

Anglo Boer War Postal History

featuring

The Republican Invasion of Natal & The Siege of Ladysmith

**A Presentation to
The Royal Philatelic Society
London**

by

Richard Stock FRPSL

Thursday 15th October 2020

The Republican Invasion of Natal and the Siege of Ladysmith

War was declared on 10th October 1899 and numerically superior Boer Forces from the Transvaal and Orange Free State invaded Natal from the north on 11th October 1899 crossing the Drakensberg Mountains in three places. Although successful at Talana and Elandslaagte, British Forces retreated towards Ladysmith leaving the Boer Commandos to occupy the towns of Glencoe, Newcastle and Dundee. Ladysmith was surrounded on 1st November and Boer forces penetrated as far as Colenso, nearly 90 miles into Natal.

The Orange Free State armies occupied Van Reenan's Pass and parts of Natal immediately adjacent. The Transvaal postal service recognized O.F.S. stamps as valid.

The map (figure 1) illustrates that it would be impossible for northern Natal to be successfully defended against superior forces.

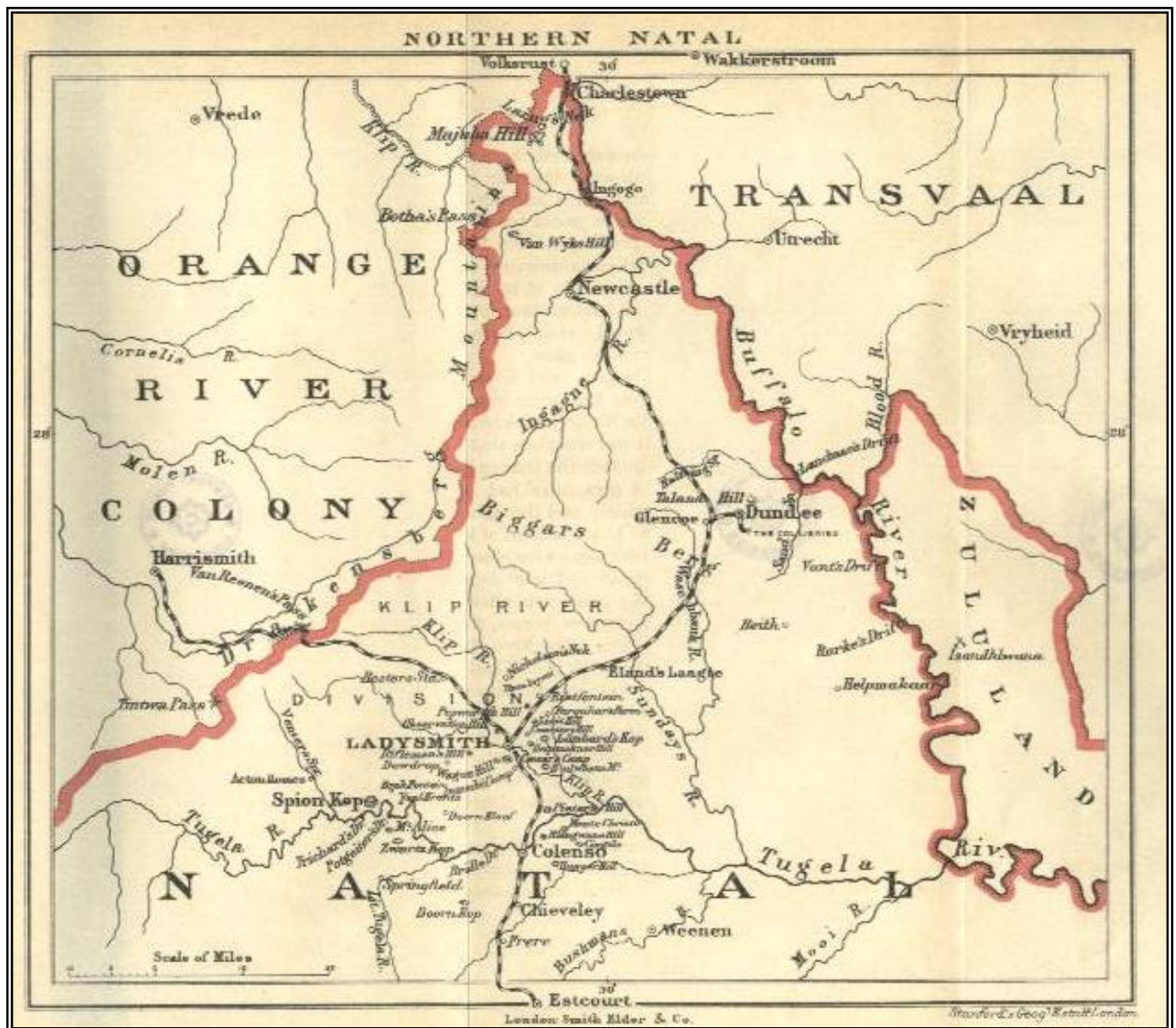


Figure 1.

The advancing Boers captured the contents of some of the hastily evacuated Post Offices and used the datestamps to cancel mail, notably at Dundee. A large number of unusual provisional datestamps were introduced during the invasion and subsequent occupation of Natal. There were four basic types:

- A. Captured single or double circle metal datestamps;
- B. The double circle "HOOFDLAGER Z.A.R" metal datestamp;
- C. Moveable type handstamps and datestamps and
- D. Oval rubber datestamps

The cover illustrated at figure 2 was in the post office when the Boers captured the town. It is franked with a 1d Natal stamp cancelled 'DUNDEE OC 9 99' (type A datestamp) two days before the invasion.

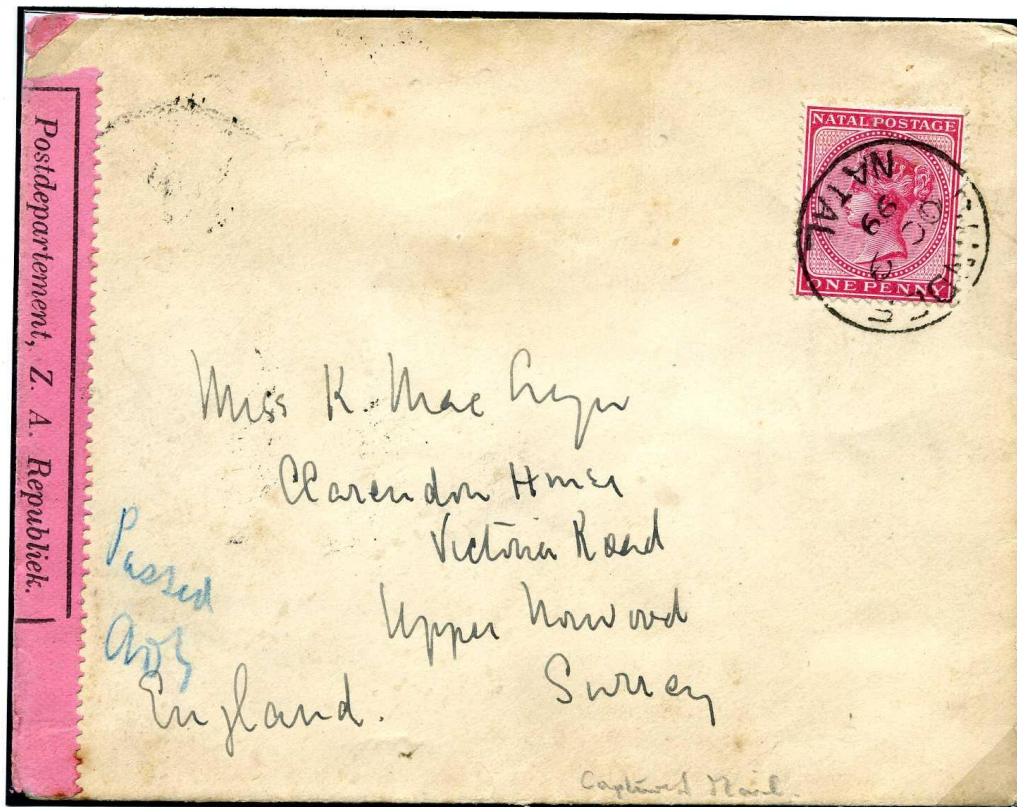


Figure 2.

The cover was sent to Pretoria where it was opened by the censor and resealed with a label tied by a Pretoria cancellation on 9 November 1899. It arrived in Durban on the 8 January 1900 where it was endorsed "PASSED" in crayon and reached London on 3 February 1900.

Figure 3 illustrates the usage of a type A datestamp on 8 December 1899 by Boer forces at Dundee.



Figure 3.

Type 3 datestamps/handstamps with moveable type were used at Newcastle, Glencoe, Charlestown, Colenso, Fouries Lager, General Burger Lager, Hattingspruit, Modderspruit, Vrede Lager and Waschbank. In the case of Newcastle and Glencoe there are many sub-types some of which consist of up to five lines of type. The cover to Pretoria, illustrated at figure 4, was cancelled by type C and type A datestamps. The single line "P.K. Newcastle 26.10.99" datestamp, in use for only four days, was applied at Newcastle and the cover was forwarded to Dundee where it was re-posted cancelled "Dundee Natal No 2 99" by the captured double circle datestamp.

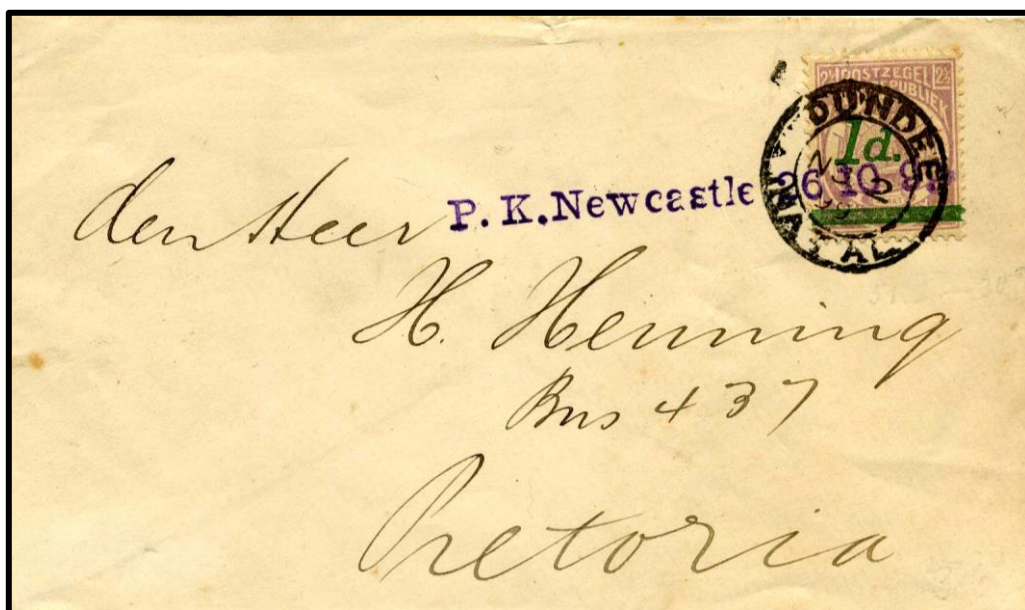


Figure 4.

The stampless cover (figure 5) from a member of the Hollander Voluntary Corps, led into Natal at Charlestown by Commandant G. Lombard on the morning of the 13th October, 1899 was handstamped "VELDDIENST" in violet and cleared at the Hoofdlager, Volksrust before acceptance at the Volksrust Post Office.



Figure 5.

Mail from the O.F.S. forces is scarcer than items sent by the Transvaal Commandos and the cover to Kroonstad, illustrated at figure 6, records the mail route to the Orange Free State and shows how the mail to and from the front was handled. It was posted at Glencoe on 12 February 1900 and arrived at Kroonstad on 16 February. There are transit datestamps, Newcastle 12 February and Johannesburg 15 February, on the reverse.



Figure 6.

The Colenso Field Post Office used a straight line datestamp (figure 7) between 13 January and 6 February 1900. The reverse of figure 7 has transit marks 'Hoofdlager Z.A.R. 16 Jan 00', 'Johannesburg 18 Jan 00' and arrival datestamp 'Krugersdorp 18 Jan 00'.

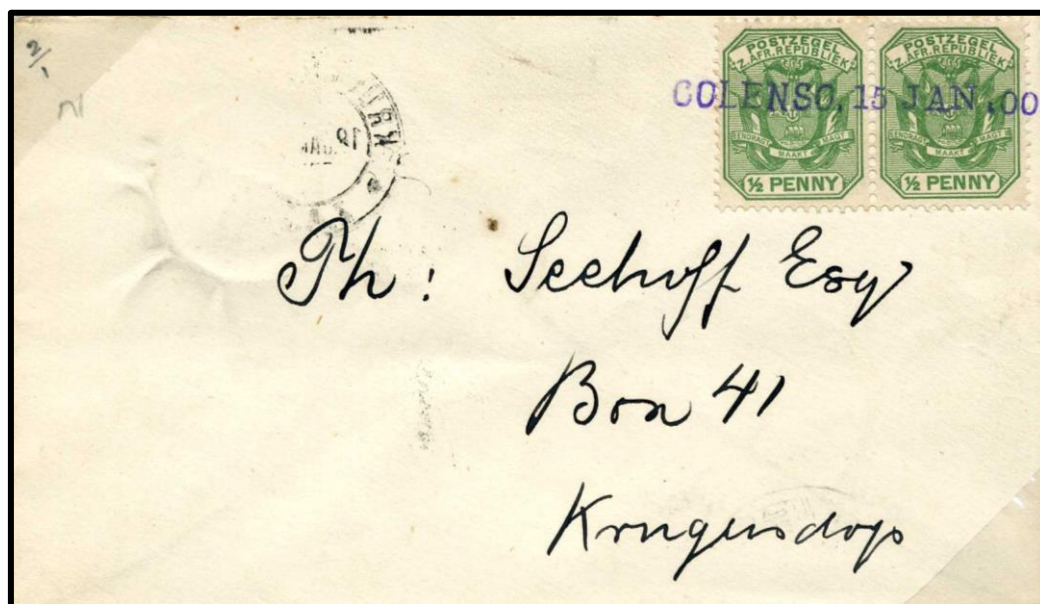


Figure 7.

The Republican Forces introduced a series of oval rubber datestamps at the following locations: Elandslaagte, Charlestown, Modderspruit, Hattingspruit, Keerstation, Mount Prospect, Dannhauser, Ingogo, Ingagane, Waschbank and Wesselsnek. The card, figure 8, from one of the Scandinavian volunteers serving with the Transvaal forces was posted at the Ingagane Field Post Office on 17 April, 1900 to Stockholm and cancelled with the oval datestamp in violet. On the reverse of the card is the blue three line handstamp "Veldpost Z.A.R. Newcastle 18 April 1900 transit datestamp.



Figure 8.

During the Boer occupation censorship was introduced and mail with British and / or Boer censor labels is known including a cover from Dannhauser to Ireland from a doctor captured by the Boers. The cover (figure 9) is cancelled by the oval handstamp in red. After about a month the letters 'ZAR' were removed. The cover was posted unsealed and endorsed 'Open for Inspection' to allow censorship. It was backstamped at Newcastle and sealed but again censored and resealed with a pink censor label 'Postdepartement Z.A. Republik Geopend Onderkrijgswet' at Pretoria on 5 January 1900. It was then transferred across the lines as it is backstamped Durban 15 January 1900 (figure 10).



Figure 9.



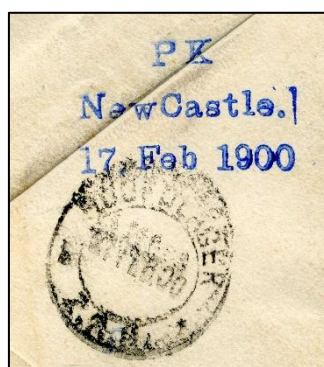
Figure 10

The envelope contained a letter from Dr. Charles Douglas who was interned by the Boers in Dannhauser. Apparently, he had free access to any part of the town because he had been treating the Boers.

Finally, a re-directed cover with three different types of provisional cancel namely, types B, C and D is illustrated at Figure 11. It is a stampless cover endorsed "Velddienst" from Pretoria on 16 February 1900 to Newcastle (backstamped with a three-line temporary handstamp "PK Newcastle 17 Feb 1900", redirected to Modderspruit where it received the provisional datestamp "Natallager, Z.A.R. 21 FEB 1900 MODDERSPRUIT". The cover received the Boer Headquarters datestamp "Hoofdlager Z.A.R. 22 Feb. 1900 before being sent back to Newcastle where it received a second strike of the temporary handstamp for 23 Feb. 1900.



Figure 11



Datestamps on the reverse of the cover

The Siege of Ladysmith

The siege began on 1st November 1899, when the town was surrounded by Boer forces. The garrison comprised 12,000 troops commanded by Lt. Gen. Sir George White. Col. Yule's column had retreated to Ladysmith from Dundee on 26th October, 1899.

Arrangements for handling mail before, during and after the siege are described. A postcard sent from Ladysmith before the siege is shown, also a cover arriving with the last mail on 31 October 1899 before the town was cut off and a 'siege runner' cover smuggled through the Boer lines during the siege. Further items include letters written during the siege and posted after the town was relieved by British Forces. Some contain interesting and poignant references to conditions prevailing during the siege.

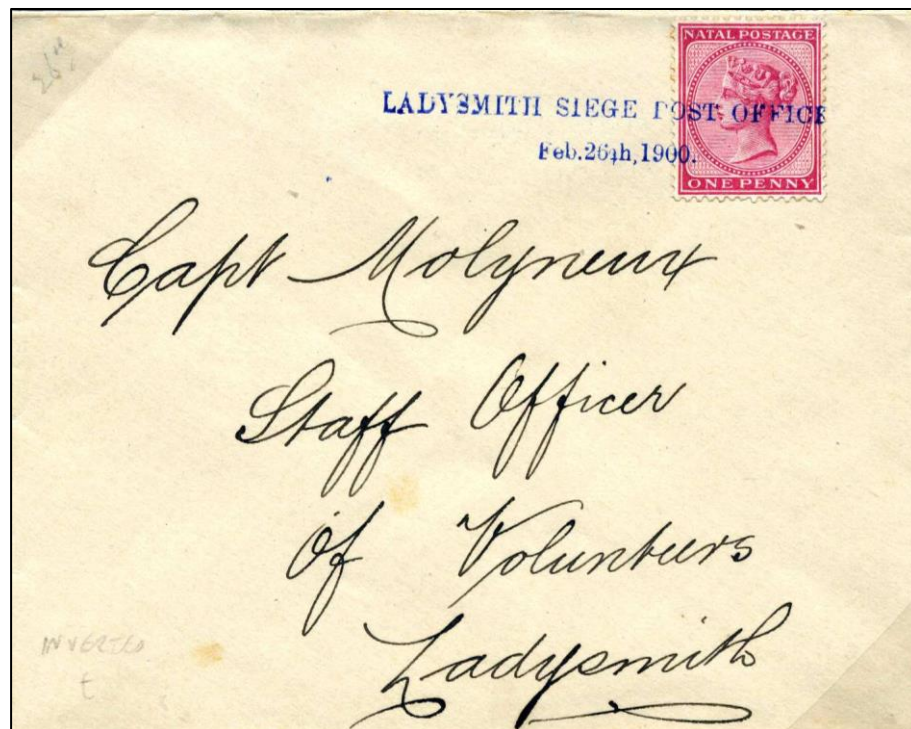


Figure 12

On 6th February 1900, Gen. Sir Archibald Hunter, Natal Field Force, Chief of Staff in Ladysmith, issued an order setting up a 'Garrison Postal Service' with nine districts, each with a central receiving box and a bicycle messenger service to the main post office. The special two-line postmark illustrated above was used (figure 12). There were two hand-stamps, on one the word 'siege' is misspelled 'seige'. There are other minor varieties.

Following their defeat at Colenso in December 1899, the British were reinforced and in January 1900 began to advance. They relieved Ladysmith on 28th February and reoccupied Dundee on 17th May.

British forces mail is represented by items from Field Post Offices, letters sent before, during and after the Siege of Ladysmith, internal mail and siege postcards. Mail from the Boer Headquarters outside Ladysmith including a letter from Commandant General Piet Joubert is also shown. Postcards and ephemera illustrate aspects of the invasion and the siege.

Mail sent from Ladysmith before the Siege



Figure 13

Mail trapped in Ladysmith by the Siege

Cover to Durban (figure 14) franked 1d lilac cancelled 15 October 1899. It was redirected to the Natal Field Artillery, Ladysmith and arrived on 31 October with the last mail before the town was cut off by the Boer forces. It remained in the post office during the siege and was sent to Melmoth, Zululand after the town was relieved. It arrived on 6 March 1900.

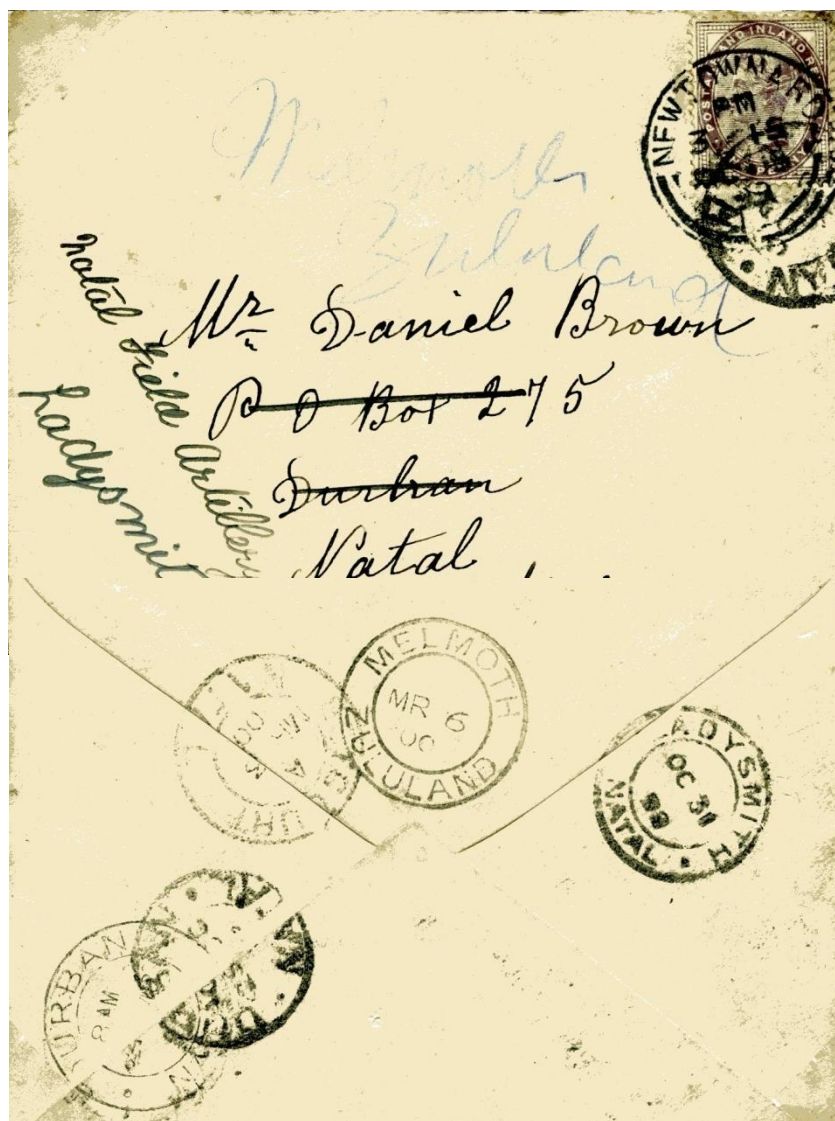


Figure 14 →

A 'Siege Runner' Cover

Some mail was smuggled out of Ladysmith by runners and posted at Estcourt.

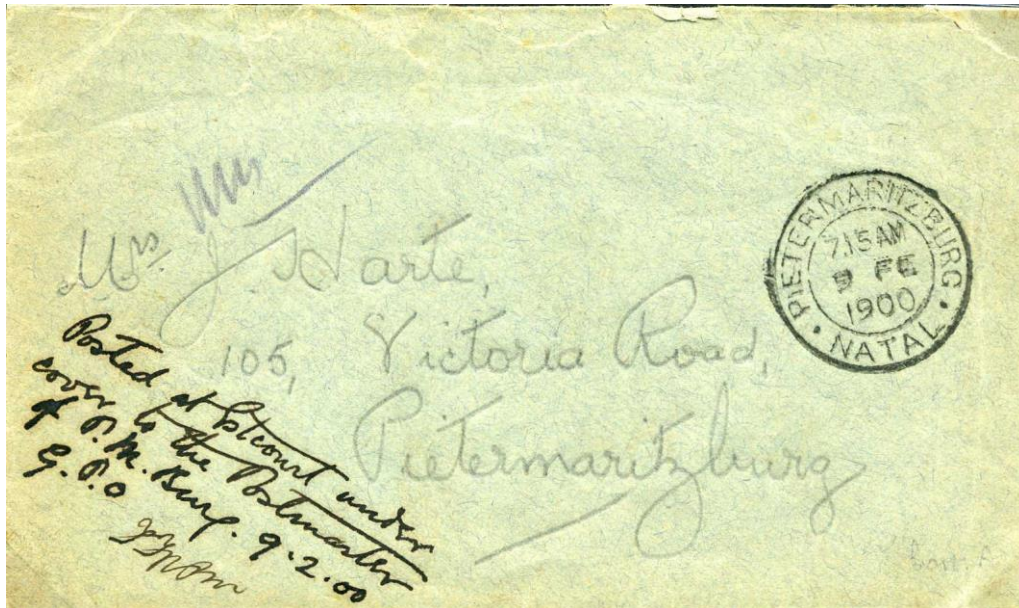
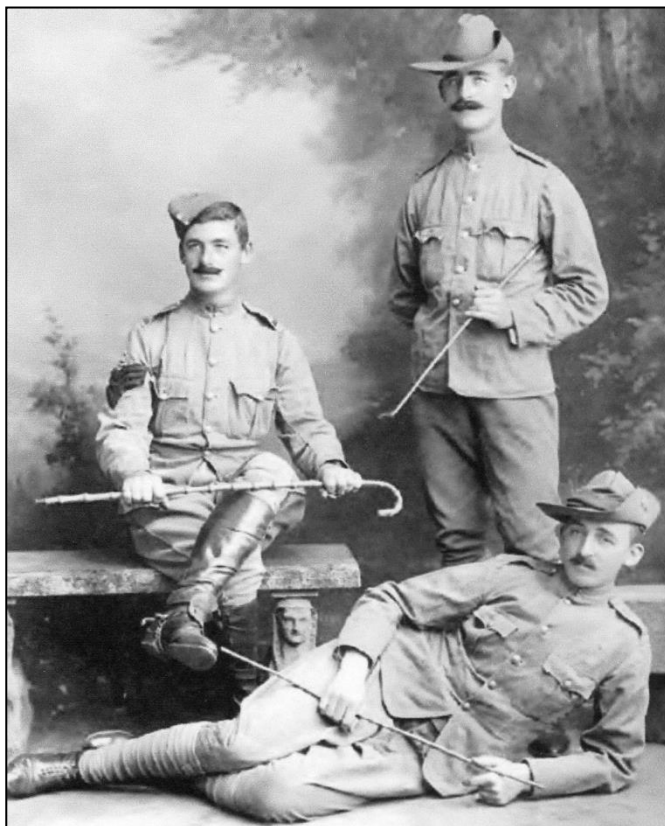


Figure 15

Cover (figure 15) 15smuggled through the lines at Ladysmith endorsed "Posted at Estcourt under cover to the Postmaster of P.M.Burg 9.2.00 G.P.O.",



Trooper
W.H.F. Harte
(reclining)
with his
brothers
R. Harte
(seated)
and
A.E. Harte
(standing).

350 officers and men of the Natal Carbineers were besieged in Ladysmith and Trooper Harte had mail sent to his mother during the siege.

Boer Forces Mail

"In Dienst" cover (figure 16) to Krugersdorp with "Hoofdlager ZAR" datestamp and "Modderspruit 14 Feb 1900" handstamp recorded used between 11 and 14 February 1900.

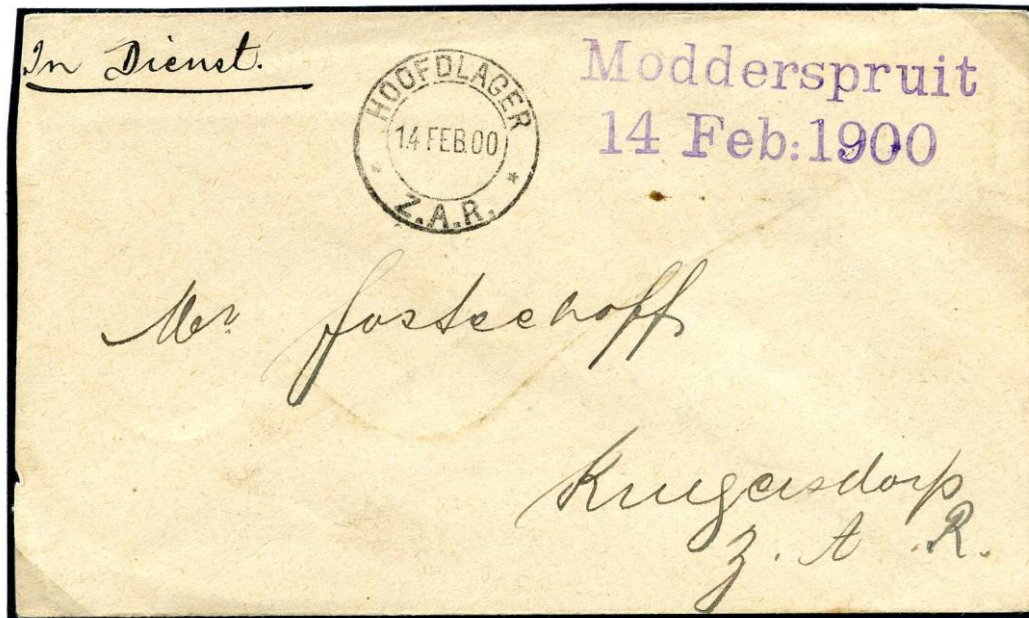


Figure 16

Stampless cover (figure 17) endorsed "Velddienst" from the Boer Forces outside Ladysmith on 15 January 1900 bearing the "Hoofdlager ZAR (Headquarters) datestamp sent via Johannesburg, 17 January and arrived at Bramfontein on 8 February, 1900

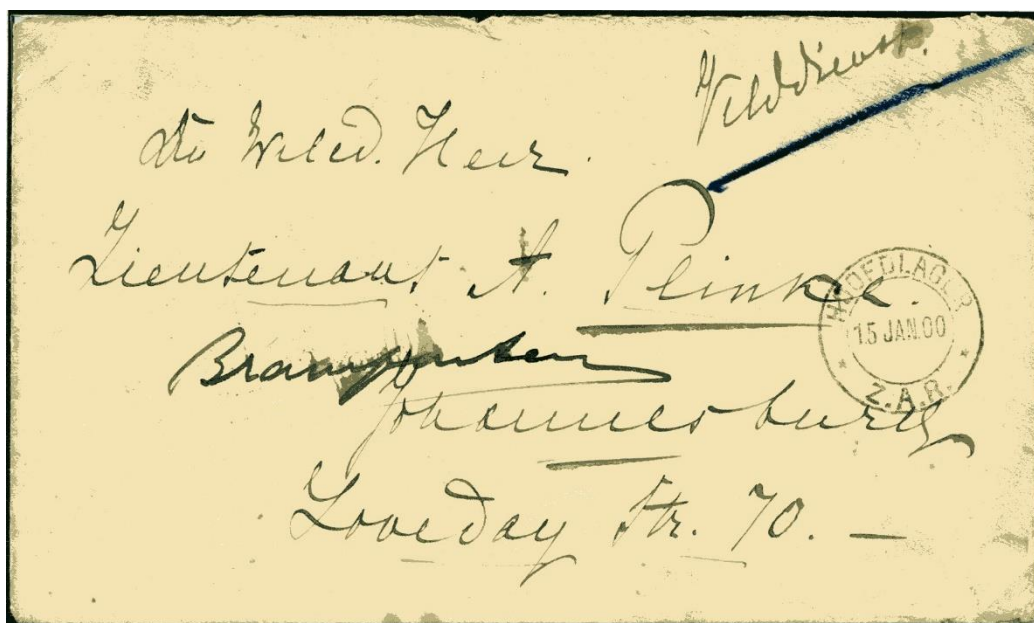


Figure 17

The Siege Postcard

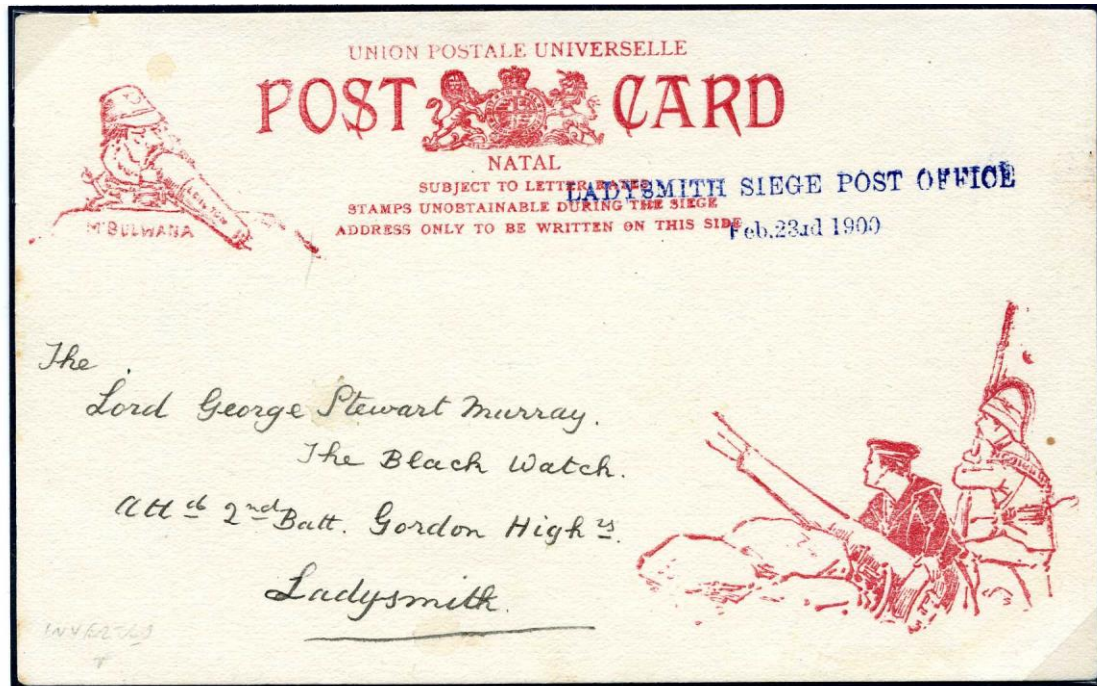


Figure 18

The Siege Valentine

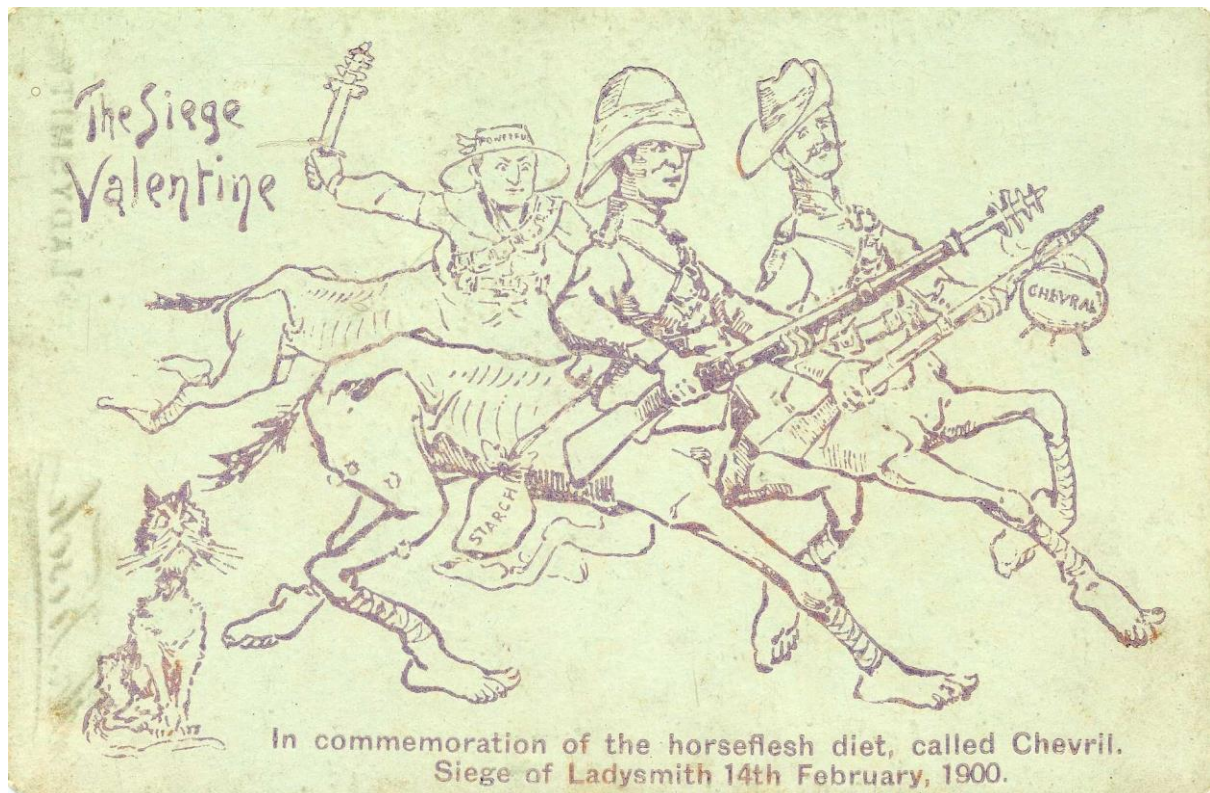


Figure 19

A Diet of Horseflesh



Figure 20

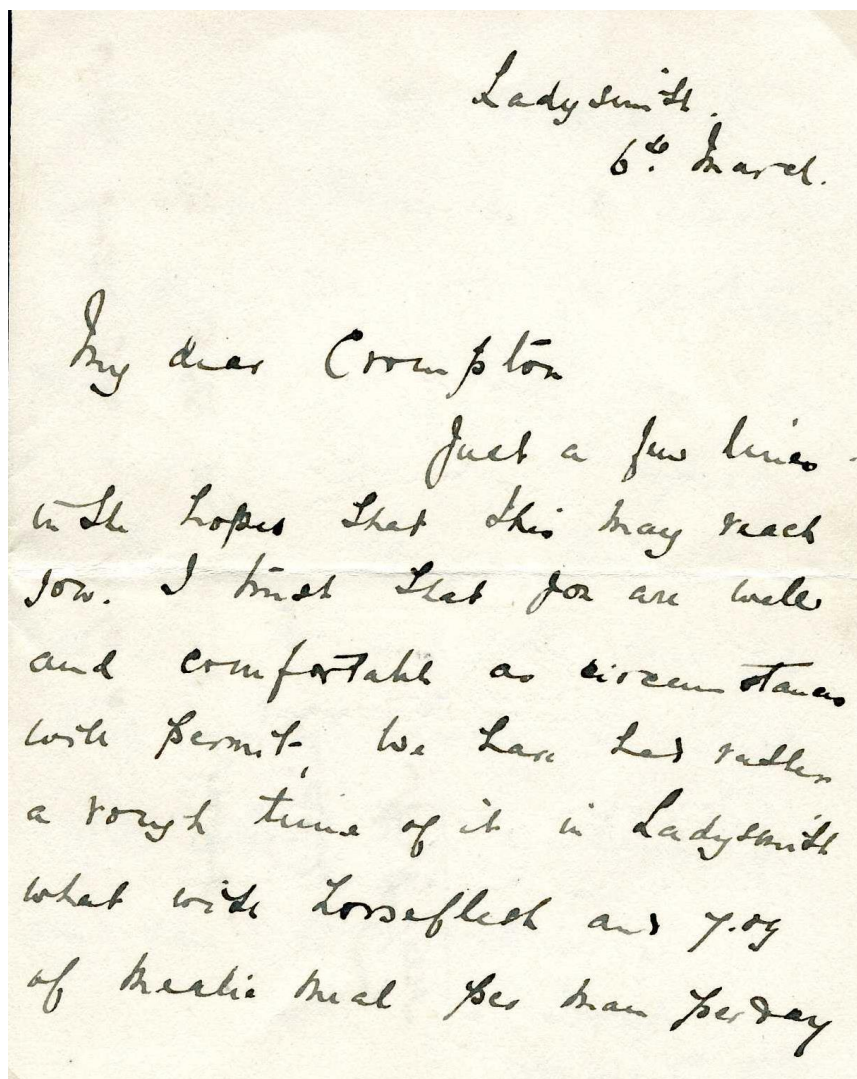


Figure 21

"....we have had rather a rough time of it in Ladysmith what with horseflesh and 7 oz of mealie meal per man per day and shells for dessert...."
Surrounded by Burghers

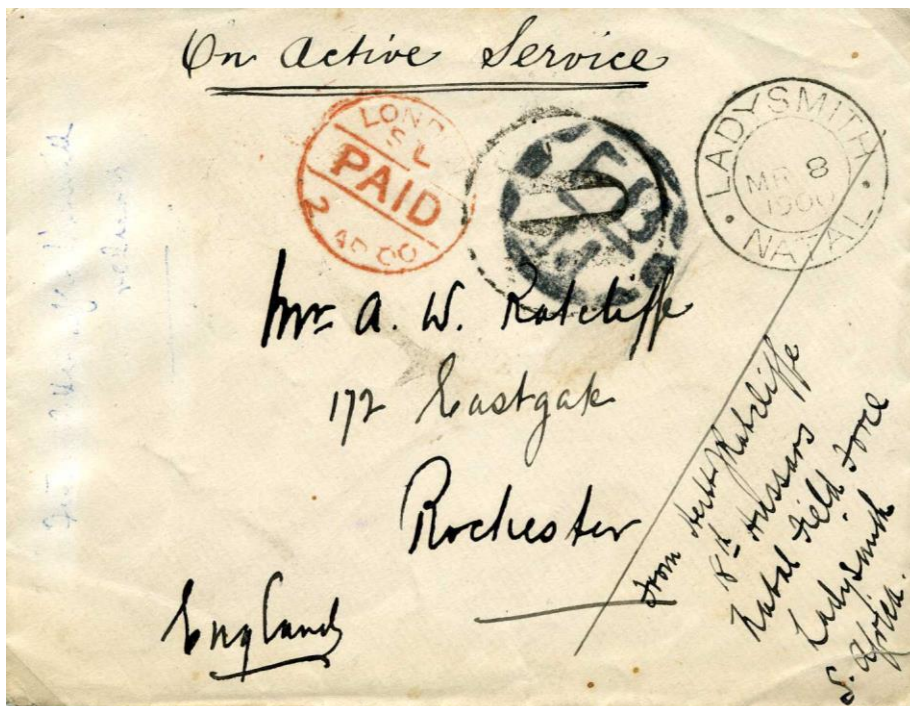


Figure 22

"On Monday last we evacuated the hill where we had been facing the Boers on the ridge opposite....life was awful up there, ¼lb biscuits & 2 small pieces of horseflesh the whole lot being pigs food but I've learned to eat it and enjoy it."

Figure 23

at last, after months of weary waiting - borne with shillons and admirable fortitude, the garrison of L. is relieved. Indeed we have had a hard and terrible time, to not expect too much of me yet, as too much news has to be told which must be sent later. I have a small diary of every days doings with the Regt since the night we departed up for the front I brought the letters yesterday, which came in a bag. The Regt had to back way on loads... By the way did you send a parcel. You mentioned something about one. If not it was just as well, as we have had or rather are having good things piled upon us now, and a parcel waiting so long may have gone astray. The letters too have had rather a rough experience being almost in every engagement. from Colenso. Spion Kop. Vaal Krantz etc

The Boer retreat and the British re-occupation of Natal

This part of the display contains mail sent during the Boer retreat and the British re-occupation of Natal including the use of temporary datestamps. Gen. Burger's Lager was located at the Mkupe Pass in the Biggarsberg mountains west of Glencoe after the Boer retreat from Ladysmith.

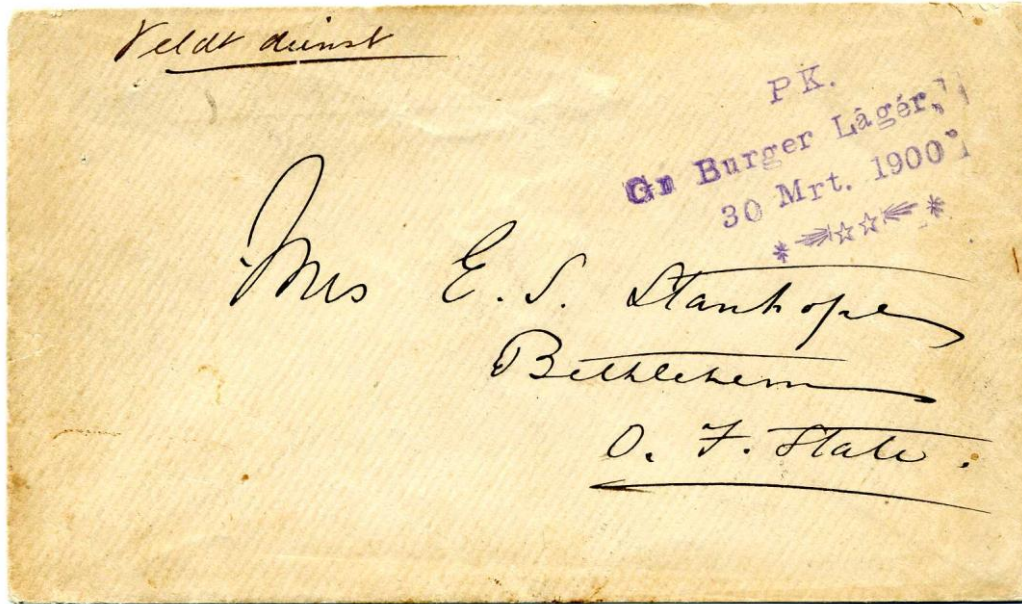


Figure 24

The cover to Bethlehem (figure 24) bears one of three recorded strikes of the 'P K. Gn. Burger Lâgér, 30 Mrt. 1900' handstamp. Gen. Burger requested leave at the end of March 1900 and Commandant Fourie was promoted to General to replace him. The propaganda card to Germany (figure 25) cancelled 'P.K. Fourie's Lâgér 21 APR 1900' is one of three examples recorded and the only taxed item.

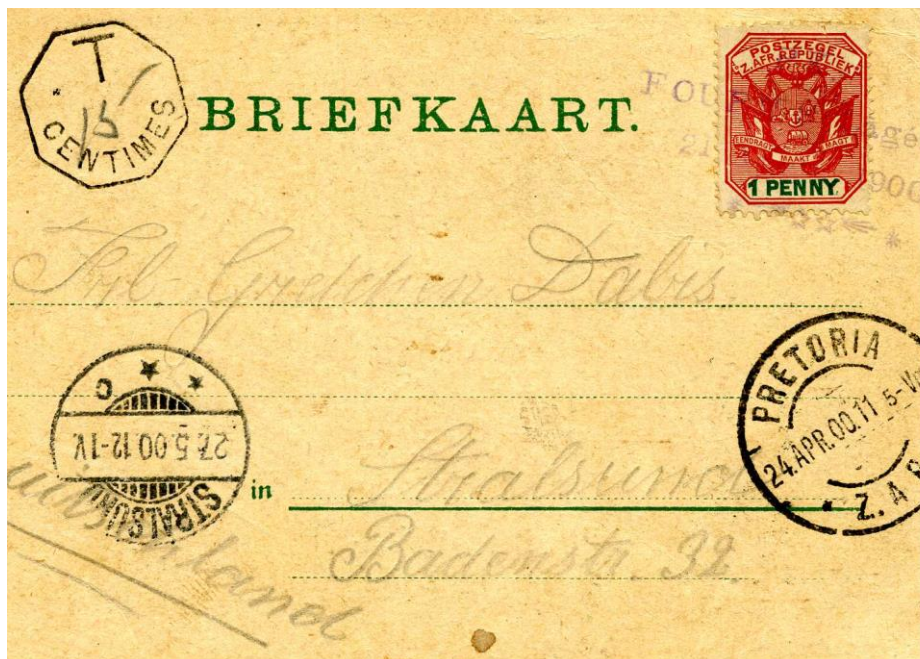


Figure 25

Natal Field Force

A shortage of Field Post Offices in Natal led to the Army Post Officer Corps introducing its own temporary datestamps and cancellers. The Field Force datestamp NFF2 is recorded used from 2nd February to 26th March 1900 (Figure 26) and appears to have followed the Natal Field Force as it moved from Chieveley to Spearman's Farm Camp, to Ladysmith, to Volksrust.



Figure 26

The specific circumstances relating to the use of NFF 2 mailbag seal (figure 27) are not known although it may be due to a shortage of datestamps. It was in use from early March to early April 1900 and seven examples are known.



Figure 27

Elandslaagte

Situated 12 miles north-east of Ladysmith and the scene of a major battle on 20th October 1899 it was re-occupied on 5th March 1900. A distinctive oval provisional datestamp (figure 28) was used from March to May 1900.

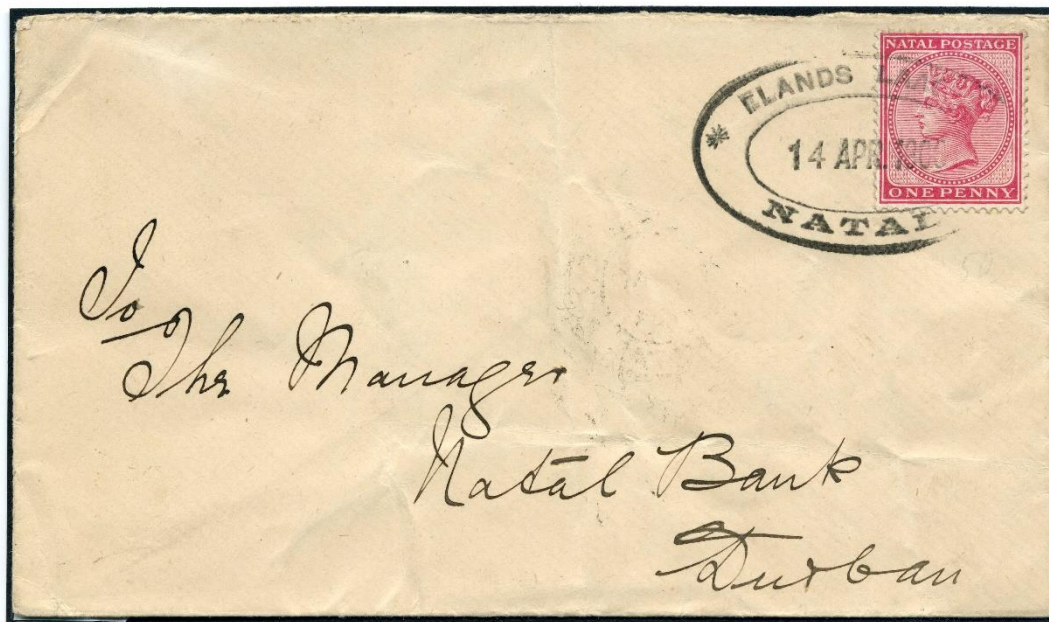


Figure 28

Coal Fields Rail

Situated near Dundee Coal Fields Rail was an agency in the early 1890's. During the re-occupation it used a temporary datestamp (figure 29) pending receipt of the normal type of circular datestamps

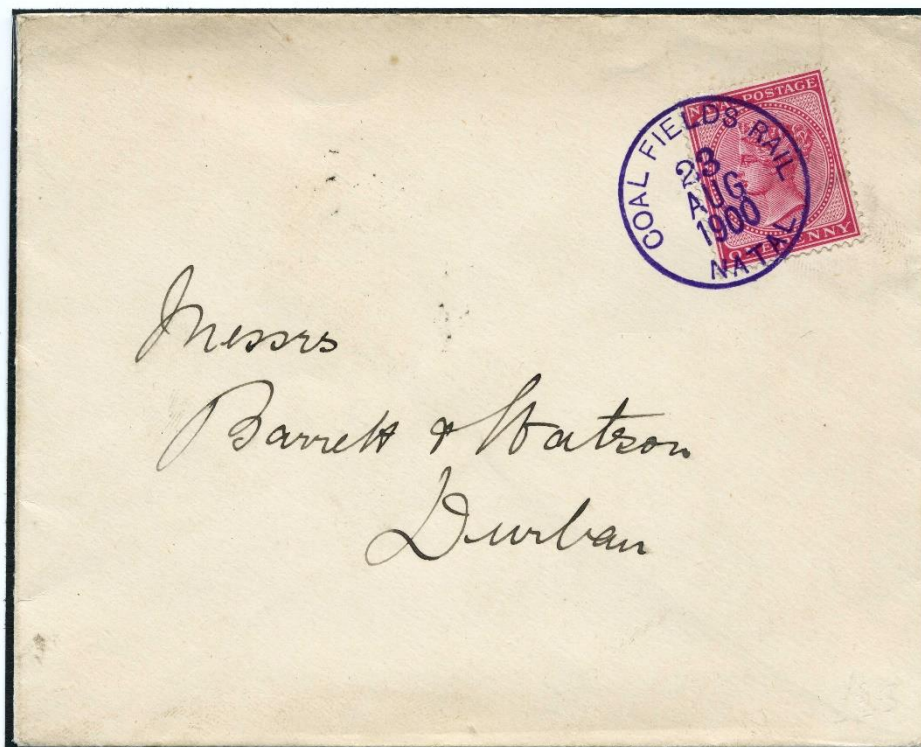


Figure 29