

BRITISH WEST AFRICA STUDY CIRCLE

The Post Office Archives and the early Postal

History of West Africa

In the early part of the nineteenth century mails to West Africa would be paid for in advance or taken by travellers, for no arrangements existed enabling the recipient to pay for a letter. Mail from West Africa to other places was all unpaid though money might be given to a traveller who would pay the postage from a British port. Unpaid mail was handed over by the ship's captain at his first port of call where it received a Ship Letter mark to enable the mileage to be calculated. The letter would be charged the prevailing ship letter rate according to its weight plus the inland rate which depended upon weight and mileage. After 1840 the penny post replaced the mileage rate. All the prestamp entires in the archives of the Methodist Missionary Society which emanate from West Africa are unpaid and marked as described above.

With the development of Packets, that is ships under charter to the Post Office for the conveyance of mail, a more systematic method of handling mail came into existence. Usually the British Consul or a Postmaster appointed by a colonial Government would deal with the mail. He would have to receive the mail, check the letter bill forms that accompanied it, check any Registered letters, and arrange for the mail to be collected or delivered. Outgoing mail would have to be marked, the letter bill forms completed, and the bag sealed for delivery to the Packet. Each month or quarter he had to make out a debit and credit statement covering outgoing and incoming mail, for every letter was brought to account. Letters to the colonies were all prepaid, letters from them were usually unpaid. In Britain the Falmouth Postmaster made up the West African mails until October 1858 after which the Packets made for Liverpool.

In three places in West Africa the British Post Office employed paid Agents to handle mail. These were Sierra Leone, Fernando Po and Lagos. Much of the official correspondence written from this country survives in the Post Office Records Department where there is a run of letters from 1849 to 1872. After this date letters have only been preserved at five yearly intervals. Correspondence to the Postmasters at Cape Coast Castle and Bathurst has been preserved from 1849 to 1871: after that date some letters are also preserved at five yearly intervals. These letters are bound up in nearly a hundred foolscap volumes together with correspondence to other parts of the world.

The appointment of Agents and Postmasters enabled senders in West Africa to pay for some of their mail. This became possible in Sierra Leone in July 1853 with the appointment of Joseph E Dillet as Postal Agent. In the Gambia instructions were sent to the Postmaster in April 1858 to this effect.

In Fernando Po the Consul, F J Hutchinson, was appointed Agent for the Bight of Biafra in March 1859 and was empowered to collect postage on letters not passing through the United Kingdom. A similar arrangement was made with the Consul in Lagos, B. Campbell, and the Letters to the two Consuls are dated 22. Feb. 59. These Agents were instructed not to collect postage on mail direct to the United Kingdom. However, a letter dated 23. 1. 60 makes the prepayment of postage on letters from Sierra Leone to the United Kingdom compulsory: unpaid letters dropped into the letter box were to be subjected to a 6d fine in addition to the postage liable. A circular letter sent to Lagos, Sierra Leone, the Gambia and Fernando Po on 21. 10. 62 states that prepayment of mail at these places is optional, so evidently the rules had soon been relaxed.

The Post Office has preserved the following Sets of Instructions to Postmasters and Agents:

- 22. 5. 59 Three pages of instructions to Fernando Po; an exact duplicate was sent to Lagos.
- 23. 3. 58 Seven pages of instructions sent to Bathurst.
- 30. 8. 53 Thirteen pages of instructions sent to Sierra Leone.
- August 62 A further seven pages of instructions sent to Lagos.

These cover every aspect of the handling of mail, the marks to be applied to envelopes, and the principal rates of charges on mail.

From time to time the Post Office sent out printed Tables of Rates but only a few of these survive. Rates from the United Kingdom can easily be ascertained from the British Postal Guides which begin in 1856. The Records have a complete run of these and they show the Packet sailing times.

The correspondence is principally concerned with enquiries about unaccounted Registered Letters and with changes in postal rates throughout the world. The negotiations that led to the setting up of the Lagos and Fernando Po Agencies can be studied. Copies of contracts with shipping lines were forwarded together with the schedules. There were requests from the colonies that British stamps be supplied but these were always refused and colonies advised to obtain their own stamps. A letter to this effect to the Gambia is dated 22. 12. 60 and on 22. 6. 61 a letter to Cape Coast states 'I have to point out that British postage stamps are not available for the payment of letters posted in any of the colonies which have control of their own posts'. The corollary of this principle is seen in a letter to the Plymouth Postmaster dated 26. 4. 58 'The Postmaster General has obtained the authority of the Lords Commissioners of the Treasury for the employment of British postage stamps at the several Foreign Ports or Places on the West Coast of Africa to prepay the postage of letters addressed to this country.'

A letter to the Agent at Fernando Po dated 24.6.67 makes it clear that residents in Gaboon may use British postage stamps on mail sent to the care of the Agent in Fernando Po.

On 21.8.68 the Postmaster wrote to Cape Coast. The Postmaster at Accra - whose mails were controlled by the chief Post Office at Cape Coast - had forwarded a bundle of letters 'which he states to have been found among waste papers at his Office. I have to point out that some of these letters date back as far as 1863... I must request that you cause strict enquiry to be made in the matter'. Unfortunately, replies from West Africa have not been preserved.

A letter to Fernando Po dated 16.5.71 states that moveable boxes were to be placed on steamers of the British and West African Shipping Company and that mail so received was to be accounted for under the heading Moveable Box on the Letter Bill Forms.

The introduction of new postal rates from the colonies was not uniformly applied at particular dates, for each colony had control of its own internal postal arrangements. They did, however, follow the advice offered by the London General Post Office that was sent from time to time but, of course, the implementation of such advice took varying lengths of time in the various colonies. The British West African Colonies joined the Universal Postal Union in 1879 and had all settled down to uniform rates by 1880. I have obtained photostats of all the important documents in the archives that relate to West Africa and will be pleased to loan them to members of the Circle. I have dealt with accountancy marks, registration procedures, postal rates and the archives themselves in the four separate sections that follow.

ACCOUNTANCY MARKINGS (from 1853)

Covers before the 1880's, when the bulk weighing of mail brought an end to the marking of every letter, bear marks in black and red and occasionally blue. These are accountancy marks and not, as is often stated, postal rates. The following information is drawn from the Instructions to West African Postmasters and Agents.

On Packet Letters from the U. K. to West Africa.

On prepaid mail under $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. 1 was written in red. This indicated 1d being the part of the postal rate due to the Colony. On registered mail half of the registered rate would be entered in red and this too would be due to the Colony e.g. 2 when the rate was 4d.

On Packet Letters from West Africa to the United Kingdom

On prepaid mail under $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. 5 was written in red (when the postal rate was 6d) and this was the amount due to the London Post Office. On unpaid mail under $\frac{1}{2}$ oz 1 was written in black being the amount due to the Colony. Figures such as 6 would presumably be struck in the United Kingdom to indicate the postage due from the recipient and if a fine was liable a further 6d would be charged.

On Letters sent by Private Ship

Packet letters travelled on ships under charter to the Post Office but mail might be put on Private ships. In this case the postal rate was shared evenly between the Colony and the London Post Office so, when the 6d postal rate applied for the $\frac{1}{2}$ oz, 3 in red would indicate the amount to be accounted for to the receiving country. Mail put on foreign private ships caused real difficulty and on 22.9.65 a letter to Bathurst noted that mail had been put aboard a French packet and brought to account at rates applicable to that carried on a British Packet. These were insufficient. 'No arrangement exists for forwarding mails from the West Coast of Africa to England by means of the French Packets and, therefore, you must not make use of those Packets.'

On Registered Letters.

The number written beside the Registration handstamp was the number given to that letter on the Registered Letter list that accompanied every sending of mail containing Registered letters.

POSTAL RATES TO AND FROM WEST AFRICA FROM 1853

It seems best to provide a series of extracts taken from Post Office records rather than to provide a continuous narrative. Each colony had control of its own posts and so, changes of rates had to be negotiated separately until U P U rates were adopted. The instructions and proposals from the G P O in London only related to international mail and to intercolonial mail carried by Packets under charter. Local postal rates therefore are not referred to save in those cases where a Packet touched at two or more ports in the same colony, as for example Accra and Cape Coast.

- A. 1853. Extracts from the instructions to the Sierra Leone Agent dated 30.8.53.

1. To and from the U. K. and S. Leone

Letters not exceeding $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. 1s0d

Letters exceeding $\frac{1}{2}$ oz and not 1 oz 2s0d

Letters exceeding 1 oz and not 2 oz 4s0d

Letters exceeding 2 oz and not 3 oz 6s0d

and so on in proportion.

Newspapers were not liable to any postage.

(This rate had been introduced for all Colonies in 1836)

2. Between Intermediate Ports.

These were ports at which the West African Packets touched. Rates were as in 1 above but newspapers to ports which were not in British Possessions paid 2d.

3. Non-commissioned officers, sailors and stewards (and Army Schoolmistresses from 4. 6. 68)

1d for private letters under $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. No charge for redirection. A letter of 7. 3. 64 to S. Leone stated that the Government of S Leone could charge an internal rate on these letters if it thought fit.

B. 1854. Extract from Instructions to the Postmaster Cape Coast Castle dated 22. 2. 54.

1. The letter rate is changed to 6d per half ounce.

C. 1855. Instructions to the Postmaster Cape Coast Castle.

1. 'From 1st January 1856 the Packet rate between Gold Coast and any other British Colony or foreign post, without passing through the United Kingdom, will be reduced from 1/- to 4d for letters not exceeding half an ounce.'

D. 1855. Instructions to the Agent at S. Leone.

1. The 6d rate is to be introduced on 1st June 1855.
2. The 6d rate applies to any colony if the mail passes through the United Kingdom and to foreign countries excluding France and mail passing through France.
3. The 1d newspaper rate will start on 30th June 1855.
4. Officers' letters are to be charged at the 6d rate.

- E. Instructions to the Postmaster Plymouth. 23.6.57.
1. The rate to Gambia is reduced to 6d.
- F. Instructions to the Postmaster at Bathurst Gambia 22.2.58.
1. The 6d rate of postage for letters and the provisions of the Colonial bookpost have been extended to the Gambia.
- G. Instructions to the Postmaster Plymouth dated 1.4.1858.
1. The 6d rate is to be applied to Goree, Lagos, Fernando Po, Cameroons, Old Calabar, Bonny, Badagry and Wydah or to any foreign ports or place on the West Coast of Africa.
- H. A General Colonial Circular dated 12.3.1858 states that until then, letters from the colonies passing through the United Kingdom to other colonies and foreign ports had been charged double the inland rate. This double rate is now changed to a single rate of one penny. (the inland rate referred to is a British inland rate not any colonial inland rate).
- I. Another General Colonial Circular dated 11 Dec. 1865 lays down that letters between 1 oz and $1\frac{1}{2}$ ozs are to be charged 3 rates not 4. (reference to A 1 above shows how previously 4 rates had applied).
- J. A printed Table of Rates of Postage from the Gambia, Gold Coast, Lagos and Sierra Leone gives rates from 1st Jan. 1879.
1. 5d per $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. There follows a long list of countries. This 5d is to be accounted for to the London Post Office. (i.e. the 6d postal rate will still apply if these countries charge an internal rate of 1d).
 2. 10d per half oz. There follows all those countries not in the General Postal Union. (plus the internal rate).
 3. 1s4d per half oz. A list of some remoter islands and countries. (plus the internal rate). These rates applied to mail sent by both Packet and Private Ship.
- K. Another General Colonial Circular: The one to the Gambia being retained in the G P O Records.
1. The Surcharges levied by the Gambia Post Office by virtue of Article V of the Convention of Paris dated the 1st June, 1879 in addition to Union rates are:

- i. On letters 1½d, postcards ½d, newspapers ½d. A list of countries to which this applies is attached. It covers most of the world.
- ii. On letters 2½d, postcards and newspapers 1d. A list of places in the Far East follows.

L. Post Office Notice Number 44 of 17 April 1882 issued in Sierra Leone is in the G P O Records. Attached is a letter stating that the rates in the Gambia, Cape Coast, Lagos and Accra are the same.

1. Rates to the Union Post Offices in West Africa 4d per ½ oz.
2. Rates to Non Union Post Offices in West Africa 6d per ½ oz.

Comment

The statement that the rate from West Africa to the United Kingdom was once 5d has often been made. It appears for example in Robson Lowe's Encyclopaedia Vol. 2 under Lagos page 295. This error could have arisen either from taking the accountancy mark 5 on covers to present the postal rate, or by a misunderstanding of printed circulars such as that in J above which only refer to that portion of the total rate to be paid to London.

I hope at a later date to establish internal rates in the Colonies and to publish a list of rates extracted from Postal Guides etc. after 1882.

M. Extract from a Table of Rates displayed at Lagos.

1. From Gambia, Gold Coast, Lagos and Sierra Leone. The rate for countries in the Universal Postal Union is to be 4d per half ounce from 1.2.1880.
2. To Aden and Eastern countries in the U P U 5d per half ounce.
3. To countries not in the U P U. Rates are from 9d to 1s3d. (This extract is taken from Payne's Lagos and West African Almanack).

REGISTRATION OF MAIL

The Instructions sent to Sierra Leone in 1853 show that mail from the United Kingdom to places where there was an agent could be registered but that no mail from West Africa to the United Kingdom could be registered.

- A. A letter to the Postmaster at Cape Coast Castle dated 10th July 1857 states that all Registered letters should have Registered written or stamped on the envelope. Presumably, then registration from West Africa is starting. The U. K. fee was then 6d and presumably this was the rate from West Africa.
- B. A letter to the Consuls at Lagos and Fernando Po dated August 1862 states that mail to the United Kingdom and certain colonies and foreign countries can be registered "on the assumption that the fee for the registration as far as the United Kingdom only is fixed at sixpence".
- C. A letter to the Postmaster at Lagos dated 23rd May 1865 notes that he has been sending registered letters to other West African ports. "There is no provision for the registration of inter-colonial letters."
- D. In 1866 the United Kingdom Registration rate was reduced from 6d to 4d. A general colonial circular was sent out dated December 1865 advising the colonies of the change and recommending that they reduced their rates accordingly.
- E. A General Colonial Circular dated 24 Feb. 1870 stated that the Registered rate to the United Kingdom had been reduced to 4d in 1866 but on a letter then forwarded from the United Kingdom to a foreign country an additional 6d had been charged. This latter charge was now reduced to 4d.

THE G P O RECORDS

Among the vast collection of records that has been preserved the following appear to be those relevant to the study of West African postal history.

Post 48 The Colonial Postmasters Letter Books. These are copies of letters sent by the Secretary of the Post Office. The series starts in 1849 and ends in 1871: thereafter letters are only preserved at five yearly intervals until 1902. The correspondence is in 51 large foolscap volumes. Two volumes have been lost.

Post 48. The Agents' Letter Books. As above but to the Agents. They run from 1849 to 1872 and thereafter in five yearly intervals until 1902. There are 42 volumes.

Post 44. 12. Instructions to Colonial Postmasters, Agents and Surveyors abroad. The volume from 1849 to 1867 contains the Instructions referred to earlier in this Paper. Clearly a small selection has been made for fortunately, Sierra Leone, Lagos, Fernando Po and Bathurst are included.

Post 29 Packet Minutes 1811-1900 and 1900-1920. This is a series of Papers filed in folders comprising Minutes to the Postmaster General from the Secretary of the Post Office together with some replies from the Colonies and foreign countries. The Papers have been well indexed and from them can be found details of the Packet services and of such matters as the introduction of the Insured letter service and parcel post arrangements. Under the heading International Bureau are papers relating to the Universal Postal Union.

Packet 461M of 1886 gives a circulation list of all those places in West Africa (some 350 in all) to which mail could then be delivered. There is an interesting correspondence with Post Masters listing all Post Offices under their charge.

Post 44. 34 This is an abstract of Information from British Colonies in reply to the General Circular from the Post Office relating to the proposed 6d rate. Only Sierra Leone had replied from West Africa. The abstract is dated 3. 2. 52.

Post 51 This consists of agreements between the Postmaster and Shipping Companies. Vol. 32 gives the contract of 7. 6. 58 with the African Steam Ship Company and also that of 4. 6. 66. There is a letter of 14. 3. 73 discussing details with the Company and also the contract drawn up on 30. 12. 87. Volume 52 contains a further contract of 23. 12. 87 with the British African Steam Navigation Company Limited.

Establishment Books These run from 1857 onwards. They show the establishment in the British Post Office and also list the Agents abroad together with their salaries. One can check those in West Africa year by year.

British Postal Guides. These start in 1856. They give Tables of Rates of postage from the United Kingdom and details of services available to overseas places together with the shipping schedules.

Handstruck Stamps from 1825 These are in 72 volumes of steel impressions and 25 of rubber. They contain impressions of some of the cancellers sent to Post Offices at home and abroad. I have photostats of all the West African cancellers but the majority of those known to us are not recorded. The Post Office will not now allow photostats to be taken as the books are deteriorating.

Access to the Records These are situated in rooms at St. Martin Le Grand and are open to the public. Most of the volumes are in store and can be seen on written application two at a time. Photostats can be made where practicable, though the correspondence is all on flimsy paper. I have taken notes of all the West African material (and some photostats) and would be pleased to correspond with members about them.

P O Beale.

17th November, 1972.