

# British Letter Mail to Constantinople via Marseilles by French Packet 1837 - 1875

**Purpose of Exhibit:** Show the postal history of British Letter Mail to Constantinople routed via Marseilles by the French Packet Service to the Levant in the period 1837 (when this service was established) up to 1875 (creation of the General Postal Union).

**Presentation:** Commercial and personal mail with emphasis on rates, methods of despatch and mail handling. Strictly civilian mail, no military related mail addressed to army personnel serving in the Crimean War theatre is included.



*The Port of Marseilles, c.1850*

**Postal History:** In May 1837 the French began the operation of a State-owned regular paquebot service with a line between Marseilles and Constantinople, the so called "Levant" line. Initially, there was little demand for this service by the British public as it was rather expensive. The Anglo-French Convention of June 1843 allowed a considerable reduction in the rates, making the use of this service more attractive. By 1850 this State-owned French service was a technical triumph but a financial fiasco, leading in 1851 to the privatisation of the service.

The French packet service was the normal or primary route used for British mail to Constantinople from 1843 to 1851, and again from 1854 until 1867. With the advancement of the rail routes eastwards, gradually this service became less frequently used to such an extent that post-1872 mail to Constantinople via this route is virtually unknown (although still used for other Levant places such as Syria or Asia Minor).

**Coverage:** Commercial and private letter mail from GB to Constantinople via Marseilles by French Packet. Examples of mail shown include prepaid and unprepaid mail, taxed, returned, registered, late fee mail. Rates are explained in detail and French steamers identified. **Note that this one-frame exhibit covers mail to Constantinople only.** Such mail was classified and handled by the General Post Office distinctly from the other Levant, Syria or Egypt destinations.

**Study & Bibliography:** Numerous post office circulars and notices were consulted. The use of the following two seminal works of postal history is acknowledged: 1) Raymond Salles *La Poste Maritime Francaise, Tome II, Les paquebots de la Mediterranee de 1839 a' 1939*. Paris 1962. 2) Jane and Michael Moubray, *British Letter Mail to Overseas Destinations 1840-1875*. The Royal Philatelic Society London, 1992. Also useful is the September 2014 presentation by Robert Abensur at the Collectors Club of New York, titled: *French Offices in the Levant - Postal Rates 1.5.1837-31.7.1849*.

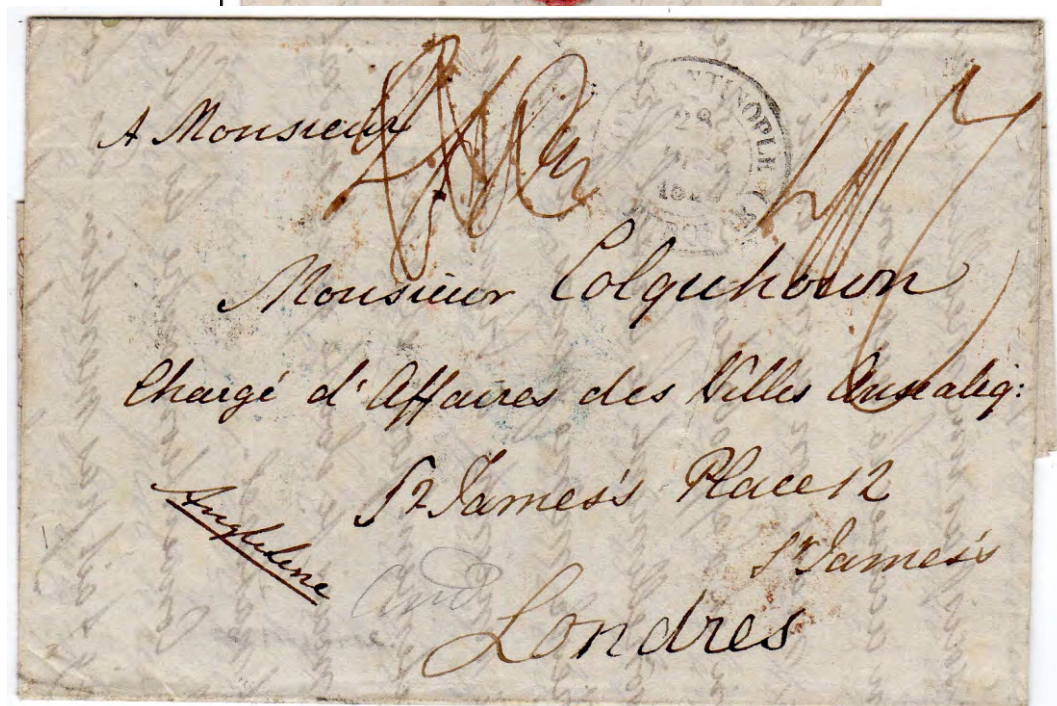
On 26th May 1837 the General Post Office announced the inauguration of the French Packet Service via Marseilles supplying a list of the Mediterranean ports (Constantinople among them) to which letters might be dispatched by the new route.

Prepayment of postage was compulsory; the rate was set at 2s 8d 1/2 for a single (1/4 oz) letter. The normal route at the time was the land route via France and Austria costing just 1s 7d per 1/2 oz. This fact made the use of the French Packet route an unattractive option.

Postal material via the Marseilles route of this period is virtually unknown. Thus, to illustrate the first period rate, the following item in the opposite direction Constantinople to GB item is shown:



28.12.1840



Entire letter posted at the French Post Office in Constantinople with dispatch postmark CONSTANTINOPLE / 28 DEC 1840 / TURQUIE to London (20.1.1841). French paquebot *Dante* carried the letter via Malta (disinfection slits and PURIFIE AU LAZARET / MALTE cachet) to Marseilles.

Postal Rate: 1/2 oz unprepaid letter, 4s 7d (originally marked for 2s 8 1/2 d single rate but deleted) paid by the addressee: 10d British fee + 3s 9d French fee (2 x 1s 10 1/2 d per 1/4 oz)

The Anglo-French Convention of June 1843 allowed a considerable rate reduction and also permitted optional prepayment, thus making this service more attractive, especially as the land routes to Constantinople at the time demanded that letters be at least partly prepaid.

18.12.1846

For British **unprepaid** letters to Constantinople the French Post Office charged: 5 decimes British fee + 11 decimes French territorial rate (Boulogne - Marseilles) + 9 decimes packet rate from Marseilles to Constantinople = 25 decimes.

Note: British weight scale for British part - French internal weight scale for French part.



Lombard Street to Constantinople (6.1.1847), 1/4 oz **unprepaid** letter, 25 decimes paid by the addressee. Paquebot *Mentor*.

17.7.1849



British **prepaid** letters paid 5d British fee + 10d French territorial & packet fee (again, different weight scales for British and French parts of the trip).

London Chief Office to Constantinople (1.8.1849), 1 1/4 oz **prepaid** letter, red PD - (Paid to Destination) cachet paying a total of 5s 11d: British fee: 20d (5d x 4 rates), French fee: 50d (10d x 5 rates), Late fee: 1d for posting letters 6 to 7 pm.

Paquebot *Egyptus* on its sole 1849 trip on the Levant line.

As shown previously, rates of this period are complex, mainly because British and French scales were different, resulting in considerable rate differences in similar items having only slight weight differences. This is demonstrated by the following pair of items:

18.9.1846



<p><b>British weight scale:</b></p> <p>&lt; 1/2 ounce, 1 rate</p> <p>1/2 &lt; 1 ounce, 2 rates</p> <p>2 &lt; 3 ounces, 6 rates, etc</p> <p><b>French weight scale for British use:</b></p> <p>1 rate per 1/4 ounce, ie:</p> <p>&lt; 1/4 ounce, 1 rate</p> <p>1/4 &lt; 1/2 ounce, 2 rates</p> <p>1/2 &lt; 3/4 ounce, 3 rates, etc</p>
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Twopenny Post Upper Berkeley Street, London, 2 1/4 oz prepaid letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sublime Porte, Constantinople (1.10.1846), paying a total of 10s:

British fee: 30d (5d x 6 rates) for a 2-3 oz letter,

French fee: 90d (10d x 9 rates) for a letter up to 2 1/4 oz.

Paquebot *Pericles*.

18.01.1847



Sublime Porte, c.1870

Twopenny Post Upper Berkeley Street, London, 2 3/4 oz **prepaid** letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sublime Porte, Constantinople (1.2.1847), paying a total of **11s 8d**:

**British fee: 30d (5d x 6 rates) for a 2-3 oz letter,**

**French fee: 110d (10d x 11 rates) for a letter up to 2 3/4 oz.**

Paquebot *Pericles*.

This cover was only 1/2 oz heavier than the previous one but paid an extra **1s 8d** due to the more expensive French structure of rates - note that the British component of the postal fee remained the same at **30d**.

*Highest recorded rate for a GB to Turkey via Marseilles cover in the pre-GPU period.*

The British entered the Crimean War in March 1854, the peace treaty was signed a couple of years later in Paris. The military aspect of the postal history of this period is beyond the scope of this exhibit but it should be noted that the vast volume of mail recorded in this period is military related. During this period trade between Britain and Constantinople was minimal, hence the scarcity of commercial / civilian mail. The Anglo-French Convention of 12th December 1854, effective 1st January 1855 allowed a reduction of postage, setting this at **1s per 1/4 oz.**



7.4.1855

Manchester to Constantinople (21.4.1855), 1/4 oz **prepaid** letter at **1s**.

Paquebot *Sinai*.

*Elusive example of commercial mail in the Crimean War period.*

9.10.1856



Liverpool to Constantinople (20.10.1856), 1/4 oz **unprepaid** letter. The French Post Office in Constantinople charged the addressee **13 decimes**. Paquebot *Carmel*.

The Anglo-French Convention of 24th September 1856, effective 1st January 1857 allowed a further 50% reduction of postage, setting this at 6 per 1/4 oz. This was cheaper than the route via Belgium (1s 1d per 1/2 oz) and costed exactly the same as the overland route via France. One major aspect of the 1856 Convention was the provision for the exchange of closed mails, which was implemented with the opening of the civilian British Post Office in Constantinople in July 1857.



14.2.1857

Manchester to Constantinople (3.3.1857), 1/4 oz **unprepaid** letter. The French Post Office in Constantinople charged the addressee 9 decimes, ie 6 decimes per 1/4 oz + 3 decimes penalty per 1/4 oz.

Paquebot *Telemaque* on its sole 1857 trip on the Levant line.

19.1.1857

Manchester to Constantinople (10.2.1857), 3/4 oz **unprepaid** letter. The French Post Office in Constantinople charged the addressee 27 decimes, ie 18 decimes (3 x 6 decimes per 1/4 oz) + 9 decimes penalty (3 x 3 decimes per 1/4 oz).

Paquebot *Borysthene*.



These covers still exhibit French transit markings (ANGL.AMB CALAIS), a practice abandoned in July 1857 with the despatch of closed mailbags to the British PO in Constantinople.

1st July 1857: Establishment of the British Post Office in Constantinople, a direct descendant of the Army Post Office established there in 1854 for the need of the Forces during the Crimean War. Letters now dispatched in closed mail to the Office via the French packets, thus no French transit markings on letters.

15.7.1857



The BPO Constantinople

Manchester to Constantinople (30.7.1857), 3/4 oz prepaid letter at 1s 6d.

Paquebot *Simois*.

16.7.1857



Lombard Street to Constantinople (30.7.1857), 1/4 oz prepaid letter at 6d.

Paquebot *Simois*.

*An intriguing pair of covers as they travelled in the same shipment of mails on Simois. Only two other covers are recorded sent in the first month of operation of the British PO in Constantinople.*



The period 1857 to May 1867 is characterized by the relative dominance of the "via Marseilles" route compared to the other alternative routes to Constantinople. This was mainly due to the fact that this was quite a regular service and as the railway network eastwards was still evolving, offered delivery times comparable to the land routes. One further advantage of the *Via Marseilles* route was that a large number of transit countries were avoided.

16.9.1864



Liverpool to Constantinople (1.10.1864), 1/4 oz **prepaid in cash** letter at 6d. Paquebot *Carmel*.

12.10.1864



Malvern to Constantinople, 1/4 oz **prepaid in stamps** letter at 6d. Paquebot *Godavery*.

## The Years of Dominance 1857-1867 *Insufficiently Prepaid / Unprepaid Mail*

Insufficiently Prepaid and Unprepaid Mail was treated similarly, as these two examples show:

10.10.1866



Manchester to Constantinople (29.10.1866), 1/4 oz **prepaid** letter at 6d but found to be double weight, so marked INSUFFICIENTLY PREPAID. Charged 1s on arrival (i.e. the additional 6d per 1/4 oz and two fines of 3d per 1/4 oz unprepaid). Paquebot *Godavery*.

4.4.1864



Sunderland to the Captain of the barque *Scotia's Queen* at Constantinople (16.4.1864), 1/4 oz **unprepaid** letter. Charged 9d on arrival (i.e. 6d per 1/4 oz and a fine of 3d per 1/4 oz unprepaid). Paquebot *Meinam*.

On 1.1.1857 the registration fee was reduced by half at 6d per 1/4 oz (from 1s per 1/4 oz which was set on 1.1.1855). In October 1861 registration was set at 6d per letter, ie it was no longer related to weight. On 1.2.1866 it was further reduced to 4d per letter.

Only a handful of registered items from GB to Constantinople in the pre-GPU period are recorded, all but one are sent *via France and Austria* or *via Belgium*. The only recorded item *via Marseilles* is shown below:



The Ottoman Bank Headquarters, Constantinople



17.10.1860



Liverpool to the Ottoman Bank in Constantinople (28.10.1860), 1/2 oz registered prepaid letter at 2s (2 x 6d per 1/4d ordinary rate, plus 2 x 6d per 1/4 oz registration fee). Paquebot *Borysthene*.

*Only recorded complete registered letter from GB to Turkey via Marseilles in the pre-GPU period.*

According to the Post Office Guide of 1857 (p.15) *Late Letters are such as are posted after the ordinary time and which cannot therefore be sent forward by the mail then in preparation, unless extra payment is made.* London had a particularly complex system for charging late fee letters. In the next couple of pages the Late Fees structure at the Chief Office, St Martins le Grand in the period 1865-69 is shown:

14.6.1866



1d Late Fee

London Chief Office to Constantinople (22.6.1866), 1/4 oz prepaid letter at 6d, Late fee: 1d for posting letters 6 to 6.45 pm. Paquebot *Amerique*.

16.2.1865



2d Late Fee

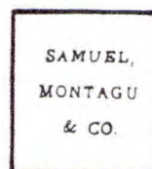
London Chief Office to Constantinople (28.2.1865), 1/4 oz prepaid letter at 6d, Late fee: 2d for posting letters 6.45 to 7.15 pm. Paquebot *Sinai*.

Protective Underprints (on the back of stamps) were applied by firms to their own stocks of postage stamps to protect themselves against petty pilfering by staff. This practice soon gave way to the more familiar perfins.

One of the known users of Protective Underprints was the London firm Samuel, Montagu & Co. (Merchant Bankers). The founder of the firm, Samuel Montagu, 1st Baron Swaythling (1832 – 1911) was a philanthropist and Liberal politician who sat in the House of Commons from 1885 to 1900, and was later raised to the peerage.



Samuel Montagu



Unofficial Protective Underprint (1s green)

5.10.1866



4d Late Fee

London Chief Office to Constantinople (29.10.1866), 1/2 oz prepaid letter at 1s, Late Fee: 4d for posting letters 7.15 to 7.30 pm. Paquebot *Godavery*. The 1s postage stamp bears the sender's unofficial protective underprint reading "SAMUEL MONTAGU & Co". The 4d orange paying the Late Fee was sold at the PO counter so is not underprinted.

*A most elusive Fourpence Late Fee letter, undoubtedly the only recorded example to the Eastern Mediterranean region, and one of only a handful of covers bearing a surface printed stamp with protective underprint.*

The London Agents "SUSE & SIBETH" are known for their preference of the via Marseilles route for their mails to Constantinople. It seems however that this was not always the case...

2.1.1862



London Chief Office to Constantinople (11.1.1862), 1/4 oz prepaid letter at 6d, Late fee: 1d for posting letters 6 to 6.45 pm. Paquebot *Phase*.



30.8.1861

London Chief Office to Constantinople (7.9.1862). Original route instructions "per french steamer via Marseilles" amended to "via Vienna & Kustendje" as the letter was posted too late to catch the paquebot *Cydnus* sailing from Marseilles the next day. Ambulant transit mark for the entrance in Germany from Belgium AUS ENGLAND PER AACHEN- FRANCO (31.8.1862), WIEN (2.9.1862), arrival Austrian Post Office CONSTANTINOPEL.

Via *Belgium* rate: 1/2 oz prepaid letter at 1s 1d, Late fee: 1d for posting letters 6 to 6.45 pm.

In May 1867 the route via Marseilles became a secondary route, the quicker route via France and Austria was now the primary route. This was suspended in July 1870 (Franco-Prussian War) and finally withdrawn in April 1871.

7.7.1869

The route via Marseilles was still an option although affected by the Franco-Prussian War, but that did not affect much of the mail directed to Constantinople as by this time it was scarcely used. The primary route was now the faster route via Belgium (and Austrian Packet from Trieste).

The above unfavourable developments for the route via Marseilles was mainly due to the expansion of railway services eastwards in the European Continent.



London Lombard Street to Constantinople (16.7.1869), 3/4 oz letter at 1s 6d. Paquebot *Niemen*.

The letter remained for a few months in the BPO Constantinople and was then marked NOT-CALLED-FOR and returned to London.

On 1.7.1870 the rate fell at 8d per 1/2 oz but this was still more expensive than the route via Belgium (6d per 1/2 oz). Unprepaid letters were charged at the British Post Office in Constantinople with 8d per 1/2 oz plus a penalty of 3d per 1/4.

By this time, letters to Constantinople were almost exclusively sent via Belgium, the example shown below is the latest usage via Marseilles recorded by the exhibitor:



7.2.1872

Liverpool Exchange to Constantinople (17.2.1862), 1/2 oz **unprepaid** letter. The BPO Constantinople charged **1s 2d** (8d per 1/2 unprepaid, plus two fines of 3d per 1/4 oz). Paquebot *Tagé*.

*Latest recorded letter from GB to Constantinople by French Packet via Marseilles in the pre-GPU period.*

A further rate reduction took place on 1.7.1875, the rate now became 6d per 1/2 oz. At the same time the route via Belgium became the standard GPU rate of 2 1/2 d per 1/2 oz, but because France did not apply the uniform rate until 1.1.1876 this was set much higher. No examples of the 6d or 2 1/2 d rates via Marseilles are recorded.

This was the final blow for GB letter mail to Constantinople by the route via Marseilles. It was still an available option for the sending of parcels and it was briefly reopened for letters in the troubled years 1914-1919, but only because land communications were prohibited during the WW1.