April 1915 no.473 reads 'Strike out Wrong Train Stamp and all the entries related to it', thereby confirming the withdrawal of this mark.

Collectors should be aware of fakes which were produced some 40 years ago (see for instance the editorial in *India Post* (IP) 95 Jan/Mar 1988). Genuine strikes are found only on items posted in a travelling post office. Examples of these fakes are shown below. In the first case not only is the rectangular mark on a cover posted from a normal (stationary) post office, but the mark has been badly executed (note the sloping bottom line and the small 'W') and with a date of 1910 it does not match the known period of use of the rectangular mark. In the second case two examples of this mark have been recorded (one in IP 112 possibly dated 1912, Q8/92, never answered, the second dated 1905). It is an isosceles triangle which, in addition to the 'posted in wrong train' lettering, contains two further letters which may be R4 or possibly BA, the significance of which is unknown. The first cover has a Burmese travelling post office mark, but shows no evidence of having been re-directed; the second cover appears to be from Delhi RMS but again shows no evidence of having been re-directed. No other mark is known with additional lettering. The final mark is on a Burmese cover dated July 1936 but it is not thought to be a genuine mark; it is on a TPO cover but there is no evidence of re-direction.



DETAINED: LATE FEE NOT PAID

The Post Office Annual Report 1886-87 dated 31.12.1887 contains the following paragraph: para. 14 By the imposition of a late letter fee the abuse of posting letters in wholesale quantities in the vans provided for sorting operations has been checked, while offices maintained by this Department at railway stations for Railway Mail Service work have, to a large extent, been relieved of money order, registration and other duties which properly belong to the local Post Office.

Virk (Indian Postal History 1873 – 1923) confirms the above by stating that from 1887 a late fee was charged of ½ anna per article posted in a post office or train letter box.

Thus a specific late letter fee was introduced at some time previous to December 1887 at letter boxes operated by the Railway Mail Service on railway stations. The 1887 Railway Mail Service Handbook reads as follows:

para.193. Clearing of late letter-box. – At stations where a late-letter fee is ordered to be imposed, there should, in addition to the ordinary letter-box, be kept a separate letter-box, specially distinguished, for late-letters only. The ordinary letter-box should be withdrawn, and the late letter-box placed on the Railway platform at the proper hours, *i.e.*, at 5 P.M. for despatches to be made by trains leaving between 6 P.M. and 6 A.M., and one hour before the starting of each train for all other despatches. The articles taken out of the late letter-box should be carefully examined; those bearing the late-fee should be forwarded to destination in the usual course; all others should be detained until the next despatch, and the remark ‘Posted at Railway Station without late-fee’ written on them.

No stamp or seal referring to the late-fee is listed in the 1887 Handbook and it is apparent that none had been introduced at the time of writing (no date of production is given in Philip Sheridan’s Preface to the Handbook).

Kaye (IP no. 89 Jul-Sep 1986) quotes from the January 1895 Postal Guide as the first mention regarding posting of late letters on travelling post offices as follows:

‘Letter boxes for articles (letters, postcards and small packets) bearing an extra ½ anna stamp are affixed to all trains to which travelling post offices or sorting carriages are attached...

When there is no post office or letter-box at a railway station, articles may be posted in the train letter-box without a fee between 6am and 6pm. Any special conditions as to posting in the train boxes at certain stations are marked upon them. Articles posted without the extra fee are liable for detention.’ Note that Kaye’s date of 1895 is not consistent with the statement by Virk quoted above.

In his 1987 IP article Shenoi identified 5 marks, of which I shall call the genuine marks types A, B and C. He gave details of the frame size in each case but as these are rubber stamps and subject to distortion, and were undoubtedly produced in considerable numbers, I do not feel that small variations in size are significant.

The types are as follows and are shown at actual size:

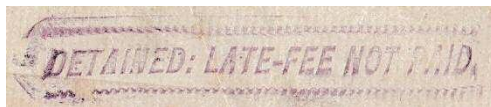
Type A Described by Shenoi as a bisected rectangle, approximate dimensions 54 x 13 mm. Period of use October 1887 to December 1903. I refer to it as 'boxed, two-line'.



Type B Described by Shenoi as a bisected rectangle with ornamental frame, approximate dimensions 56 x 11 mm. Period of use October 1891 to September 1903. Unlike the other marks it reads DETAINED: LATE LETTER FEE NOT PAID. I refer to it as 'boxed, two-line with ornamental frame'. I would welcome a better copy of this mark.



Type C Described by Shenoi as single line format, approximate dimensions (length of frame lines x distance between frame lines) 59 x 7 mm (mean of values given by Shenoi). Period of use May 1895 to March 1917.



Regrettably, there are a number of marks which purport to be genuine but are undoubted fakes, and are often added to covers emanating from non-RMS offices. The first of these has the correct wording but is of a size and font which is not consistent with type A.



The second is similar to the genuine type C but the capital letters are in an upright form. Shenoi gives no further details. Another fake applied mostly on covers from non-RMS offices.



The fact that the (genuine) marks were issued as rubber stamps suggests to me that they were issued on a 'temporary' basis. That they were in use for some 30 years suggests otherwise, but I am unable to put forward a theory as to why they were not quickly replaced by something more permanent.

Most of the known copies of these marks were used at stationary offices, however in his detailed listings Shenoi gives half a dozen examples of type C used on board travelling offices in the period from February 1897 to October 1901. A careful reading of the statements quoted above suggests that from 1887 letters posted into the late letter-box on a railway station platform would be examined and divided into those on which the late fee had been paid and those which had not, thus any notice of detention would only occur on covers dealt with by stationary RMS offices. By 1895 the facility for the posting of late letters had been extended to a letter-box affixed to trains, such that covers should be found with notice of detention applied by a travelling post office. This change is confirmed by the inclusion in the list of stamps and seals to be used in the 1911 Railway Mail Service Handbook of the following item:

No.13 Detained: late-fee not paid stamp. Supplied to sorting sections and to mail offices at which a late letter fee is imposed.

The latest date of use recorded by Shenoi for these rectangular stamps is March 1917, and it would seem that after this date they were replaced by something more permanent, namely the double oval or ellipse shown below.



The first date of use of this mark that I have is December 1920. It had a remarkably long life in general use, being still in use as late as 1961.

