

THE LIVERPOOL PACKET CANCELLATIONS

By Mike Dovey

In the 1800s, the arrival of mail at Liverpool from ships from all over the world presented a huge problem for the local post office. Mike Dovey provides a guide to the different cancellations produced to meet demand and offers an explanation for the mysterious Reversed 'S' variety.

During the 1800s, Liverpool was to become the busiest port in the country, if not the world, with ships arriving from far and wide. Not only did each ship deluge the port with a variety of goods, both coming into and out of the country, but many of the ships carried mail under various contracts drawn up between the Post Office and the ship owners; the most famous being the 1840 contract between Samuel Cunard and the Post Office for the conveyance of mail to Canada and the USA.

From the middle-to-late 1700s, the main post office in Liverpool used a variety of ship letter marks for well over 100 years to show mail coming into the country. These are all well written up by Alan Robertson in his book and followed on with the *Robertson Revisited* edition by Colin Tabear (Robertson indicated all ship letters with a prefix 'S', while all packet letters were prefixed with a 'P'). For most of the time, as each ship docked, the mail would be sorted and ship letter marks added with no real problem, as the quantity of mail could be contained and dealt with, especially with the introduction of the Packet Letter cancellations in 1840, which were used to deal with the Cunard contract to North America. However, times were changing and there were problems looming on the horizon.

A growing problem

As the British Empire grew in size and stature, so did the size of the ships that transported goods and passengers. Additionally, the more people that populated each country, the amount of mail grew so that while a ship in the 1800s could deliver a couple of mail bags, by the 1840s the number of bags were in double and even treble figures and rising with each voyage. To make life even worse, with ships becoming safer, they began to grow in size, from say a thousand tons to two, three and four times bigger in the space of a dozen



Fig 1 The normal and correct usage of the S19 paid Ship Letter cancellation first used in 1855 and continued in usage until 1876. This envelope is dated 22 August 1857, the day when the SS *Great Britain*, at the time the biggest ship in the world, docked in Liverpool and discharged so much mail it overran the post office

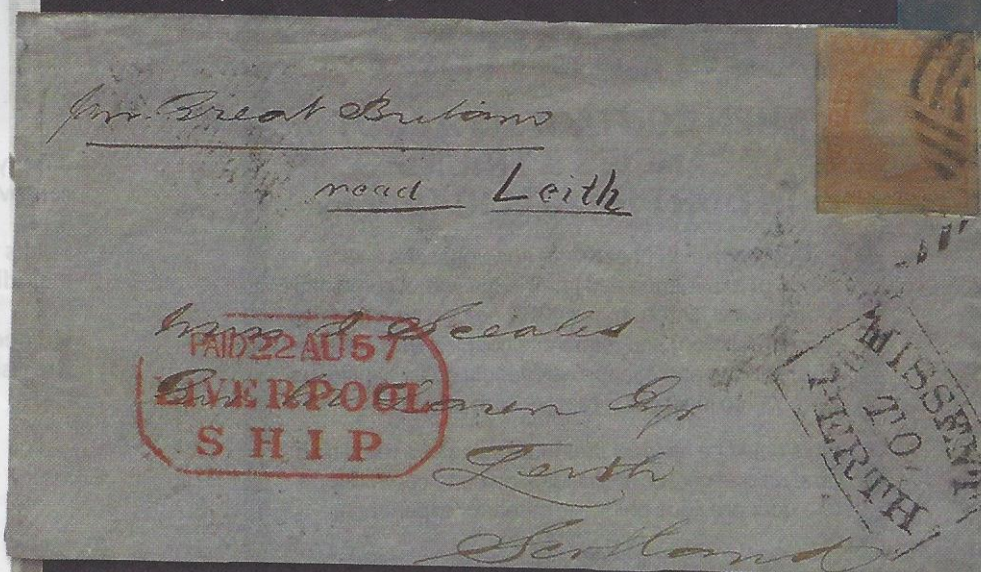


Fig 2 To help deal with the huge amount of mail from the SS *Great Britain*, the S16 Ship Letter cancel was pressed into service for the day with 'PAID' inserted and used in red instead of the usual black (S17). This particularly fine cover was even missent to Perth, when it should have gone to Leith (Edinburgh)

years. This meant even more passengers and more immigration into the countries, not only to the Empire but also all of the countries that Great Britain had trading links, meaning even more mail was being posted.

All this came to a head on 22 August 1857 when the SS *Great Britain*, at the time the biggest ship in the world, built by the famous Isambard Kingdom Brunel (later beaten in size by another Brunel vessel – the SS *Great Eastern*), docked in Liverpool after a voyage from Australia (Fig 1). It discharged so much mail in one go it overran the post office so badly the staff had to find every possible datestamp to handle the mail, resulting in the creation of the S17 'PAID 22 AU 57 LIVERPOOL SHIP' cancellation, which was only used for one day (Fig 2).

The SS *Great Britain* had left Melbourne with what was already a huge amount of mail, made even worse as all of the mail bound for the P&O vessel SS *Simla*, which would have sailed up to Galle where it would have offloaded passengers, mail and cargo bound for Great Britain, was for some reason loaded onto the *Great Britain*. On arrival at Liverpool and once all of this gigantic volume of mail had been dealt with, the post office decided that something had to be done and this episode could not be repeated in the future.

As the use of packet datestamps in conjunction with the Cunard contract had been a great success, it was decided to have proofed for use new packet letter cancels for use alongside the current ship letter cancels. They were proofed in 1858 and four new datestamps were introduced into the system, namely two with a BR (British) packet and two with a U.S. (American) packet (Fig 3). These were followed a year later in 1859 by new cancels for a COL (Colonial) packet and a DE packet (Fig 4). The COL packet mark was used for mail from India and the surrounding countries of the Empire and African countries as the ships rounded the Cape of Good Hope. The DE cancel is now believed to be a mistake caused when 'DE' for December was inserted into the die instead in error. It is only known used for one day – a situation explained later in this article.

First usage

These new cancellations were first used in 1858 and it is noticeable that P11, P16 and P19 are all basically the same, allowing for the drawings maybe being slightly misdrawn, while P13, P17 and P21 are again all the same with different dies placed in use (Fig 5 and Fig 6). It can also be noticed that P23 is one of the first trio probably P16 or P19.

All of the cancellations shown were proofed in London in 1858, with the exception of the DE datestamp, which adds some form of proof that the use of the DE was in fact a mistake because there is no record of any inclusion in the proof book. There is no doubt that each one of the datestamps shown were ordered in bulk of some form, so that the post office could deal with the intake of mail as each ship arrived. It is probable that there could have been upwards of ten or 20 in use at any one time. Also, it is highly probable that by 1870 the volume of mail had grown so much that more datestamps were needed and a new set was ordered and proofed in that year (Fig 7).



Fig 3 The four datestamps introduced in 1858: P11 (1858–1903); P13 (1858–1903); P16 (1858–88); and P17 (1858–1902)



Fig 4 In 1859, new cancels for COL and DE appeared: P19 (1859–1903); P20 (1859–1903); P21 (1859–1903); and P23 (one use in 1859)

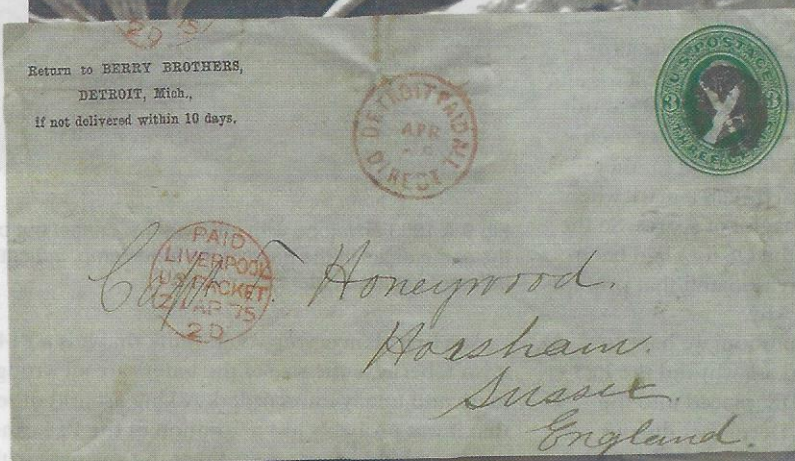


Fig 5 Example of P13, the U.S. packet, dated 2 April 1875 (Reduced)

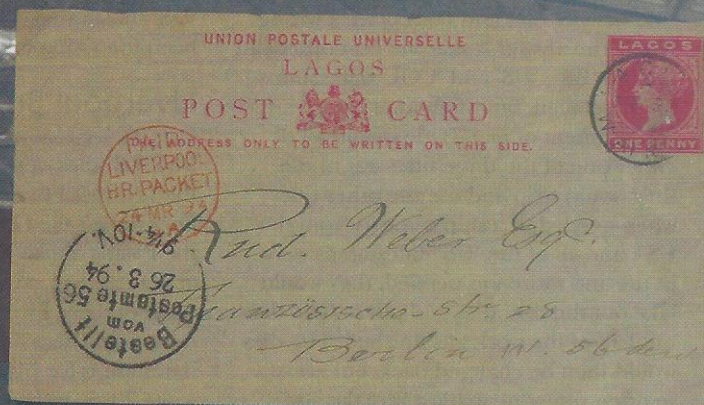


Fig 6 Example of P17, the BR Packet, dated 24 March 1894 (Reduced)



Fig 7 A new set of datestamps was produced in 1870 to meet demand: P12 (1870–1903); P14 (1870–1903); P18 (1870–1903); P18a (1886–1904); and P22 (1876–1904)

There is no doubt that all of these five datestamps were proofed for use in the 1870s as they are all so similar, with the P18a mark probably used prior to 1886. These datestamps, together with the issues of 1858, all helped to keep up with the ever increasing amount of mail arriving into the port and then the post office.

Reversed 'S' datestamp

For many years, there was a notion that the post office had ordered some of the datestamps with an inverted 'S' because there were examples of certain datestamps where the 'S' had been reversed. However, it must be said that the Victorians were a very precise and disciplined lot, and I am sure that they would never allow such a mistake to happen, especially as the same error occurs a number of times. I know of three items with a reversed 'S' dated 1895, 1898 and 1901 and am sure that this timespan can be expanded easily once collectors delve into their collections (Fig 8).

It is this point that begs the question as to why a datestamp would have a cancellation with a reversed 'S'? It cannot be that the Victorians would order such a mistake, and even if they did so, they would never have used such a mark when they already had a bagful of spares. So the only answer is that the US dies had been removed for some reason and that prompts another question – why?

To answer that question, we have to go back to 1859 and ask why did the P23 datestamp have a 'DE' placed into the cancel. If it was the December die put into the cancel, what reason could there be to open the cancel, remove either the 'BR' or 'US' dies and then place a wrong 'DE'? The answer is that the post office did use the 'BR', 'US' and 'COL' datestamps to cancel mail, but when a very large consignment of mail came in and all of either one of the three titles was in use, they would strip and use the other titles when needed. If a ship came in from the USA and all of the 'US' datestamps were in use and more was needed, they would take out the 'BR' dies and put in 'US' dies until all of the work was finished. The dies would then be changed back, but every so often someone made a mistake and reversed the 'S'. This would also be the same when a ship came in from, maybe, Africa and then the US datestamps would be commandeered and changed to 'BR' until reverting back again.

This explains why there are datestamps with a reversed 'S' over a period of time and it kills the theory that the Post Office ordered dies with a reversed 'S'. Many will ask what proof is there of all this conjecture; the proof is all contained in an envelope that came to light near to the end of 2020 (Fig 9).



Fig 8 A P12 Liverpool US packet with reversed 'S' datestamp (Reduced)



Fig 9 A 1903 envelope with a US packet cancel but certainly not P13 or P14. Note the same digits in the base of the datestamp, indicating it is the P22 COL cancel with different inserted letters (Reduced)

At a first glance, you would think that it is a P14 US PACKET cancel, but on inspection, it isn't, because the size of the letters are all wrong. The next thought is that it is a new mark and totally unrecorded. Asking around other collectors, the general consensus was that it was probably just a variation of the P14 cancel and was no big deal. However, after delving a bit deeper, we find that the answer was there all along. This 'new' US PACKET mark is in fact the P22 COL PACKET datestamp, but with the 'COL' removed and the 'US' substituted. This is proof that all three of the titles were interchangeable and had been for a long time.

Liverpool Brazil and and Plate Steam datestamps

Four P24–P25a cancels were introduced in 1872, for use on two specific voyages (Fig 10). The 'LB' dies were for a mail contract from Liverpool to Buenos Aires on ships carried by the Liverpool Brazil (hence the initials 'LB') and River Plate Steam Navigation Company, later to be called Lamport & Holt Line, while the 'PS' dies were for a mail contract with the Pacific Steam Navigation Company (Fig 11 and Fig 12). All four of these datestamps are either very rare or extremely rare.

All of these Liverpool Packet cancellations were in use from 1858 and 1870 until 1903 (although there are items for certain marks dated 1904). While the idea of creating datestamps for BR, US and COL were a good idea in the first place, it is fairly certain that some 20–30 years later, it became a bit of a free for all, with all of the datestamps being used in great bulk as each ship docked with an absurd amount of mail with which the post office could barely cope. It goes without saying that even the LB and PS dies, not known used after 1878, were replaced at some point to be used for BR and US dates.

By 1903, it is fair to say that all of the datestamps were interchangeable, which could well account for the large number of variations being recorded over the years (Fig 13). It could well be that by 1903 every datestamp ever proofed from 1870 onwards was indeed fair game to be used with the onslaught of mail. As a result, no-one knew which die originated in which datestamp, meaning that a 'BR' or 'US' die was used as and when in any and every datestamp available, born out by the use of the US die in the 'COL' datestamp. It must have been that at some point at the very end of 1903 someone of merit in the post office in Liverpool must have gone to the Liverpool Head Postmaster and stated that the use of these cancels was a losing battle and maybe it was time to stop annotating mail in such a way, which came to pass.

There is a P14 cancel with an inverted 'S' in a collection dated 30 November 1895. On this day, the Cunard liner *Campania* and the White Star liner *Adriatic* both arrived into Liverpool from the USA within three hours of each other. Both vessels would have large amounts of mail to be dealt with, hence the need to alter a BR die to a US die which led to the 'S' being inserted the wrong way round. The erroneous datestamp was used for one day only to deal with the excess work load. It should also be noted that all mail actually posted on board the two ships in the ship mailbox would be treated with a paquebot postmark, which had only been introduced the year before.

End of the Liverpool Packet cancel

The demise of the Liverpool Packet cancels was swift and immediate as there are hundreds of examples in 1903 and very little in 1904 – I know of only two dates, four items, in January 1904, the latest shown in this article (Fig 14). The introduction of the omnibus paquebot postmark in January 1894 for mail posted on the high seas, introduced another totally separate chapter in the history of maritime postmarks in the port of Liverpool. By 1904, with the demise of the Packet cancel, the workers in the post office would have had little time to catch their breath as the volume of mail from transatlantic vessels poured out of the ship's mailboxes applicable for a paquebot postmark, replacing some of the volume of work lost to the Packet Letter mail.

I am deeply indebted to Colin Tabart for permission to use images from the Robertson/Robertson Revisited books.

The 2010 4th edition of the Paquebot book is long out of print, but it is now available on a DVD disc for £25 plus postage. If you are interested, please email the TPO & Seapost Society at tpo_seapost@hotmail.com for details. There is now also a 2020 Addenda to the 2010 paquebot book again available by applying to the above email address.

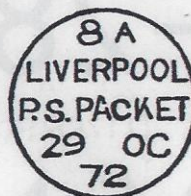


Fig 10 New datestamps introduced in 1872: P24 (1872–74); P24a (1872–74); P25 (1872–78); and P25a (1872–76)

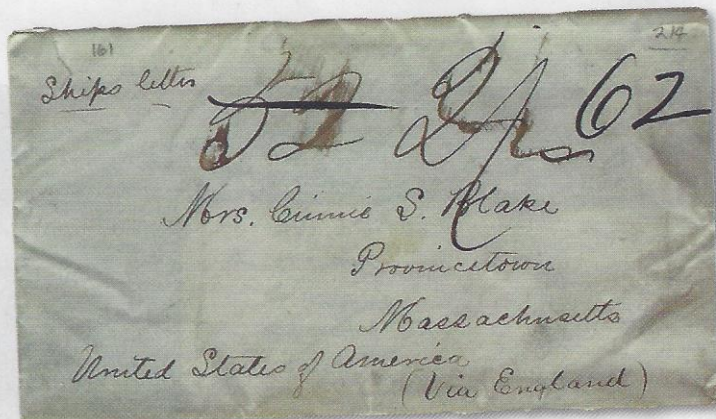


Fig 11 Origin of posting unknown, but this cover was carried on SS *Cordillera*, which arrived at Liverpool on 30 March 1872, before being carried on the Cunard vessel SS *China* to the USA. It has been postmarked on the reverse with a P25 LIVERPOOL PS PACKET mark – one of the earliest known dates (Reduced)



Fig 12 Posted from Montevideo to Ireland and carried on the SS *Leibnitz*, which has a 35-day passage. Cancelled with an extremely rare LIVERPOOL LB PACKET cancel on the reverse (Reduced)



Fig 13 A P18a cancel with inverted digits in the code at the base dated 26 December 1901 (Reduced)



Fig 14 This P22 LIVERPOOL COL packet is dated 24 January 1904. This postcard was posted from India to Liverpool and is extremely rare (maybe the only known item) because most post from India would receive a Bombay-Aden Sea Post Office cancel. It is not known why this card was treated in a different way (Reduced)