THE LISBON POSTS
A Brief Anglo-Portuguese Postal History
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Packet Boats

No one knows the identity of the first postman, perhaps a slave of an early Egyptian pharaoh or Chinese emperor carrying an edict to the populace.

We do have, however, some sketchy details of the first organised postal services. There are Portuguese records of a postal service for European travellers as early as the 12th century, and in 1510 the Correio Mor was established to carry the king's mail. In the 15th century in England, Edward IV founded the "Royal Posts", and in 1512 Henry VIII appointed the first "Master of Posts".   These early postal services would have been by horseback over poor roads and taken days or weeks to reach a distant part of the realm. The services would also have been restricted to the royal families and their nobles.

International post would have been even slower and more uncertain. There are records of a letter being sent in triplicate by different routes from Lisbon to Goa in 1510 to ensure at least one copy reached its destination. One can imagine that it was at least two years before a reply was received!

In the 16th century in England, Charles I established the first public service, with stage coaches travelling between "posts" where the horses would have been changed.

In 1660, Charles II founded the General Post Office (GPO) with Henry Bishop appointed as the first Post Master General. It was Bishop who, in 1661, invented the first postage "stamp". The date that the letter received by the carrier was stamped on the envelope to ensue that the letter was delivered promptly.

Mail between England and Portugal would have been by overland carrier through France, or later by payment to private ships' captains who would have delivered the mail to a receiving officer at the destination port. In the 1650's, however, the first regular services by "packet boat" were established, with services linking the English port of Harwich with Calais. These boats were small and lightly armed and relied on speed to avoid capture by pirates or ships from unfriendly nations. They carried bullion, private goods and paying passengers as well as the mail, sealed in weighted packets, which could be jettisoned overboard if the packet boat was in danger of capture.

In 1689, war between England and France blocked the overland mail route, giving an early entrepreneur, by the name of Edmund Dummer, an opening to establish several packet services. These included one which linked Falmouth with Corunna in 1689 and then with Lisbon from 1702 to 1711. At this date, the service was taken over by the Admiralty and the Post Office, and in 1840 by the Peninsular Steam Navigation Company, later known as the Peninsular and Orient, or "P&O".

Falmouth was chosen because it is the navigable port furthest west on the south coast, thus reducing the risk of capture by pirates and the French who infested the English Channel. The packets were made up in London on Tuesday, left by a conveyance known as "Russell's Wagon" on Wednesday and departed from Falmouth on Saturday. The packet ships were frequently attacked, some were captured, and often recaptured.

There are stories of heroic actions where packet boats, when forced to fight, overcame and even captured larger enemy ships.

One well documented tale is known as "Buckingham's Journey". Buckingham, a resident of the Flushing district of Falmouth, was on his third voyage on the Lisbon packet. The ship was captured by the French and the crew and passengers, who included women and children, were imprisoned in Corunna. After a few months, the jailors decided that they no longer wanted to feed their hungry prisoners, so they freed them on condition that they walked to Lisbon, some 300 miles away. They set off and after many trials and tribulations arrived in Porto. For some reason, they didn't take ship there but, after a few days' rest, continued their journey to Lisbon. They thought their troubles were over when they reached the Tejo and were able to travel on by boat. Unfortunately, they were intercepted by a British pressgang, who forced the able-bodied men to join the navy. Buckingham managed to hide and was able to complete his journey, returning to Falmouth by the next ship.

Surviving Dummer packet letters are very rare but more survive from later dates. A typical example is an 1816 letter posted from Teignmouth to a shipping agent in Porto. The letter was stamped in Falmouth and travelled to Lisbon on the packet, where an arrival stamp was applied. The letter would then have travelled overland to Porto. The letter was posted on the 30th November and arrived on 26th December in Porto. The postal charges in those days were very complex and often miscalculated. In this case, there would have been a charge for the carriage from Teignmouth to Falmouth, another for carriage on the packet boat, and a third for the onward transport to Porto. The letter is stamped two shillings and three pence, which in 1816 was a considerable sum.

The contents of the letter are also interesting; they alert the agent to the imminent arrival of a ship from Newfoundland containing 1500 quintals (about 15,000 lb, or 6,800 kilos) of bacalhau - what else?!

The packet was a vital link during the Peninsular War. An agent (Thomas Reynolds) was appointed and the frequency of the service was increased to three times a week. Letters from the field took between 13 and 20 days to reach England, depending on the winds.

In 1813, as the battles moved north, the service was moved to northern Spain. In France the following year, Wellington expressed his dissatisfaction with Lieutenant-Colonel Sturgeon, who was responsible for the posts at the time. This caused Sturgeon to deliberately ride too close to the French lines and he was killed. Wellington's officers certainly took his disapproval seriously!

As has been mentioned, postal charges were complex and confusing. Charges were by distance, weight and even by number of sheets of paper. Examples exist of "cross written" letters where the sender has filled the page and then turned the paper through ninety degrees and filled it again to save paying for the postage of an additional sheet.

In 1840, Roland Hill, in an effort to simplify the system, introduced the uniform penny rate for internal mail in Great Britain, and the first adhesive postage "stamps" – the penny black and the two pence blue – were introduced. This system was rapidly adopted by other countries, the first perhaps rather surprisingly being Brazil in 1843. In 1853, Portugal followed suit, and stamps with the portrait of Queen Maria II were introduced. Portugal adopted many of the British postal reforms and even imported British post boxes, some of which are still in use today.

There was also co-operation between the British and Portuguese in India, with The British East India Company opening a post office in Portuguese Goa in 1854. Letters were forwarded to Bombay and then by British packet boat to Suez. Until the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the mail proceeded by camel to Alexandria and then onwards to Lisbon and England by a second packet boat.

International mail charges were still complex at this time, and stamps of both countries were often required. Gradually, countries developed treaties by which they accepted each others' stamps but it was not until 1949, when the Universal Postal Union was formed, that this became accepted world wide.

A story with local interest occurred during the Boer War, when Boers escaping from the British crossed over into Portuguese Mozambique. The Boers were shipped back to Portugal, many ending up in Caldas Da Rainha. Letters still exist from South Africa to Caldas and Caldas to South Africa, all carrying at least one "opened by sensor" stamp.

The 1930's heralded the introduction of the first airmail services and in 1939 the first transatlantic service was introduced via the "Pan Am Clipper" service from London via Lisbon and the Azores. Air travel was still highly dependant on the weather in those days and the average letter still took 14 days to make the trip.

A Wartime Letter

The Second World War saw a new role in postal history for neutral Lisbon. Letters from German and British prisoners of war and their families were exchanged via PO Box 506, Lisbon. This was actually the Thomas Cook office. German and British flying boats would land in the Tejo estuary to deliver the letters, the pilots occasionally even meeting. The letters were opened by

Thomas Cook staff and forwarded to the intended recipient. I guess this filled in the time as the tourist trade was not too good in those days!

Stamp collecting became a craze towards the end of the 19th century and it was not long before post offices started to design stamps aimed at this market. In Borneo and Mozambique, particularly attractive stamps were issued featuring wild animals. These were even "cancelled to order" and sold to collectors without the inconvenience of any letters having to be delivered. It has been claimed that, at one time, 50% of the profits of the Portuguese Mozambique Company came from the sales of these stamps. The stamps are considered worthless by modern collectors.

Commemorative issues also became commonplace. The centenary of the postage stamp was widely commemorated in 1940, with Portugal issuing a set of stamps featuring Roland Hill's portrait. The 200th anniversary of various Peninsular War battles has also been celebrated. The most innovative Portuguese stamp, however, was one that was recently issued made out of cork!

Stuart Moulton hails from Herefordshire where his grandmother, father, mother and sister were successive sub postmasters in a small village. This background engendered a lifelong interest in philately and postal history, which he now has time to indulge in retirement, following a career as a sales manager in the analytical chemistry instrumentation group at Hewlett-Packard.