

THE PORTLAND SHIP LETTER CANCELS

By Mike Dovey

Mike Dovey discusses the ultra-rare Portland ship letter cancellations produced in the early 20th century. With just a handful of examples known – one with no reported use – Mike puts forward some possible reasons for their rarity and ponders the possibility of unknown examples lying unnoticed in collections.

In the late 1800s the number of vessels sailing to and from Great Britain was for ever increasing, and so were the vast number of passengers being carried to all parts of the world, and the one thing they could all do whilst at sea was to write letters. All of the ships would have a ship's mailbox available, or at least an availability to hand letters to the Purser, and as the passengers would have no stamps to stick onto their scribbles it would fall to a member of the crew to have to run to the nearest post office, when the ship docked and purchase what the Purser or Captain thought they may need.

In most cases the ship would buy either too many or too few stamps and so, at worst, the Captain would end up with a safe full of stamps he could only use on the next voyage, presuming it would be the same as the previous one.

Sovereign territory

All this was to change, when on 1 January 1894 a new system of posting mail at sea was introduced known as 'Paquebot' postings, whereby, a ship on the high seas would be treated as its own sovereign territory and its country of registry, and so a British ship could use British stamps for mail posted on board which negated the need for anyone to have to run off to a post office for local stamps.

Also, around the same time, was the advent of the picture postcard, which began when passengers on board ships would go ashore and purchase view cards and then write them and post them in the ship's mailbox. The shipping lines quickly realised that this new method of sending picture postcards could be turned to their advantage by printing postcards of the ship itself and selling them to the passengers to send back to friends and relatives, this would be a perfect way of advertising the ship, and the shipping

Fig 1 For some reason the Portland post office decided not to issue one paquebot cancel, but instead issued three ship letter cancels. All are ultra rare!

SHIP LETTER.
CASTLETOWN.
ISLE OF PORTLAND.

Type 188
Used 1900–2

SHIP LETTER.
FORTUNESWELL
ISLE OF PORTLAND

Type 189
No record of use

SHIP-LETTER
PORTLAND HARBOUR.S.O.
DORSET

Type 190
Used 1910–11

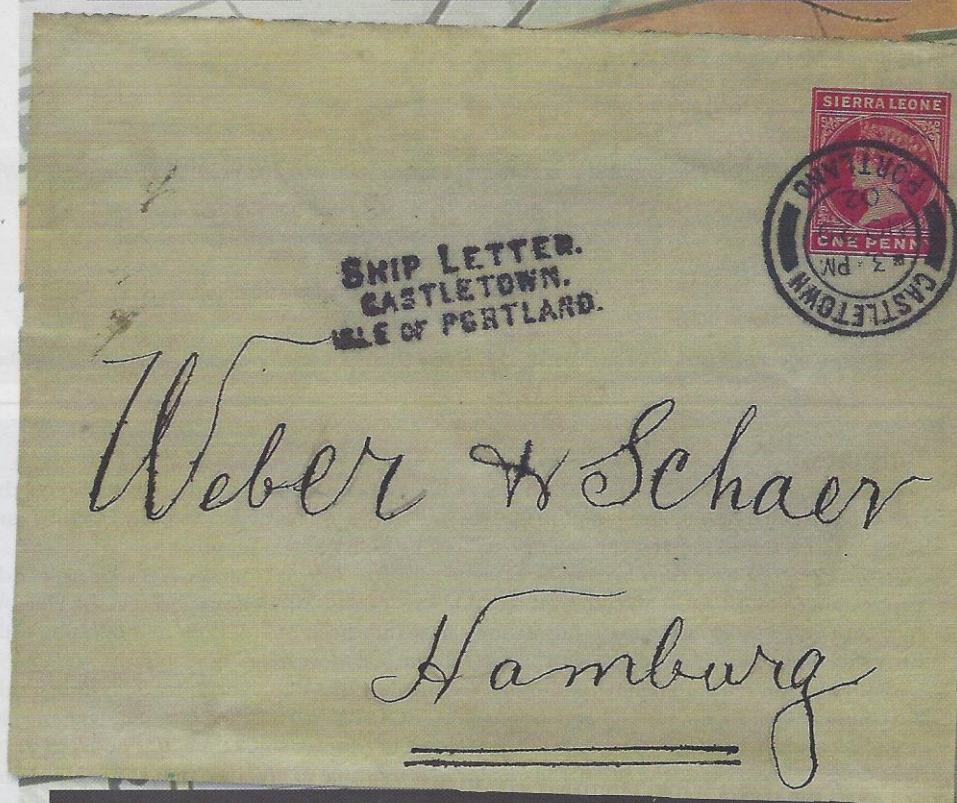


Fig 2 This letter, with a type 188 ship cancel, was posted in Sierra Leone and dated 1902 using a Sierra Leone stamp and addressed to Hamburg in Germany. It was probably carried on a British vessel which deposited mail at Portland

line, while the passengers themselves actually paid for the cost of production – a kind of a win-win situation.

Three rare cancels

On 1 January 1894 all of the major ports in Great Britain were issued with a paquebot cancellation, now known as an Omnibus Number 22. This was followed later by various

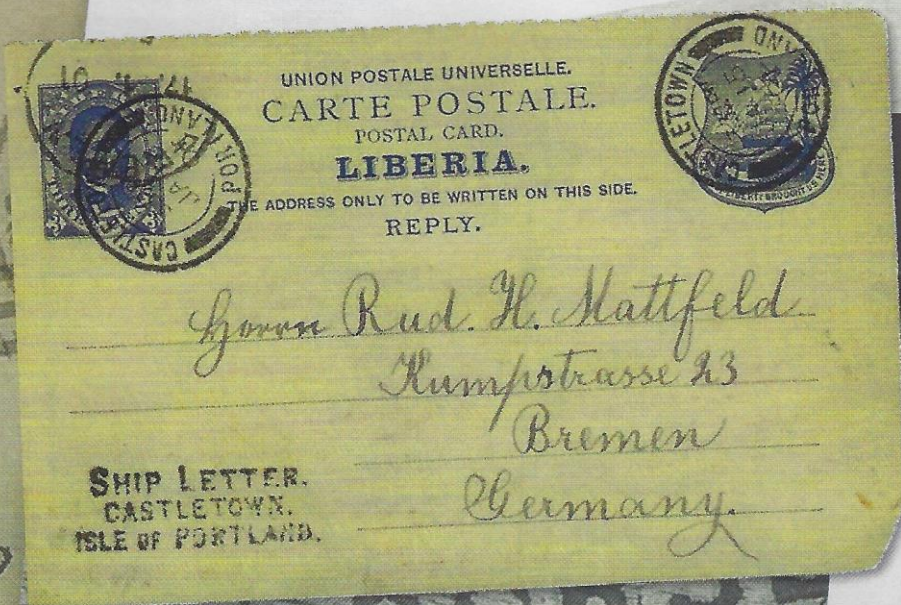


Fig 3 This postcard, sent from Liberia in 1900, was dropped off at Portsmouth, where it received a type 188 ship letter mark, before being forwarded onwards to Germany

port post offices introducing their own paquebot cancels after being proofed by the GPO. However, at the time it seems that Portland decided to not issue a paquebot mark, but to issue not just one, but three different ship letter cancels (Fig 1).

The reason for this is not known, but what is known is that Portland was primarily a Royal Navy port and so here we have the first major problem. Why didn't Portland have an HM ship cancellations issued to the port at the time of these ship letter marks? Or why wasn't a maritime mail cancellation issued in the years that followed? If there are such marks then any envelope or postcard with such a mark would be just as rare as these Portland ship letter cancels.

The post office in Portland, be it Castletown or Fortuneswell, was situated in the centre of Portland and outside of the Royal Naval Dockyard, which, could be a factor as to why there are no HM ships or maritime marks.

Faster delivery

At around this time, shipping lines decided that it could be a good idea to drop mail at the first port of landfall in Great Britain. In this way, mail would get to its destination a number of days faster than if the ship sailed straight to the destined port of call. Cunard Line sailings to Liverpool would, for a time, drop mail at Swansea or Fishguard, while Elder Dempster ships would drop mail by tender at Plymouth before going onto a final destination.

Type 188 cancel

It is true that merchant ships must have called at Portland to deposit mail for forwarding onwards to London, as this would possibly explain why a letter from West Africa was deposited at Portland

Fig 4 A photograph of HMS *Dominion*

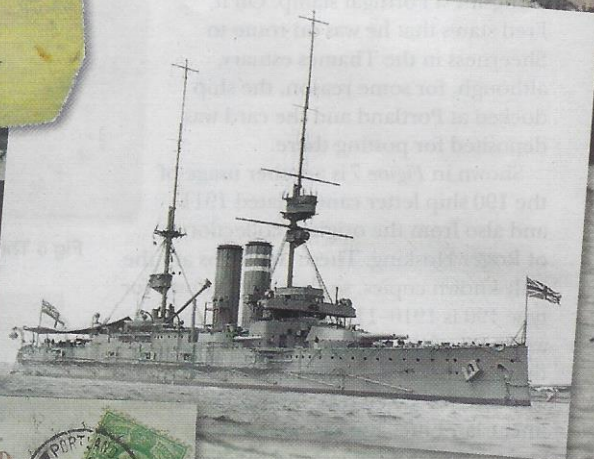


Fig 5 This postcard, sent from a crewman of the Royal Navy vessel HMS *Dominion*, was posted at Portland Harbour in 1908 but for some reason didn't receive a ship letter cancel (Reduced)

by a ship on route for, maybe, London (Fig 2). The result is that the letter in Figure 2 was cancelled with the 188 paquebot mark and dated 1902, while there is also a second postcard treated in the same way, which is shown in Figure 3, dated 1900. Both of these items were originally in the collection of Roger Hosking, who always maintained that he had the only two known copies, although whether this was true is unknown at present, hence the current usage known for type 188 as 1900-2.

No known copies of type 189 cancel

There are no known copies of the type 189 paquebot cancel at this moment in time. And while it was proofed, there are no known dates of usage, but it was maybe between 1902 and 1910, although it could have been before 1900 or even after 1912. It is more than likely that the 189 cancellation was used at some point, and even more likely that there could well be an example of the mark on an envelope or postcard somewhere in the world, and the most likely place will be maybe, somewhere in Europe, as we will see later in the article.

The reason for this article is, that while there is no known usage of 189, the total usage of both 188 and 190 can probably be counted on one hand, and, should any collector own both 188 and 189, then because of the sheer lack of items available, he or she would have to be the only collector to have a pair of Portland ship letters such is the rarity of both of the marks.

HMS *Dominion*

In 1908 a naval rating named Fred had posted a postcard to his mother from the King Edward VII class battleship HMS *Dominion* (Fig 4). On this occasion he used a British stamp, and for some reason it did not receive a Portland ship letter mark (Fig 5). It was a normal practice for all mail posted on the high seas, regardless of whether the stamp was British or foreign, to receive a paquebot postmark to denote that the letter or card

had in fact been posted in a ship's mailbox at sea. However, on this occasion the card was posted and it did not receive a ship letter cancel.

Type 190 cancel

Fred was to post another postcard in 1910, as shown in *Figure 6*. However, on this picture postcard of Vigo there is a three-line 190 ship letter cancel applied alongside a Portugal stamp. On it, Fred states that he was on route to Sheerness in the Thames estuary, although, for some reason, the ship docked at Portland and the card was deposited for posting there.

Shown in *Figure 7* is another usage of the 190 ship letter cancel dated 1911 and also from the original collection of Roger Hosking. These two items are the only known copies, so the usage known for type 190 is 1910–11. The postcard shows a picture of the SS *Argyllshire* which at the time belonged to the Scottish Shire Line. The line was taken over by another famous line, Clan Line, and in 1933 the ship was renamed *Clan Urquhart* and finally sold for scrap in 1937.

Why so rare?

We have to ask ourselves, why are these three ship letter marks so very rare, that one is not known, and the other two are even rarer than hen's teeth? There are maybe two ideas that can be put forward. Either of the ideas could be true, and there could even be other ideas as to why Portland Harbour ship letters are so very very, and yes, very rare.

Option One: The post office at Portland Harbour would only cancel mail with a ship letter mark if the item had a foreign stamp on it, and so, all mail with a British stamp would be cancelled with just the Portland Harbour datestamp, although why Royal Navy mail was not bagged and sent on to British Forces Post Office ships is not known. This would certainly reduce the number of items with a ship letter, but there would still be a good number of cancels done over a 12-year period. However, there is a posting known using a GB stamp and so maybe the answer could lie in option two.

Option Two: It could be that all of the mail was cancelled with the Portland Harbour datestamp and then sorted and bundled with only the top item in each bundle actually receiving a ship letter mark. In this way each bundle of maybe 50 or a 100 items would produce just one ship letter mark. By doing this there would be a volume of mail, but very little usage of the ship letter cancellations, and this could explain why Fred's 1908 postcard did not receive such a mark.



Fig 6 This postcard is the earliest known example to be posted with the type 190 cancel

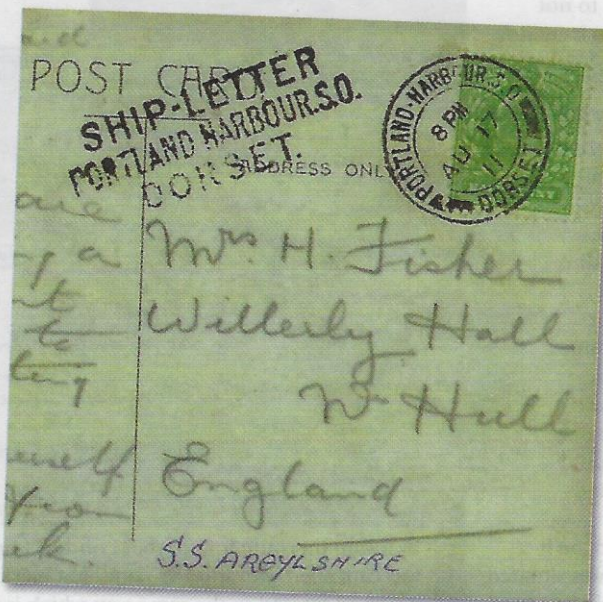


Fig 7 Part of a postcard dated 1911 that includes a type 190 cancel. It is one of only two known examples of this type of cancel, but do any more exist in collections that can prove a different date of use?

Whatever the reason, this article is maybe the first time that anyone has actually seen the two Portland ship letters together in one article, and that they could well be owned by one person and in one collection. This article shows, that there are at least four known items which are the above four mentioned, this therefore begs the question as to how many others are out there in various collections, and is there even a copy of the 189 ship letter mark?

If you have any information about extra marks please contact the writer via the email address below, so that we may write a true, fully-expanded history of the subject for future reference when we are all long gone. Alas, there is so much maritime postal history now lost, and all because the owner of maybe a superb collection, who had the knowledge of the subject, passed away, and not only was his knowledge lost, but the collection was sold and scattered to the four winds, leaving us all with a gaping hole and a subject lost for ever.

It is imperative that all subjects are written down for future generations to read up and know what happened in the past, but this can only be done if we get things into print for future generations to see. My most sincere thanks in advance for any help you can give to open the life of the Portland ship letter.

Further reading

There is now a new 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.

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