

# MARITIME POSTAL HISTORY: RARE LIVERPOOL SHIP MARKS

By Mike Dovey with additions by Julian Jones

For centuries Liverpool has played a pivotal role in global trade, attracting ships from all over the world. As such, a good collection of Liverpool maritime postal history can be formed for a reasonable price. However, as Mike Dovey and Julian Jones reveal, like many collecting fields, there are several 'Holy Grail' items that elude even the most determined completists.

Every collector of postal history will know, that once a subject has been chosen the opening gambit is very easy. A collection can be started with a few very easy items, followed by a few more harder to obtain additions. However, at some point the collector comes to realise that there are certain items that are either beyond his or her reach, because of a monetary constraint, or the fact that certain items are just not available for what can be a very long period of time. This article deals with many of those items that are just not available.

Liverpool maritime postal history is a superb and wide subject to collect, and a good collection can be obtained for a reasonable price which can be made into a display that merits applause. But, unless the collector is very lucky when scouring auctions, then the following could be the ones missing from what all collectors really want – a complete collection.

## Reference books

Anybody collecting Liverpool ship cancellations will probably know, or have heard of, Alan Robertson's famous book, *A History of the Ship Letters of the British Isles*, originally printed in 1955 as a limited edition of 600 copies with sections A through E. They will also know of the follow-up, published by Colin Tabearnt in 1997 which updates section E into one smaller book.

All of the Liverpool postal marks were split into three main sections, ship marks 'S', packet letters 'P', and miscellaneous 'M' in order to better catalogue the many marks of that port.

Colin Tabearnt's book does not attempt to indicate scarcity, so this article is just to show some of the rarest and hardest marks to obtain. This is not to say that any other Liverpool marks are not collectable, but these are some of the ones that could empty your pockets. The examples shown start at the lowest scarcity value and climb upwards.

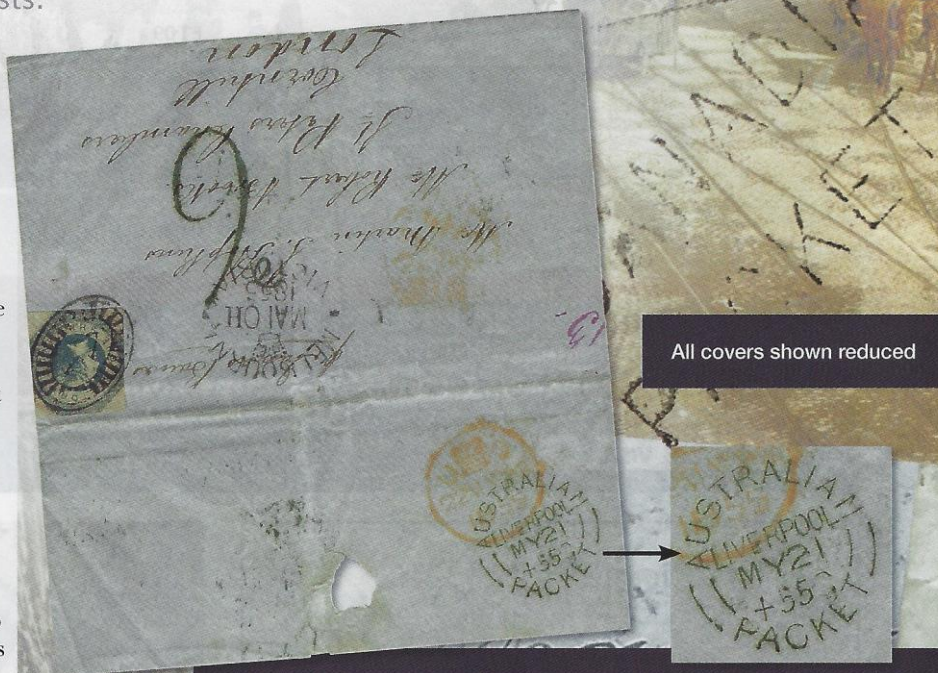


Fig 1 An 1855 entire posted from Melbourne to London which has a P28 Australian Liverpool packet cancellation in black. Although the packet mark is not particularly rare, due to the fact it was used for two years and a lot of mail was carried on the Black Ball Line and White Star Line, a good strike such as this one is harder to find and commands a premium

Shown in *Figure 1* is the P28 Australian Liverpool packet cancellation in black, used 1855–56, and also used in green in 1855 only. Although it was only used for two years on ships mostly belonging to the Black Ball Line and the White Star Line, a lot of mail was carried, and the mark is not quite as rare as the date span would indicate. Good strikes are a little harder to get, and these are the ones that attract a premium.

*Figure 2* shows an entire which was struck with a packet mark 'PKT LETTER/LIVERPOOL/26 NO/1855' (P9) alongside a very rare mark, used only in 1855, 'CONVEYED BY/UNITED STATES/PACKET' (M5) seen only on letters carried by the Collins Line.

Because of a reduction in frequency of Cunard services to Canada and the USA, due to requisition of its ships for the Crimean War, letters from Canada could be sent via New York (US Packet) for a fee of 1s.2d. rather than the usual fee via Halifax NS (British Packet) of 8d. per ½oz. This rate was set out in GPO instruction No 71 in 1854.

The M6 Liverpool miscellaneous 'ART-5/B.R.PKT' cancellation, shown in *Figure 3*, used 1849–60, can be found in black or green, although no marks have been seen prior to 1851 which was the beginning of the new rates introduced by the US Post Office for west to east coast mails, and for distances over 3000 miles. Although the mark has an 11-year date span, good copies are rare, hence the high valuation. It was used in conjunction with a packet mark, on this occasion a Liverpool P5 struck in green and dated 1853.

*Figure 4* shows the 'EXSL 1 'LIVERPOOL/EXEMPT SHIP' letter cancellation. It was proofed on 4 September 1840 and used in black until 1864. The mark was added to consignees' letters addressed to the port of landing. Such letters paid no ship letter



Fig 2 This entire, sent from the US to Scotland, includes a P9 Liverpool packet mark alongside a very rare M5 'CONVEYED BY/UNITED STATES/PACKET' mark which was used only in 1855 on letters carried by the Collins Line

Fig 3 Good copies of the M6 Liverpool miscellaneous 'ART-5/BR.PKT' cancellation, shown here on this entire, are difficult to find, despite being used for 11 years. Here it is used alongside a Liverpool P5 packet mark struck in green

or inland rate, although there was still a 2d. charge due to the Post Office to recompense for the master's gratuity. Although the mark was in use for 24 years, it was used on very rare occasions, and good copies are hard to find, hence the premium value placed on a good example.

### As rare as hen's teeth

Shown in Figure 5 is the P27 South American Liverpool packet cancellation, used on only three occasions on 2 December 1854, 4 January 1855 and 28 February 1855. The mark is stated to have been used on the four voyages that the shipping company, South American and General Steam Navigation Co – Buenos Ayres to Liverpool, made, but the mark was not used on the first voyage and the cover shown is dated from the second voyage which landed at Liverpool on 2 December 1854. The landing on 4 January 1855 has the cancel with indices A B & C, and therefore the post office must have had three date stamps to deal with the mail on that day.

After the fourth voyage, which landed on 28 February 1855, the ships of the line were requisitioned for the Crimean War. When that war ended that service to South America by the shipping company was never restarted. This mark is one of the rarest and a value will be somewhere in the realms of 'hen's teeth'.

### SS Great Britain

Liverpool is famous for a superb series of ship and packet letters stretching back as far as 1757,

**LIVERPOOL  
EXEMPT SHIP**

Fig 4 Although the EXSL 1 'LIVERPOOL /EXEMPT SHIP' letter cancellation was in use for 24 years, it was only used on very rare occasions. The example shown here is nice and clear, which is also unusual, and increases its rarity value

Fig 5 The South American Liverpool packet mark (P27) on this entire was used on the second voyage made by the South American and General Steam Navigation Co in 1854. Only on three occasions was this mark used

All covers shown reduced



although, most of the well-known cancels will be in use from 1800 onwards (the most famous was the series of packet letter cancels used for the Cunard contract for mails to the USA). Liverpool port was the busiest in the country during this period of time and it is no surprise that by 1841 there was a cancel put into use known as S16 (i.e. the 16th ship letter mark known in use and excluding any packet marks).

It is known used in black from 1841–1855, and red from 1842–1855 when it was finally put to rest.

However, the story doesn't finish there, as the last known example of the S16 canceller was dumped in a drawer and forgotten about until a sunny day in 1957, as you will find out later in this article. The next three items are all related to Brunel's famous vessel, the SS *Great Britain*.

The outer wrapper shown in Figure 6, dated January 1855, is the last arrival date for the SS *Great Britain* before being requisitioned for service in the Crimean War where she transported troops for nearly two years. It has a Liverpool S18 ship letter cancel, which was known used in red in 1855 only, making this item carried on the ship something of a rarity and a great way to open a trio of covers associated with this famous ship.

Once the ship had been relieved of war service duties it made a single voyage to Australia in 1857 before being requisitioned again for war service, this time to take troops to India to fight in the Indian Mutiny. It is this voyage that is the most important for all collectors of Liverpool ship letters.

The small envelope shown in Figure 7 has an S19 Liverpool ship cancel, known used in red from 1855–1876. While a posting



Fig 6 Posted in Melbourne on 28 October 1854, this letter arrived in Liverpool on 24 January 1855, marking the last arrival date for the SS *Great Britain* before being requisitioned to carry troops to the Crimean War. It bears a Liverpool S18 ship letter cancel, struck in red, which was only used in 1855, making this a rare item from such a famous ship



Fig 7 Posted in Melbourne on 26 May 1857 and carried on the SS *Great Britain* to Liverpool, landing on 22 August 1857, this cover has an S19 Liverpool ship cancel. It is highly coveted by ship letter collectors as it indicates that the ship did indeed return to normal services between the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny

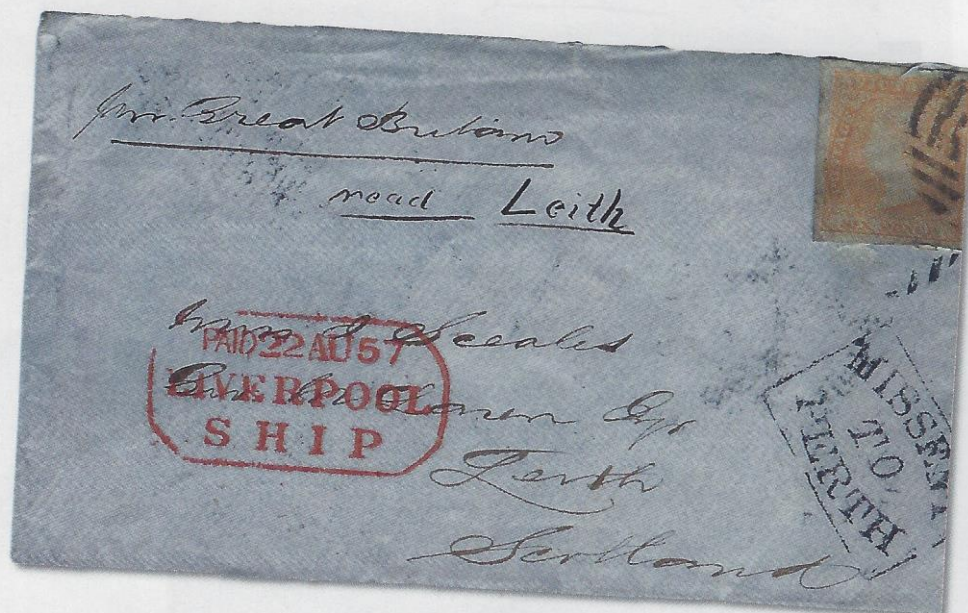


Fig 8 This rare cover, posted in Melbourne on 20 May 1857 and arriving in Liverpool on 22 August 1857, includes an S17 ship letter cancel. The canceller was found in a drawer and brought back into service for one day only due to the vast amount of mail brought ashore from the SS *Great Britain*. The cover was also misread and sent to Perth before being redirected to its correct destination in Leith.



using this S19 type of cancel, which was in use for 21 years of service, might seem of no real consequence, this particular date and the usage of the cancel indicates the day the mark became famous. It indicates the fact that SS *Great Britain* did in fact make that single voyage between the two war exploits and is now so sought after by collectors of ship letters.

The SS *Great Britain* sailed from Melbourne in May with a full cargo of mail, and it is thought that, on route back to England, the ship also took on board all of the mail from the P&O vessel SS *Simla* and also the Cunard ship SS *Jura*. On arrival at Liverpool, on 22 August 1857, there was so much mail that the post office used every available S19 datestamp (it is well known that there was always more than one datestamp made which could be used when it was very busy).

Even with all datestamps in use, the post office still could not cope, so for one day only, they pressganged into service the now defunct S16 ship letter cancel, which hadn't been used for over two years, inserting a 'PAID' mark into the top left-hand corner. Once the day was over, the old S16 ship letter mark, which was found in the drawer as mentioned earlier, ended up back in the drawer never to be used again. This one-day-only cancel is listed as S17.

This S17 ship letter cancel is so rare that it is thought all of the known copies can be counted on two hands at best, while others would say maybe only one hand, such is its rarity value. The example shown in Figure 8 has a final little chapter of its own, as the post office misread the address and sent the letter to Perth when the address was in fact Leith and so it was re-directed – a fitting conclusion to what in philatelic circles, was the most famous voyage of all time in the history of the truly superb SS *Great Britain*.

## Allan Line vessel

Figure 9 shows a small envelope, complete with letter, which was posted at a time when many of the Atlantic vessels had been taken for use as transports for the Crimean War, especially the Cunard Line. This letter was posted at Hamilton and carried by the Allan Line vessel *Canadian* to Liverpool where it received an M10 'BY-CANADIAN/PACKET' cancel, which was originally made for letters to be carried by the Canadian Steam Navigation Company.

On the reverse is a P9 packet letter cancel dated 14 August 1856 and it arrived at its destination at Maryport in Cumberland the following day.

The *Canadian* was wrecked only ten months later in June 1857, such were the extreme sailing conditions along the Canadian coast.



Fig 9 The front and back of an entire with an M10 'BY-CANADIAN/PACKET' cancel, originally made for use on letters carried by the Canadian Steam Navigation Company. On the reverse, is a P9 Liverpool packet letter cancel dated 14 August 1856. The letter was carried by the Allan Line vessel *Canadian*, which was wrecked ten months later in 1857

There are other marks from Liverpool which are maybe just as rare and just as valuable, but the above is just a hint of what you could buy with luck and maybe in excess of a couple of thousand pounds on a good day if they were available, which of course they are not! But we can all dream of such an occurrence happening, when a lot in an auction suddenly comes your way.

All of the items in this article are from one person's collection, so it is possible to find and collect a near perfect full collection. So if you are reading this article thinking, Oh dear, maybe I have a problem, then have faith, because with luck anything is possible, and the very scarce end of a subject can be found and obtained. Isn't the fun of collecting in fact the chase and not the kill? Once you have got the item and written it up then the adrenalin passes onto the next most wanted item.

## References

*A History of the Ship Letters of the British Isles*, Alan W Robertson, 1955 limited edition of 600 copies, reprinted for a further 100 copies, containing updates, by H Hayes in 1973.

Robertson Revisited, Colin Tabcart, James Bendon Ltd., Limassol, 1997.

## Further reading

There is now a new 2020 *addenda* to the 2010 *paquebot* book 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](mailto: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, again please contact the TPO & Seapost Society for details.

