

# Travelling Post Office After Midnight Postmarks

By Dr Iain Wells and Keith Morris

The practice of Travelling Post Offices not to alter the date of postmarks applied at midnight led to the possibility of obtaining a first day cover bearing the previous day's date. To deter collectors, the GPO decided to provide TPOs with a special postmark for use on covers bearing new stamp issues. However, this just created a new area to collect and resulted in enthusiasts buying new issues and then racing about the country trying to beat the trains in order to gain these coveted postmarks. Dr Iain Wells and Keith Morris highlight this neglected area of first day cover collecting.

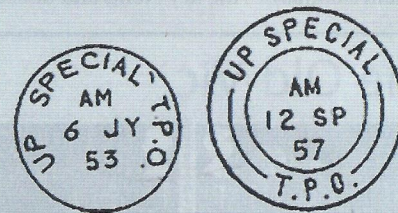


Fig 1 AM postmarks were introduced in 1953 to stop collectors producing f.d.c.s. with postmarks dated before the official first day of issue

I have had first day covers posted and dated the day before the official launch date for the issue. Surely not, it is impossible, you may say; the Post Office would never allow it. Read on; this may interest you.

## Mail on board trains

The transmission and sorting of mail on board trains began in 1838 between Birmingham and Liverpool, not long after the introduction of railways in Great Britain, and ended in 2004 due to the competition from road transportation. The trains carrying and sorting mail were known as Travelling Post Offices (TPO), Sorting Carriages (SC) or Sorting Tenders (ST), depending upon the duty. For administrative purposes, the TPOs and SCs were issued with dedicated postmarks to apply to official documentation. From 1860, the public were permitted to post mail directly into the TPO for an additional charge known as a Late Fee and the postage stamps were cancelled with the TPO's postmark.

Many, but not all, the TPOs ran overnight to their destination and for administrative purposes the date applied was not altered at midnight. This was to avoid confusion with the following night's run of the particular TPO. Consequently, any mail posted directly into the TPO after midnight would receive the previous day's date. In ordinary circumstances this didn't present any problems. However, until 1981, it was possible to purchase the new issues of stamps (as well as postal stationery items) at midnight on the day of issue from an all-night post office in London. Philatelists could then travel by car or train to a station at which a TPO heading for London called and post a cover bearing the new stamps and, therefore, legitimately obtain a postmark with the previous day's date.

Prior to the 1960s, first day cover (f.d.c.) collecting was limited to a very small collecting fraternity, but as the number of new issues began to increase, the appeal



Fig 2 The Crewe to Peterborough TPO commenced operation in 1966, departing from Crewe at about 00.45a.m. and travelled via Derby where it called at about 2a.m. The Lincoln Section of this TPO was detached at Derby to continue separately to its final destination at around 4.10a.m. This first day cover was posted at Nottingham at about 3a.m. bearing the 4d. value of the British Birds issue of 1966 and receiving the After Midnight postmark of this TPO; the first occasion of its use. The actual handstamp used on this occasion is shown alongside

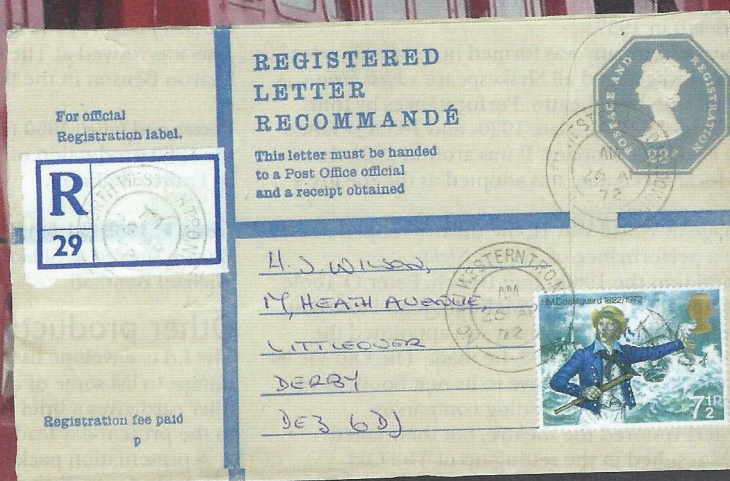


Fig 3 Travelling Post Offices accepted registered items of mail for a Late Fee costing 7½p (post decimalisation). This item was handed into the North Western Night Down TPO at Preston after a mad dash by road through the night from London's Trafalgar Square Post Office, which sold new issues of stamps from midnight. The North Western Night Down TPO left London Euston at 10.50p.m. and travelled via Crewe to Carlisle where it was scheduled to arrive at 5.15a.m.

Base image credit: Duncan Harris, Travelling Post Office Sequence for pick up of mail on moving train. Taken 2009

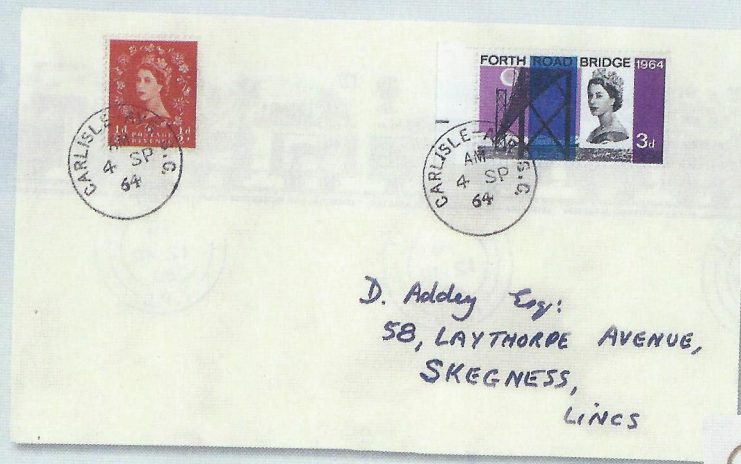


Fig 4 First Day Cover with the 3d. value of the Forth Road Bridge set posted into the Carlisle–Ayr SC at Kilmarnock on the first day of issue. The Sorting Carriage travelled from Carlisle via Kilmarnock, where this cover was posted, to its final destination of Ayr. This was the only occasion that the SC used an After Midnight postmark and no more than 50 covers exist. The ½d. definitive stamp defrays the Late Fee

All covers shown reduced

of collecting an f.d.c. for each event also increased. As a result of this new collecting area, certain members of the TPO & Seapost Society and others found this way of expanding their collections with a set of f.d.c.'s dated the day before the stated new issue date. To f.d.c. collectors, this new twist opened up a whole new collecting area.

**AM postmarks**

However, the GPO, as it was then, took a dim view of philatelists taking advantage of this method of obtaining pre-dated f.d.c.'s. Following much deliberation in 1952–53, the GPO, in preparation for the Coronation stamp issue in June 1953, decided to provide the six TPOs running into London in the early morning with a special postmark for use on any covers bearing new issue stamps. These postmarks were similar to the normal operational postmarks except they included a die with the legend 'AM' above the date – the AM signifying After Midnight to distinguish the postmark from that of the next run of the TPO the following evening (Fig 1). Thus, a unique type of postmark was introduced to the six TPOs travelling into London that signified use on the first day of issue and this was prior to the introduction of dedicated first day of issue postmarks in the 1960s.

Initially, it appears that philatelists were unaware of this arrangement as it was not publicised outside the GPO. However, from about 1960, a dedicated group of philatelists began exploiting these arrangements to obtain these AM postmarks. To do so meant, in most cases, a sleepless night because it necessitated travelling into central London to purchase the new issue stamps at midnight then either driving at speed or travelling by train to post the f.d.c. into a TPO heading for London. The group usually coordinated their activities because the person driving was, obviously, unable to affix the postage stamps to the envelope. Therefore, a passenger was necessary and he could also lookout for the police in case they were caught driving in excess of the speed limit!

As the motorway network expanded during the 1960s and 1970s, it brought other TPOs and SCs into reach, in addition to the original six running

Fig 5 A first day cover posted into the East Anglian TPO travelling Down bearing the full set of Famous Composers issued in 1980. This is the penultimate time this particular postmark was applied before the withdrawal of the all-night facility at Trafalgar Square Branch Office



Fig 6 This f.d.c., created in June 1981, a few months before the all-night facility at the Trafalgar Square Branch Office was withdrawn, was posted into the Great Western TPO travelling in the Down direction, receiving its After Midnight postmark. The TPO travelled from London Paddington, where it left at around 10.20p.m., to Penzance, which it reached at 6.40a.m., having travelled via Bristol. To post covers into this TPO necessitated driving 'furiously' from London to Liskeard in Cornwall by 4.46a.m!

into London (Fig 2 and Fig 3). Uniquely, in 1964, the stamps issued to commemorate the opening of the Forth Road Bridge were released at midnight from the Edinburgh Head Office. With planning and coordination, philatelists, led by Colin Langston, the doyen of AM collectors, were able to post into five of the TPOs and SCs travelling in Scotland, although due to fog, two of the intended postings had to be abandoned (Fig 4).

**End of the line**

On 19 October 1981 the last remaining all-night Post Office at Trafalgar Square reverted to normal opening hours and drew to a close this aspect of collecting first day covers (Fig 5 and Fig 6). At least the collectors of this material no longer had to queue up at midnight to purchase the stamps and then drive at break-neck speed, licking and sticking the stamps through the night to reach a TPO or SC to post their covers.

Collectors of this type of f.d.c. did not go to all this bother and expense on every occasion that new issues of stamps were made, particularly as the frequency of the issue of commemorative stamps increased through the 1960s. The numbers of first day covers with the unique TPO AM postmark is not large, sometimes only a handful were posted into a particular TPO. For the Forth Road Bridge issue, for example, it is known that only 50 first day covers were posted into each of the four Scottish TPOs and one SC. For the two issues with a railway theme issued during the currency of AM postmarks, i.e. the sesquicentenaries of the Stockton and Darlington Railway in 1975 and Liverpool and Manchester Railway in 1980, a larger number of f.d.c.s were prepared (Fig 7 and Fig 8).

A total of 28 Travelling Post Offices and Sorting Carriages are known to have used After Midnight handstamps (Table 1) between them using 45 different postmarks (Fig 9).



Fig 7 First day cover with the 12p *se-tenant* Liverpool and Manchester Railway strip issued on 12 March 1980 receiving the After Midnight postmark of the Up Special TPO. This TPO travelled from Aberdeen, which it left at 3.30p.m., to London Euston where it arrived at 4a.m. travelling via Perth, Carstairs, Carlisle, Crewe and Rugby



Fig 8 First day cover bearing the Liverpool and Manchester Railway issue of 1980 posted into the East Anglian TPO travelling in the Down direction, i.e. away from London. The TPO travelled from Liverpool Street to Norwich via Ipswich where this cover was posted at around 2a.m. The postmark replaced an earlier but similar one in 1965



Fig 9 Some of the many different AM postmarks created by TPOs and SCs using AM handstamps (Reduced)

• Bristol-Derby TPO	• Huddersfield-Whitehaven TPO
• Carlisle-Ayr SC	• London-York-Edinburgh TPO
• Crewe-Bangor TPO	• Midland Going South TPO (Fig 12)
• Crewe-Cardiff TPO	• North East Night Up TPO
• Crewe-Glasgow SC	• North East Night Down TPO (Edinburgh Duty)
• Crewe-Peterborough TPO	• North Western Night Down TPO
• Crewe-Peterborough (Lincoln Section) TPO	• Shrewsbury-York TPO
• Down Special (Aberdeen Section) TPO	• South Eastern Up TPO
• East Anglian Up TPO	• South Eastern Down TPO
• East Anglian Up (Peterborough Section) TPO	• South Wales Down TPO
• East Anglian Down TPO	• South Western Up TPO
• East Anglian Down (Peterborough Section) TPO	• South Western Down TPO
• Great Western Up TPO (Fig 10 and Fig 11)	• Up Special TPO
• Great Western Down TPO	• York-Shrewsbury TPO



Fig 10 It was not only commemorative issues that were eligible for After Midnight treatment but also definitives. This cover bearing the three new definitives issued in August 1979 has been posted into the Great Western TPO Up, which travelled in the opposite direction to the Down TPO, at Reading at around 2.45a.m.

All covers shown reduced



Fig 11 A cover bearing the 50p stamp issued in 1980 to mark the London International Stamp Exhibition posted into the Great Western TPO Up, i.e. travelling towards London from Penzance. Additionally, the envelope has been dispatched from a preserved TPO sorting carriage at Didcot Railway Museum

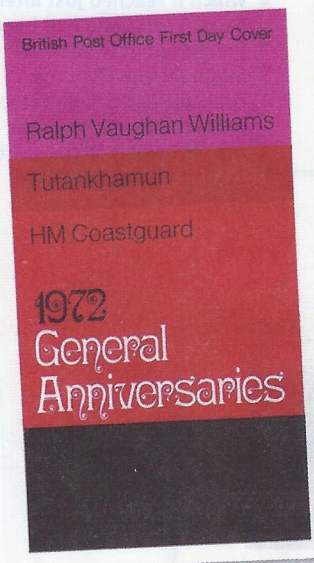


Fig 12 The Midland TPO travelling south from Newcastle-upon-Tyne at around 7.30p.m. to its final destination of Bristol, which it reached around 4.30a.m. The TPO travelled via York, Derby, Birmingham (New Street), Worcester and Cheltenham. This first day cover, posted at Worcester at around 2.45a.m., has the 3p value of the 1972 General Anniversaries set cancelled with the second of two different postmarks deployed by this TPO, which was in use from 1966

Unusual examples

The GPO's arrangements for cancelling first day covers on TPOs and SCs didn't always go according to plan. As the use of the postmarks was occasional, the handstamps were kept in TPO Section stores, not on the TPO, and only issued when required. Sometimes, the stores failed to issue them and the onboard sorters would either resort to blurring the normal operational postmark (Fig 13) or sending the covers unfranked to TPO Section in London, which was

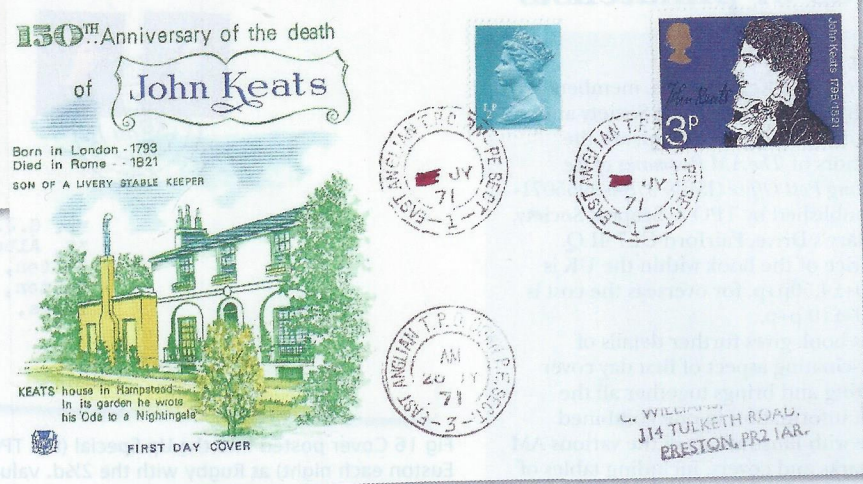


Fig 15 Cover bearing the 3p stamp of the 1971 Literary Anniversaries set initially predated 27 July by the East Anglian TPO (Peterborough Section) travelling in the Down direction. The date in the postmarks subsequently being obliterated by red pen and the correct After Midnight postmark applied retrospectively at TPO Section in London.

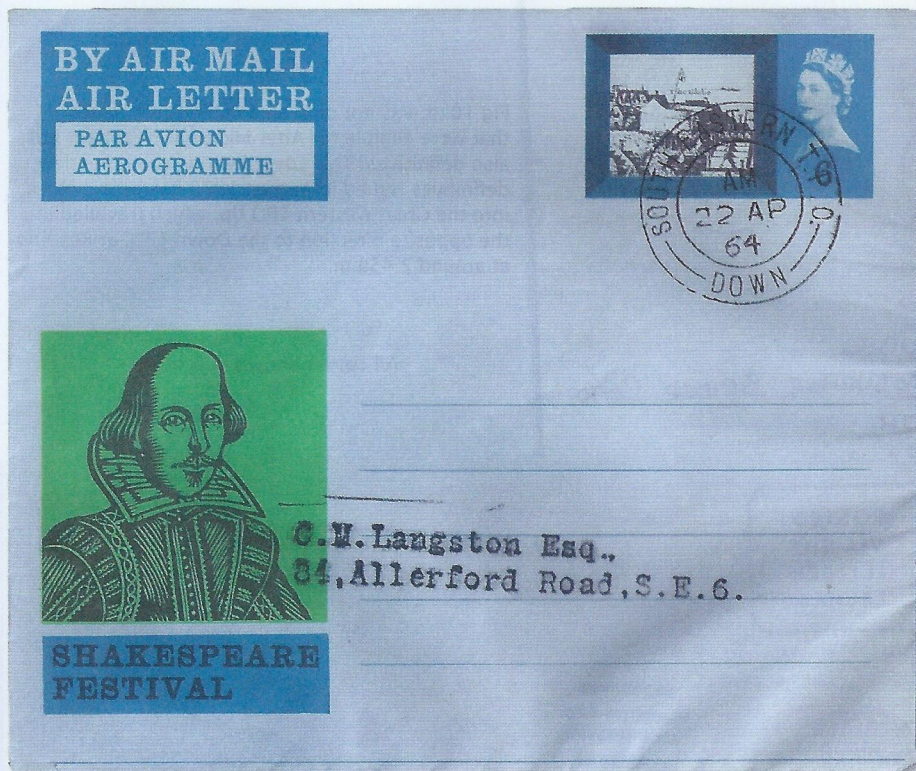


Fig 14 New issues of stationery including air letters were also released at midnight from the London all-night post offices. This example of the Shakespeare Festival air letter of 1964 was posted into the South Eastern Down TPO and has received the After Midnight postmark that had been made up by TPO Section with an incorrect date, in this case the day before the official release date, thus creating a predated After Midnight cover unintentionally! The South Eastern Down TPO left London Canon Street at 11.50p.m. and travelled via East Croydon, Redhill, Tonbridge, Ashford and Folkestone. The cover is believed to have been posted into the TPO at Tonbridge, where it arrived at 1.26a.m.

responsible for the operation of the TPOs, where the correct postmark was applied retrospectively (Fig 14).

On other occasions, the TPO sorters failed to recognise the new issue stamps and inadvertently predated them with the operational postmark (Fig 15). There are also instances when the stamps on a first day cover were predated by mistake and sent to TPO Section to be doctored using an eraser to remove the date and then apply the correct date by hand over the original (Fig 16). It is amazing the extent to which the GPO went to avoid pre-dated first day covers reaching the hands of philatelists.



Fig 15 Cover with the 3p value of the General Anniversaries set issued on 26 April 1972 and predated by one day on the Huddersfield-Whitehaven TPO by mistake. This TPO set off from Huddersfield at 1 a.m. for its final destination of Whitehaven, which it reached just after 6a.m. The stamp had been purchased in London at midnight and then the collector had driven the 220 miles to Preston to reach the TPO where it called from 2.50-3.50a.m. (Reduced)

## It is amazing the extent to which the GPO went to avoid pre-dated first day covers reaching the hands of philatelists

### Further Reading

Iain Wells and Keith Morris, members of both the TPO & Seapost Society and the Railway Philatelic Group, are the co-authors of *The AM Postmarks of the Travelling Post Office* (ISBN 978-0-9955071-2-8), published by TPO & Seapost Society, 1 St Mary's Drive, Fairford GL7 4LQ. The price of the book within the UK is £35.50+£4.50p+p, for overseas the cost is £35.50+£10 p+p.

This book gives further details of this fascinating aspect of first day cover collecting and brings together all the known information in one combined source with illustrations of the various AM postmarks and covers, including tables of known dates, as well as explaining about the official doctored covers and the existence of bogus AM marks that could confuse the unwary.



Fig 16 Cover posted into the Up Special (the TPO travelled from Aberdeen to London Euston each night) at Rugby with the 2½d. value of the Post Office Savings Bank issue of 1961. However, on this occasion the TPO didn't have the correct postmark on board and cancelled the stamps with the normal handstamp bearing the previous day's date. The cover was subsequently withdrawn from the post and sent to TPO Section who doctored the postmark by applying a '28' over the original 27 in the date and an 'AM' die above the date both by hand! (Reduced)