

The Boer War - Armoured Trains and Looted Mail

by

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Introduction

In 1899 the whole of the peacetime British military railway organisation consisted of two railway companies R.E., some 300 personnel who were rapidly brought up to war strength and augmented by other units when war broke out. There was no organised railway staff. However, the Army provided a number of energetic officers with suitable railway experience in the Sudan, Canada and India. One officer, Captain & Brevet-Major E.P.C. Girouard was appointed Director of Railways for the South African Field Force on 7th October 1899, four days before the outbreak of hostilities.

Armoured trains

Railway activity was limited until the arrival of the Army Corps and events were only enlivened by the early adventures of some of the armoured trains (figure 1). Four had been constructed in Cape Town before the war. One accompanied Methuen's advance, another saw service on the Stormberg line, whilst two were in Kimberley and advanced towards Mafeking. Also, the "Mosquito" was at Mafeking and the "Powerful" at Bulawayo. There was one train in Natal. Their reputation diminished after the disasters at Kraaipan and Chieveley.



Figure 1.

The Chieveley incident achieved widespread publicity. Winston Churchill, a war correspondent for the *Morning Post* was aboard the armoured train commanded by Capt. Haldane at the latter's invitation as it proceeded towards Chieveley via Frere. Haldane's orders were to 'reconnoitre with caution'. As he approached Chieveley station Boer horsemen were seen a mile away, which information was relayed to Haldane's commanding officer, Col. Long, who told him to stay at Frere because "Chieveley station was last night occupied by the enemy and not to put faith in information obtained from local sources." The same could be said of Col. Long's information because he knew of the Boer occupation and failed to tell Haldane.

This well known incident was the subject of a letter by Sgt. Parry of the Durban Light Infantry who was present during the engagement and subsequently called to give evidence before the Court of Inquiry into the loss of the armoured train and Capt. Haldane's involvement.

During April 1900 an armoured train operated on the line north of Mafeking between Lobatsi and Gaberone after the recapture of Crocodile Pools by Imperial troops in February 1900. Covers exist from Sgt. T. Glanville, D Squadron, No. 1 armoured train, Ootsi with Army Telegraph and Crocodile Pools cancellations (figure 2).

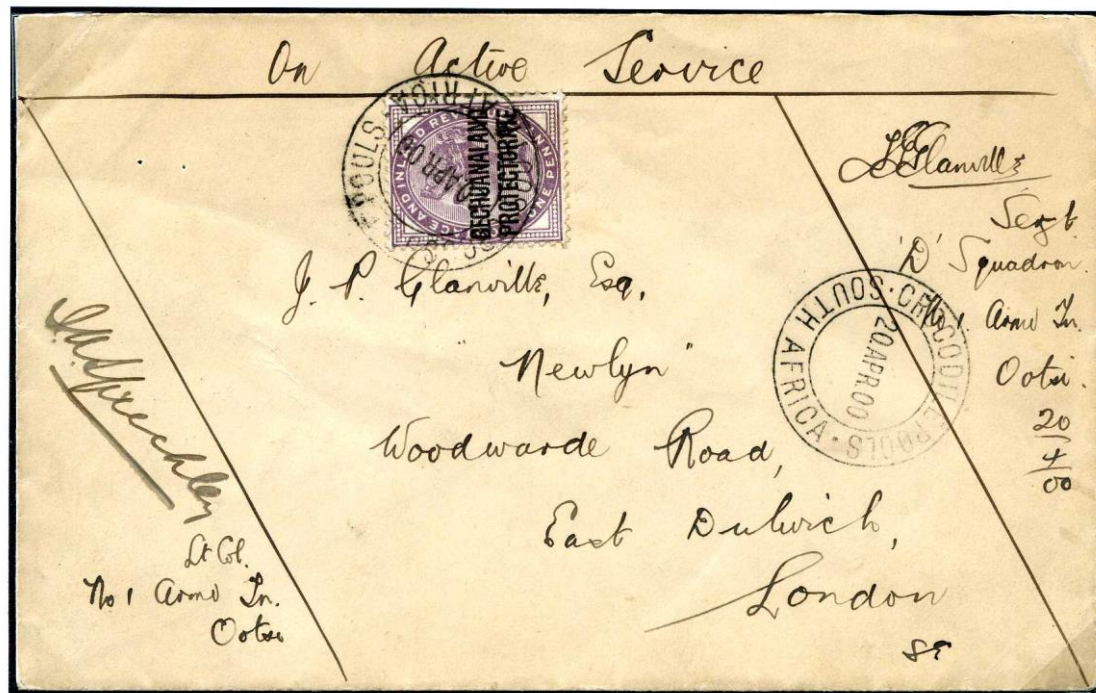


Figure 2.

Armoured trains were regarded as death traps by many officers and soldiers due to their vulnerability to attack (figure 3) by the Boer forces who followed the advice of Christian de Wet '.....a train was captured by the simple device of blowing up the line in front of and behind it...the burghers found a large quantity of the things they needed.....when they had helped themselves the train was burnt'.

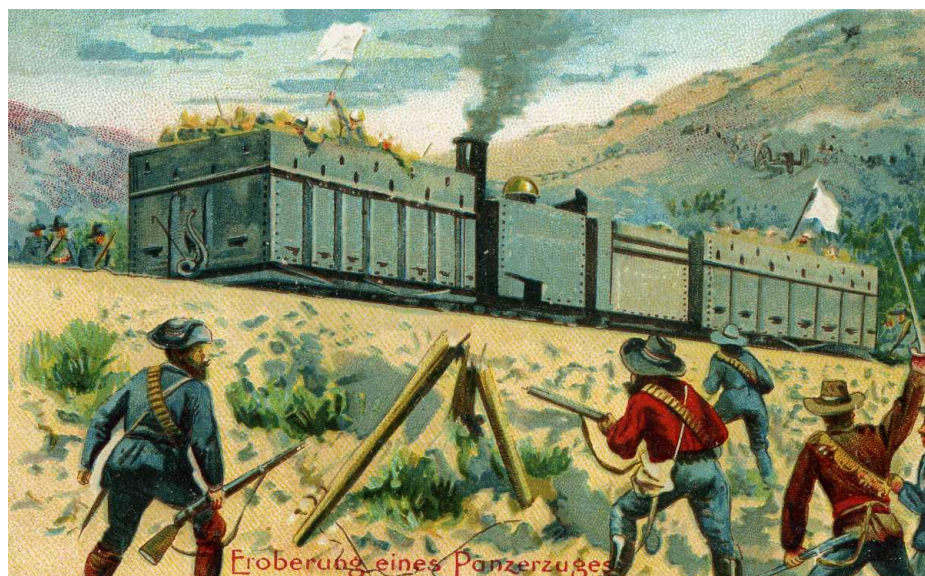


Figure 3. Boer forces attacking an armoured train

Towards the end of 1900 the once discredited armoured train was revived and the number of trains increased to 19; an assistant director was appointed and all trains placed under his control. Security improved but attacks by Boer forces and accidents continued to occur. On 5 February 1902 No. 15 armoured train came off the rails at Daspoort near Pretoria en route to Pietersburg from Cape Colony. One officer and 10 men were killed. 20 were injured.

The cover (figure 4) from Capt. Tolleschank, Officer Commanding No. 13 Armoured Train, 19th November 1901 to Teignmouth, England from Malmesbury, C.G.H. illustrates later use of armoured trains.

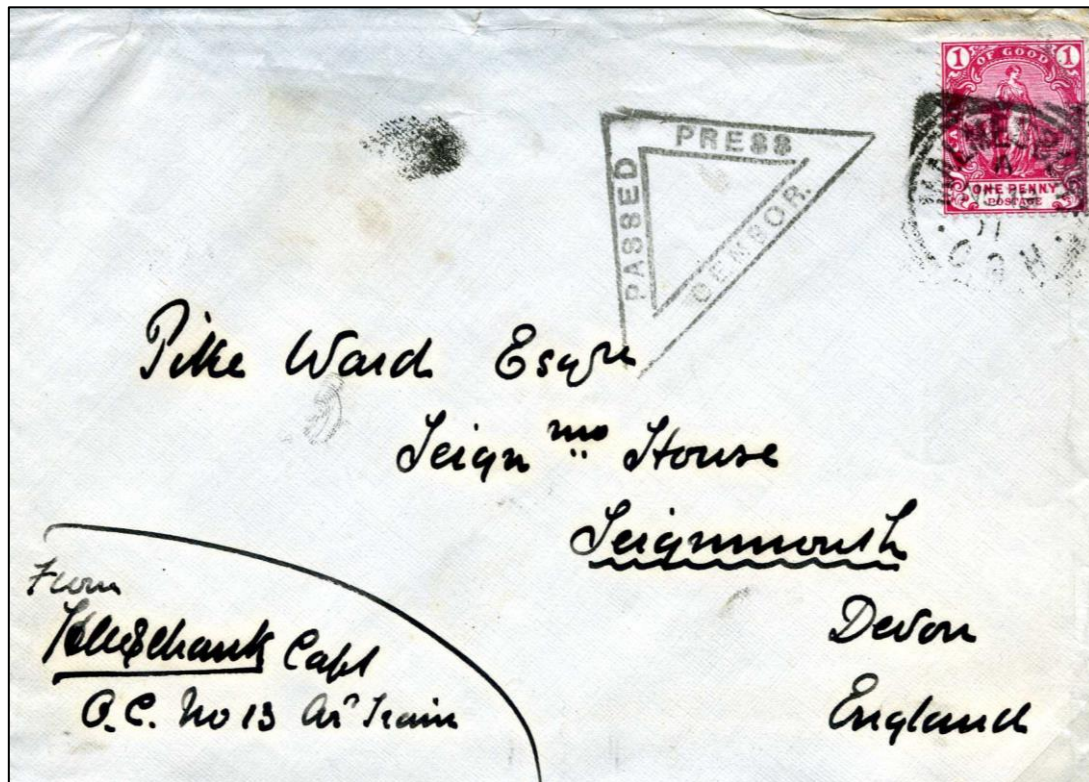


Figure 4

Looted and recovered mail

The continuing vulnerability of trains led to numerous incidents of mails being looted and recovery of the remains once the Boers had left the scene. Probably the most well known is the attack on Roodewal Station on the 7th June, 1900. At daybreak De Wet attacked the station which was garrisoned by 150 men, including one company of the 4th Btn. Sherwood Foresters. They were guarding stores including 2000 mail bags and hundreds of 28lb lyddite shells. The garrison held out until Boer reinforcements arrived but later surrendered.

After the surrender all the stores were looted by the Boers and what they could not carry away they burnt. The mail bags were ripped open and valuables confiscated. The Boers also captured Army Post Offices 22, 23 and 35 and a quantity of unstamped postal orders.

FPO 22 datestamp had been used at Bloemfontein on 27th April, 1900 – 3 days before it was issued to Roodewal Station on 1st May.

The Illustrated London News for 18th August 1900 contains a description of the attack and a number of photographs taken by Archie Langman of the Middlesex Yeomanry who at the time accompanied the Yeomanry Field Hospital in a private capacity.

Photographs also exist of Highlanders searching among the debris of the looted mailbags (figure 5). Items of mail (figure 6) retrieved by British Forces bear the two line cachet "Recovered from the Mails looted by the Boers on June 8."



Figure 5

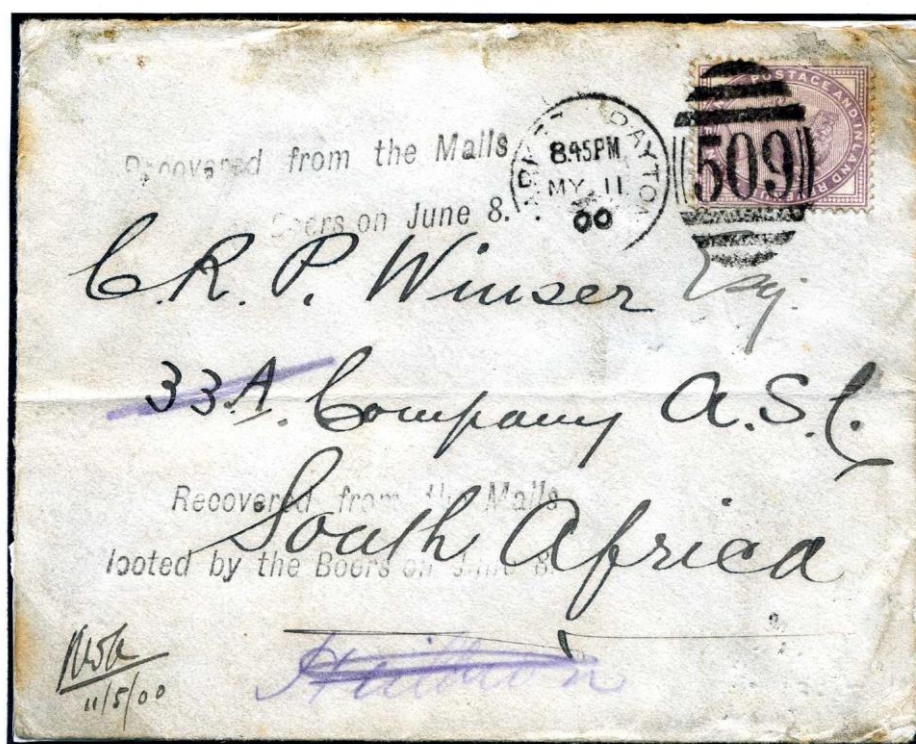


Figure 6.

A letter written from Roodewal Station on 13th June contains a description of the attack and its aftermath including a visit to Kitchener's camp "to get them to post some letters for me I had a chat with Kitchener (not knowing who he was until after the conversation) – I was criticising his firing – great joke wasn't it."

Another cachet recorded on a number of covers, some of which have been censored is "RECOVERED FROM ENEMY AT VREDE O.R.C." It has been seen on a cover from Belgium on 24 February, 1900 addressed to Bloemfontein with Pretoria and Kroonstad datestamps (figure 7).

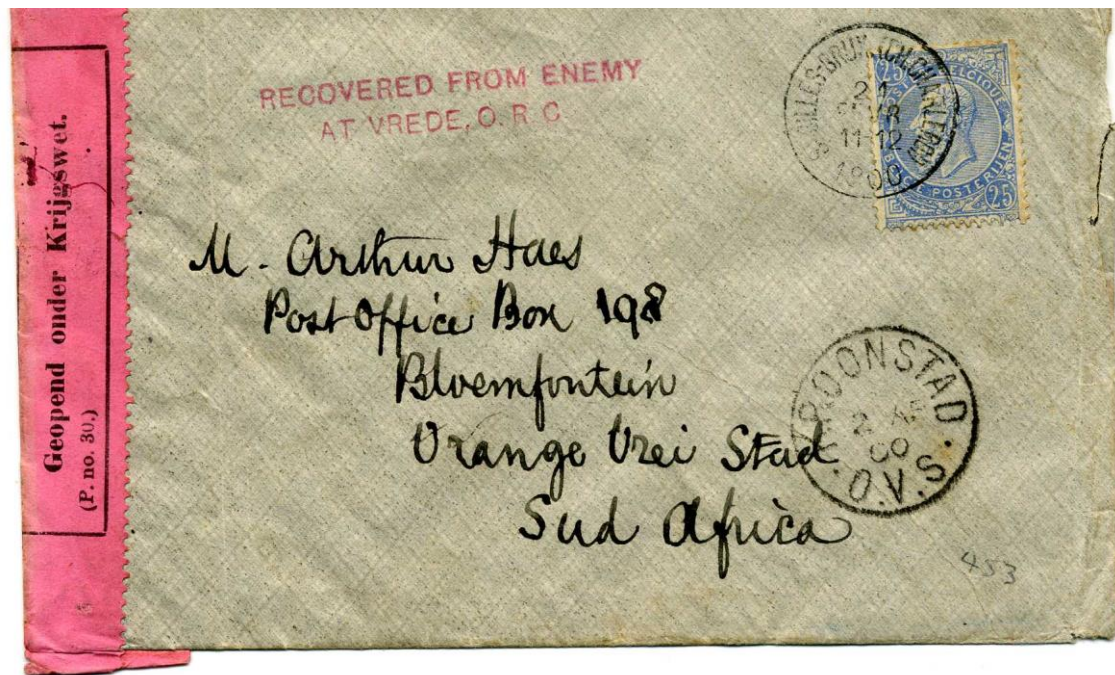


Figure 7.

The cachets “RECEIVED WITHOUT CONTENTS IN ARMY POST OFFICE” and “RECOVERED FROM MAILS LOOTED BY THE ENEMY” are known on separate covers and at least one cover dated 7 December 1900 with both cachets (figure 8).

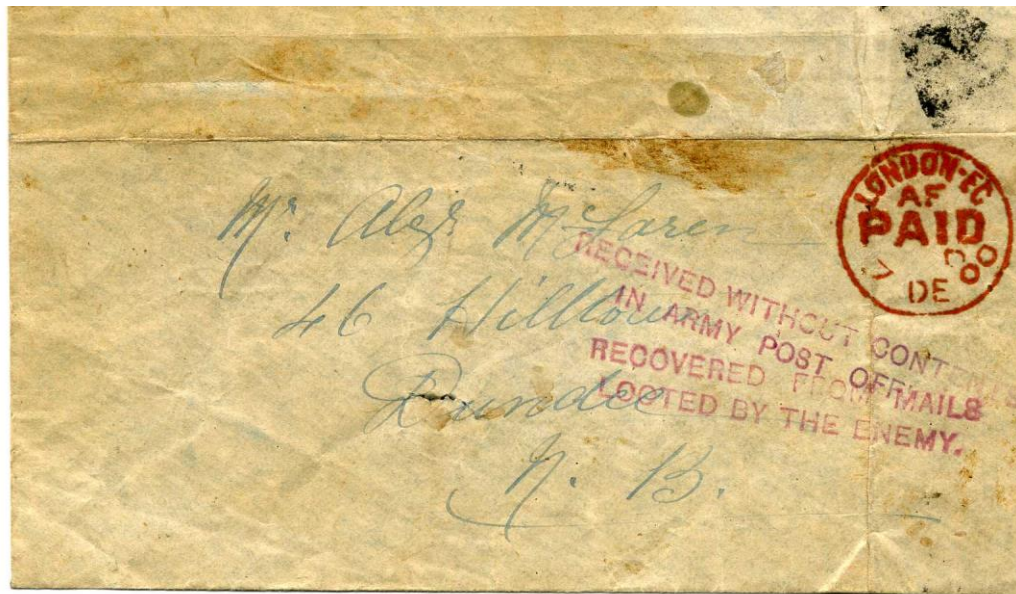


Figure 8.

Another cachet “INCLUDED IN MAIL BAG LOST ON CAPE RAILWAY AND RECOVERED 25TH JULY 1901” is known on covers with original datestamp A.P.O. 54, 15 January 1901 (figure 9).

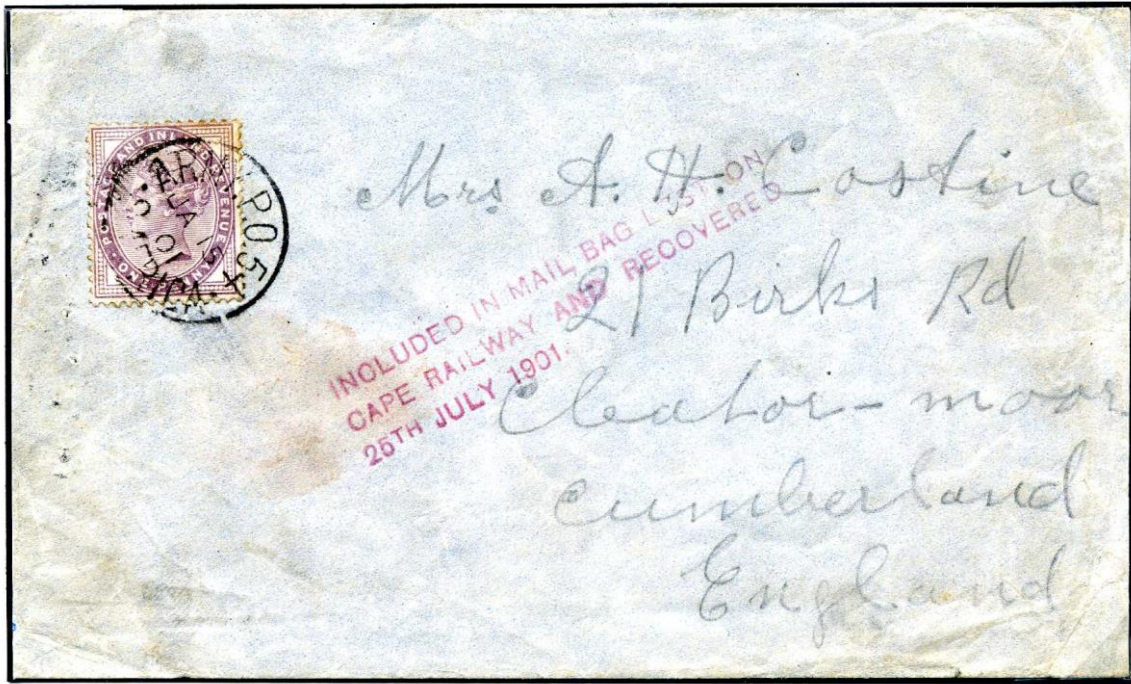


Figure 9.

After the arrival of Brig.-General Broadwood in Rustenburg on 26 September 1900, Lord Methuen was responsible for clearing the Western Transvaal. Looted mails were found in farmsteads during October. Several covers are known with the scarce handstamp "FOUND IN RUSTENBG BY BRITISH FORCES". Two have original cancellations dated 27 April 1900 (figure 10) and 15 May 1900, they also have pre-war Z.A.R. Found Open and Resealed labels.



Figure 10.

Finally, a particularly rare cachet is a two line rubber handstamp "RECOVERED FROM ENEMY AT MIDDLEBURG, TRANSVAAL". It is recorded on a Natal postcard with printed ½d stamp cancelled "Jansenville C.G.H. NOV 5 00" and the cachet is struck in red.