

THE RAILWAY LETTER MAIL of Great Britain, 1891 to 1899

This presentation examines the railway letter mail system adopted in Great Britain jointly by the General Post Office and participating railway companies between 1891 and 1899. The unusual partnership between private enterprise and government provided a needed expedited mail service that neither partner could offer on their own. When initiated in 1891, the joint service required two stamps, one for the railway fee of 2d and one for the regular Post Office postage. The service was regulated by an agreement between the Post Office and the participating railways.

The service began operation on February 1, 1891. The important features of the arrangement:

1. Upon every railway letter a fee of 2d, in addition to postage at the ordinary rate 1d for letter not exceeding one ounce, will be charged. The railway servant will affix and obliterate both the railway company 2d adhesive labels as well as the postage stamp.
2. Letters will be forwarded to the station of address by the next available train. Where necessary it is to be handed on from one company to another. At station of address the letter is to be handed to addressee, his agent, or put into the post.

The exhibit includes precursors, essays, stamps, express delivery uses, cancels and postal rates.

Earliest Reported Use of a Railway Letter Stamp



31 January 1891 cover carried to the mails at Bath by the Midland Railway
"MIDLAND RAILWAY/VIA BATH" handstamp cancels both postage and railway stamp
posted the day before railway letter mails service was to commence

RAILWAY LETTER MAIL

Precursors

String Letter



Prior to 1 February 1891, it was contrary to post office regulations for railroads to carry letter mail. However, the carriage of parcels was not part of the Post Office monopoly. So, if a letter was tied with string, it became a parcel and could legally be carried outside the mails by a private railway.



label on back (a reduced image)

1850s string letter from Charfield to Berkley
Midland Railway parcel label, endorsed "To be
forwarded immediately from Berkeley Rd
Station" with 6d due upon delivery

original string underlying the label is knotted
at bottom of the envelope

RAILWAY LETTER MAIL

Precursors

Newspaper Parcel Label / Franked Letter Envelope



(1855, Penzance) cover with preprinted address to the West Briton Newspaper Office at Truro West Cornwall Railway 1d newspaper parcel label, signed by C.P. Charlton while Supt. at Penzance only recorded example of any stamp issued by the railway, early use of a newspaper parcel stamp



21 October 1887 outside of the mails use from Trimdon Station to a coal dealer in W. Hartlepool North Eastern Railway franked envelope for use in sending orders for coal (sold at 12 for 1s) use in clear contravention of the GPO postal monopoly for letter mail

RAILWAY LETTER MAIL

The Railway Stamps

Essays / Issued Stamps

Hand-painted Essays by Messrs. De La Rue



"POSTAGE AND RAILWAY SERVICE"
(Feb 27, 1890)

Rejected designs for a 3d postage stamp that combined the 2d railway fee and the 1d postage. Due to legal and time restraints it was decided that the individual Railways should each print their own stamps of a uniform design.



"RAILWAY LETTER POSTAGE"
(April 14, 1890)

Variations of Design

Following the original proposed design and text, North Eastern Railway issued their red stamps. However, the final design selected had a modified text and the red issue was suppressed by the Post Office. A revised design, printed in green, was then issued with the prescribed inscription.

"Stamp to be used only for letters bearing a postage stamp" in central circle and "Railway Letter Post" in bottom tablet.



"Fee for conveyance of single post letters by railway" in circle and simply "Railway" at foot.



RAILWAY LETTER MAIL

Conjunctive Use

Second Day Use

London and South Western Railway
+ South Eastern & Chatham Railway

Conjunctive Uses: The "Letters of Agreement" stipulated that:

Letters will be forwarded to the station of address by the next available train. Where necessary it is to be handed on from one company to another. At station of address the letter is to be handed to addressee, or his agent, or put into the post.

This example was carried by London & South Western Railway to Waterloo Junction where it was transferred to South Eastern & Chatham Railway for carriage to Bromley.



WAYBILL
from Fordingbridge
to London
to Bromley

2 February 1891 Fordingbridge Station, via Waterloo Station and Waterloo Junction to Bromley
prepaid London & South Western Railway 2d railway stamp and 1d postage
"FORDINGBRIDGE" straight line station cancel, "546" station's telegraph office handstamp
Waterloo L. & S.W.R. and Waterloo Junction Parcels Office handstamps
Bromley / Kent 10 (PM) 2 February 1891 postmark

shows railway station, telegraph office, parcels office and post office markings

RAILWAY LETTER MAIL

Triple Conjunctive Uses

Barry Dock and Railways / Barry Railway
+ Taff Vale Railway
+ Great Western Railway

The name "Barry Dock and Railways" was changed to "Barry Railway" in August 1891.

G.W.R.
TRANSFERRED
AT
PADDINGTON
And to be so Abstracted



(backstamp)



May 1891 Barry Dock and Railways to London, 2d railway stamp (control #63) and 1d postage passed to Taff Vale Railway at Cogan, then to Great Western Railway to Paddington **only reported example of the 2d stamp in private hands** (a mint strip is in British Museum)



6 May 1898 Barry Dock station to Birmingham, 2d Barry Railway stamp and 1d postage passed to Taff Vale Railway at Cogan, then to Great Western Railway to Birmingham

RAILWAY LETTER MAIL

Triple Conjunctive Use

Highland Railway
+ North British Railway
+ Midland Railway



WAYBILL
from Kingussie
to Perth
to Carlisle
to Birmingham

3 June 1891 Kingussie Station (Scotland) to Birmingham

Highland Railway parcel label on reverse for delivery to the station rather than a post office
ms "Kingussie" origin station name on label, Highlands Railway 2d stamp and 1d postage
by Highlands Rly to Perth, North British Rly to Carlisle and Midland Rly to Birmingham

RAILWAY LETTER MAIL

Outside the Mails Uses

Railway Station to Addressee

A clause in the December 1890 Letters of Agreement stipulated that, "At station of address the letter is to be handed to addressee, or his agent, or put into the post ... (and) a railway letter can either be addressed to a passenger station to be called for or to the actual residence of the addressee." Such uses represent about 10 percent of the known railway uses.



24 December 1891 Gorey Station (Ireland) to Dublin marked "Urgent" on Christmas Eve Dublin Wicklow & Wexford Railway 2d railway stamp and 1d postage, did not enter mails



label on back (reduced image)

April 1895 Worthing Station to Pier St, Ryde Pier, Isle of Wight, with "Carriage Paid" label London Brighton & South Coast Railway 2d railway stamp and 1d postage, did not enter the mails

RAILWAY LETTER MAIL

Postal Rates

Postal Card / Under Four Ounces



19 August 1898 Altrincham Station to Longsight, Manchester, $\frac{1}{2}$ d postal card rate
Manchester, South Junc. & Altrincham Railway 2d railway stamp

Letter Postage Rates 1885 to 21 June 1897	
1d	to 1 ounce
$1\frac{1}{2}$ d	over 1, but under 2 ounces (see page 16)
2d	between 2 and 4 ounces



21 May 1891 Wroxham Station to the mails at Norwich for Stockport
Great Eastern Railway 2d railway stamp and postage of 2d for a letter two to four ounces

RAILWAY LETTER MAIL

Postal Rates

Tolerated Uses Abroad

Prohibited Letter Mail to Foreign Countries and Colonies: Prior to 1910, the Postal Guides stated that letters to overseas destinations were not to be accepted for transmission as railway letters. The disposition of any such letters was to be in a manner to be determined by the Postmaster General.



Saturday, 8 December 1894 from East Grinstead, via London, to **Cairo, Egypt**
London Brighton & South Coast Railway 2d. railway stamp and 2½d postage
"EAST GRINSTEAD/ * STATION * / LB & SCR" cancel, Cairo arrival backstamps



only reported example
of a railway mail letter
with the 1d soldier's
concession rate

Saturday, 18 November 1899 Moreton Station, via London, to **Natal Field Force** member
London & South Western Railway 2d railway stamp and 1d postage
"MORETON / * STATION * / L. & S.W. RY" cancel, endorsed to be posted at Waterloo

RAILWAY LETTER MAIL

With Express Delivery

Hull & Barnsley Railway

Express Delivery: The General Post Office began their express delivery service for all letter mail on 25 March 1891 in London. By August 1891 the service had expanded to cover the whole kingdom. In 1895 an express service using a messenger from the post office to the addressee could be used up to three miles for three pence. In 1897 the rate remained the same but the distance from delivering post office was increased to under four miles.



7 October 1898 Hull to Pontefract Railway Station and by express messenger to addressee "EXPRESS" handstamp and endorsed by sender "By P.O. messengers from Railway Station" Hull & Barnsley 2d Railway stamp and 1d postage plus 3d stamp for express delivery to 4 miles the 1d stamp is perfin "LYB" (London & Yorkshire Bank) and flap with "Hull" and bank name

the only reported express letter carried by the Hull & Barnsley Railway

RAILWAY LETTER MAIL

With Express Delivery

London, Brighton & South Coast Railway

While regular railway letter mail entered the post office mails at destination, or not all if directed to be picked up at the station, railway letters for express delivery entered the mails at origin. They were then passed to the railway for onward carriage to a post or telegraph office where it would be given to a messenger for final delivery.



21 April 1898 Brighton to Victoria Station, London and by express messenger to addressee endorsed by sender "Urgent" and "To be handed to Express Messenger at Victoria Station" requisite perpendicular line on front and back and "EXPRESS" handstamp 2d railway stamp and prepaid 4d (1d postage and 3d for London delivery)

RAILWAY LETTER MAIL

Cancellations

Manuscript Cross Cancels

Cross Cancels: A Public Notice for the new railway letter service stated in reference to the railway label and postage stamp: *obliterate both by marking a conspicuous cross on the face of both stamp and label with pen and ink.*



5 February 1891 (first week use) London to the mails at South-Norwood Sorting Office South Eastern Railway 2d railway stamp, no control number and 1d postage, pen "X" cancels
2d stamp is the only known example without a control number



large lettering



small lettering



30 October 1894 use to Bromley, Kent where it entered the mails, pen "X" cancels South Eastern Railway 2d railway stamp, small lettering, with control number, and 1d postage

RAILWAY LETTER MAIL

Cancellations

Manuscript Station Name Cancels

Per instructions, the top cover has both stamps cancelled at origin. The lower cover does not.



15 August 1898 Longton Station by North Staffordshire Railway, posted at Hanley 1d postage overlapping 2d railway stamp, both with manuscript "Longton" (Station) cancels



L. J. W. W.
2/2/98
9:18 am

2 February 1893 Charlestown Station (Ireland) to the mails at Sligo and by post to London Waterford, Limerick & Western Railway 2d railway stamp, manuscript cancel, and 1d postage

RAILWAY LETTER MAIL

Cancellations

Handstamped Station Cancels

Station Name Devices: The General Post Office supplied stations with oval cancel devices upon request. These markings, of a standardized design, were to be used for cancelling both the railway letter stamps and the postage stamps. Additional handstamps with station name could also be procured for use on post office forms. However, some were sourced by the railways.



BROCKENHURST
* STATION *
L&S.W.R.Y.



14 October 1895 Brockenhurst station to Wimborne, "BROCKENHURST" cancels
London & South Western Railway 2d railway stamp and 1d postage



CHADWELL

22 April 1898 Chadwell (Heath) Station to Liverpool Street Station, London, posted on arrival
East London Railway 2d imperf stamp (120 issued) and 1d postage, "CHADWELL" cancels

RAILWAY LETTER MAIL

Cancellations

Handstamped Parcels Cancels



The various handstamps that include the station name plus the word "Parcels" were evidently made by the railway companies and were not supplied by the GPO.

24 March 1897 "SUTTON PARCELS" per post from Portsmouth to Ventnor, Isle of Wight London Brighton & South Coast Railway 2d stamp and 1d postage, Ventnor arrival backstamp



4 July 1893 Stirling to the mails at London, N.W., rate for 1½d to 2 ounces prior to July 1897 Caledonian Railway Company 2d railway stamp and 1½d postage, "STIRLING PARCELS" cancels