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THE MAILS TO SOUTH AFRICA: PART 1 THE BEGINNING AND THE CONTRACTS

By Mike Dovey

In the first of a two-part article, Mike Dovey of the TPO & Seapost Society examined the unique postmarks, postage rates and mail routes used to send mail between South Africa and Britain from 1850 to the end of the 19th century.

Prior to 1850 all mails to and from the Cape Colony in South Africa and Great Britain were posted in the hope that the ship would arrive at a destination and just maybe the mail would be delivered. For a number of years the Post Office in England tried to find a regular service so that the mails could be delivered with a degree of certainty.

In December 1850 a contract was signed with the General Screw Steam Shipping Company which lasted until 1854 (the company had also reached a similar agreement with the Mauritius Post Office to carry mails from Port Louis in Mauritius to Galle in Ceylon). Again in 1856 another contract was signed with the Lindsay Line, but that survived for less than a year. In both cases the fee paid was around £30,000 per annum, but both companies failed to deliver the mail in an agreed 38 days and so both agreements lapsed.

In September 1857 a contract was agreed, this time with the Union Line, after discussions with the Admiralty and a five-year tender was brought into operation just 11 days later. The contract was for a fee of £33,000 per annum with vessels sailing on a monthly basis, allowing a passage of not more than 42 days, the route being from Plymouth to Capetown, with stops at Ascension and St Helena. A stipulation in all three of these contracts was that all of the ships had to be in excess of 500 tons in size.

The first Union Line vessel to arrive at Capetown on 29 October 1857, 44 days after leaving Plymouth, was the MV *Dane*, a 530 ton vessel at just 195 feet in length. While the first voyage out was unheralded due to the speed of setting up the contract and the lack of advertising, the return voyage back to Plymouth, arriving on 7 January 1858, was a spectacular success, with the vessel carrying some 11,000 letters.

There followed seven contracts between the Post Office and the Union Line:



Fig 1 A small envelope from Capetown, Cape Colony to London. Carried on board the RMS *Briton* (Union Line No 2) during the first mail contract with the Union Line. It arrived at Plymouth in 35 days – three days inside the agreed 38-day voyage agreement. The stamp is a green Cape of Good Hope 1s.

- | | | |
|--------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| • 1863 | Twice Monthly service | Time allowed 38 days (Fig 1) |
| • 1868 | Twice Monthly service | Time allowed 35 days |
| • 1873 | Fortnightly service | Time allowed 30 days |
| • 1876 | Fortnightly service | Time allowed 26 days (Fig 2) |
| • 1883 | Fortnightly service | Time allowed 22 days (Fig 3) |
| • 1888 | Fortnightly service | Time allowed 20 days |
| • 1893 | Fortnightly service | Time allowed 19 days (Fig 4) |

The significance of changing the contract from twice monthly to fortnightly was that the first contracts would achieve 24 sailings per annum, while the following five contracts would achieve 26 sailings per annum.

The Union Line had enjoyed a monopoly on mail carriage in the early contracts; however, all was to change with the 1876 contract. In 1872 Sir Donald Currie and his Castle Line had commenced sailings from London and Dartmouth to Capetown on a regular basis. His ships were so much faster that the line attracted a large amount of mail, all posted at a cheaper price as the ships were deemed to be unofficial carriers of mail. (The rate on a Union Line vessel was 1s., while a letter on a Castle Line ship was 4d. – both per half ounce). During this time, senders of mail would annotate their letters with 'By Donald Currie Line' or 'By Dartmouth Steamer' as the mail was not only much cheaper but also very much faster.

The 1876 contract was agreed with both companies to carry the mail. Part of the agreement was that they would run alternate sailings so that the fortnightly sailings effectively became weekly. There was a clause that stipulated that the two companies could never merge, this being done in the hope that there would always be healthy competition to keep down contract prices in the future.

For the next 20 years all went well. There was plenty of trade to be had for both lines in both directions. However, by the turn of the century all was to change.

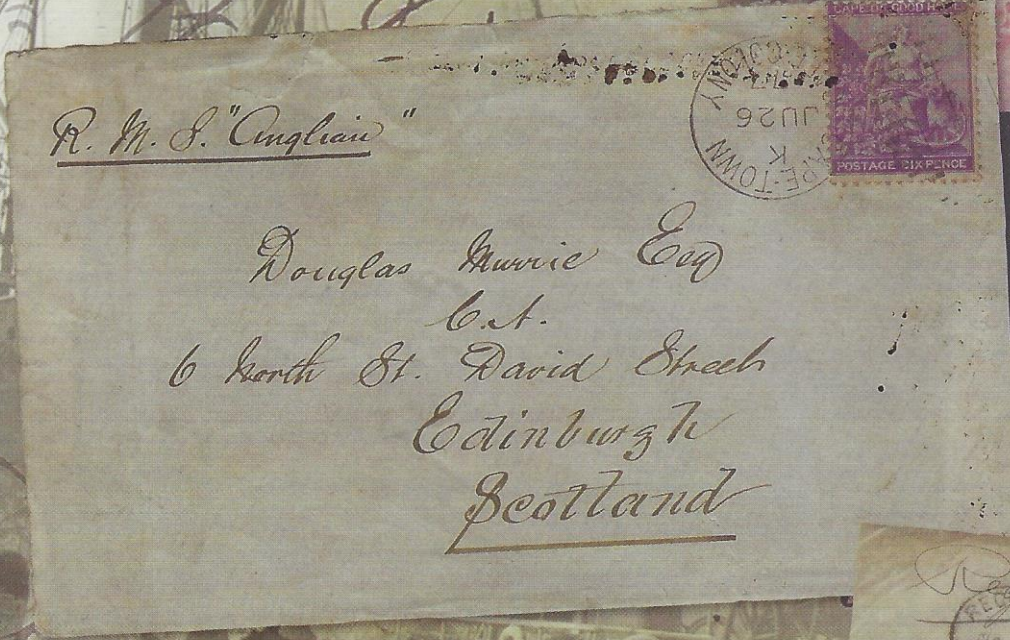


Fig 2 Small envelope carried on board the RMS Anglian (Union Line No 26) from Capetown to Edinburgh, posted during the fourth contract 1876–1883. The time allowed was 26 days – it arrived in 24 days. Franked with a 6d. Cape of Good Hope stamp

The Devonport Cape packet marks

The first Devonport Cape Packet cancellation was used in December 1857 after a contract had been agreed between the Post Office and the Union Line Shipping Company. The Union Line had originally been a coaling company, supplying coal to ships of the P&O and Royal Mail Lines at Southampton under the name of the Southampton Steam Shipping Company, being formed in 1853. However, the five ships they owned were quickly taken over by the British Government to supply the troops in the Crimea in 1854. When that war ended in 1855, all the ships were surplus to requirements in their old task due to a surplus of coal stocks, so fresh routes had to be found. Voyages to South America proved fruitless, so in 1857 the board of the company changed the name to Union Line and a contract was agreed with the Post Office for a monthly sailing to the Cape.

The sailings were to be from Plymouth to Capetown and in bad weather Simonstown (formerly Symons Bay). This service continued from the first voyage by the MV *Dane* on 15 September 1857 until 1870 when the whole operation was moved to Southampton in order to cut costs and hopefully earn more revenue following the severe fall in trade around the Cape owing to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.

The four cancels (P3–P6) (Fig 5) were in use from December 1857 until 1870 and little is known about which



Fig 3 A registered envelope posted from Capetown to Birmingham dated 2 November 1887 and carried on board the RMS *Tartar* (Union Line No 45). It was posted during the fifth 1883–88 contract, which allowed 22 days for the voyage. The envelope actually arrived in Birmingham on the 21st day. Postage for the letter was 10d. (Reduced)

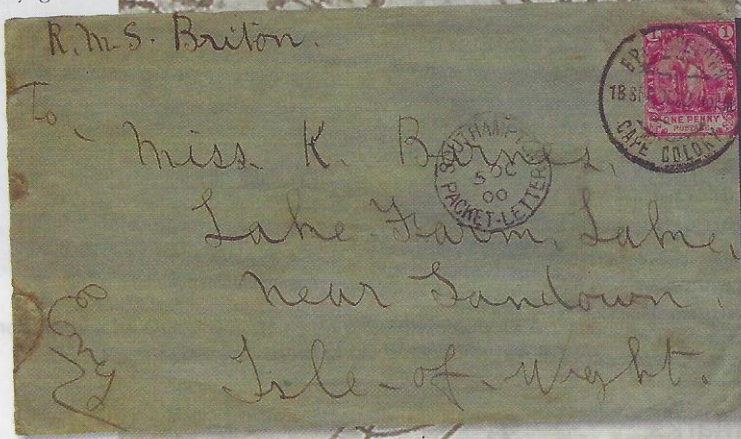


Fig 4 A cover posted at Cape Colony on 18 September 1900 and carried on the RMS *Briton* (Union Line No 72) to the Isle of Wight. On arrival at Southampton it was postmarked with a H214 paquebot mark dated 5 October 1900, a voyage of 18 days. This is an early use of the H214 paquebot, which is known used from 1900–17 (Reduced)

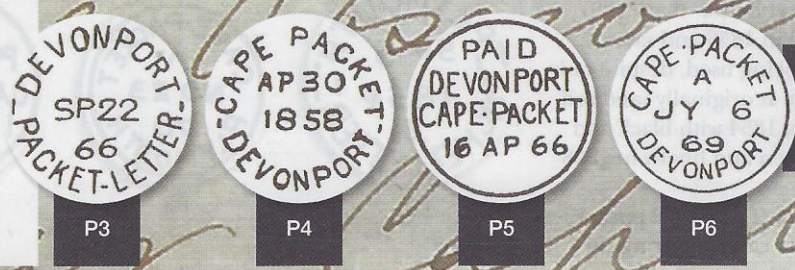


Fig 5 Devonport P3 to P6 packet postmarks

Base image credit: The 7th eye, tall ships in harbour about c1890s

ones were used in what period of the 13 years they were in service. *Figure 6* shows the P6 cancel used towards the end of the era, the envelope having been posted in London on 7 August 1869, leaving Devonport the following day to arrive in Capetown on 13 September. The 1s. stamp has been obliterated with a London W43 postmark. The quartered circle postmark on the reverse is believed to have been used only on the Cape Packet voyages, either on its own or in conjunction with a Cape Packet postmark and is known used from 1865 until 1869, but this date could well start at an earlier point.

Figure 7, used from Capetown to Lymington in England with a P5 Cape Packet cancel in red, does raise a couple of questions for the collector who has stumbled into this area of Seapost and perhaps has little knowledge of the usage of stamps at this period of time in Africa. The envelope was posted and then passed through the post office at Capetown in December, to arrive at Devonport on 18 January 1866 (the code used at Devonport is 250) to arrive at its final destination the following day. It is an Officer's letter and therefore was, it is assumed, posted from an Officer in a regiment on duty somewhere in Africa, as Cape of Good Hope stamps had been available in Capetown since 1853 with the now famous Cape triangles.

With the advent of the Penny Post and adhesive stamps only beginning in 1840, and the Cape triangles being used from 1853 but only at the Cape of Good Hope, it is thought that if mail was posted back to Britain by regiments, etc. working in areas without stamps, they would use British stamps to pay postage. Being an Army letter it would go at a lesser rate than the ordinary rate of 1s. for an ounce, as per *Figure 6*. This being the case, a Regiment would use British stamps and all the mail would be collected into a bag, sealed and forwarded onwards to Great Britain for cancelling and distribution. However, what makes *Figure 7* so good and rarer than the norm is the fact that as it passed through Capetown it was cancelled there and then forwarded on to Devonport where it received the Packet mark. This is unusual for Officer's mail posted from the area at the time.

The Plymouth packet marks

The 'Plymouth Packet Letter' mark (P2) (*Fig 8*) was first used in 1853 and saw a diversity of colours being used, despite only a four-year timespan. It originally used red ink, followed later in 1854 with black and yellow, 1856 with green and finally in 1858 with blue.

The entire at *Figure 9*, with a P2 packet mark, was posted and carried during the



Fig 6 A cover with a P6 postmark and an M1 quartered circle postmark (believed to have been used only on the Cape Packet voyages). The cover is dated 1869, which was towards the very end of the usage of the Devonport postmarks



Fig 7 A P5 postmark used on an 1865 Officer's letter sent from somewhere in South Africa via Capetown to England using British 1d. red stamps

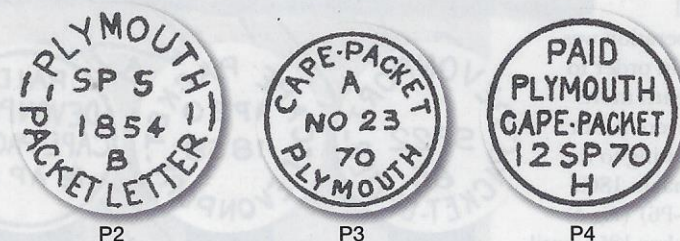


Fig 8 Plymouth packet postmarks



Fig 9 The Plymouth P2 postmark in yellow was applied in 1854 only. This entire was posted at Port Louis in Mauritius on 4 April 1854, cancelled with a 'PACKET LETTER / MAURITIUS' postmark and arrived at Plymouth on 27 May 1854 (Reduced)



Fig 10 A cover dated 10 November 1874 with a P3 Cape Packet Plymouth mark, index C (Reduced)



Fig 11 A cover with a rare P3 Cape Packet Plymouth mark dated 'DE 24 76' and an 'EDINr & CARLISLE SORTING TENDER' TPO mark dated 'DE 26 76' (Reduced)

very first contract between the Post Office and the General Screw Steam Shipping Company. Dated 1854 it would have been carried towards the end of the contract. The Plymouth cancellation in yellow is extremely rare. The reason as to why the different colours were used is unknown at present.

The P2 mark seemed to have fallen out of use as the Devonport cancels came into use. However, when the Devonport cancels ceased in 1870, Plymouth came back into use again. The '8d' tax mark shown in Figure 10 was originally issued to the Devonport Post Office in April 1868. However, when the mails were transferred to Plymouth the '8d' mark, together with other values, was used aboard the Plymouth-Bristol Travelling Post Office (TPO). This service had started on the Bristol to Exeter Railway to carry mails from the West Indies. It seems that the mail was carried in a somewhat sedate manner as, in 1874, the TPO carriage was fitted with larger wheels so that it could be used with express trains on the Plymouth to Bristol TPO run. The cover at Figure 10 was carried on the new, faster service.

In 1870 the mails from the Cape were cancelled with Cape Packet Plymouth cancellations, P3 and P4 (see Fig 8). These postmarks had limited use as the Union Line moved all of its operations to Southampton later that year. As a consequence, very few ships called at Plymouth, making these two cancels very rare.

Figure 11 shows a cover with a rare P3 Cape Packet Plymouth mark dated 'DE 24 1876'. On Boxing day it travelled north on the 'EDINr & CARLISLE SORTING TENDER' TPO.

In my next article I look at the history of mails to South Africa from 1900, including Ocean Post Office cancellations, paquebots, and postmarks of the Round Africa Service.

Note: the 'P' numbers shown in this article are taken from either Alan Robertson's 1955 book *Ship Letters Of The British Isles* or Colin Tabcart's later book *Robertson Revisited* published in 1997).

Further reading

There is a 2020 addenda to the 2010 paquebot book again available by applying to the email address shown below. For details, if you are interested, please email the TPO & Seapost Society at: tpo_seapost@hotmail.com

The 2010 4th edition of the paquebot book is long out of print but is now available on a DVD disc for £25 plus postage.

