

The Development of Victorian Postal Stationery

COLIN BAKER

5. Newspaper Wrappers and Letter Cards

When the penny post was introduced in 1840 no particular arrangements were made for newspapers since these were all subject to a special newspaper tax which gave them the privilege of passing through the post free of charge. In 1855 the payment of this tax became discretionary, although the free post privilege remained if the tax had been paid. In these cases the newspaper tax stamp had to be visible in the post. If it was not the newspapers were treated as ordinary letters and charged accordingly. As a consequence of this regulation it was the practice to wrap newspapers in a band of paper so that not only were both ends of the newspaper exposed but so was the tax stamp.

On 1 October 1870 the newspaper tax was abolished and newspapers which were registered with the Post Office could be sent through the post at $\frac{1}{2}$ d per copy. In addition, the book post, which had already been in existence for a number of years, was reduced to $\frac{1}{2}$ d for the first two ounces. Although referred to as the book post, this method could be used to send any type of printed material, including non-registered newspapers, providing the contents could be clearly seen to be printed matter. To coincide with these changes new $\frac{1}{2}$ d newspaper wrappers were issued on the same date.

A New Shape of Stamp

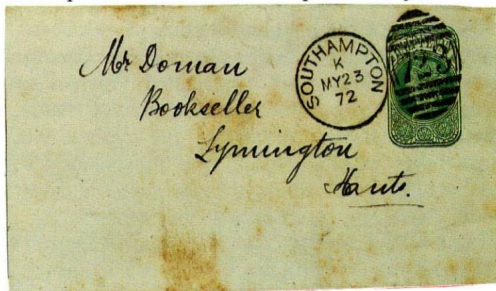
The $\frac{1}{2}$ d stamp for the new wrappers broke away from the traditional shape for postage stamps, being much taller than any previous issue. Wrappers were necessarily narrow so that their contents protruded either side and could be checked easily to make sure that only printed matter was enclosed. The new narrow stamp allowed more space for the address and also gave a much larger area for cancelling the stamp, even if it laid across a fold in the wrapper.

For the first few weeks following the issue of the new stationery wrappers the PO continued with its anti-forgery campaign by including printing dates set into three circles across the bottom of the stamp. However, the PO quickly recognised the futility of this system, and since



The first issue of the $\frac{1}{2}$ d newspaper wrapper with the printing date incorporated into the stamp

Subsequent issues had the dates replaced with florets



no dates were included in the new postcard stamp released at the same time, the use of dates in the new newspaper wrapper stamps was quickly abandoned. One month after they were first issued wrappers were released without the stamp showing any printing date.

In 1883 a new die was prepared for the $\frac{1}{2}$ d wrapper stamp which gave rise to minor changes to the Queen Victoria's portrait. The main difference between this and the first die lies in the shape and shading of the hair ribbons at the back of the Queen's head. The shading on the ribbons in the first die is vertical, whereas the ribbons are thinner and have horizontal shading in the new die, which was used for the remainder of Victoria's reign.

Problems in the Post

During the first five years of their use, the PO found an increasing number of wrappers contained material other than printed matter and it was decided instructions were required to

reinforce the regulations relating to matter sent by the book post (or printed paper rate as it became known). Initially a three-line instruction was added to the wrapper above the stamp, but this was not considered clear enough and it was changed to a more definite five line instruction after a few months.

The wording of this instruction was subsequently condensed into four lines in 1889, but it still imparted a clear message that misuse would attract additional charges. However, by the very end of the century the PO concluded that with the extensive use of the ½d printed paper rate envelopes, it was no longer necessary to continue printing these instructions and from 1898 they were no longer included.

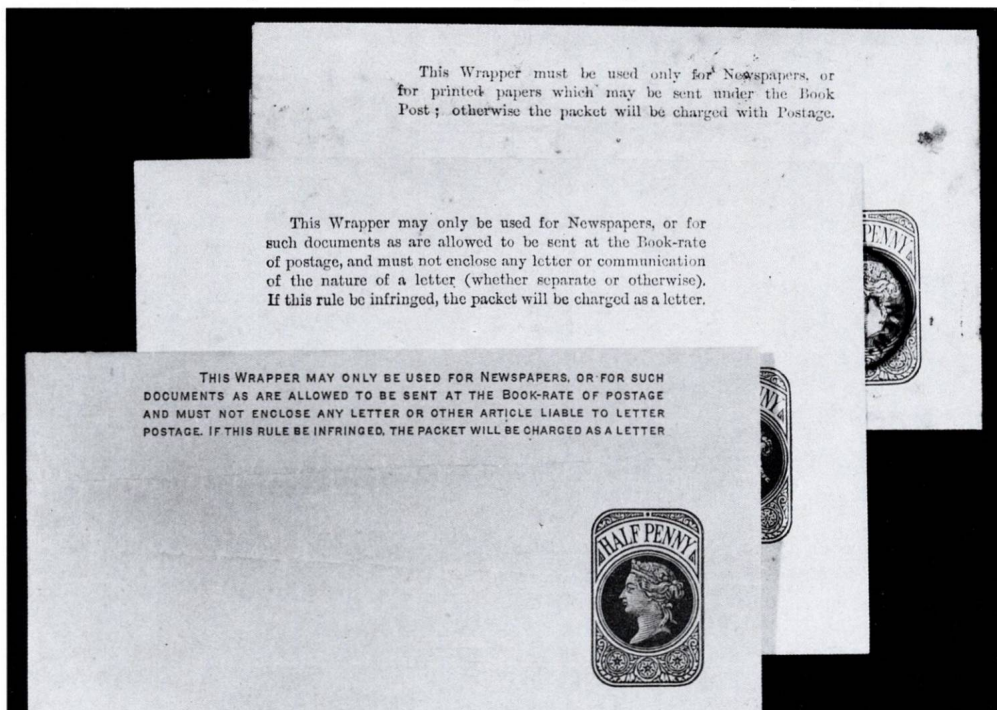
Apart from misuse of the book post rate, the new wrappers suffered other troubles in their early years. Many ripped open during transit and PO staff spent a great deal of time matching together wrappers and their contents before forwarding them to their destinations, not always getting the combinations right to the public's general annoyance. To overcome this problem a new stronger buff coloured paper was used from 1877 containing a greater proportion of fibre and this solved most of these problems.

Wrappers for Heavier Papers

Despite all the early problems the ½d wrapper was a much used item but was only valid for printed papers up to 2 ounces in weight. It became clear that there was the need for a wrapper to cater for heavier weight papers as well as those sent to overseas destinations, and in 1878 a 1d wrapper was issued. No instructions were printed on this wrapper since 1d was also the basic letter rate and it was therefore valid for any enclosure providing the weight limit was not exceeded.

The new 1d stamp once again incorporated the same portrait of Queen Victoria as that used for both the ½d wrappers and the inland postcard, but it was set into an oval frame surrounded by the wording "Postage One Penny". It was printed in brown, De La Rue having by this time successfully developed a suitable fugitive ink in this colour. Shortly afterwards the colour of the ½d wrapper stamp was similarly changed.

Finally in 1901 the colour of the ½d stamp returned to its original green to meet the requirements of the Universal Postal Union on standardisation of colours for basic postal rates, green being the colour adopted by all members



The three different settings of the instructions on newspaper wrappers: 1875 (first), 1875 (second), 1889

This Wrapper may only be used for Newspapers, or for such documents as are allowed to be sent at the Book-rate of postage, and must not enclose any letter or communication of the nature of a letter (whether separate or otherwise). If this rule be infringed, the packet will be charged as a letter.

BEST ADVERTISING MEDIUMS IN THE WEST OF ENGLAND.

Devon Weekly Times, 1d., Circulation 14,000 Weekly.

Devon Evening Express, ½d., „ 3,000 Daily.

OFFICES: 226, HIGH STREET, EXETER.



Post Office newspaper wrapper subsequently overprinted for printed papers.

Newspaper wrappers are perhaps the least attractive of all the issued stationery items from the Victorian period. They tend to be very plain at first glance, are all very similar and cancellations are often little more than indistinct smudges. There are however examples which have been overprinted (as against privately stamped versions) and some of the cancellations include secret time codes, adding to their interest.

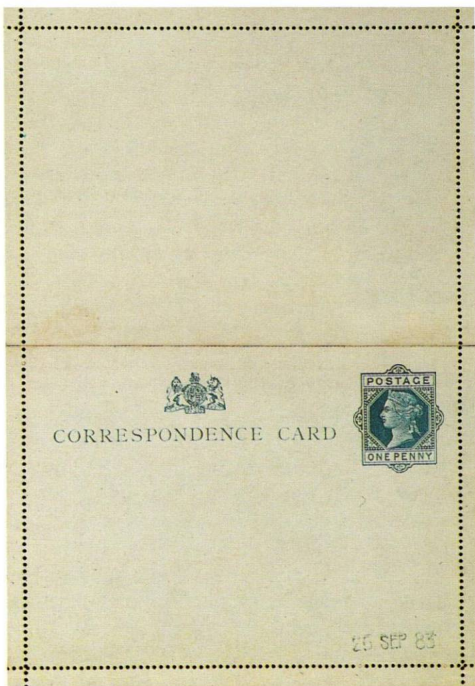
The Letter Card

The postcard had quickly become a very popular medium for sending short messages. With up to six postal deliveries a day in London and the provinces, the postcard was used as much then as we use the telephone today. However it had one disadvantage, the message that it carried could be read by anyone. While this was generally not a problem, there were occasions when the public preferred not to send open correspondence but did not want to resort to writing a formal letter. The answer to this dilemma was simple although the solution took many years before it came to fruition. As early as 1871 a Hungarian, Charles Akin, patented the idea of a letter card proposing it should be a folded and sealed card which could only be opened by tearing away perforated edges.

Twelve years later in 1883 De La Rue prepared an essay for the PO headed "Correspondence Card" which was similar to Akin's original idea and carried the 1d stamp previously used for

overseas postcards. De La Rue's essay was printed in bright blue on white card, but rather like Akin's idea nothing came of it for a number of years.

In the meantime several continental countries were already using letter cards based upon the *The De La Rue essay for a "letter card" prepared in 1883. The final version of the letter card was first put on sale to the public on 11 February 1892*



same format as that suggested to the British authorities. This pressured the PO into preparing a letter card for use in this country, which they eventually released on 11 February 1892. It had been suggested to them that the postage on letter cards should be 3/4d, that is midway between the postcard and letter rates. However on the Continent the postage rate for these cards had been set at each country's basic letter rate and the PO chose to adopt the 1d rate rather than any other. De La Rue's proposal in their 1883 essay to use blue printing on white card was turned down in favour of red printing on blue card for the issued version, a convenient combination of colours since the materials were

readily available at De La Rue's printing works.

As letter cards passed through the post at the normal letter rate there were no objections to them containing enclosures providing the correct postage was prepaid. Therefore no instructions were included concerning this, but a note on the reverse drew users attention to the need to add extra stamps to letter cards if it was intended they were to be sent abroad. The PO was concerned that the public might confuse the 1d letter card rate with the similar overseas postcard rate.

Poor Mr Akin who in 1871 had originally held the patent for a letter card very similar to that finally issued received no compensation for his idea, having allowed the patent to lapse by the time the letter card was released in this country.

The inland letter card could also be used to foreign destinations providing the correct postage of 2 1/4d was prepaid

© Colin Baker 1995

