

Postal History of County Cork, 1696 to Universal Postal Union

The earliest Acts of Parliament relating to postage required that ships landing anywhere in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland would hand over their letters to the post office for onward delivery. The length of the County Cork coastline and the deep water ports outside Cork city, established Cork as a gateway for postage to Europe and particularly the United Kingdom.

Scope and Objective: The objective of the exhibit is to trace the postal history of Cork, city and county, from 1696, through the increasing postage rates to the rate reform period of 1839/1840 and the decreasing postage rates and there to the establishment of the UPU.

Importance: The location of County Cork as a central shipping hub and the remoteness of the location from London and Dublin, allows the full story of the development of the mail service in Ireland and Great Britain to be clearly illustrated.

Exhibit Plan

Section 1: Early Post Period from 1696 to 1784

Section 2: Independent Post Period 1784 to 1831

2.1 First Rate Period 1784 – 1797

2.2 Second Rate Period 1797 – 1805

2.3 Third Rate Period 1805 – 1810

2.4 Fourth Rate Period 1810 – 1813

2.5 Fifth Rate Period 1813 – 1814

2.6 Sixth Rate Period 1814 – 1826

2.7 Seventh Rate Period 1826 – 1827

2.8 Eighth Rate Period 1827 - 1831

Section 3: Unified Post Period 1831 to 1839

Section 4 Postal Reform Period 1839– 1850

4.1 Interim 4d Rate 1839 – 1840

4.2 Uniform 1d Rate 1840 – 1850

5.0 Adhesive Stamp Period 1840 to 1850

5.1 Adhesive Stamp Period 1850 to UPU

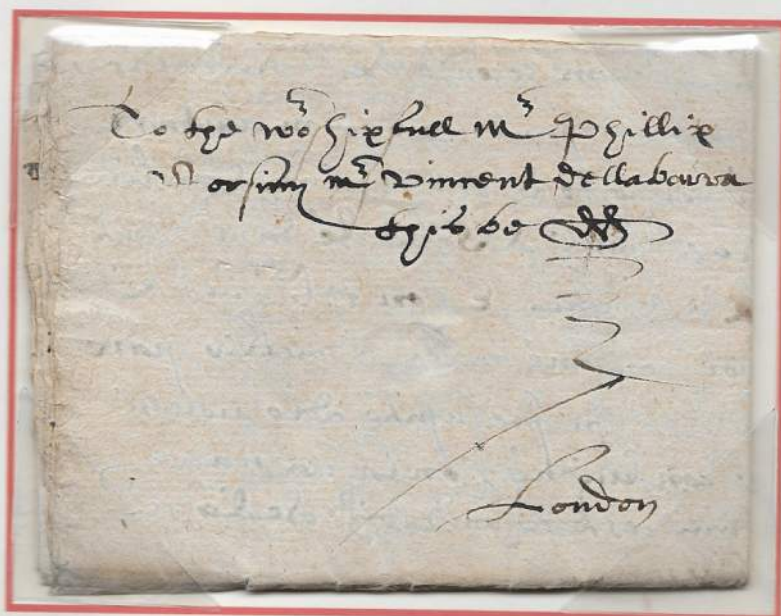
5.2 Adhesive Stamp Period UPU

6.1 Ship Letters 1d Rate 6.2 Ship Letters 6d Rate

6.3 Ship Letters 4d Rate 6.4 Ship Letters 8d Rate

6.5 SL Uniform 8d Rate without inland postage

6.6 Transatlantic mail



Early Mail Prior to Rates being set.

1591 (June 9th) Entire letter from Cork to London. Most of the merchant post from the 16th century had no postal markings, such as this letter from Guglielmo Petala, who worked for Filippo Corsini, a London merchant who made his own arrangements to have his letters delivered.

The Corsini correspondence contained eleven letters from Ireland, this being the only one from Cork and the earliest known letter from Cork.

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Rare items
outlined by
red box.



Ship letters
denoted by
Ship
symbol.

Cork Postal History 1696 to UPU Synopsis (February 2025)

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5.2 Adhesive Stamp Transatlantic Mail

5.3 Adhesive Stamp Period UPU

6.1 Ship Letters 1d Rate

6.2 Ship Letters 6d Rate

6.3 Ship Letters 4d Rate

The postal history of Ireland is distinctive but closely related to that of Great Britain. Although under the jurisdiction of the British Post Office, the Irish postal system was administered from Dublin up until 1784. It was at this date that the Irish Post Office became autonomous and began to produce its own special handstamps as distinct from following the English procedure. However, the gross abuse of franking, high rates of postage, different length of miles, different currencies and lack of control from senior management forced the amalgamation once again of the British and Irish Post Offices by the Duke of Richmond in 1831. Under this new jurisdiction Free Franking was heavily curtailed, Penny Posts were extended leading to the Postal Reforms of 1839 and the issue of adhesives in 1840. This exhibit details the increasing postal rates from inception until 1840 and the decreasing international rates from 1840

until these were stabilised with the establishment of the General/Universal Postal Union.

The postal history of Cork is essentially that of Ireland. There were four post towns in County Cork in 1659: Cork city, Bandon, Kinsale and Youghal. The post offices of Charleville and Mallow were then added between 1659 and 1682. In 1659, the post between Cork and Dublin (and onwards) ran once a week and took several days, while by 1830 this had increased to a twice daily connection by coach which took only 10¼ hours and by 1830 a further 11 post towns in County Cork had been added to the network. The postal rate set in the 1660 Parliamentary Act was 2d for a single sheet sent less than 40 miles and 4d if a single sheet was sent greater than 40 miles (rate within Ireland, British rates applied in England, Scotland and Wales).

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Note

Mail sent from Cork to Great Britain was required to travel first to Dublin and the rate applied to the letter face was the rate to Dublin. This was then replaced with the rate for the next leg and the initial rate was crossed, e.g. if travelling to Edinburgh, the next leg would be as far Donaghadee, where a further rate would be applied. This latter rate would include the cost of the Packet transfer to Portpatrick, the cost of the Scottish wheel tax and the mileage to Edinburgh. Hence a letter face would show multiple rates crossed out as the journey progressed.

Exhibit Changes: Exhibit has been extended to eight frames since last showing internationally and the exhibit has been reshaped to end with the ship letters (previously integrated throughout the exhibit).

Ship Letter Mail

Irish Ship Letter Rates	
British Act 1711	1d plus inland rates
British Act 1765	1d plus inland rates
Irish Act 1784	1d plus inland rates
Irish Act 1815	Single 6d plus inland rates Double 12d plus inland rates
British Act 1835	8d plus inland rates India Letters 4d plus inland rates
British Uniform Postage Act 1840	8d with no inland rate

All foreign letters were considered to be ship letters and the passing of the 1660 Act of Parliament required all mail carried on board private ships (not packet mail) to be subject to postage on arrival in the United Kingdom. Ship masters were required to hand over all letters to the Post Office official at their point of entry into the United Kingdom. This made the Cork coast a very strategic position for the receipt of foreign mail en route to British towns. Ships crossing the Atlantic would land for a number of reasons, such as fresh supplies, repairs or shelter. There were five significant ports on the County Cork coastline: Cork City, Cove (later called Queenstown), Kinsale, Youghal and Skibbereen.

The 9 June 1711 Act of Parliament (9 Anne Cap10) instructed the Master of each ship to pass over all inbound letters at the port of arrival, with a fee of one penny to be paid for each letter handed over. This was followed by the issue of SHIP LETTER handstamps to postmasters at all Irish ports of entry. This ensured the Master of the ship was paid and that the correct rate of postage was calculated accurately (entry port to destination). Ship letter handstamps were unique to port of entry but multiple handstamps were in use at larger ports. Ship letter handstamps identified the entry point into the United Kingdom for correct calculation of rates and were no longer required when mail moved to prepayment with adhesive stamps. The exhibit traces the increasing ship letter rates to 1840 and the decreasing rates from there to the UPU rates of 1875.

Independent Post Office 1784 to 1831

The Independent Irish Post Office was established by an Act of Parliament on 1 August 1784 and remained in place even after the 1801 Act of Union. Miles were set as Irish miles (1 Irish mile = 1.27 English miles) and rates were Irish currency. There was a total of eight rate changes in this period, each is detailed in the exhibit.

The mermaid date stamp, unique to Ireland, was in use between 1808 and 1814, consisting of an inner circle with day, month and year. The circle is surrounded by an elaborate mermaid design (the awkward shape makes good impressions difficult to find).

The 5 July 1827 Act repealed the requirement to pay separate rates in Ireland and Great Britain and introduced an overall distance from dispatch address to receiving address, measured in English miles and paid in English money (the legal currency within the United Kingdom). This paved the way for the Unified Post Period.

Unified Post Period 1827 to 1839

An 1829 Parliamentary Report exposed a number of scandals within the Irish Post Office and two Acts were passed to bring the Irish Post Office back under the control of the British Post Office (i.e. amalgamation of the independent Irish Post Office with its British counterpart). The March 1831 Act appointed a Postmaster General for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The second Act in 1832 allowed the new Postmaster General to regulate the privilege of Franking in Ireland. Repealing such things as previously facilitated abuse of the privilege. This period also led to a unified ship letter rate across the United Kingdom.

Postal Reform Period 1839– UPU

This period r parallel to the adhesive stamp period, where the transformational rates are applied without the use of adhesive stamps. This period saw the introductions of reforms such as the 1d penny black adhesive stamp and the Mulready envelopes. This period saw the introductions of further reforms for international letters and the requirement to cancel all mail posted at sea with a Paquebot marking. In the case of Irish mail, special railway post boxes were established, to allow for a direct connection with the transatlantic steamers from Queenstown. These were sorted by the travelling post office on board the train.

The port of embarkation for mail sent by the Cunard packets bound for Halifax and Boston, was changed from Liverpool to Queenstown in November 1859. The London mail travelled by train to Holyhead, packet to Kingston (Dublin) and by rail to Cork and Queenstown. This gave a saving of 24 hours in delivery times. Arrangements were made for all British Packets to call at Queenstown for the purpose of embarking and landing mail to and from North America. This cemented the critical location and importance of Cork in transatlantic mails.

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