

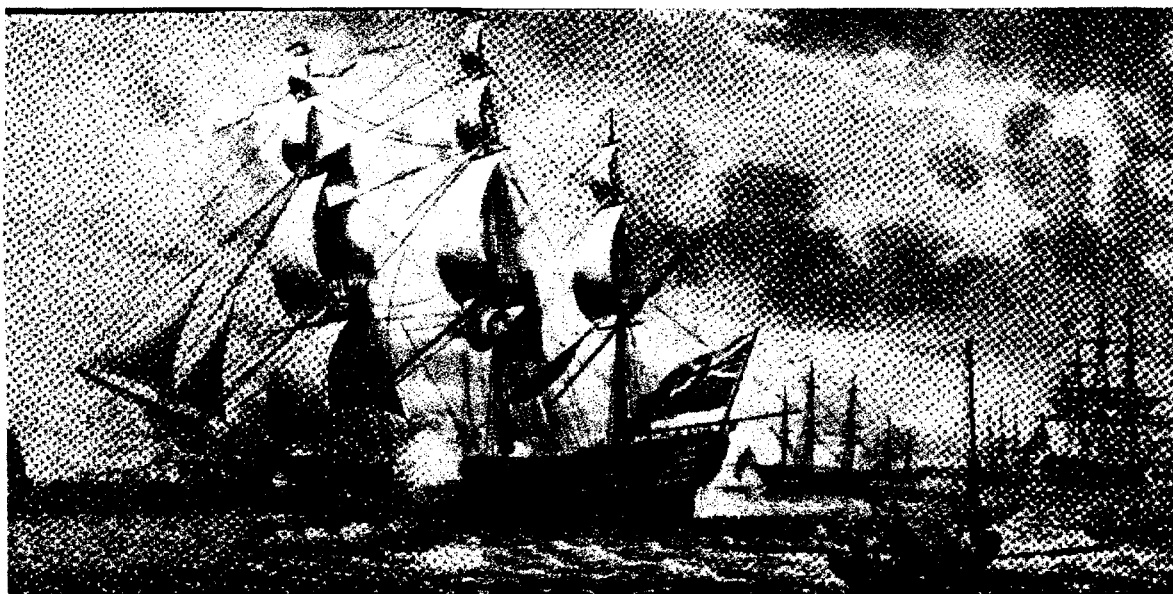
1/2003  
9th January 2003

INDIA LETTERS  
1770 to 1840

This display is dedicated to the memory of Alan.W.Robertson MBE without whose expertise, enthusiasm and generosity this collection would be a shadow of what it is.

These are letters to and from the United Kingdom all of which were carried by sailing ships that rounded the Cape of Good Hope in one direction or another or, in a few cases, made a round trip to the Cape and back. The period covered is approximately 1770 to 1840, a mere 70 years, and yet it covers almost the entire era of the public carriage of mail by this means, by sailing ship, and this route, via the Cape of Good Hope.

Prior to the last quarter of the 18th century almost all communication with that part of the world, be it the transport of personnel, goods or correspondence, was for and on behalf of the Honourable Company. Everything was carried by ships in the service of, or chartered by, the Company. The Directors saw no reason to involve the Post Office, indeed since the Company had enjoyed a Royal Charter since 1600 it probably never occurred to them to do so. On the other hand by 1840 a reliable service by steamer from Bombay had been established to various ports up the Red Sea, particularly Suez. This service formed the first and last legs of the so called 'overland' route between England and the east. By virtually halving the time taken by ships via the Cape it is not surprising that all important mail was now sent by this vastly shorter route.



EAST INDIAMEN SAILING FROM THE DOWNS c1788

This display is very much a 'stamp collection' of the handstruck rather than the adhesive variety. Only two items in this display are truly 'stampless', one of these is the first letter shown dated Madras April 7th 1681 which is a good example of a letter surviving from this period. It bears no postal markings but the name of the ship that carried it is shown in manuscript. Most of the other items displayed bear multiple handstamps which is one of the attractions of collecting this type of material.

The display is divided into three sections. Part one covers the period up to and including 1814. This is the time when the Post Office was in conflict with the Directors of the Company and gradually got a foot in the door or rather a share of the proceeds from this potentially lucrative postal route. The second section deals with what happened as a result of the Act of 1815, the first serious attempt by the Post Office to gain the upper hand. The Act lasted four years before the introduction of the concessionary 4d sea postage rate that resulted in the appearance of India Letter handstamps issued to some fifty ports around the coast of the British Isles. This heyday of ship letters via the Cape is illustrated in section three.

Part 1) (Items with green margins.) Up to and including 1814.

The first item, Madras April 7th 1681, is typical of the early letters from India which, although it is a private letter was not handled by the Post Office. About 1770 the Company started handing over letters to the Post Office for delivery inland, particularly to Scotland. These letters received strikes of the earliest London Ship Letter stamps. Outgoing letters on the other hand, although they clearly reached London did not receive Ship Letter stamps and must have been simply handed over to the Company for shipment to India.

PTO

### Part 1) Continued.

Although no London Ship Letter stamps or manuscript postal information was used on any of these outgoing letters this is not the case when they arrived in India. All three Presidencies applied stamps or manuscript postal instructions mainly for inland accounting purposes. On letters from India a number of Stamps were used at Madras (The post office was in Fort St. George.) and Calcutta but less so at Bombay.

None of this was bringing in much revenue to the Post Office which must have been very frustrating for the powers that be. In 1814 a most bizarre scheme was dreamed up, the Post Paid Withdrawn Ship Letter. This was supposed to cater for all destinations not covered by existing Post Office services but in effect that meant south of the equator (or that direction.) and east of the Cape of Good Hope. Briefly the idea was that letters to such places should be taken to one of a number of designated offices where the clerk made a guess at what the rate would have been if a service was available, halve it, take the money and apply a handstamp to that effect, (and a fine handstamp it was!) After that the letter could legally be handed to anyone going in that direction. Needless to say this idea did not catch on and was withdrawn after a few months. Two examples are shown, one addressed to Cape Town and the other to Calcutta.

This must have been the last straw which resulted in an Act of Parliament in an effort to make some real money. The Company had lost its Charter in 1800 and this Act finally gave the Post Office the ascendancy

### Part 2) (Items with red margins.) The Act of 1815 or King's Postage.

The Act was 55 Geo.III Cap.153. Which came into effect in July 1815. It was a cumbersome, expensive and unpopular piece of legislation but it was made to work and was in force for 4 years. The first item in the display is an original copy of the Bill after the committee stage that became the Act. The next 5 items are a description of the Act which explains how the term King's Postage came about and also illustrates the various handstamps that were issued by the Post Office and the stamps that were produced locally in India. There can be no doubt that the Act was taken seriously and was effective but not to the extent that had been expected.

The display illustrates what happened to letters to and from England and the three Indian Presidencies starting with Madras then Calcutta and finally Bombay.

In my view the Postmaster at Madras showed the most initiative. He realised that a handstamp was required to identify letters for the expensive monthly packets and had a stamp made locally. The fine intaglio Crown Circle Madras Ship Letter(sic) resulted. It was undoubtedly made by a local artisan because of the spelling mistake. The stamp was only used for three months before definitive packet letter stamps arrived from England. (for all three Presidencies together with Ceylon, Mauritius, Cape of Good Hope and St. Helena.) The Postmaster still realised that he needed a stamp for the cheaper less regular Ship Letter service. I believe he got the same artisan to produce a suitable stamp which he did but made the same spelling mistake! This stamp was in use for two and a half years before the spelling mistake was corrected.

The Calcutta office was not so adventurous but it did come up with receipt and despatch stamps including the words 'King's Postage'. This was synonymous with 'Sea Postage' which was payable under the Act to the GPO hence the Crown. However this was never an officially recognised designation though the term was used at all three Indian Presidencies.

The Act was repealed in July 1819 but it was 6 months before the news reached India. As a result letters were being posted in India for the best part of a year which arrived in this country after the Act had been repealed which resulted in the most delightful chaos! Several examples of this are illustrated. Attention is drawn to the LIVERPOOL INDIA SHIP LETTER stamp which was used as a despatch stamp under this Act and a receipt stamp for many years under the next.

### Part 3) (Items with green margins.) The era of the INDIA LETTER stamps.

On the repeal of the Act of 1815 the special concessionary Sea Postage rate of 4d came into force for incoming letters from many places east of the Cape. This made a huge difference and was an undoubted success.

This first 20 items are all outgoing and illustrate the series of Post Paid stamps that were used at the London Ship Letter Office. The stamp used in red only in 1819 was easily the most handsome, after which they deteriorated somewhat.

All the remainder of the display are letters bearing INDIA LETTER stamps of ports around the coast of the British Isles starting at London, round the south coast and then up the west via Wales and Ireland to Scotland. This is not intended as a comprehensive display of INDIA LETTER stamps but the ones chosen are interesting for particular reasons such as the wide variation in places of origin. These range from Tahiti to the east to Rio de Janeiro to the west. All these letters were treated as India Letters, correctly or incorrectly. Many examples of corrections are illustrated. Although confirmation is still sought I am of the opinion that INDIA LETTER stamps used in red were applied at the Ship Letter Office in London. Attention is drawn to particular items such as the Chichester and Arundle Ship Letter stamps with accompanying boxed INDIA stamps applied in London. Several of the items shown were used by Alan Robertson to illustrate his magnum opus. Particular attention is drawn to the St. Ives and Hale items which are now known to have arrived on the same ship.