Victoria’s England-Bound Mail 1855-1857:
The Crimean War Clipper Ship Era

Purpose
This exhibit illustrates the use of clipper ships for carrying Victoria's mail to England after contract steamships were commandeered by the Admiralty for service in the Crimean War. All sailings departed from Melbourne, the only port where clippers called for Australasian mail bags.

The exhibit documents that clippers, the world’s fastest vessels, successfully and reliably carried the homeward mail in 80 to 100 days, an average of two weeks slower than steamers but on a longer route and in rougher seas.

Scope & Organization
The exhibit begins with an 1856 cover carried by the last contract steamship to depart Australia during the war, and continues in four sections:
- Single-voyage mail contracts in early 1855, as steamships became increasingly unavailable;
- Continuous British mail contracts from June 1855 and 1856 with the Black Ball and White Star Lines;
- Single-voyage colonial Victoria contracts;
- Unscheduled noncontract sailings, which occurred throughout the entire period.

The exhibit concludes with an 1857 cover that marks the post-war return of the first contract steamship service.

Postal rates, and many postmarks, changed during the clipper period. Because postmarks aid in identification of mail carried by clippers, basic information on them is briefly provided. Rarest covers have red borders.

Background
Great Britain and France declared war against Russia in March 1854. In November 1854 General Screw Steamship Co. and the P&O both withdrew from their Australian mail contracts when their ships were diverted for war use.

Clipper ships perfectly filled the need for a reversion to sail. They were fast, reliable and sturdy enough to take advantage of the continuous gales below 40° S, the "roaring forties." They were also spacious enough to carry large cargos and many passengers, important revenue sources since mail contracts alone were insufficient to yield a profit.

Clippers sailed from Liverpool, rounded the Cape of Good Hope, and called at Melbourne for the mail bags from South Australia, New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria, and New Zealand. Return was via Cape Horn. Every voyage was thus a global circumnavigation.

Last contract steamship from Australia after packet service terminated by war

Melbourne, 16 February 1856
Prepaid 1/4 for via Marseilles, but endorsed per General Screw Hellespont, bound for Singapore
P&O steamships from Singapore to Galle, Suez, Malta, and Marseilles
Mails in London on 28 April, where rated 4d due for far East mail 73 days

*Hellespont* was the last remaining contract steamship, and sailed only because she was sold for scrap to a buyer in Singapore.
When the Admiralty dragooned steamers as war transports, no one knew how long the conflict would last, so the Post Office issued single-voyage contracts with sailing-ship companies, as subcontracts to the two existing steamship company contracts.

First contract clipper ship to sail from Australia

Subcontract voyage of General Screw SS Co.

Paid 4/-
quadruple ship-letter fee
1-2 oz.
Black Ball James Baines
Melbourne 11 March
Liverpool 20 May
Liverpool rated 2/- due
quadruple 6d uniform rate
70 days

The fastest voyage to England by any sailing packet

Castlemaine, 9 March 1855

Maiden return voyage of Black Ball Lightning

Subcontract voyage of P&O Steam Nav. Co.

Paid 1/- ship-letter fee
Black Ball Lightning
Melbourne 11 April
Liverpool 29 June
Liverpool rated 1/- due,
retaliatory packet rate
79 days

First Australian mail subject to the British retaliatory rate

Melbourne, 11 April 1855

Victoria had refused adoption of the 6d British Uniform “Empire” rate, initiated on 1 October 1854, so GPO London retaliated by charging all incoming letters from Victoria as if they were unpaid. Victoria adopted the uniform rate in July 1855.
First Continuous British Contract, Black Ball Line

June-December 1855

When it was evident the war would not end soon, Black Ball landed a contract for monthly sailings for June-December 1855.

First homeward packet under the British uniform rate

Paid 6d uniform rate
Melbourne credited 5d to U.K.

Black Ball *Marco Polo*
Melbourne 22 July
Liverpool 20 October
Liverpool marked paid
Rec’d 22 October
90 days

Melbourne, 21 July 1855

Landed at Queenstown due to unfavorable winds

Geelong, 21 August 1855

Paid 1/- double uniform rate, Melbourne 10d credit to U.K.
Black Ball *Oliver Lang*, Melbourne 23 August, Queenstown Ireland 26 November
Liverpool marked paid on 28 November, London the same day 97 days
Carried more than 12,000 letters, 6,000 newspapers, and four tons of gold

Before January 1856, Melbourne had no credit or debit handstamps for postmarking letters under the uniform rate. Credits went to the contract holder: 6d for a British contract, 1d for a Victorian contract, 3d to each post office for a non-contract sailing.

Melbourne, 29 September 1855

Paid 6d uniform rate
Melbourne credited 5d to U.K.
Black Ball Donald McKay
Melbourne 2 October
Liverpool 28 December
Liverpool marked paid
Rec’d 29 December
89 days

Delayed by calms off Cape Horn

Paid 1d newspaper rate to Melbourne;
No postage for conveyance to U.K.
Black Ball James Baines
Melbourne 28 November
Liverpool 2 March
Loaded bags in Melbourne from New Zealand, Adelaide, and Sydney
Ireland arrival unknown
Made Liverpool in 95 days

Three Victorian wrappers from this decade are recorded

Geelong, 20 November 1855
First Continuous British Contract, Black Ball Line

June-December 1855

Landed in Ireland due to unfavorable winds

Geelong, 20 August 1855

Paid 6d uniform rate
Melbourne 5d credit to U.K.
Black Ball Oliver Lang
Melbourne 23 August
Queenstown 26 November
Rec’d 28 November 96 days

Late fee paid to ensure conveyance by clipper

Melbourne, 26 October 1855

Paid 6d uniform rate,
6d late fee
Melbourne 5d credit to U.K.
Carried mails from Hobart, Sydney & Adelaide
Black Ball Champion of the Seas
Melbourne 27 October
Liverpool 25 January
91 days

Finest of 8 foreign-mail covers bearing the world’s first TOO LATE stamp
Second Continuous British Contracts
Black Ball Line

January 1856–March 1857

Unpaid accepted, despite prepayment requirement

Sent unpaid
Melbourne debited 5d to U.K.

Black Ball Lightning
Melbourne 28 Aug.
Liverpool 20 Nov.

Liverpool rated 6d due
Received 21 November
87 days

Prepayment was mandatory, so should have been returned for postage

Geelong, 26 August 1856

Paid only to England; American packet unpaid

Paid 6d uniform rate

Black Ball Lightning:
Melbourne 27 December
Liverpool 24 March

Liverpool 12¢ debit to U.S
Ocean Line Washington:
Southampton 26 April
New York 12 March

New York rated 33¢ due for British debit, Am. Pkt., and U.S. inland
88 days

Prahran, 25 December 1856

The 1856 Clipper Ship Contracts

Monthly sailings were required, and contractors had to pay for transport of mail from Melbourne to other colonies. Although contractors received 50% of postage and ½penny per newspaper, a £100/day penalty was levied for late departure from Liverpool, and £20/day for Melbourne arrival after the 78 day limit. A £20/day bonus was to be paid for beating the 78-day limit.
Second Continuous British Contracts

White Star Line

January 1856–March 1857

Wired to Melbourne, where posted from the GPO

Paid 6d uniform rate
Melbourne 5d credit to U.K.
White Star Red Jacket
Melbourne 10 January
Liverpool 8 April
Rec’d 9 April
91 days

From 1854, messages could be wired to the GPO for posting. Fewer than ten examples are recorded.

Melbourne, 9 January 1856

Registration applied only to departure point

Paid 6d uniform rate, 1/- registered, Melbourne 5d credit to U.K.
White Star Mermaid, Melbourne 13 March, Liverpool 9 June
Liverpool rated 6d due for registration
98 days

Melbourne, 7 March 1856
Colonial Contracts
White Star Line

January 1856–March 1857

Shipped to Melbourne for the packet sailing

Paid 8d double Tasmanian packet rate to U.K.

Steamer Lady Bird
Launceston 8 January
Melbourne 9 January

Red Jacket
Melbourne 10 January
Liverpool 8 April

London rated 1/- due,
double 6d uniform rate

Rec’d 9 April

89 days

Hobart, 4 January 1856

Carried 4.3 tons of gold, 47 mail bags, 28,000 newspapers

Geelong, 23 August 1856

Paid 6d uniform rate, Melbourne 1st credit to U.K.
Lightning, Melbourne 28 August, Liverpool 20 November

84 days
Too late for Kent sailing, sent via Sardinian

Paid 6d uniform rate
Melbourne applied 1d credit to U.K.
“Too late” for Kent sailing; White Star Sardinian
Melbourne 27 June
Kinsale 11 September
Rec’d 13 September
75 days

Double rate; landed at Gravesend

Paid 1/- double uniform rate
Melbourne 2d credit to U.K.
White Star True Briton
Melbourne 13 September
Gravesend 8 December
Rec’d 10 December
86 days

Eight of these 2d postmarks are recorded

Echuca, 29 August 1856

When adverse winds prevented landing at Liverpool, ships were required by law to land the mails at the nearest port, from where mail bags were then conveyed overland to London.
Paid **11d**: 6d uniform rate, 5d French transit, <¼ oz.

*Melbourne* retained 5d, 6d credit to U.K., French transit and British inland

*Formosa*, Melbourne 31 July

Galle 1 September

P&O steamers to Galle, Suez & Trieste

Rail from Trieste (11 Oct) to Ostende

Rec’d 14 October 99 days

*The only Victorian cover paying the 11d rate*

---

**The only clipper sailing via the Indian Ocean**

Melbourne 28 July 1856

---

**To Prussia via Liverpool and Aachen**

Melbourne, 27 September 1856

Paid only to the U.K., **6d** uniform rate, *Melbourne* 1d credit to U.K.

White Star *Red Jacket*, Melbourne 2 October, Liverpool 29 December

Unpaid to Prussia via Ostende and Aachen at **8d** (7 Sgr) rate effective July 1852

Aachen exchange office mistakenly added the 1d credit, and rated 8 Sgr due 94 days

*Four covers are recorded as paying this rate to Prussia*
Non Contract Voyages

January 1855–March 1857

Earliest shipment of Australian wines to England

Melbourne, 16 May 1855

Paid 2/- double ship-letter fee, ½-1 oz.
Private clipper ship George Marshall, Melbourne 16 May, London 6 August

London rated 1/4 due, double the 8d retaliatory rate against Victoria for not adopting the 6d British uniform rate

86 days

Clippers were famous in Australia after Scotsman James “Bully” Forbes, Captain of the Black Ball Line’s Marco Polo, set a world speed record in 1852, averaging 15 knots over four days, and arrived at Melbourne from Liverpool in a record 68 days. In 1853 there were more than 200 full-rigged ships at anchor in Melbourne harbor, yet owners of private clipper ships such as the George Marshall knew they could easily compete for outbound freight in that very competitive market.
Melbourne, 29 August 1855

Towed into Liverpool amid strong easterlies

Paid 6d uniform rate
Melbourne 3d credit to U.K.
White Star Line *White Star*, Melbourne 29 August
Liverpool 27 November
91 days

Melbourne, 16 January 1856

Strong north easterlies force landing in Ireland, towed to Liverpool

Paid 6d uniform rate
Melbourne 3d credit to UK
Eagle Line *Albatross*
Melbourne 18 January
Crookhaven 2 May
Inland to Dublin, Kingston-Holyhead packet
115 days

12 May 1856, *London Daily News*: “The Eagle Line ship Albatross, Captain Allen, which for the last fortnight has been beating about the channel owing to adverse winds, was towed into the Mersey on Saturday evening [10 May]. She left Melbourne on the 18th of January and has 18,000 ounces of gold.”
Non Contract Voyages           January 1855–March 1857

The Wigram Line of London

Paid 6d uniform rate,  
6d registered
Melbourne 3d credit to U.K.
Wigram Line Kent
Melbourne 11 June
London 2 September
London rated 6d due for registration
Received 5 September
98 days
One of only two Wigram Line sailings

Maryborough, 31 May 1856

The Eagle Line of New York

Geelong, 26 February 1856
Paid 6d uniform rate, Melbourne 3d credit to U.K.
Eagle Line Eagle, Melbourne 28 February, Gravesend 22 May
86 days
One of only two Eagle line sailings; not listed in Tabeart
Landed at Bristol

Paid 6d uniform rate
Melbourne 3d credit to U.K.

Morning Star
Melbourne 20 March
Bristol 19 June
Liverpool 20 June
Rec’d 20 June
94 days

To New Hampshire via London

Paid 6d uniform rate
Melbourne 3d credit to U.K.

Sydenham
Melbourne 6 February
Gravesend 3 June
London 3¢ debit to U.S.

Havre Line Fulton
Southampton 3 June
New York 16 June
New York rated 24¢ due
137 days

Effective 1 January 1857 the sending country kept all postage, with no accounting. The above 3d credit was thus applied in error.
Non Contract Voyages           January 1855–March 1857

**Black Ball’s first non-contract sailing after termination of their mail contract**

Geelong, 26 November 1856

Paid 6d uniform rate, Melbourne 3d credit to U.K.

Black Ball *Ocean Chief*, 26 November, Liverpool 23 February 1857

90 days

*She walks the water like a thing of life*

*And seems to dare the elements to strife.*

Lord Byron, on clipper ships

**Beginning of the end of British contract clipper service**

The Treaty of Paris, formally ending the Crimean War, was signed in March 1856. The Admiralty advertised for renewal of steamship service to Australia, planned to begin in early 1857. In August 1856 Admiralty contracts with the Black Ball and White Star lines were terminated. The last British contract clipper was Black Ball’s Donald Mackay, which left Liverpool on 5 October 1856. All six clipper-ship packets after September 1856 were under colonial contracts; another five sailed as private ships.
Return to Steam
British Contract Steamship

European & Australian Royal Mail Co.

Second homeward sailing under the contract

Melbourne, 14 February 1857
Paid 9d, 6d uniform rate, 3d French transit (to ¼ oz.)
E&ARM Simla, Melbourne 15 February, Suez 26 March
E&ARM Jura, Alexandria 28 March, Malta 31 March
E&ARM Cambria, Malta 31 March, Marseilles 3 April
Marseilles rated 5 decimals due for inland
49 days to Marseilles

The earliest of 3 Victorian letters to pay this rate, effective 1 January 1857

The New Steam Contract

The Admiralty signed a five-year contract with E&ARM in October 1856 for monthly service between Southampton and Alexandria via Malta, and between Suez and Sydney via Galle and Melbourne. Very challenging schedules were set in hours, as were times for mail deliveries. Financial penalties for non-adherence were steep.

E&ARM lacked the ships and experience to succeed. Breakdowns were common, and fines for lateness threatened the company. E&ARM underwent a partial merger in July 1857 with the Royal Mail Steam Packet Co., who assumed full responsibility for the contract when E&ARM failed in April 1858. Clippers may have been marginally slower, but they were far more reliable.