# BIRMINGHAM 'SHIP' Double Ring Handstamp – Part 1

## Was it a 'paquebot' or a 'ship' mark?

By Ian Baker

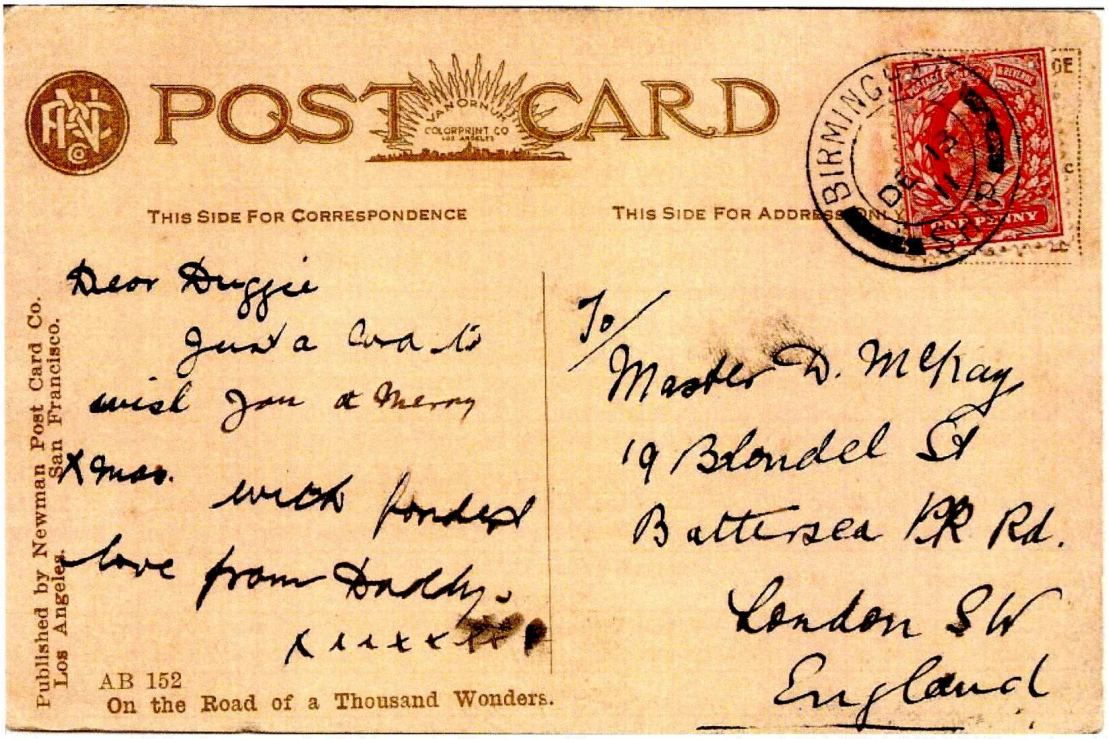



*Figure 1 – ppc of "The Poinsettia", California's Christmas Flower, stamped with Ed. VII 1d (SG219) and tied by dr Birmingham 'Ship' dated DE 13/11.*

### Why did Birmingham have a 'Ship' handstamp?

The use of this mark has been a mystery since it was first noted in 1949 and although there have been a number of further records; speculation still abounds as to how and why it came into use. This article has been compiled with help from Julian Jones and Mike Dovey (TPO & Seapost Society), Barry Attoe and other members of staff at the British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA) and also from Eric Lewis (Midland [GB] Postal History Society). Research of files at the BPMA has recently uncovered additional information, although more research needs to be undertaken. The following is a summary of the background to the landing of mails, primarily at Plymouth, their railway distribution and current views as to how the mark was used.

It will be seen that of the landing of mails at Plymouth, the majority was forwarded by train to London, with perhaps 20-25% going to Bristol, some of which was then forwarded to Birmingham. Three options of how an item might receive the 'Ship' mark are listed at the end of the article.

### Background

The handstamp was first recorded by EK Gibbs, in the Philatelist of April 1949 and in Volume 3 (Sep-Oct 1949) of the TPO Journal. Further copies were noted but until recently only seven or eight examples were known. Those currently recorded are shown in Table 1, from which it can be seen that UK destinations noted are mainly to the north of Bristol with just four copies to the south-east or south-west of England. It is believed all the items were written and posted 'on board' ship.

Those written on a trans-Atlantic westbound voyage were being landed at New York and receiving a paquebot mark, exceptions being item 6 (cancelled at Father Point, Quebec) and items 16 and 19. They were then bagged and transferred to an eastbound service. Currently, it is believed that most of the recorded items were landed at Plymouth. However, Avonmouth, Fishguard and possibly Liverpool or other ports were also involved.

In February 1905, the Secretary, GPO requested of the postmasters of Bristol, Birmingham and Plymouth; **"how were direct mails from the Transatlantic Packets currently disposed of and their proposals for improvements for sorting on board".**[1] Similar requests were made of Liverpool and probably other ports, although these replies have not, so far, been seen. This was in anticipation of the Trans-Atlantic Sea Post Office service, which started with the sailing of the SS Baltic, from New York to Liverpool on 10th May 1905. See 'R' in the following paragraphs for each reply. It was the practise for the Agents of the shipping lines, to arrange and pay for, tenders for the *landing* of mails, while the GPO did likewise for any *embarkation* of mails[2].

**BIRMINGHAM 'SHIP' HANDSTAMP - Figure 7, Paquebot Cancellations of the World.... By Mike Dovey and Keith Morris**

| No | Date | Destination | pc etc | Stamp | Notes and other marks | Paquebot mark | Shipping line | Recorded - TPO: Vol/page/year or auction etc |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | SP9/1907 | Chatham | pc | ? | - | ? | ? | 26 / 203 / 1972 |
| 2 | ? ?/1908 | ? | ? | ? | Earliest recorded date in Robertson Revisited | ? | ? | Robertson Revisited |
| 3 | DE14/909 | - | stamp | GB 1d | - | - | - | WL Freshwater (dealer) Feb 1957 |
| 4 | AP 19 / 1910 | Birken-head | pc | GB 1d | NZ ppc, dated on 13 Mar. | no | - | Cavendish, Sep 2005 Sale 676, lot 1237 |
| 5 | AU18/1910 | Whitby | pc | GB 1d | pc of SS Baltic. 'N.Y.P.O. HUD.TERM.STA. /F/JUL31/1910/PAQUEBOT' In Hosking as Fig.2 now Fig.7 | yes, w/b | White Star | private collection |
| 6 | MY22/1911 | West Yorks | pc | GB 1d | pc written on SS Laurentic, tied sr 'FATHER POINT/MY13/11/QUEBEC' | no, w/b | White Star | private collection |
| 7 | OC 16 / 1911 | Ponty-pool | pc | GB ½d x2 | pc of RMS Carpathia. N.Y.P.O. (? STA) /A/OC 10/1911/PAQUEBOT' | yes, w/b | Cunard | Grosvenor, May 2011, lot 3278 |
| 8 | DE13/1911 | London | pc | GB 1d | pc Poinsettia flowers of California | no | - | private collection |
| 9 | AP 04 / 1913 | North Wales | pc | GB 1d | NYPO Paquebot | yes, w/b | ? | noted by J Jones |
| 10 | 15DE/1913 | - | piece | ? | From Panama | no ? | - | sold by M Samwell |
| 11 | 18MY/1914 | North Wales | pc | GB 1d | RMS Carmania. N.Y.P.O HUD. TERM. STA. /A/MAY 11/1914/PAQUEBOT' | yes, w/b | Cunard | private collection |
| 12 | 18MY/1914 | North Wales | pc | GB 1d | RMS Carmania. N.Y.P.O HUD. TERM. STA. /A/MAY 11/1914/PAQUEBOT' | yes, w/b | Cunard | private collection |
| 13 | 21MY/1914 | Peterborough | pc | GB 1d | pc of San Diego, California written on HMSC Niobe off Ensenada, Mexico | no | R.N. | 21 / 142 / 1967 |
| 14 | 25JY/1914 | Birmingham | pc | GB 1d | Written on SS Aquitania. N.Y.P.O HUD. TERM.STA. /B/JUL 17/1914/PAQUEBOT' | yes, w/b | Cunard | private collection |
| 15 | 27OC/1920 | Shropshire | pc | GB 1d | Written on SS Adriatic. N.Y.P.O PENN TERM.STA/C/OCT 15/1920/PAQUEBOT' | yes, w/b | White Star | 26 / 203 / 1972 |
| 16 | 1DE/1920 | Colwyn Bay | pc | GB 1d | written on RMS Carmania | no, w/b | Cunard | private collection |
| 17 | 26SP/1921 | Birkenhead | pc | GB 1½d | pc of Puente Verrugas Peru, Havana 'Paquebot' (H2394) also ties stamp | yes | ? | private collection |
| 18 | 11JY/1922 | Coventry | pc | GB 1d | pc of SS Baltic. NEWYORK, NEWYORK JUL 3 1922 PAQUEBOT' | yes, w/b | White Star | noted by J Jones |
| 19 | 19SP/1922 | Hinckley, Leics. | pc | GB 1d | RP pc of and cachet: 'RMSP"SS ORDUNA"/date 8th?/ POSTED ON HIGH SEAS' | no, w/b | RMSP | Cavendish, Jan 2009 Sale 712, lot 765 |
| 20 | 5NO/192? | Newton Abbot | cover | GB 1½d | SG 362 so probably early 1920s | no | - | private collection |
| 21 | 12JU/1923 | ? | cover | St Kitts 1d | - | ? | - | Philatelist, Apr 1949 |
| 22 | 22FE/1924 | Portsmouth | cover | GB 1½d | Written on HMS Capetown, in Jamaica until 4 Feb. then other WI islands | no | R.N. | 3 / 139 / 1949 |
| 23 | 18 FE / 1937 | - | piece | GB 1½d | Impression 'woolly' in Robertson Revisited as S1 | no ? | - | 4 / 43 / 1950 |

*Table 1: A list of all known examples of the Birmingham 'SHIP' mark. Note, items 11 and 12 were written on RMS Carmania, by different people to different addresses*

## Liners and sorting at Plymouth

By the early 1900s East Quay, Millbay was established as the major UK hub of ocean passenger and mail services. Ships from at least twelve companies called, including P & O, White Star, Elder Demster, French Line, Norddeutscher Lloyd and United States Line. In addition Union Line and American Line passengers were landed at Ocean Quay, Stonehouse Pool, while the mailbags were landed at East Quay. Although the smaller vessels could dock at the quay, it was quicker for large ships to anchor in Plymouth Sound and for tenders to transport passengers and mail to the quayside. If docking at the quay, any mail including that 'posted on board' would be handed to post office staff or taken by the shipping agent to Plymouth HO.

R – The Transatlantic Packets direct mails were received from USA, Canada, Newfoundland, Bermuda, Cuba, Mexico, Japan and New Zealand. While mails for Plymouth went to the local Head Office, those for Bristol, seven north of England cities, Ireland and Scotland were sent by 'special train' from Plymouth to Bristol, where they were forwarded on the first available train. However, letters for Dublin or Cork were specified to be sorted at Plymouth or in the 'Plymouth and Bristol SC'. Of the remaining letters for "England", those from the American Line were to be sent to Bristol and those from all other Packets to London, as were all letters for London[3a].

The liners approaching Plymouth were in constant radio contact with their Shipping Agents to advise their anticipated arrival time, together with the numbers of passengers, baggage and mail to be landed. The Agents were then able to request from GWR the required tenders and trains. A report[4] for the Secretary (GPO) in February 1908, by Mr Parsons, notes the speedier landing of the mails at Plymouth compared with Liverpool. It notes that in December 1907, 1100 bags were on their way to London, one hour fifteen minutes after the 'Majestic' dropped anchor in the Sound.

By 1911 up to seven tenders were working these transfers, the best known being Sir Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Richard Grenville. For the larger vessels, more than one tender would attend each collecting passengers, baggage and/or mail. In some cases, separate tenders would land the London and Bristol bound mails.

The landing practise at Plymouth was dependent on the number of mailbags. Small bundles of letters, from ships not contracted to carry mail, were taken to Plymouth HO. Also Post Office staff, did not go into the Sound if there were 10 or less bags to be landed from the vessel by tender (which was arranged by the Agents of the Shipping Companies). The postmen took possession at the quayside and the bags were probably sorted there, in a sorting carriage or building set aside for the purpose. It is recorded that the GPO paid rent to GWR for such accommodation[5]. The mail being despatched to London, Bristol or Plymouth HO depending on the bag destination address. It is not known whether the 'posted on board' mail received a paquebot mark at the quayside or at Plymouth HO. For larger liners, tenders were sent into the Sound with post office staff, who supervised the transfer from the liner and sorted the bags into the London and Eastern or Bristol, Midlands and north bound Divisions, if this had not been done in the mail room aboard the liner. This saved time and any confusion was avoided at the Docks, in the transfer to the trains[6].

When on 23 July 1920, HJ Draper moved from Chester to take up his appointment as Postmaster of the Plymouth Office, he arranged for the minimum number of bags to be landed at the Docks "where a Postman took possession of them" to be increased from 10 to 25. It is clear that 'posted on board' items would have been included in this mail, all of which may have been processed locally. In October 1922, Mr Draper requested new arrangements for the landing of these 'small' mails. Following lengthy discussions with both the shipping companies and the local Whitley Committee (unions) the minimum number was increased from 25 to 250 bags by September 1923. The ships of fifteen companies were involved including Cunard, P&O, Royal Dutch West India and White Star. The arrangement saved the Post Office staff having to go into the Sound for a "very large" number of landings, as the bags could be sorted on board the tender, on its return to the quay, before being loaded into the requested trains. This was done while the passengers' baggage was unloaded and passed through Customs[6].

Considerable numbers of bags were being landed in the 1920s, as is shown by a statement showing Plymouth P.O. staff costs, for landing US Mails in the three months ending 28th February 1922, during which time 26 vessels landed 85,256 bags at a cost of £480.7s.10d[7].

At this time; "At Plymouth the (*American*) Mails are landed by tender. A tally only is made on the transfer from Packet to tender; and on the tender the bags are checked in detail and sorted into several divisions." However, "At Liverpool the detailed check was abolished in June 1908. A count of the total number of bags is made as they leave the Packet and a second count of the total when they are transferred to the Liverpool Post Office *or despatched by train*" [8].

With the outbreak of WWI, some companies ceased to call at Plymouth and in August 1921, the only Trans-atlantic liners landing mails were from Cunard, Holland America, Red Star and the US Mail Steam-Ship Company. However, the BPMA records show that some Lines made 'temporary omissions' as in February 1925, when White Star and Cunard were not using Plymouth to land mails, as the US Post Office chose US registered ships to forward eastbound mail[9].

There was, however, a steady increase in total liner arrivals with the peak year, before WWII, being 1930, with 682 inbound vessels, landing 41,000 passengers and nearly 308,000 mailbags (220,000 had been landed in 1913). During this period from WWI, more than twenty-five shipping lines established new or re-established pre-war calls. To speed the transfer of mailbags from tender to train, a moving conveyor belt was first used from 19th February 1927[10].

### Liners and sorting at Bristol

R – "The only mail from America received and dealt with at Bristol was from the American Line, due at Plymouth each Saturday and received from there by special train. The mail originated from the Offices of Exchange in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, San Francisco, Chicago, Baltimore and St. Louis and from six other offices in Canada." This mail "was sorted during the day into direct bags for 137 post towns and 23 TPOs. The Plymouth & Bristol TPO (*Foreign Mail*) is under the control of the Postmaster of Plymouth"[3b].

### Trans-Atlantic Sea PO, sorting on board

The Instructions to British Officers employed on the New York to Liverpool (and for the *Plymouth*) service, via Queenstown, were issued on 29th April 1905[11]. The service operated from 10th May 1905 until the outbreak of WWI.

Initially, the American mails for South Africa were stored separately for landing and transfer to the first train for Southampton. Also any bags at New York without (*destination*) labels were put to one side for subsequent sorting in the Sea PO; it is possible these included the westbound paquebot transfer bags.

Firstly the mails for "Ireland" were sorted and bagged and together with the direct bags for Dublin, Belfast etc were off-loaded at Queenstown. Secondly, the mails for "Scotland" were sorted and bagged and together with the direct bags for Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee etc were off-loaded at Queenstown or Liverpool (*or Plymouth*).

Thirdly, the mails for "England" (including Wales) and London (City) were to be sorted, again the 'named' direct bags were to be kept to one side to be off-loaded with the 'made-up' bags. A large sorting 'case' of 128 boxes was used, comprising:
Left wing (40 boxes) for the twenty-two "Road" Divisions, which included 'Chester' (for North Wales), 'Birmingham', 'Irish', 'Scotch', 'London – Forward' and 'Foreign'

Middle portion (48 boxes) for forty-two English Town bags for Accrington to Nottingham, including Birmingham

Right wing (40 boxes) for a further thirty-one English Town bags for Oldham to Woolwich.

The instructions, go on to state that even if some of "the direct mails for English offices made up in the Sea Post Office be landed at Queenstown..... the 'Road' bags, together with such bags for 'England' as have not been opened in the Sea Post Office" should *not* be landed at Queenstown but at Liverpool (*or Plymouth*).

The mails for London (City) are sorted and made up for each London District. If the English Town bags are landed at Queenstown, then those for London (City) whether sorted or not, should also be landed there, as "it is desirable that the whole of the London Mails should reach Euston (*or Paddington*) at the same time".

Identified underpaid mail, was stamped and bagged separately and certainly in 1925 some found its way to Birmingham – *see* TPO Vol. 64/No.1 page 5. Probably, only if there was time available, would the bags without destination labels, be sorted on board the eastbound Sea PO.

To be continued

# BIRMINGHAM 'SHIP' double ring handstamp – Part 2

## Was it a 'paquebot' or a 'ship' mark?

By Ian Baker

### Sorting at Birmingham

R – the Birmingham postmaster stated that direct letter mails at present were received for: Birmingham only, from Cunard and White Star Lines at Liverpool and Queenstown; and of letters and newspapers, from the American Line at Plymouth but sorted at Bristol, for Birmingham and fifteen other towns, mainly in the north of England but also Ireland and Scotland[3c].

Birmingham was an Office of Exchange by 1904, as were Liverpool, Bristol and Plymouth. The Office was expanded in February 1920 to deal with parcels from six European countries. From April 1921, through mail stowage vans operated from Plymouth (Millbay Docks) to Birmingham (and Crewe).

### Railway operations at Plymouth

The South Devon Railway, which became part of Great Western Railway (GWR) in 1878, took full control of the Great Western Docks in 1874. The first passenger trains ran from East Quay in 1882, generally running non-stop to London. Ocean passengers bound for London, disembarked at Plymouth because the train journey of about five hours saved considerable time over continuing to London via Southampton. By 1905 Millbay Docks was established as a major hub for the landing of ocean passengers and mail. GWR operated train services as required, for passengers to London (Paddington) and for mail (all of which was contracted to GWR) to both London and Bristol.

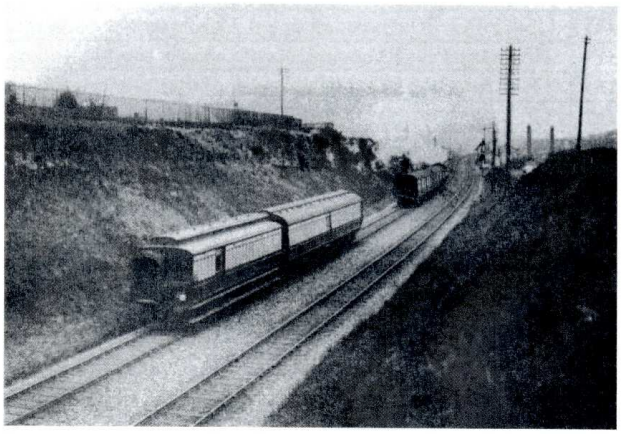
From 9 April 1904, the London & South Western Railway operated passenger only services from Plymouth Ocean Quay Station (Devonport Stonehouse Pool – boat trains) to London (Waterloo) in order to keep their Union and American Lines passengers, who would have previously used trains from the LSWR, owned Southampton Docks. This service closed on 28 May 1910, after which all ocean passenger and mail traffic was carried by GWR, from Plymouth Docks Station (Millbay Docks – boat trains).

The Bristol & Penzance TPO (North Mail) operated from 11 February 1896, probably via Plymouth (North Road) but only ran to Plymouth from 14 August 1916 due to the War. The handstamps are known used 1900-1913, with index 'E' or 'W', indicating east or west of Plymouth. By 1922, this TPO had reconnected at Bristol with the Midland TPO, not having done so since 1895. It was officially renamed the Plymouth - Bristol TPO and Bristol - Plymouth TPO from 14 April 1930[12].

The Plymouth and Bristol TPO (Foreign Mails) was started in August 1869 to sort the West Indies mail arriving at Plymouth (Millbay Docks). The Tax marks originally issued to Devonport were transferred for use by the sorters of the TPO. However, it may have ceased to run as a TPO by 1895, when the Roster shows the Duty as "Bristol (or London). Special Cape and West Indies Mails Inward" (see the George Daniel note below). Four vehicles Numbers 862-865 were used for sorting and were kept at Plymouth, two of these, Numbers 864-865 were used for the Night mail between Paddington and Penzance. It is believed the other two Numbers 862-863 were used at Millbay Docks for sorting of the ocean mails. There is reference in the Minute Book in June 1894 to the 'payment for the use of sorting carriages at Plymouth Docks for the sorting of foreign mails'. New handstamps were issued with the title changed to 'ST', although those with 'TPO' were used concurrently[5].

In a TPO Journal article[13] it is recorded that Ken Gibbs discovered that the Plymouth & Bristol TPO (Foreign Mail) had been "a building in Millbay Docks adjacent to the railway, certainly since the turn of the century if not before". It was thought this continued in use until the early 1920s. This would coincide with the introduction in April 1921 of through vans from Millbay to Birmingham (and Crewe). It is also noted that the late George Daniel, who had access to GWR operational manuals, found that as far back as 1895, all the Plymouth & Bristol TPO vehicles were baggage vans and not sorting carriages. Furthermore, a report at the BPMA dated 20th June 1904, regarding mails landed at Plymouth by American Line steamers, states that the letters for 'England' are sorted at Bristol and the newspapers at Birmingham. The main reason being cost, as the sorting on a TPO between Plymouth and Bristol, of the letters alone, would require at least 33 sorters accommodated in four or five mail carriages[14].

From 1 July 1906, the GWR route to London was shortened by 20¼ miles, with the opening of the Castle Cary 'Cut-Off', thus avoiding Bristol (Temple Meads). By 1907 vehicle No 862 was kept in reserve at Bristol and the duty consisted of two 'sorting' vans Numbers 837 and 863 (based at Millbay?) and four stowage vans Numbers 821-824. The vans Numbers 837 and 863 were 'slipped' from London bound trains at Bedminster for Bristol, the other stowage vans going on to Paddington[5].



In the years following WWI, the Bristol & Penzance TPO (North Mail) continued to run only between Plymouth and Bristol. In addition, a number of trains continued to depart from Millbay Docks, as required by the shipping Agents, to service the passengers

and mail landed, 40% of which originated from North America. However, there were a series of complaints concerning GWR, due to dock 'entrainment' labour disputes and GWR's tardiness in the dispatch of the mails[9].

In schedules, seen at the BPMA, of the US Mails landed at Plymouth for the period 1st November 1919 to 12th April 1920, there is no pattern in the time of landing of the mailbags (total: 39,927 letter bags; 24,334 parcel cases) to the timed departure of trains, whether ordinary or 'special' requests, or whether to London (29,106; 21,736) or Bristol (10,212; 2,598). It is not stated for which destination the remaining letters only bags (609) were despatched but they were probably for sorting at Plymouth and may have been the paquebot mail[15].

The trains only ran on the request of the Shipping Agents and their make-up was of passenger carriages, mailbag stowage vans or a combination of both. In the main, destined for London but some mail van 'specials' went direct to Bristol, in addition to the Bristol & Penzance TPO and those stowage vans 'slipped' at Bedminster from London bound 'special' trains. On 26th April 1921 GWR did agree to the running of stowage vans from Millbay Docks direct to Birmingham and Crewe. Although there were initial difficulties during that summer due to a shortage of coal[16]. The docks were closed to mail and passenger trains in 1963, the last year of ocean liners calling at Plymouth.

Overview

As is stated by Mike Dovey in the new "Paquebot Cancellations of the World..." page 315, a paquebot mark should be applied, to a postcard or envelope that has been posted on board a merchant ship *on the high seas* and is subsequently deposited in a postal system *foreign* to the ship's country of registry. The stamps used for pre-payment being those of the nationality of the ship, or of the country in which it is maintained.

Of the 23 records in Table 1, 19 are *known* to have GB stamps and 14 are *known* to have been 'written on board'. Although only 9 have paquebot marks (8 at New York) and two are Royal Navy ships, it is believed that all the items were written and 'posted on board'. The St Kitts item is an example of the stamp of a ship's last port of call being accepted as valid postage, although since WWII this is no longer true. In fact, all British and British colony stamps were generally accepted as interchangeable on British and British colonial ships.

The frequency of postcard records in the list is explained by the picture postcard collecting hobby, the 'Golden Age' being before WWI. While only three copies, on cover or piece, were known in 1950 (Numbers 21-23 in Table 1) postcards have gradually surfaced as family collections have come to the market.

The New York paquebot items in the list, were part of the bagged eastbound mail on British or USA ships and were presumably not sorted on board or at Plymouth HO but transferred directly onto trains for Birmingham (via Bristol until the through vans in 1921). Item 6 is a strange case, as the postcard was also written on a westbound voyage but the GB stamp was cancelled with a Canadian local office handstamp, before being returned to the UK. All other items arrived at Plymouth (or another UK port?) on British registered ships, as, if on foreign ones, they should have foreign stamps and have received a Plymouth paquebot mark.

With reference to 'sorting carriages' and/or a 'building' (the Plymouth & Bristol TPO [Foreign Mail] in 'name') it is probable that mailbags and/or their contents, including identified underpaid items, were sorted at the Millbay Docks until the early 1920s when GWR agreed, in April 1921, to run stowage vans through to Birmingham (and Crewe). Foreign vessels not contracted to carry mail would only have items 'posted on board' (bundles of loose letters) which would be taken from the quayside to Plymouth HO, for the 'paquebot' handstamp and subsequent sorting. Similar mail from UK registered ships may also have been handled locally.

The mailbags landed by tender were sorted either, on the Sea Post liners, on the tender while returning to the quay, or at Millbay docks for: Plymouth HO (paquebot handstamp and local mail), to trains for London and Bristol ('road' and 'town' bags) or to the Plymouth & Bristol TPO (Foreign Mail) 'building' for sorting before loading on later trains for London and Bristol.

As Mr Gibbs comments in TPO Vol. 26, page 159 (Sep. 1972) 'loose letters' (from the smaller liners not contracted to carry mail?) were taken to Plymouth HO. Mailbags from the larger contracted liners were transferred direct to the trains, thus bypassing Plymouth. However, Mr Gibbs is recalling procedures of some forty years before, in the late 1920s or early 1930s, as the direct train to Birmingham began in April 1921 and the conveyor belt was introduced in February 1927. Also, as Birmingham was an Office of Exchange by 1904 and the first 'Ship' mark is for 1907, his comment that "all ports were *instructed* to send ship mail to Birmingham", could be either a confirmation of an earlier instruction or a new instruction taking advantage of an established office.There were also 'Ocean Mails' from Avonmouth and Fishguard, some at least of these coaches were forwarded from Bristol to Birmingham, possibly attached to the Midland TPO in which sorting took place[17].

Questions and confirmations required – can you help?

The Bristol & Penzance TPO (North Mail) was a regular TPO but operating to Plymouth only, from 14th August 1914. Did it run via Plymouth (North Road) carrying and sorting only UK internal mail?

Was the Plymouth & Bristol TPO (Foreign Mail) just a 'name' for the sorting operation in vehicles Numbers 862-863 or a building at Millbay Docks? The evidence points that way and certainly in 1905, the 'TPO' was under the control of the

Plymouth Postmaster and not London. Why did the other 5 records, known to have been written 'on board', not receive paquebot marks?

Did the Royal Navy ships transfer their mail to a British vessel? Neither ship had time to return to the UK. HMCS NIOBE was off the Pacific coast of Mexico throughout May 1914 (see TPO Vol. 21, page 143) and HMS CAPETOWN was in the Caribbean throughout February 1924 (Ministry of Defence reply to Sydney Raine, 8th August 1966).

Is it significant, or just coincidence, that all known 'Ship' marks are dated after 1st July 1906, the day that GWR opened their 'short cut' to London, avoiding Bristol?

Given that from the early 1920s the 'building' at Millbay Docks was no longer used for sorting and with direct vans to Birmingham from April 1921, why are there are only 2 'Ship' records after September 1923, when postmen did not go into the Sound for landings of less than 250 bags?

### Scenario options

Option 1: Items with foreign paquebot marks, were forwarded to UK ports as separate mail. They were *not* UK port paquebot items, nor were the 'on board' items arriving on British registered ships. All these items with no *country* of origin, may have been sorted together at the Plymouth & Bristol TPO (Foreign Mail) 'building' and then sent, in sealed bags, to be sorted at and distributed from Birmingham, where they received the 'Ship' mark, issued to identify such incoming *ship* mail . All other mail, originating from overseas *countries*, was sorted and distributed by the quickest means. Posted 'on board' mail arriving on foreign *registered* ships received the local UK port paquebot mark.

Option 2: All mail from any ship was sorted by bag at Plymouth, mail for London being despatched immediately. If the amount of other destined mail was too great, the extra bags were sent by rail to Bristol, who if they could not cope, sent the remaining bags to Birmingham. The 'on board' mail arriving on 'foreign' registered ships was directed to Plymouth HO, where it was stamped with a paquebot mark. It is assumed the four southern England items in Table 1, were miss-sorted into the wrong 'Road' bags.

Option 3: Small bundles of 'loose letters' received a Plymouth paquebot handstamp; liners contracted to carry mail transferred all their mailbags to tender and then, depending on the destination label, to mail coaches bound for either London (possibly 75-80% of the mail) or Bristol, where some was sorted for Birmingham to be cancelled. Again it is assumed the four southern England items in Table 1, were miss-sorted into the wrong 'Road' bags.

### Additional member's records and thoughts

My main collecting interest is in the postal history of Birmingham, of which the 'Ship' cancellation forms but a part. However, I have found it fascinating exploring the background of how it may have been used. Further research at BPMA is required to: a) try to locate the Post Office instruction referred to by Mr Gibbs, that "all ports were instructed to send *ship* mail to Birmingham". *I believe this is critical to solving the mystery* and must presumably have originally been issued before 1907; b) establish when Birmingham first became an 'Office of Exchange' for letters; and c) re-check the proof books, for the 'Ship' handstamp, which may well have been issued some time before 1907.

Therefore, can readers who have an example of the handstamp, please check to see if it is unrecorded in Table 1 and if so, please forward a copy/scan (preferably both front and back of postcards) to the Editor. If it is in the list, can you add any information, especially regarding the UK destination of item 2 or 21? Do you have any additional information that might confirm or disprove one of the options, or perhaps a new idea completely?

Undoubtedly, it is important to consider what has 'not' been expressed, either fully or in part and to keep an 'open mind' in interpreting the research and comments. At this time given the above report, I favour Option 1, as it deals with the 'ship' mail of the High Seas, while the normal foreign country mail was distributed as quickly as possible. However, until the original 'Instruction' is traced, it will remain a mystery.


Sources:

[1] BPMA – POST 29/853/File XVI (Start of 'Trans-Atlantic Sea PO')
[2] BPMA – POST 29/1228/various files
[3a] BPMA – POST 29/853/File VII (Plymouth report)
[3b] BPMA – POST 29/853/File IV (Bristol report)
[3c] BPMA – POST 29/853/File V (Birmingham report)
[4] BPMA – POST 29/865/File I (Report by Mr Parsons)
[5] Travelling Post Offices of GB & Ireland by Harold Wilson, page 115-118
[6] BPMA – POST 29/1228/File XVII & XVIII (Arrangements at Plymouth)
[7] BPMA – POST 29/865/File III (Mails landed at Plymouth)
[8] BPMA – POST 29/1228/File XVIII (Landing of American Mails)
[9] BPMA – POST 29/1228, 865 & 866/various files
[10] BPMA – POST 29/1229A/File XXXIII (Conveyor at Millbay)
[11] BPMA – POST 29/853/File XV (Instructions to British officers)
[12] Travelling Post Offices of GB & Ireland by Harold Wilson, page 93-96
[13] TPO Journal No 298, Winter 2007, page 105-106
[14] BPMA – POST 29/853/File I (American Line mail for 'England')
[15] BPMA – POST 29/1228/File XI (Train despatch times from Plymouth)
[16] BPMA – POST 29/865/File XV (Through vans to Birmingham)
[17] TPO Journal No 301, Autumn 2008, page 95

# Birmingham 'Ship' Handstamp – More Examples Recorded

By Ian Baker

**Table 1a:** Additional records notified of the Birmingham 'SHIP' mark:

| No | Date | Dest | pc etc | Stamp | Notes and other marks | Paquebot mark | Shipping line | Recorded - TPO: Vol/page/year or auction etc |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8a | DE 25 / 1912 | Cologne | cover | US 5c x2 | S. S. MAURETANIA cachet | no | Cunard | private collection |
| 21 a | 25 AU / 1923 | Southsea | pc | GB 1½d | written on HMS Calcutta | no | R.N. | private collection |