

# The London and Holyhead TPO

By Clive Jones

Clive Jones, TPO & Seapost Society Committee member, unravels the complex story of mail sent to Ireland via steam packet from Holyhead to Kingstown and the day and night railway post office that connected with the service.

In 1860 plans were made for a speedier and more efficient mail service between London and Dublin. This involved the establishment of both a day and night Railway Post Office (RPO) operating between London to Holyhead, and also a Holyhead and Kingstown Packet ship on sorting duty between the mainland and Ireland. These coordinated improvements were established officially on 1 October 1860.

## Early days

At the start of the service, only missent handstamps were issued for both the day and the night mails. No direction of travel was indicated by these instructional marks. An example is shown in *Fig 1* on a letter sent from Northwich, Cheshire, on 5 February 1863. Due to a missort, it has been collected by trackside apparatus at Crewe (no stop at this time), probably by the 'Down' night mail, which left London Euston at 8.25p.m. Addressed to Birmingham, the handstamp was applied to explain any delay resulting from the incorrect routing.

Working with only basic oil lamps for illumination, it is not surprising that letters were sometimes missorted. I have another example from 1864 where the sorter had misread 'Durham' for 'Dublin' due to the basic handwriting of the era.

The designation 'RPO', (Railway Post Office) was officially changed to 'TPO' (Travelling Post Office) in 1867, but the next handstamps of interest still used 'RPO' even though the stamps were not issued until July 1871. These were a pair of handstamps which were used at the Inland Office for use on mail received too late for a direct bag. The night mail had a mark reading 'I/RPO/E', always struck in black ink, whereas the day mail used a stamp, as shown in *Fig 2*, reading 'I/RPO/M', always struck in red ink. Here the 'M' means 'morning', i.e. the day mail, and the 'E' stands for 'evening', i.e. the night mail.

The letter shown in *Fig 2* for Dublin left Yorktown, near Adelaide, South Australia, on 20 April 1882, arriving in England at the end of May. The letter was further sorted on the Holyhead and Kingstown Packet on 29 May, while en route to Dublin. This cover is also interesting to



Fig 1 Missent 1863 cover from Northwich, Cheshire, to Birmingham bearing 'LON. & HOLYHEAD R.P.O IRISH MAIL NIGHT' handstamp



Fig 2 Cover sent from Australia to Dublin in 1882 bearing 'I/RPO/M' in red ink signifying it had been sent in the day mail (Reduced)

collectors of Australian Postal History, as the Holyhead and Kingstown packet mark of 29 May on the reverse of the cover (not shown) proves that the mail went by the Orient Line route via Naples and thus shows the applicable postage rate of 6d. by this route from South Australia. (Further details of this transitional period are available from Colin Tabbeart's excellent ANZUK books.)

The first dated handstamps were issued in February 1870. However, these again did not show the direction of travel. It was not until March 1881 that a trio of handstamps were each issued for the 'Night Down', 'Day Down', 'Night Up' and 'Day Up' duties. These marks could be used to cancel adhesives on 'Late Fee' mail posted into the sorting carriages or as an indicator for missorted mail.

From 1 November 1882, mail boxes were affixed to the outside of all mail trains for the receipt of 'Late' letters. Early usages of TPO postmarks are very scarce on the London and Holyhead route, and a reason is given in the 'TPO Rules and Regulations' for 1897, which states: 'When two or more T.P.O. carriages run in a train only one Late Fee Box will be used. One box is therefore to serve down to Crewe for the combined N.W.T.P.O. [North Western] Day Mail and L. & H. [London and Holyhead] T.P.O. Day Mail leaving Euston at 7.15am and that box will be the one belonging to the N.W.T.P.O.'



Fig 3 Late cover bound for USA, sent via Queenstown, Ireland, bearing the 'LONDON & HOLYHEAD T.P.O. NIGHT DOWN' datestamp

In simpler words, the London and Holyhead TPO could not receive 'Late Fee' mail until it became a separate TPO at Crewe, and then it would have only stopped at Chester on its journey to Holyhead. Although the 'Late Fee' charge had been reduced to ½d. in March 1880 for inland mail, special fees applied for transatlantic mail. At London Euston Station, a 'Late Fee' of 2d. was in force in the 1880s for such mail, and in the provinces a 6d. rate was in use. An example is shown in Fig 3 on a small envelope sent to the United States on Saturday 21 July 1883. This item probably joined the London & Holyhead TPO Night Down at Chester, joining the liner that had already sailed from Liverpool at Queenstown in Ireland, as per the 'Via Queenstown' instruction on the envelope.

### USA and Canadian mail

As can be seen from the above example, it was not only Irish mail carried on the London and Holyhead TPO, as mail for the United States and Canada was also important, but the sailings from Liverpool were not always convenient for the existing arrangements. The Postmaster General was told by the Cunard Company in late 1894 that it proposed to discontinue the call at Queenstown unless mail was brought there in time for an earlier departure on Sunday mornings. The Post Office achieved this by arranging for a sorting carriage to go by the 4.10p.m. train from London Euston to Holyhead on Saturdays. A similar service was also introduced on Wednesdays to connect with the White Star liners who were also at Queenstown.

A pair of datestamps was issued in time for the commencement of the service on 6 April 1895. Early examples of datestamps used on their own are very scarce, as a pair of 'killer' obliterated was issued on 12 November 1895, with numeral 'K48', superseding the datestamp for cancelling adhesives. The cover in Fig 4, sent to Halifax, Nova Scotia (via New York),

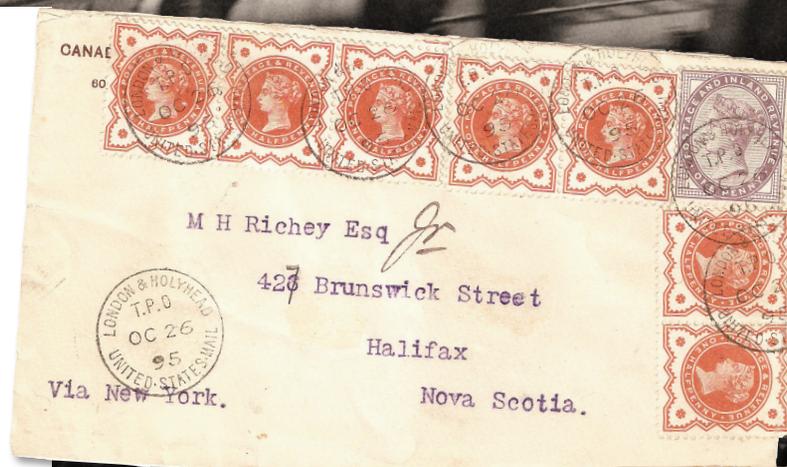


Fig 4 Cover sent to Halifax, Nova Scotia (via New York) bearing seven strikes of the 'LONDON & HOLYHEAD T.P.O. UNITED STATES MAIL' datestamp (Reduced)



Fig 5 Cover addressed to New York posted on 23 January 1897 with the 'K48' 'killer' obliterator cancelling the adhesives and the 'LONDON & HOLYHEAD T.P.O. UNITED STATES MAIL' datestamp at centre bottom (Reduced)

on Saturday 26 October 1895, has paid a 'Late Fee' of 2d. on top of the 2½d. single (up to ½oz) letter rate. The cover has seven crisp strikes of the new datestamp issued for this specific duty.

An example from 15 months later, Fig 5, shows the 'killer' obliterator 'K48' now cancelling the adhesives. This was the usual practice until about 1902, after which time



Fig 6 Postcard bound for St John's, Newfoundland, with the rare (and puzzling) 'LONDON SUPPLEMENTARY CANADIAN.MAIL' datestamp

the datestamp was again used on its own. This later example, sent from Fisher, King & Co, leather factors of Bermondsey in London, was posted on Saturday 23 January 1897 and addressed to New York where it arrived on 31 January. The 'perfinned' stamps of the sending company were used to the value of 9½d., making up treble the foreign rate and 2d. for the special 'Late Fee'.

In addition to the United States Mail, special arrangements were also made for the Canadian Mail. On 1 September 1895, the Canadian duty was transferred from Liverpool to London, and a special sorting carriage was attached on Thursday evenings to the London to Holyhead TPO 'Night Down', which left Euston at 8.45p.m. A pair of postmarks was issued for the Supplementary Canadian Mail in May 1895. The card shown in Fig 6 is the earlier of two known examples. The other copy (from the H S Wilson collection) was dated Thursday 26 February 1903 and was addressed to the Fiji Islands, via Vancouver.

The card illustrated in Fig 6 was postmarked in Bolton, Lancashire, at 8.15p.m., on Thursday 6 November 1902. By this time, the transatlantic liner would have already sailed from Liverpool. The posting was early enough to catch the London and Holyhead TPO 'Night Down' at Chester, thus a connection with the departed ship could be made at Queenstown. The item arrived in St John's, Newfoundland, on 17 November. The exact reason for applying this rarely used transit mark is unclear. It is possible that it was applied at Chester awaiting the TPO. The other example was sent from Rhyl, but unless more examples come to light to enable further study, this mark will remain an enigma.

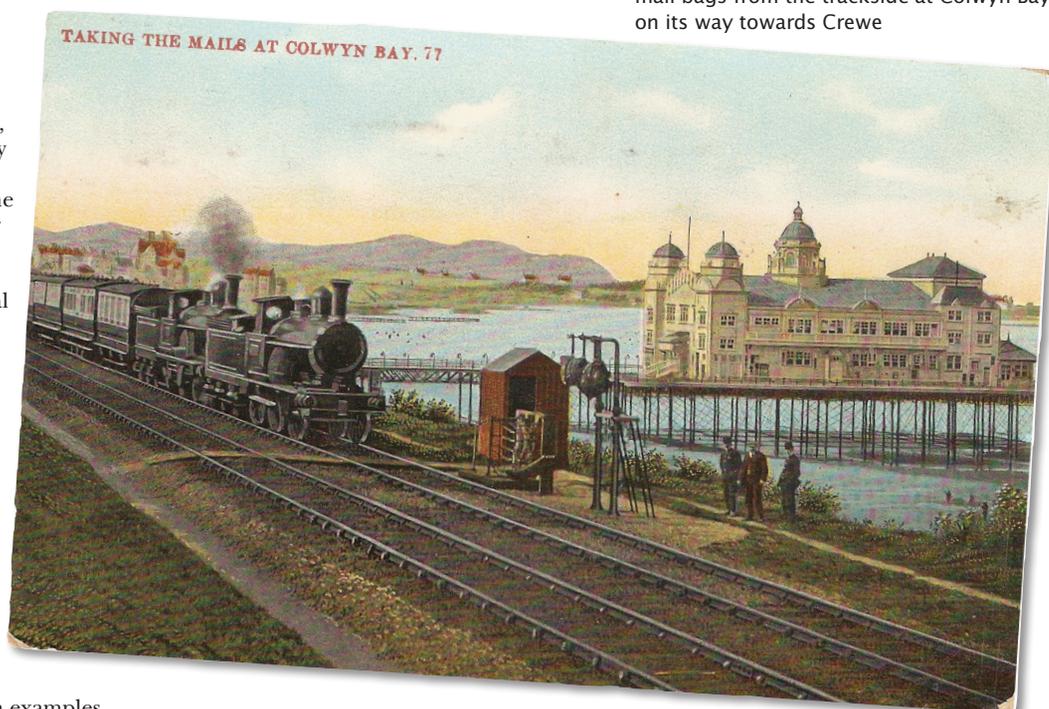


Fig 7 A picture postcard showing the day mail service from Holyhead about to collect mail bags from the trackside at Colwyn Bay on its way towards Crewe

The Canadian Supplementary Service does not appear in the March 1907 roster, so it probably ceased between 1903 and 1907 – most likely at the start of this period. The special sorting duties for United States mail were stopped in February and November 1914 respectively, when both Cunard and White Star liners ceased to call at Queenstown.

### Continuation of service to Ireland

The ordinary night mail and day mail duties continued to serve the Irish mails. The latter must have been a familiar sight to holidaymakers along the North Wales coast, judging from a popular postcard available in Edwardian times (Fig 7). This view of the day mail, which would have left Holyhead at 11.30a.m., shows three mail bags about to be picked up from the exchange apparatus at Colwyn Bay.

Many different postmarks were in use on the London and Holyhead TPO throughout its history, and perhaps, it holds the record for the longest use of a handstamp. One of the 'Day Down' marks issued in March 1881 was still in use nearly 50 years later! Previously recorded used up to 1912, the cover in Fig 8 shows a very late usage from July 1930. It can be speculated that the sorter in London has failed to notice or understand the word 'Ecosse' in the corner of this letter from Corsica and considered the address of 'St Patrick's Street, Portpatrick' to be sufficiently Irish sounding to be sent to the 'Irish Mail'! Of course, this should have been routed with the Scottish mails.

## End of the service

This interesting aspect of postal history came to an end at the onset of World War II; the day mail ceasing on 30 September 1939 and the night mail finishing with the last up mail service of 1 September 1940. By then, a Society had been formed in January 1938 to study specifically the history, workings and postmarks of TPOs across the world. This was subsequently expanded to cover maritime travelling post offices.

Details of the TPO & Seapost Society may be obtained from the Society's website ([www.tpo-seapost.org.uk](http://www.tpo-seapost.org.uk)) or by emailing [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 (telephone 01285 713 075).

### References

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John Parmenter (2002), *London Late Fee and Too Late Mail 1840 to 1930*, London Postal History Group.

Keith Morris and Mike Dovey (2016), *The Travelling Post Office Cancellations of Great Britain and Ireland*, TPO & Seapost Society.



Fig 8 1930 cover from Corsica to Scotland (Ecosse) that was sent to Ireland in error and showing a late use of the 'LONDON & HOLYHEAD.T.P.O. DAY.DOWN' handstamp