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AUGUST 2023

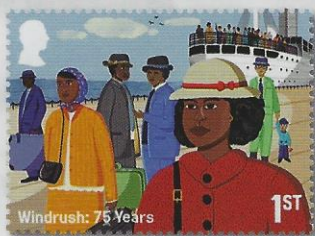
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THE MAILS TO SOUTH AFRICA: PART 2 THE MERGER

By Mike Dovey

Mike Dovey of the TPO & Seapost Society concludes his study of mails to South Africa at the turn of the 20th century with a look at Ocean Post Office and Union of South Africa cancellations and paquebots in use following the merger of the Union and Castle Lines in 1900.

The big difference between the mail contract agreed with the Union Line and the Castle Line in 1893 and the previous mail contracts was the use of Ocean Post Office cancellations on board the 'Mail' steamers. These cancels were to be used on all letters, etc., posted on board the ships when they were not in any territorial waters. After being posted in the ship's mailbox the mail would then be cancelled with a datestamp with an index letter showing which ship it was posted from. The mail was then bagged and deposited at the next port of call for forwarding to all destinations. Only the larger ships were allocated an onboard post office and such ships would be designated as RMS (Royal Mail Steamer), while the smaller vessels classed as intermediate would be designated as SS (Steam Ship).

In 1893 the Union Line sailed from Cape Town to Southampton and back, while the Castle Line sailed from Capetown to London and back – both lines depositing mail to tenders at Plymouth before their final destinations. The most important port of call was Madeira where cancelled mail was dropped off. Northbound vessel could leave bags of mail to be collected by a southbound vessel for transit back to South Africa, while southbound vessels would drop mail off for collection and delivery back to Great Britain.

The index letters were allocated on the basis that Union Line got 'A', Castle Line got 'B', Union got 'C', Castle got 'D' and so on. It can be noted from the list in *Table 1* that using this sequence the allocated numbers do show a pattern, certainly up to the amalgamation of the two lines in 1900.

The merger of the two lines took place during the Boer War which started in 1899. An outline of a new, ten-year contract had been agreed by both the Union Line and the Castle Line in 1899

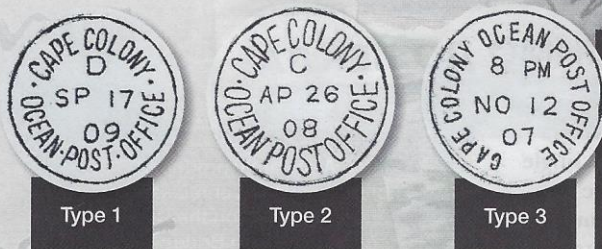


Fig 1 The three types of Ocean Post Office cancellations. The letter below 'Cape Colony' in Type 1 and Type 2 identifies the ship the item of mail was mailed from

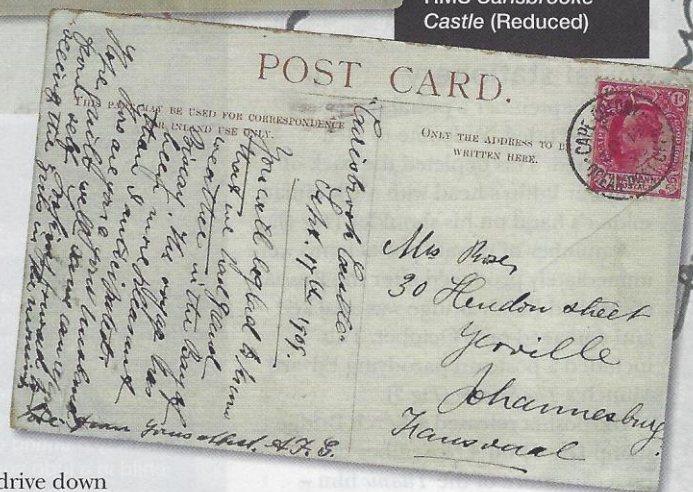


Fig 2 A Type 1 letter Ocean Post cancel used on a postcard posted on board RMS Carisbrooke Castle (Reduced)

which would follow the expiration of the old 1893 agreement. This still included the clause that the two Lines could not amalgamate at any time, ensuring that the companies had to compete with each other, thus keeping costs down. As

an added incentive to drive down costs, politicians in South Africa and Whitehall decided to open the contract to all comers in the hope that a third line would want to come in with a cheaper tender. In the event, everything went wrong from the political angle; there were no tenders from any other line and the Union Line and the Castle Line both refused to tender. Thus, when the old contract expired there would be no mail contract at all and therefore no mail would be carried.

Eventually, in December 1899, a position was accepted by all. Proposed by Sir Donald Currie of the Castle Line, it called for the amalgamation of the two lines into one fleet, something that had always been vehemently fought against by the South African Parliament. A new company called Union Castle Mail Steamship Co was founded in February 1900, with Union Line providing 114,000 tons of shipping and Castle Line 107,000 tons. Sir Donald Currie was to be in charge of the new company.



By 1902, despite the nonappearance of an expected boom in trade following the end of the Boer war, all ten ex-Union Line 'G' class intermediate ships were still at sea, compared to three ex-Castle ships – 15 were laid up at Netley until the depression was over. Most of the new ships added after the creation of the Union Castle Line were based on ex-Union Line designs. Of the nine full-sized vessels used to fulfil the mail contract, five were ex-Union – *Briton*, *Norman*, *Saxon*, *Scot* and *Walmer Castle* (the latter being a new ship launched after amalgamation which was built to a Union design and was to have been called *Celt*). The other four were ex-Castle Line – *Carisbrooke Castle*, *Dunvegan Castle*, *Kildonan Castle* and *Kinfauns Castle*.

Three types of Ocean Post cancels were used. The vessel using Type 1 and Type 2 cancellations is indicated by the letter of the alphabet below 'Cape Colony'. The vast majority of the fleet used Type 1. In fact, only three vessels used Type 2 or Type 3 (Fig 1).



UNION-CASTLE LINE ROYAL MAIL STEAMER "KILDONAN CASTLE." 9,692 TONS.
Madeira. The ship was over. Her funnels are painted black with white line. S. W.

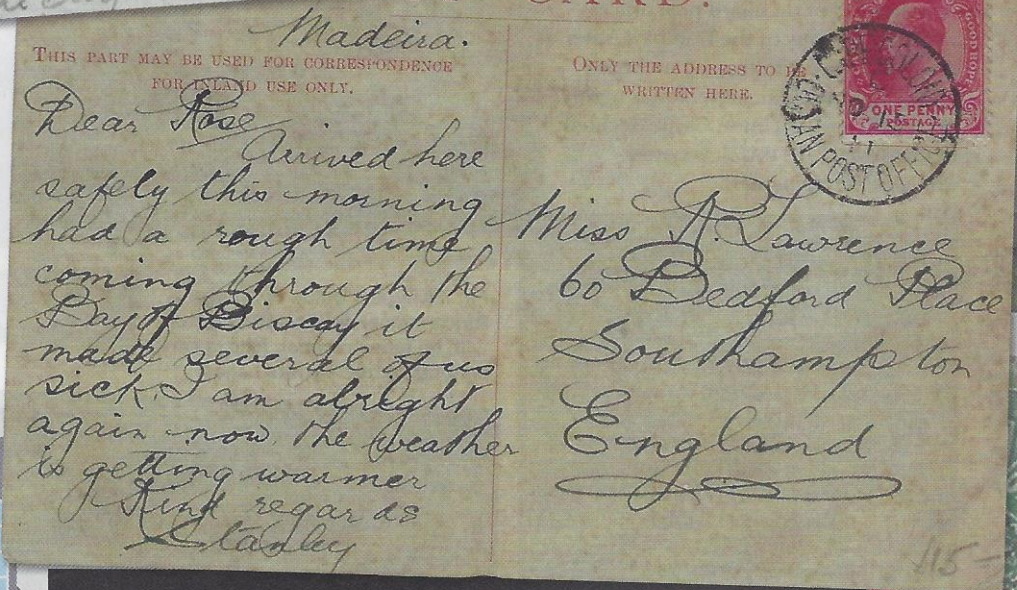


Fig 3 Type 2, letter C Ocean Post cancel posted on board RMS Kildonan Castle

Table 1: The Types of Ocean post office cancellations used by the various vessels

Type 1	
A	Scot (1893–1903)
B	Dunottar Castle (1893–1904) Armada Castle (1903–13)
C	Mexican (1893–1900)
D	Hawarden Castle (1893–99) Carisbrooke Castle (Fig 2) (1898–1910) Balmoral Castle (1910–11)
E	Tartar (1893–97) Spartan (1894–99) Saxon (1900–11)
F	Norham Castle (1894–01)
G	Athenian (1893–97) Briton (1897–1911)
H	Roslin Castle (1893–99) Dunvegan Castle (1896–1907) Edinburgh Castle (1910–11)
J	Moor (1894–1900) Armada Castle (1903–13)
K	Roslin Castle (1894–97) Carisbrooke Castle (1898) Kinfauns Castle (1899–1911)
L	Spartan (1893–94) Norman (1894–1911)
M	Norham Castle (1895–98) Dunottar Castle (1900–01)
N	Scot (1902) Tantallon Castle (1894–1901)
Type 2	
No Letter	Kildonan Castle (1904–07)
C	Kildonan Castle (Fig 3) (1907–13) Walmer Castle (1902–14)
Type 3	
No letter	Kenilworth Castle (Fig 4) (1904–1911)

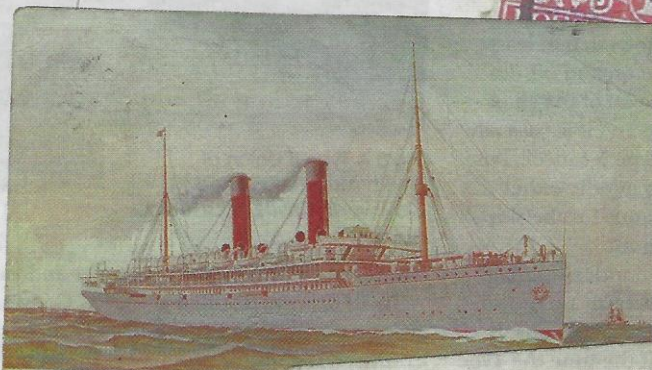
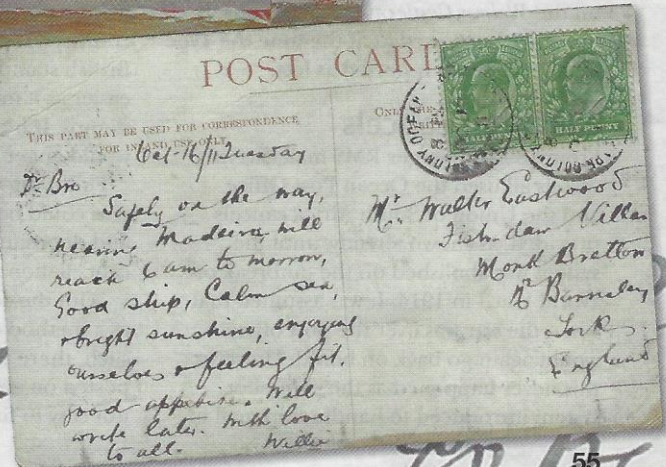


Fig 4 Type 3 (No Letter) Ocean Post cancel posted on board RMS Kenilworth Castle (Reduced)



Union of South Africa cancellations

Following the Union of South Africa in 1910, new suitably inscribed Ocean Post Office cancels were introduced from 1911 (Fig 5). Type 4 was only used on the *Saxon*, while Type 5 was used on numerous ships. Initially, it was the normal procedure that each mail-carrying vessel would be allocated a Type 5 canceller with a distinct number and that number would stay with the ship until there was a change of circumstances (Table 2). However, with the issue of Type 6 in 1912 (Fig 6) there was a total change of usage in that each postal crew was allocated a numbered cancel and they carried it from ship to ship to sort the mail while at sea. This new method of on board post offices was in fact a copy of the Bombay-Aden Sea Post Office system used on board P&O vessels on that route. It was highly successful and so Union Castle decided that as from 1912 this new system would be implemented.

Table 2: Ships allocated Type 4 and Type 5 cancels

Type 4	
<i>Saxon</i>	(1911 – 1913) (Fig 7)
Type 5	
1	<i>Armada Castle</i> (1912–13)
2	<i>Balmoral Castle</i> (1912–13)
3	<i>Briton</i> (1912–13)
4	<i>Edinburgh Castle</i> (1912–13)
5	<i>Kenilworth Castle</i> (1912–13) (Fig 8)
6	<i>Kildonan Castle</i> (1912–13)
7	<i>Kinfauns Castle</i> (1912–13)
9	<i>Walmer Castle</i> (1912–13)
10	<i>Walmer Castle</i> (1913)

Shown at Figure 9 is the Type 6, number 6 for the RMS *Walmer Castle*. There are also examples of the same ship with numbers 2, 3, 5, 8 and 9, which shows that at least six postal crews did move on and off this ship. The same applies to all of the ships carrying mail at this time and it is basically the list of ships for the Type 5 cancel. Type 6 cancels have in the top middle either an 'N' or an 'S' which stands for the ship going either North or South.

It is now known that an index number 10 was used in 1913, previously unknown, on the *Walmer Castle* on two occasions. It may have been used as at the time the Type 6, number 8 was reported as lost.

Paquebot cancels

From 1893 the larger RMS mail-carrying vessels all used the Ocean Post Office and the Union of South Africa cancels provided, as shown already, until the system was abolished on the outbreak of World War I in 1914. It was assumed that when the war was over the post offices would again go back on board. However, this never happened as the paquebot system introduced to handle ship mail in

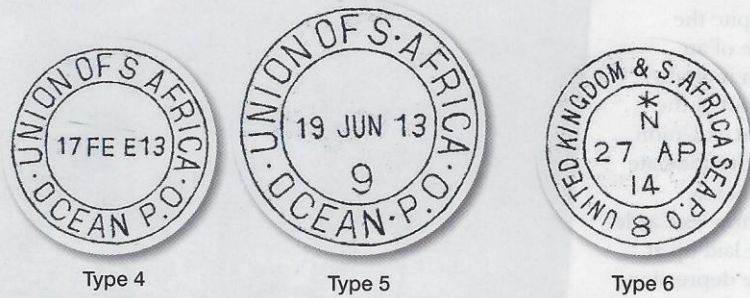
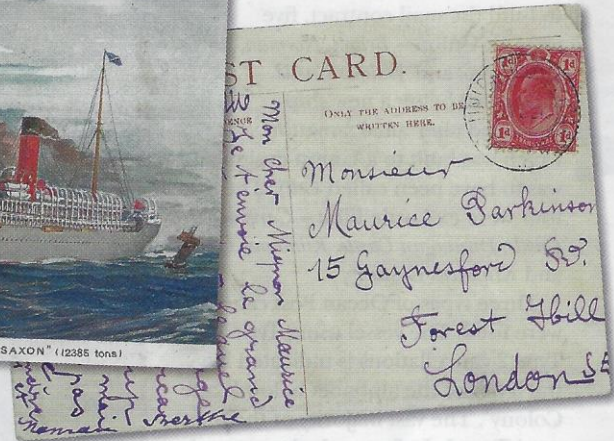


Fig 5 Type 4 and 5 Union of South Africa cancels

Fig 6 A Type 6 cancel. With this type the number on the cancel was assigned to a particular post office crew which moved from ship to ship



Fig 7 A Type 4 Union of South Africa cancel used on RMS *Saxon* with no Index number. Alas, a very light but extremely rare cancel



All covers shown reduced

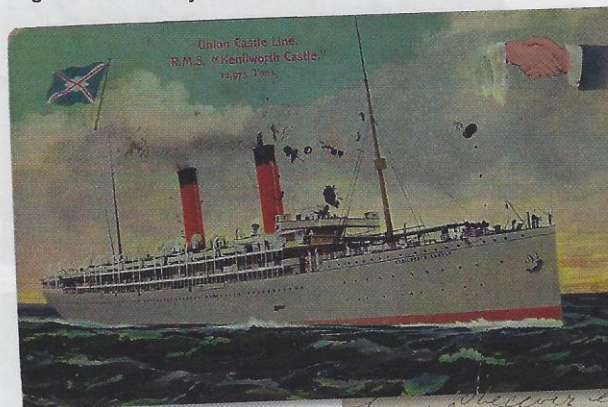
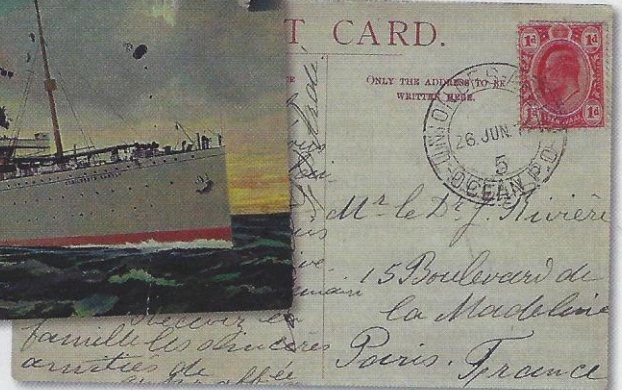


Fig 8 A Type 5 Union of South Africa used on RMS *Kenilworth Castle*, with index number 5



1894 proved to be a much cheaper and easier method to use.

In 1892 it was decided at a UPU Convention that any ship was, while on the high seas, its own territory, as per the registry shown on the ship's stern, and so could use that country's stamps for postal use. For example, a British vessel on the high seas could use British stamps anywhere in the world. This made life for the Purser of the vessel so much easier as it meant he did not have to run ashore at each port and buy a quantity of local stamps. If he bought too few he would upset the passengers; if he bought too many he would anger the ship's Captain.

Following the introduction of the paquebot system, any mail posted on the high seas could be franked with the stamps of the same country as the registry of the vessel and deposited in the ship's mailbox. Once landed at the next port of call, a special cancellation was used to show that the mail had been posted in such a way.

With the advent of the picture postcard many shipping lines began to sell such items as a method of advertising their services as well as a novel means of communication. As such, there are many varieties, as shown in this article, of both the ship the postcards were posted on and the port they were to be collected from, although many of these cards are not easy to find (Fig 10 to Fig 13).

Fig 9 A Type 6 Union of South Africa cancel used on RMS Walmer Castle. The index number 6 refers to one of at least six post office crews that worked on board the ship

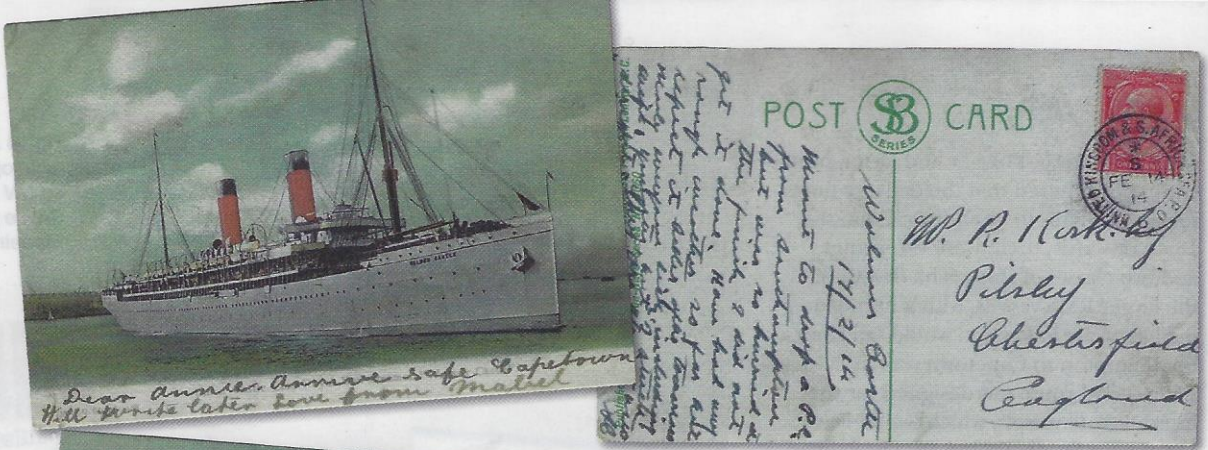


Fig 10 A 1905 picture postcard showing SS Goth with a 'PAQUEBOT' cachet and Southampton Ship-Letter cancel

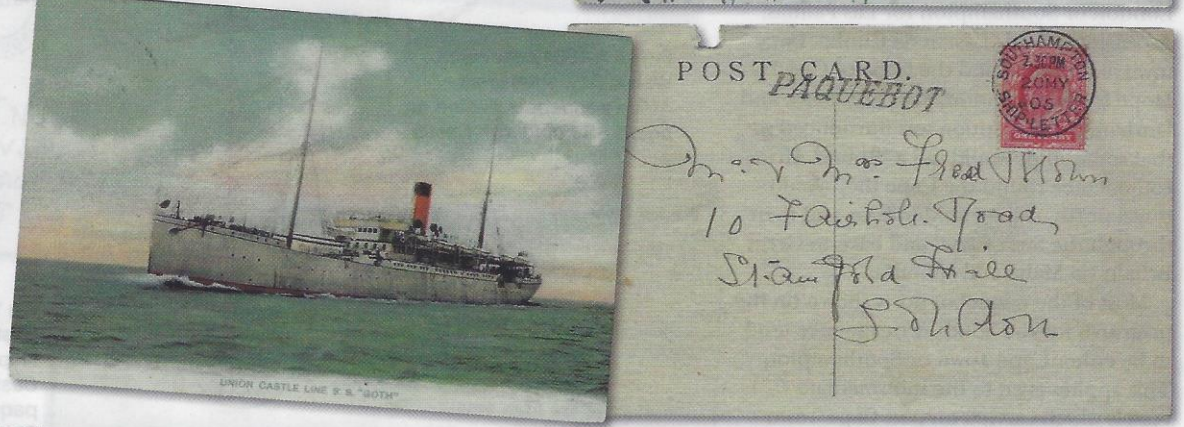


Fig 11 A 1922 postcard depicting SS Gascon with a London paquebot datestamp

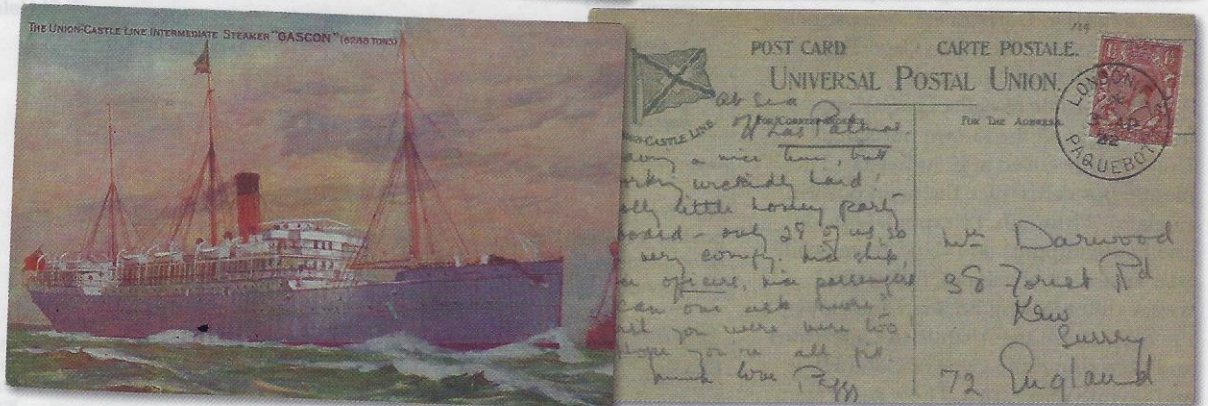


Fig 12 A 1913 card showing the larger RMS Edinburgh Castle ship. The British King George V 1d. stamp is cancelled by a Plymouth paquebot

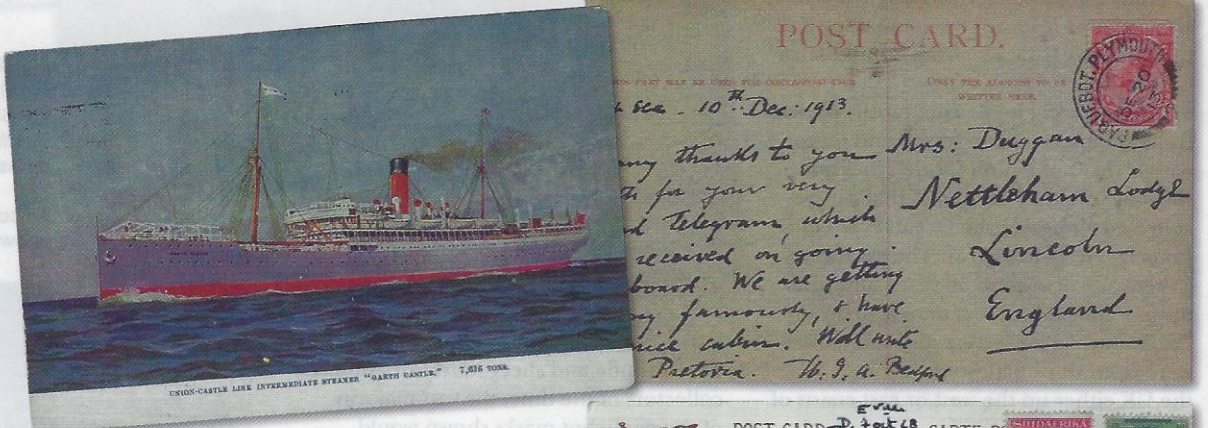


Fig 13 A postcard showing RMS Saxon, which was registered at South Africa, with South African stamps cancelled by a Cape Town paquebot datestamp



As the ships got bigger and faster, postal contracts required that the delivery times for the mail was to be shorter. From the 1890s onwards, there were two routes and two classes of ships. The first were the larger RMS vessels, which having a mail contract to keep to would sail from Southampton to Capetown via Las Palmas. The second route was designed for the intermediate vessels, which would leave London or Southampton for Las Palmas, Ascension Island, Tristan da Cunha, Cape town and then round the Cape of Good Hope for East London, Port Elizabeth, and Durban. A third option was introduced so that some ships would sail a 'Round Africa' route. Once round the Cape they would travel north, calling at Mombasa and then through the Suez Canal and back to Great Britain via Malta and Gibraltar.

Most of the paquebot ports shown on the postcards for the South Africa service tend to be either Cape Town or Southampton. This applies even to the intermediate vessels which carried on past Cape Town and onwards to Durban, etc. Any paquebot covers for ports other than Cape Town are rare and will be at a premium.

It was possible to collect paquebot postmarks of all the known ports that Union Castle called at in its heyday. The picture postcards trace the main ports in England (Plymouth, Liverpool, London and Southampton) and Cape Town, while later covers, or envelopes, follow the voyages after leaving England and show the route down the Atlantic to Cape Town and then round the Cape of Good Hope and up into East Africa. These came from not only the passenger carrying vessels but also the MVs (Motor Vessels) that were used to carry fruit, etc, from South Africa to Britain.

The following items were mostly posted from the intermediate vessels and motor vessels (MV) of Union Castle Lines and show the diversity of cancels that can be collected alongside the Ocean Post Office cancels (Fig 14 to Fig 18). The list shows a timescale of around 50 years, and while most of the early covers were actually on the Round Africa service, the later covers were from ships that would sail back to the UK either up the west or east coasts of Africa.

All of the picture postcards shown in this article are *bona fide* paquebot postings using the correct system as designed by the UPU treaties of 1892 and 1895. In many cases, the only way to obtain a paquebot posting from a Union Castle vessel was to send covers to the Master of the ship and beg his indulgence. If lucky, a couple of covers would drop onto your doormat. It is thought in some circles that such philatelic covers are of no value and the only good cover is a commercial or private

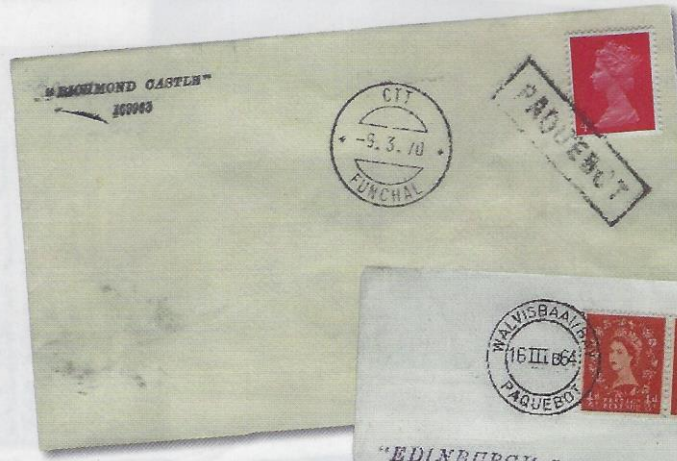


Fig 14 A 1970 envelope posted on MV Richmond Castle with a Funchal, Madeira datestamp



Fig 15 A 1964 cover with Walvis Bay, southwest Africa paquebots posted on board SS Edinburgh Castle

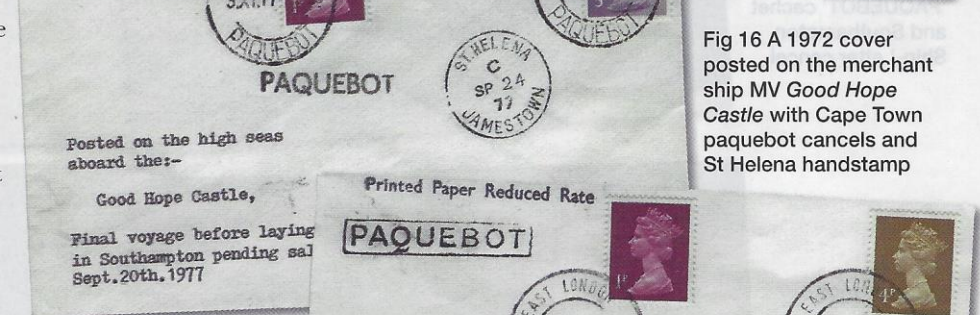


Fig 16 A 1972 cover posted on the merchant ship MV Good Hope Castle with Cape Town paquebot cancels and St Helena handstamp

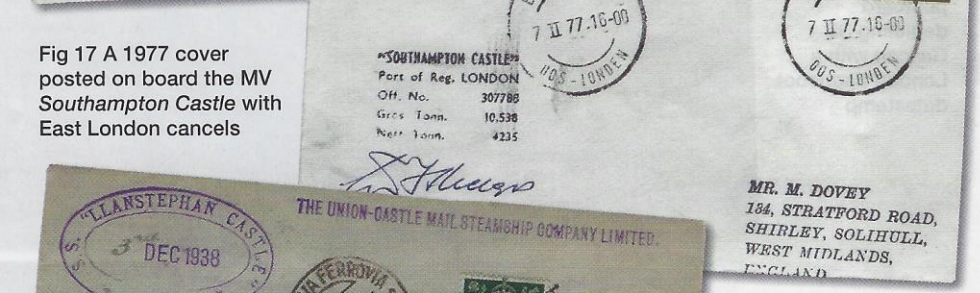


Fig 17 A 1977 cover posted on board the MV Southampton Castle with East London cancels

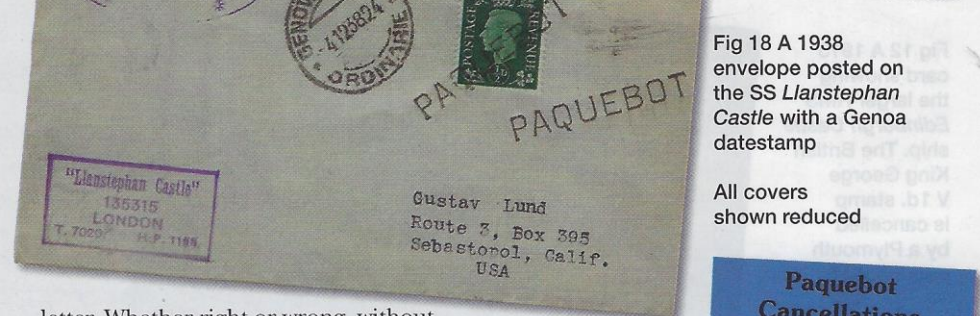


Fig 18 A 1938 envelope posted on the SS Llanstephan Castle with a Genoa datestamp

All covers shown reduced

letter. Whether right or wrong, without the fortitude and sheer hard work of many collectors of the time, the vast majority of the paquebot marks shown would never exist, and if they did they would be in extremely small numbers and would make collecting such covers very difficult indeed. If it wasn't for the diligence of the collector in asking for the covers and the generosity of the Ship Master in servicing them, then many hundreds of ships would be long lost and forgotten. Collectors of these 'philatelic' covers should in fact be congratulated for creating little bits of maritime history that without their perseverance would be long lost and gone.

Further reading

There is now an *addenda* to the 2010 paquebot book which is available by emailing 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.

