SOME PHILATELIC MARITIME MISCONCEPTIONS DISCUSSED

By Brian J. Cave, FRPSL

I wasn't present at the Bristol weekend meeting at which the subject of discussion was Paquebot markings. However, if Neville's account is accurate, there seem to be several misconceptions that it might be better not to allow to be perpetrated. Firstly, let us consider the word 'paquebot' itself (pronounced pakboo), which everyone knows is a French masculine noun meaning 'Packet-boat'. It should not be overlooked that it also means 'Steamer' and 'Liner' too, as this will then perhaps remind us not to associate the word entirely with one particular type of vessel, especially as a Packet-boat is perhaps not what most people think it is — or more correctly — was, because they went out with the age of sail.

A Packet-boat was a vessel plying regularly between two ports for the carriage of mails, but available also for goods and passengers. The term originated in the 16th century when State letters and despatches were known as the 'Packet' — so these vessels were essentially mail carrying boats. Various Acts of Parliament governed the carriage of overseas mail. In 1711 for instance, it became illegal to transmit letters by private vessels where official packet boats were already in service. These were built for speed, and in the 18th century they were plying regularly between this country and America, the West Indies, and around the Cape to India. They were lightly armed for their own protection.

By the early 19th century the Post Office themselves wholly owned and maintained a small fleet of these armed vessels, many of which were lost to storm, or captured by the French during the Napoleonic Wars, and by our American cousins during the war of 1812.

The transatlantic packets were ship rigged, around 150-170 tons with a crew of 28, and cabins for six passengers. They maintained a packet service to Lisbon, North America and the West Indies. Smaller schooner rigged vessels of around 70 tons, and a crew of 17 were used on the Harwich to Holland route, and some others plied between Weymouth and the Channel Islands. Yet others between Holyhead and Milford for the Irish service. An 1814 Act established a monthly packet to the Cape and on to India, employing East Indiamen (men o' war), and some private vessels, hence 'India Letter' handstamps.

Many of these vessels lost their role as mail carriers shortly after the introduction of steam propulsion, and the screw propeller, (towards the mid 19th century), when in order to promote the development of the merchant marine, the government gave contracts for the carriage of mails to private steamship owners. The name lived on for a few more years however in the form 'Steam Packet Ship' which described ships of a merchant shipping line which made regular voyages, between the same ports, carrying passengers and cargo in addition to their mail contract. Great shipping companies were founded which relied upon their mail contracts for the bulk of their business. In 1838 Samual Cunard obtained a monopoly on the carriage of mail between Britain and the United States, whilst the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company served the coasts of South America and the Caribbean. The Peninsular and Oriental Company being the one that carried the mail through the Mediterranean and on to India, eventually extending their services as far as Hong Kong, Shanghai and Sydney. Between the wars, for a liner to be designated a Royal Mail Steamer rather than mere Steam Ship was more prestigious (e.g. *R.M.S. Queen Mary*) when competition for passengers on the Atlantic run was keen.

From a philatelic point of view, the word 'Paquebot' was first coined for use (in one respect), in place of the older 'Ship Letter' (or its equivalent in other languages), by the Postal Union Congress held in Vienna in 1891. It got around the problem of cancelling the stamps of another country, and was intended for use on loose mail landed at

seaports. This was loose mail posted onboard a ship (and prepaid according to the regulations of the country of registry, or last port of call), whilst the vessel was at sea, either by being deposited in a box, handed to an officer responsible for mail, or to the purser or master-at-arms — whatever the arrangements were in a particular ship. In the case of a ship, which had a mail office, these letters could be handstamped 'Paquebot' onboard, before being taken ashore at the first port of call and delivered to the post office to be put into the normal mail organisation. Vessels without such provisions would also land the mail in the same fashion, but the 'Paquebot' mark would be applied in the post office ashore. In practice, ship's Agents (representatives of the owners) would usually meet the ship on docking, and undertake the actual handling of such loose letters between ship and shore post office, as part of their service to the owners.

Of course when a vessel stayed in port to discharge cargo, or carry out maintenance, or whatever, then any mail landed would be subject to the regulations and postage rates locally in force in that country, and would be franked with that country's stamps.

Only in one respect, that it was applied to letters landed from a ship was this 'Paquebot' mark similar to the older 'Ship Letter' marks that had been introduced in Britain around the mid-18th century. Predominantly the Ship Letter mark was applied to indicate that charges had to be raised on the mainly un-prepaid mail at this time.

In the 19th century, every port around Britain had a ship letter mark, most in conjunction with the name of the port. It should also be remembered that in the early days there was a special ship letter rate, which included the shipmasters gratuity, to be applied to all mail landed (with the exception of consignees letters, which were free), and for this reason it was all 'loose mail'. Any fully prepaid ship letters arriving from abroad where struck in red, indicating payment in the country of origin and were in the nature of being transit marks.

Essentially then, both 'Ship Letter' and 'Paquebot' marks were applied to mail landed from a vessel, but for different reasons and at different periods of time. In the case of the former, any duplication of correspondence would have been mainly for insurance against loss during times of conflict, or for reasons of safety against foundering, rather than any difference in the relative reliability of handling.

I know of no instances of Royal Navy vessels being designated as 'Packet Boats', in fact it would be something of a contradiction in terms, warships not being renowned for plying regularly between any two ports! The vagaries of the Service would have precluded the carrying of mail by a warship on anything other than an ad hoc basis. The closest naval equivalent would be the fast ships designated 'Despatch Vessels'. These were lightly armed vessels attached to the fleet, which were able to sail both closer to the wind and in lighter winds, than ships of the fleet. An Admiral would usually take any opportunity that presented itself to send home less urgent fleet correspondence, and in these cases often duplicated letters — for obvious reasons. The most famous Despatch Vessel is probably the schooner *Pickle*, which brought Admiral Collingwood's despatches home with news of Nelson's victory off Trafalgar.

As early as 1904, an agreement was made between this country and the United States, in which 'sea post offices' were established on board four White Star Line vessels (of *Titanic* fame), and four liners of the American Steamship Company. Other Sea Post Offices were later established on the Union Castle liners to South Africa, and probably on many other large vessels. In the Far East we are familiar with Maritime Sorters in a somewhat similar context.

I don't know the context in which Neville had occasion to mention the 'Boite Mobile' service, but since he did, let us look at it. This was an arrangement between the British and French postal authorities concomitant of the Anglo–French postal convention of 1843. It established a system whereby movable boxes could be secured to the deck of private vessels plying between English and French ports. I think the tradition he mentions of tying (lashing?) them to the mast is perhaps rather fanciful, and certainly not a 'normal arrangement'. The other possibility is that it

was normally affixed 'tween decks, to the base of the section of the mast that extended through the deckhead, thus possibly reinforcing its 'official' capacity. This being derived from the custom of serving a writ by nailing it to the mast, whereupon it was deemed to have been served upon the master or owner. However, be that as it may, these boxes were made to be unshipped on arrival in port, and taken to the post office. In Britain such mail was cancelled with a handstamp incorporating the letters 'MB' for 'Mobile Box'. These cancels were used at London, Dover, Folkestone, Newhaven and Southampton, as well as the Channel Islands Guernsey and Jersey — until the outbreak of war in 1939, when naturally the service ceased. It had been, as Neville points out, a means of posting a letter after closure of the mail outside normal post office hours. In Brunei, the facility of being able to hand a 'Late Letter' to the Coxswain of the Government launches plying between Brunei Town and Labuan, may be seen as an extension of this idea, but without the box.

Returning to the business of 'Paquebot' mail, I believe someone at the meeting had a copy of the UPU regulations, the parts of these which are pertinent to our deliberations would make an interesting article for this Journal, [Nudge, nudge!].

Neville, in referring to the 1891 Convention, mentions mail being prepaid at the postage rates of "the country to which the vessel belonged." I can only assume that this means the country of the Port of Registry — or has it to do with the ownership of the vessel? This is unclear, but I take it from his later remarks that it is indeed the country of the Port of Registry. However, subsequently he mentions the 1924 Convention changing this to the "country under whose flag the vessel sailed". I can't think how the two could be different, a ship flies the flag of the country in which it is registered. However it does clarify the rather woolly phraseology of the earlier version.

Neville goes on to say that this presents us with a problem due to the fact that the two shipping companies serving British Borneo, i.e. the Straits Steamship Co. and Sarawak Steamship Co. were registered in different countries. I can see no difference myself: the Ports of Registry equate, in this case, with the flags of the countries under which the vessels sail, and additionally between which there was, and is, a postal arrangement agreeing reciprocal postal rates.

I don't understand Neville's point regarding 'Paquebot' mail and a contract between the P.M.G. (of Sarawak I presume) and the shipping line with which he arranged it. This would involve sealed bags of mail being carried under contract, whatever shipping line carried it, and therefore not being loose mail no requirement for 'Paquebot' marks would be involved.

Similarly, the examples of mail carried by local craft owners he lists, are mainly purely internal domestic arrangements, again no 'Paquebot' requirement involved. Mail between Borneo countries by coastal vessels would be sealed, except for any loose letters posted by passengers, which only then, should — pre–Malaysia — receive the 'Paquebot' mark in the normal way. He doesn't mention Brunei in his local routing, but naturally the same would apply.

I can, however, see a hypothetical problem were a vessel registered in Panama, or one sailing under the Liberian flag for example, regularly sailing between Singapore and the Borneo ports and off loading loose mail — which would be highly unlikely! It would appear, in theory at least, that in such a case the local postal authorities would need to know the postal rates in force in the respective flag countries to check for any underfranking. Although in practice, in normal circumstances, any mail landed would probably be accepted whatever franking the letters carried. The receiving P.O. would just mark them with their 'Paquebot' chop and forward accordingly, as they would for any vessel landing for example, any stamped postcards bought at the previous port of call and written and 'posted' after sailing!

The post war expansion of air travel, whilst perhaps largely solving 'Paquebot' problems for the postal historian, brought with it its own identification mysteries — 'AR' for example! With the current spread of cruise ships perhaps there may soon be a resurgence in the use of 'Paquebot' marks. ■