

# Gibbons Stamp Monthly

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bisects of the  
Falkland Islands



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printing legacy



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## All aboard!

The Plymouth to Bristol  
Foreign Mail TPO



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the King George VI period





# The Plymouth to Bristol (Foreign Mails) TPO

By Keith Morris

In 1869 a decision was made to abolish the sorting of foreign mail on packet ships coming into Plymouth. Instead, a request was made to have the mail sorted on the rail journey from Plymouth – thus a new and unique Travelling Post Office service operating from Plymouth to Bristol was born. Keith Morris describes the introduction of the service and the various postmarks that it employed.



Throughout the Victorian era, sailing ships would leave the shores of England and sail all over the world, bringing back cargoes of exotica the likes people had never seen before and, of course, providing a vital mail service to and from distant lands. The ships were small and by modern standards frail, the failure rates for voyages were extreme and anyone sending important mail in either direction would post a pair of letters on two different ships, maybe a week apart, in the hope that at least one of them would arrive at the desired destination. Imagine the look of despair when the postman knocked on the door and demanded 3s.4d. (16p or more) for a letter when you knew a second could well be on its way.

To begin with, many of the mail contracts issued by the GPO were given to take foreign mail to and from ships arriving and leaving Falmouth. Not only was it a tough journey to transfer the mail by stagecoach between Falmouth, London and elsewhere, but many of the ships of the time would stagger into port after making long and arduous journeys. Over all, it made the shipment of foreign mail a precarious occupation.

With the advent of bigger and safer ships and the move to steamships instead of sailing ships, many of the lines, especially those with sailings from Africa and the West Indies, eventually moved their operations to Plymouth. Not only was this much closer to the rest of the country than Falmouth, it also had the huge advantage of being served by the fast, new invention of the time – the railway.

## The railways

Isambard Kingdom Brunel was the architect of creating the line that was eventually to run from London Paddington to Penzance and certainly from Bristol onwards. The early 1840s saw extension after extension (be it in broad gauge) gradually joining up the lines so that mail deposited at Plymouth would travel quickly and efficiently onwards towards London and the rest of the UK. The mail was bagged at the sorting office and sent onwards to be re-sorted



Fig 1 Coloured postcard showing the Plymouth to Bristol TPO at Plymouth Millbay Station c1900

Fig 2 A cover carried on the Plymouth Cape packet ship. The 8d. to pay postmark was first issued to the Devonport post office but was transferred to the Plymouth to Bristol TPO after the Union Line trading from the Cape moved its operations to Plymouth



at the other end of the line. As the railway service improved and the amount of mail being deposited from ships grew, it was decided that it would be a good idea to sort the mail in travelling post office (TPO) carriages attached to a train going north (the first TPO carriage was used in 1838 elsewhere in England with some success). In 1869 a new service was born using the train from Plymouth to Bristol (Fig 1).

Vessels from the Cape would dock in the port and send the mail to Devonport post office, while others would send the mail to Plymouth post office. Many ships on route for London, or even Southampton, would also moor in the bay in order to speed up the delivery of the mail. It would take maybe a couple of days to travel on to London, while mail dropped at Plymouth, with the advent of the railway and the new TPO service, would get to its destination the following day. A tender would go out to the ship and collect the mailbags which, in some cases, would go straight to the TPO carriage.

## One-way system

There were several fundamental differences with the Plymouth-Bristol (Foreign Mails) TPO compared to other TPO routes in operation at the time. Other TPOs had post office staff working in both directions and mail was dropped off at both ends. Also, each of the routes also worked to a strict timetable so that everyone knew exactly the times the carriages would run. In the case of the Plymouth-Bristol (Foreign Mails), the TPO carriages were attached to any train going north, but only if a vessel had docked or moored in the bay and the mail had been transferred to the TPO. If there was a very small amount of mail, then it would all be sorted in Plymouth post office and a Paquebot postmark would be added there. However,



if there was a large amount of mail and not enough time to sort at the post office, then the surplus mail would be transferred to the TPO carriages which would be added to the next available train. The bags would then be opened, sorted and the various TPO and Paquebot marks would be added to the letters enroute to show that they had been carried in the TPO carriages.

Once the carriages had arrived at Bristol and the mail had been transferred onwards, the TPO carriages would return to Plymouth light (i.e. unused). This meant that this TPO route was the only one that was a one-way system. There were a number of other TPO routes that travelled south from Bristol to Exeter, etc., but all of them were totally independent to this foreign mails TPO, which ran specifically at the behest of sailings into the port at Plymouth.

## The origin of the service

In 1869 it had been decided to abolish sorting the West Indian mail on board the packet boats and instead, to sort on the rail journey between Plymouth and Bristol. The South Devon Railway was asked on 8 June 1869 to provide sorting arrangements in a carriage set apart for West Indian mail from Plymouth to London. Then, on 27 July 1869, a letter was sent to the Bristol and Exeter Railway asking that a district sorting carriage should be displaced and altered for the sorting of West Indian mail between Plymouth and Bristol. The service was to start about 26 August 1869.

The *Hampshire Advertiser* reported on 1 September that the mails arrived from the West Indies aboard the *Shannon* on Monday 30 August. It also quoted the *Western Morning News* as saying: 'The mode of sorting these mails on route in the railway travelling post offices was undertaken for the first time on this occasion. A suitable staff of officials was supplied from Plymouth and Devonport Post Offices, who were instructed in their new duties by staff from the General Post Office, under the superintendence of Mr Lovatt, Sub-controller of Foreign Mails.'

The local Chamber of Commerce queried the wisdom of using Plymouth because of the frequent winter fogs which would delay the docking of the ships and wondered how long the practice would last.

In April 1874, the sorting carriage was fitted with larger wheels so as to be suitable for use on express trains between Exeter and Bristol. Figure 2 shows a cover which was carried on the new faster service. The 8d. to pay postmark was originally issued to the Devonport Post Office in April 1868, however, when the mails were transferred to Plymouth the mark, together with other values, was put aboard the Plymouth to Bristol TPO.

The earliest *List of Duties* available, from January 1893, shows a duty under the title 'Plymouth & Bristol TPO (Foreign Mails)'. The 1895 roster shows

Fig 3 A Time bill from the Plymouth to London foreign mails TPO as would have been used on the train to record its progress

**GENERAL POST OFFICE.**  
His Grace the Duke of NORFOLK, K.G., Postmaster-General.

**Mail, e.e. "PLYMOUTH to LONDON Time Bill."**

Remarks as to Delays, &c.	Carriages in Train.				Office Stamp	Actual Time of Despatch and Arrival
	P.O. Carriages	Pass. Carriages	Vans	No. of Engines from		
					Despatched by † Train from <b>Plymouth</b> , the of 189 , at	
					Arrived at <b>Newton Abbot</b> . . . at	
					" <b>Exeter Station</b> . . . at	
					Despatched by † Train from <b>Exeter</b> . . . . . at	
					Arrived at <b>Bristol Station</b> . . . at	
					Despatched by † Train from <b>Bristol</b> . . . . . at	
					Arrived at <b>Paddington Stn.</b> . . . at	
					And at the <b>General Post-Office</b> , on the of 189 , at	
Number of Bags brought to London Do. Parcel Post Boxes do.						

T. E. SIFTON, Inspector-General of Mails.

\* Insert "West Indian," "North American," or "Cape of Good Hope," as the case may be.  
† Insert "P.O. Special," "Company's Special," or "Ordinary," as the case may be.  
It must be clearly stated when Extra Engines are put on or taken off; and it should also be stated when an Ordinary Train is divided, and from what point.

G & S 19 [5219] 500 10 96v

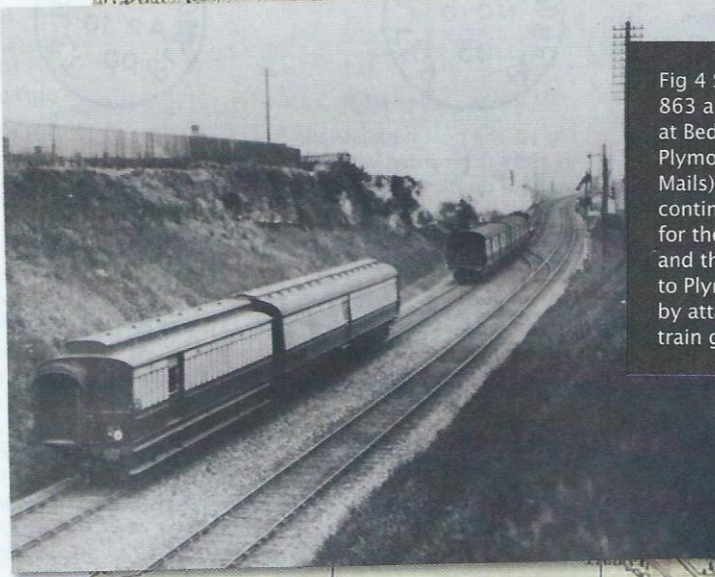


Fig 4 Sorting carriage numbers 863 and 837 after being separated at Bedminster for Bristol from the Plymouth to Bristol TPO (Foreign Mails). The remainder of the train continues to London with bags of mail for the capital and eastern counties and the sorting carriages are returned to Plymouth for their next turn of duty by attaching them to a convenient train going in the right direction

the duty running to 'Bristol (or London). Special Cape and West Indian Mails, Inward'.

Four 40ft vehicles, numbers 862–865, built in April 1892, were used for letter sorting. They were kept at Plymouth until required. An ink annotation states that numbers 864–865 were run on the night mail between Paddington and Penzance. The time bill in Figure 3 shows the complicated arrangements made for the disposal of the mail depending on the time of arrival.

The 1907 roster shows the duty using a 68ft letter sorting carriage, number 837 and four 68ft stowage vans, numbers 821–824 (all built in 1904) together with vehicle number 863 (Fig 4). Vehicle number 862 was kept in reserve at Bristol.

A note in the 1915 roster states that the large vehicles were actually 71ft 6in long by 9ft wide and were fitted with 12 wheeled bogies. These were the 'Ocean Mails'. Vehicle 837 was fitted with 'Slip' apparatus (allowing it to be detached from the main train while still on the move) and was slipped with number 863 at Bedminster for Bristol, the stowage vans going on to London. No line-side apparatus was used on this service.

It is not certain when the duty ceased, however, it was probably about 1915.



## Postmarks – Plymouth to Bristol

The B16 postmark, as in *Figure 5*, was originally issued in 1859 for use on board the Mediterranean packet ship, *China*, and was apparently transferred to the Plymouth to Bristol TPO in 1874. It has been recorded as used in 1881. The earliest recorded dated postmark (1874) is shown in *Figure 6*. This is also recorded in 1879, 1880 and 1888 without the index letter. The datestamp and B.16. obliterator (*Figures 7 and 8* respectively) were issued to Plymouth on 11 August 1875. *Figure 7* is recorded with index letter 'C' in November 1875 and has been seen without any index letter in March 1903. The postmark in *Figure 8*, has also been seen cancelling a block of 2½d. stamps, issued in 1887, and also on a cover dated May 1889 but without stops. An example with one stop (B16.), cancelling a cover of March 1879 is also known.

*Figure 9* shows an 1879 cover to Bristol, mailed from abroad and forwarded on arrival at Devonport (a double rate cover from the Cape). It is franked by green 1s. stamp tied by bold strike of B.16. (*Fig 8*) obliterator of the Plymouth to Bristol TPO with a 1s. to pay postmark at left. It has as a back stamp of Bristol for 27 February 1879.

Doubts have since been raised as to whether it was in fact used on the TPO. There is a brief note in the minute book in June 1894 regarding payment for the use of sorting carriages at Plymouth Docks for sorting foreign mails. Unfortunately, no details are given. Could the postmark have been used in this stationary office? On the other hand, a cover of unknown origin, addressed to Bristol, cancelled with *Figure 8*, without the stops, back stamped with *Figure 7*, without the index and dated 14 March 1879 has been recorded. It would seem unlikely that the cover would have been sorted twice for such a destination.

On 10 November 1883 two postmarks were issued and are recorded used with and without the \* (*Fig 10*). An example is known with the star, dated 5 July 1891, used on a 'FOUND OPEN AND OFFICIALLY RESEALED' label affixed to a badly damaged cover from South Africa to Whitehaven. The cover was also sealed with wax which was impressed with two clear examples of the 'Plymouth to Bristol Sorting Tender' bag seal. *Figure 11* and *Figure 12* are recorded used on the dates shown in the illustrations. It is not known when the title was changed to 'S.T.', or why, since it would seem the older TPO postmarks, as in *Figure 7*, were still in use in 1903. It may be that the duty was transferred to the control of the local Postmaster.

To pay postmarks, with examples in *Figures 13 to 19*, appear with rates 3d., 4d., 6d., 8d., 9d., 10d. (*Fig 20*), 1s. 1s.5d., 1s.6d. (*Fig 21*), 2s., 3s. and 4s., and were originally issued in April 1868 to Devonport. *Figure 22* was issued shortly after, indicating various other rates as well.

With the running of the new TPO and the landing of the mails at Plymouth, there was probably little demand for them at Devonport and the sorters took



Fig 5 The B16 barred oval which was transferred to the Plymouth to Bristol TPO in 1874



Fig 6 The earliest recorded postmark used aboard the TPO



Fig 7 The 'Plymouth to Bristol TPO' datestamp introduced in 1875



Fig 8 The B.16. barred oval also introduced in 1875



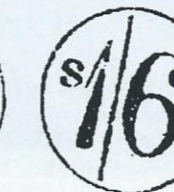
Fig 9 An 1879 cover to Bristol mailed from abroad with its 1s. stamp cancelled by the B.16. obliterator. John William Brackenbury RN was commander of HMS *Shah*, so this is a naval bag letter, hence the requirement for a British stamp (Reduced)



Fig 10 The postmark issued in 1883 is recorded with and without the \*



Figs 11 and 12 This type of postmark, with a difference in the two sizes of wording, were used 10 April 1900 and 6 May 1902. It is not known when or why the S.T. was added



Figs 13 to 19 To pay postmarks in this style with a variety of rates was issued April 1868 at Davenport and later used on the Plymouth to Bristol TPO



Fig 20 An underpaid cover posted from St Malgas, South Africa to Castletown, Isle of Man in October 1884. It travelled by the Plymouth to Bristol TPO where it received the B.16. barred oval and a 10d. to pay handstamp. It travelled via Liverpool to its destination arriving on the 30 October 1884 (Reduced)



them for use on the TPO. To pay postmarks, as illustrated in Figure 23 and Figure 24, with rates 1d., 2d. (Fig 25), 3d., 4d., 5d., and 8d., have been recorded. Official Post Office records also show postmarks with rates of 2½d., 6d., 9d., 11d., 1s., 1s.2d., 1s.5d., 1s.6d., 2s., 2s.6d., 3s., 4s. and 5s.

The Paquebot postmark as in Figure 26, but in purple, is known on a cover from Cape Town to New York on 8 January 1897, with the stamps cancelled with Figure 12. The cover also has the transit stamp of Liverpool on the reverse. Figure 27 shows a picture postcard with the Paquebot handstamp; the King Edward VII stamp is cancelled by the TPO datestamp shown in Figure 10 dated 9 May 1903.

A good example of consignee's mail unstamped from probably the West Indies via the RMSP *Don* to Messrs Thomas Dancau & Son, 41 Easycheap, London, is shown in Figure 29. The cover arrived at Plymouth at 2.50a.m. on 2 February and was transferred to the Plymouth to Bristol TPO.

Here it received a Paquebot mark, 5d./B16 postage due mark (examples can be seen in Fig 23) and the PLYMOUTH TO BRISTOL T.P.O./FE 2/98 datestamp (the same type as Fig 10) whilst being sorted into the mail bag for London, which would have been taken on to London from Bristol.

The rate changed on 1 January 1891 from 4d. to 2½d. Underpaid mail was charged at 'double deficiency', hence the 5d. postage due mark. This rate stayed in force until 24 May 1899, when Jamaica belatedly joined the Empire Penny Post scheme, hence a reduction to 1d. This makes Jamaica the likely place of sending, but anywhere else in the area (colonial or non colonial) would have been the same at the time of this cover (1898). Whilst being sorted in London, it received the London Inland Branch '2. pm/FE 2/1898' mark below the TPO mark and a later backstamp of London 'EC/ 2.15pm/FE 2/98' when it was being bag sorted prior to final delivery.

#### The TPO & Seapost Society

Keith Morris is a member of the TPO & Seapost Society. You may email the society at: TPO\_Seapost@hotmail.com

For a free copy of the society's Journal and membership application form, please contact:

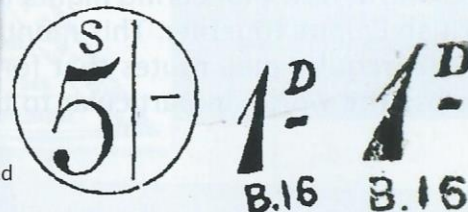
Keith Morris, TPO & Seapost Society, 1 St Mary's Drive, Fairford GL7 4LQ or phone 01285 713 075.

The Society has recently published a new book. For details of how to obtain a copy please contact the Society at the above address



Fig 21 Unstamped cover from Sucre, Bolivia, to London, probably carried on the RMSP *Moselle*, which had arrived in Plymouth on Friday 12 November 1875. The cover was transferred to the Plymouth to Bristol TPO where a circular 1s.6d deficiency to pay handstamp was struck and delivered on the Saturday morning to its final destination (Reduced)

Fig 22 This style of to pay postmark was issued shortly after April 1868 in a variety of rates



Figs 23 and 24 Various rates were denoted with this style of to pay postmark as well



Fig 25 A cover with a 2c. British Guiana ships stamp cancelled by an almost indecipherable Georgetown, British Guiana handstamp and posted to West Heathly, Sussex with a backstamp for London on 6th November 1901. As the letter exceeded the weight limit, a 2d. to pay handstamp for double the deficiency was applied (Reduced)

## PAQUEBOT

Fig 26 This paquebot postmark has been seen in purple as well as in black



Fig 27 A Royal Mail Steam Packet Company picture postcard of Pernambuco to Birmingham, with a King Edward VII 1d. tied to a single circle Plymouth to Bristol TPO dated 9 May 1903 and handstamped 'PAQUEBOT' recorded for 1903 only (Reduced)

Fig 29 A good example of an unstamped consignee mail, probably from the West Indies. It carries a paquebot, a '5d./B16' to pay and a 'PLYMOUTH TO BRISTOL T.P.O./FE 2/98' postmark (Reduced)

