

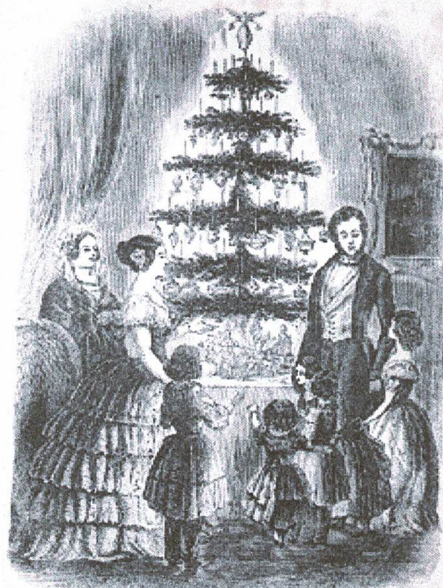
Christmas has been a Christian festival since the late Roman period; the first recorded celebration was on 25<sup>th</sup> December 336 AD, towards the end of the reign of the Emperor Constantine, who was the first Emperor openly to embrace Christianity. The date has been set perhaps a century earlier; there were some religious authorities at that time who argued that Christ was conceived in March, and hence Christmas nine months later. Probably the fact that 25<sup>th</sup> December was already an important pagan festival, celebrating the winter solstice, was at least as significant in setting the date (early Christianity was very good at piggybacking pagan festivals).



Coin Showing  
Constantine the Great  
Struck in London c315

Ever since Constantine, Christmas has been celebrated in one way or another in Christian communities and the date has importance in other ways; for example, William the Conqueror was crowned king of England in Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day 1066.

In its modern form, with gifts, cards, trees and carols, Christmas as we know it began to take shape in the 19th century. Perhaps the first major change was Christmas Day being made a bank holiday in 1834; after that, it took off thanks to Queen Victoria. Although the



THE CHRISTMAS TREE.  
Drawing of Royal Family in  
Illustrated London News 1848

Queen and more importantly her consort, Albert, are said to have introduced the Christmas tree to Great Britain, in fact it was Queen Charlotte, the German wife of George III (Christmas trees had been a tradition in Germany since the 16th century) who first celebrated Christmas in Britain with a tree. Queen Victoria as a child remembered this and she and Albert certainly popularised the tree as a way of celebrating the festival. A drawing in the Illustrated London News in 1848 showing the Royal family around a Christmas tree created a sensation at the time and made the trees a popular part of the festival. Carols, which had long been a part of the festival, became more prominent at about the same time and Christmas cards were started by Sir Henry Cole in 1843. In the same year, Charles Dickens wrote the novel *A Christmas Carol*, which helped revive the 'spirit' of Christmas and seasonal merriment and brought phrases such as "Merry Christmas" and "Bah! Humbug" into popular usage.

Christmas is a very broad subject for philately and in this presentation the focus is on the British Empire in the period up until the start of the Second World War. There are five principal elements organised as follows:

*Christmas Philately in the Victorian Period.* This is presented on Sheets 2 to 4

*Christmas in the Edwardian Period.* This is presented on Sheets 5 to 6

*Christmas in the First World War* This is presented on Sheets 7 to 11.

*Christmas Post After the First World War.* Three items are presented on Sheets 12 to 13.

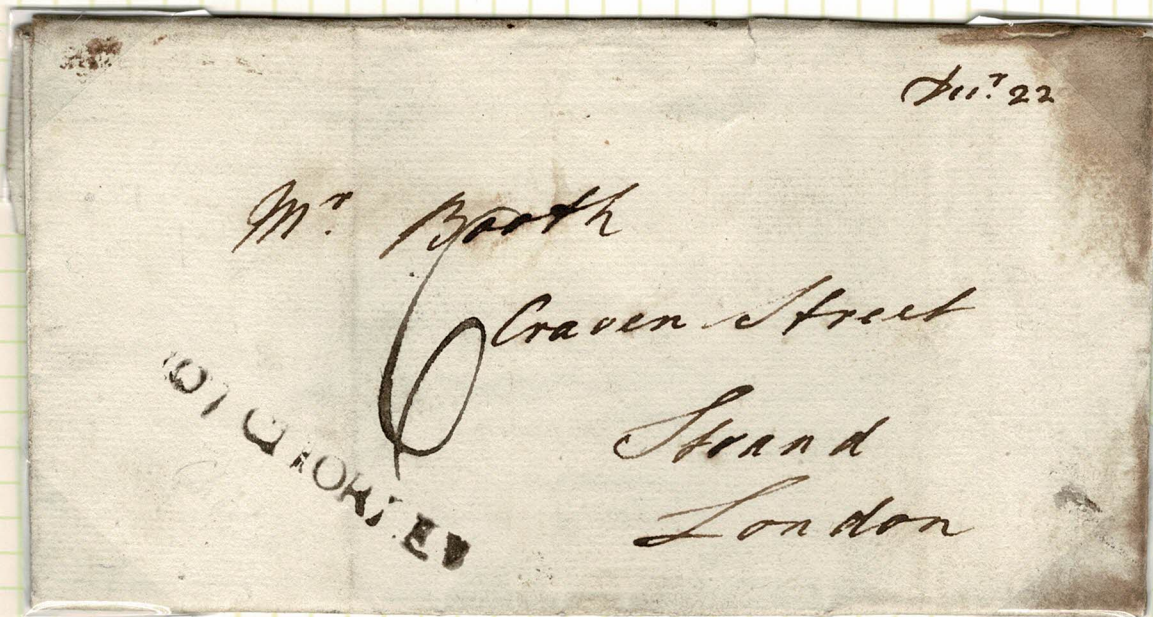
*Contenders for the Title of First Christmas Commemorative Stamp.* Perhaps surprisingly there are several of these, presented on Sheets 14 to 16. This is the only area that extends outside the Empire/Commonwealth



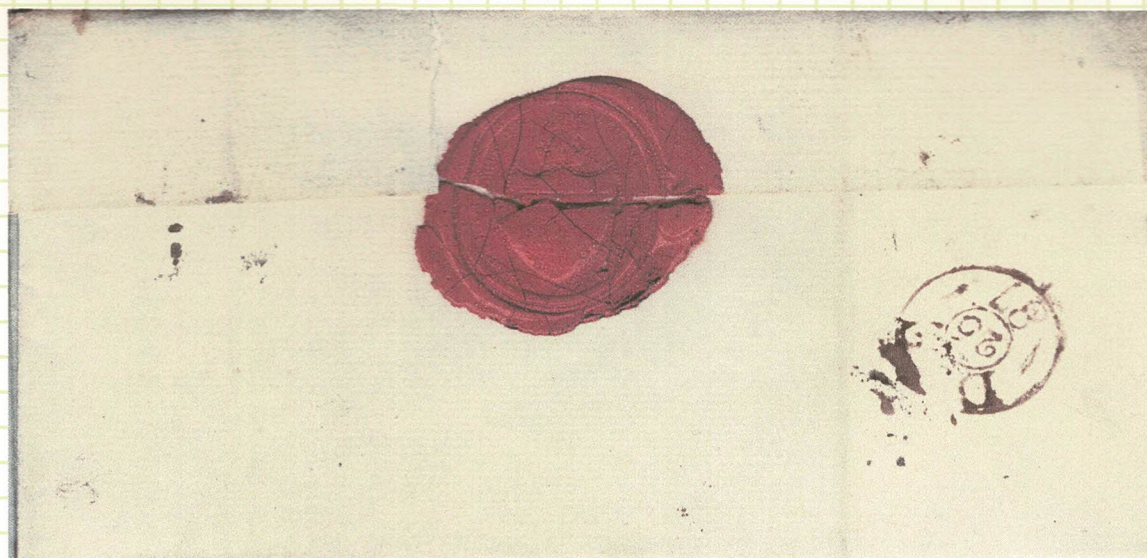
### Early Christmas Delivery Letter

The entire below is an early letter showing a Christmas Day handstamp. It was sent from Chorley in Lancashire on 22nd December 1787 and carries a previously unrecorded '207 CHORLEY' mileage mark. As the distance from Chorley to London is around 210 miles, this mark was probably kept at the local post office to mark London addressed mail and to record the distance such mail would have to travel.

The letter, which talks about deeds and the need to obtain powers of attorney, took three days to get to London (this was the era of mail coaches, not trains) and carries a receiving handstamp dated 25<sup>th</sup> December 1787. It also has a manuscript '6' on the front, which denoted the amount to be paid by the recipient. 6d in 1787 is equivalent to about £4 today.



Paid on Delivery Letter from Chorley Lancashire to London  
207 CHORLEY mileage mark and manuscript '6' on front  
London receiving handstamp 25<sup>th</sup> December 1787 on rear.



Copy of rear

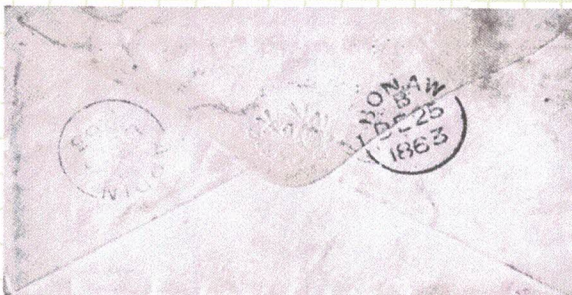


In Victorian times and indeed right up until 1960 (1965 in Scotland) the Post Office made deliveries on Christmas Day.

The letter below showed the lengths to which the Post Office went to effect deliveries over the Christmas period. It was posted in Glasgow on 24th December 1863 and addressed to someone in Lismore, an island in Loch Linnhe on the west coast of Scotland. The postal staff were clearly busy on Christmas Day, as the envelope carries both Bonaw and Appin handstamps dated 25th December. There was no bridge to Lismore and Port Appin, near Appin itself, was the ferry terminal for a short crossing to the island.



1d Red on Letter Glasgow to Lismore  
Glasgow 159 and Single Circle Cancellations, latter dated 24<sup>th</sup> December 1863



Copy of reverse showing Bonaw and  
Appin receiving handstamps dated  
25<sup>th</sup> December 1863



Map of western Scotland showing location of  
Lismore, Appin and Bonaw



## Christmas Envelope

The letter below is an early example of a special Christmas envelope. It was posted in Newry in Northern Ireland on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1868 and addressed to Belfast, where it arrived on 24<sup>th</sup> December. It carries two 1d Reds, plate 107, although the perforation is misaligned so that only one plate number on each stamp is readable. As well as the Newry single circle cancellation the stamps are cancelled with the numeric 357 handstamp, the number for Newry.

On the rear the envelope carries a small embossed design with holly, a Christmas bird with an improbably long tail and the words 'A Merry Christmas'.



Two 1d Reds on Envelope Newry to Belfast  
Newry Single Ring Dec 23 1868 and numeric '357' cancellation on front  
Belfast Dec 24 1868 receiving handstamp on rear



Copy of rear



The cut out front of an envelope below was posted on 23 December 1893. It is addressed to George Alfred Haden Haden-Best, a wealthy local landowner. Haden-Best inherited Haden Hall, to which the envelope is addressed, in 1878 and later built Haden Hill House next door to it. The drawing is presumably a joke from an acquaintance - perhaps Haden-Best had been recently robbed. Or maybe the joke was about Haden Hall being empty now that Haden Hill House was built and occupied.

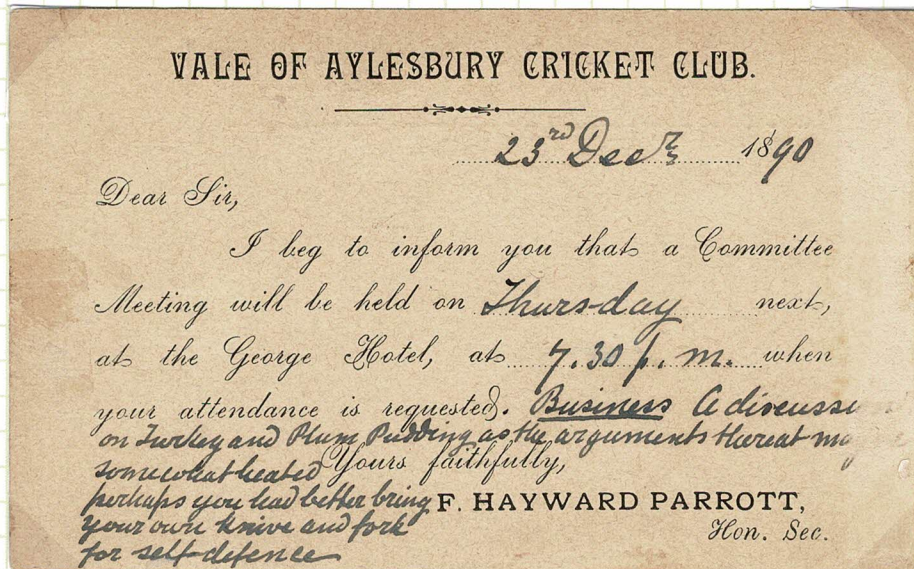




The Vale of Aylesbury Cricket Club was founded some time in the 1840s; the exact date is not known. The club was presumably thriving by the 1890s when the card below was sent notifying a member of the club's committee of a forthcoming meeting. The card was sent on 23rd December 1890, which was a Tuesday, and said that the next meeting would be on the following Thursday, which would have been Christmas Day! The card also carries a humorous message implying that the meeting might have a heated debate. It may or may not be a coincidence that the club was wound up five years later and replaced by the Aylesbury Cricket Club.

Interestingly, the card has not been cancelled although it has been addressed. Whether or not it went through the post is not clear.

The Committee meeting was held in the George Hotel, at that time located in the centre of town in Market Square. The hotel was closed in 1921 and the building later demolished in 1935. The Secretary who sent the card, F Hayward Parrott, was a prominent member of local society and in 1910 is listed as the Secretary of the Buckinghamshire Discharged Prisoners Aid Society, perhaps a somewhat different type of membership to that of the Cricket Club.



<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>d Prepaid Postcard from Aylesbury Buckinghamshire to Woking Surrey

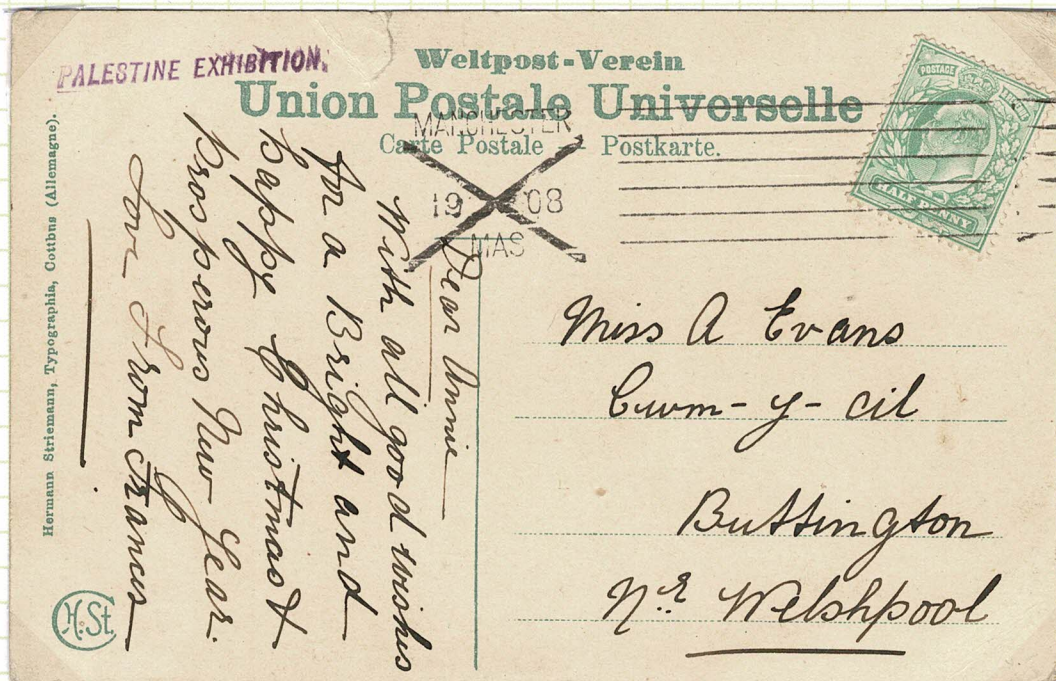


Reduced copy of front

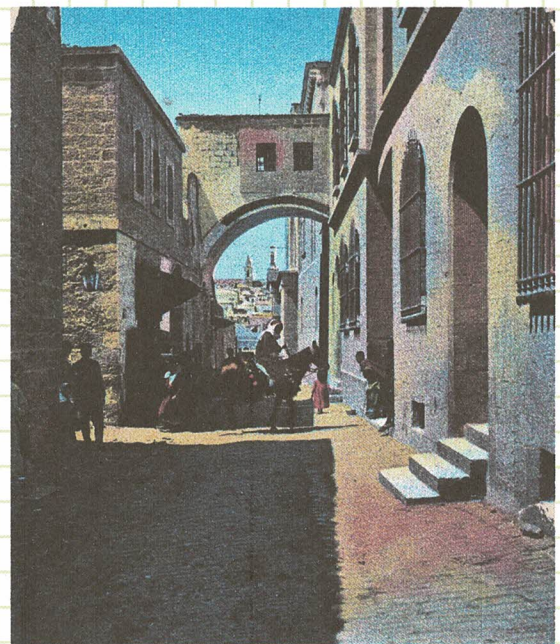


Cancellations for delivery on Christmas Day had a relatively short life; they were introduced on a trial basis in 1902 and the last year of the scheme was 1909. As a result, such cancellations are relatively rare.

There were a range of different cancellations used and the card below, posted in 1908, shows a narrow X - a thicker X is on the next sheet. The cancellation is a Manchester one and the card is addressed to a Welshpool address. This card has a Christmas theme, like the other two cards shown in this series, but in this case a slightly unusual approach; it shows a street scene in Jerusalem. The card is stamped 'Palestine Exhibition' on the back; this refers to an Exhibition held in February 1908, where the writer probably bought the card



A "Palestine Exhibition" was held at Plymouth during the first fortnight in February under the auspices of the Bishops of Exeter and Truro, and under the management of a Committee which included a large number of the clergy and ministers of the three towns. At the special request of the Committee, this Society contributed an exhibit of their maps, with casts of the Temple, the Siloam inscription, and the remarkable Hittite inscriptions; also several fine enlarged photographs of the excavations and discoveries at Gezer. Thanks to the exertions of the Revs. G. B. Berry and H. D. Nicholson, who attended personally to explain the objects exhibited, considerable interest in the work of the Fund was aroused among the many thousands who visited the exhibition.



Jerusalem. Ecce Homo Arch. Ecce Homo Bogen.  
 Arc de l'Ecce Homo.

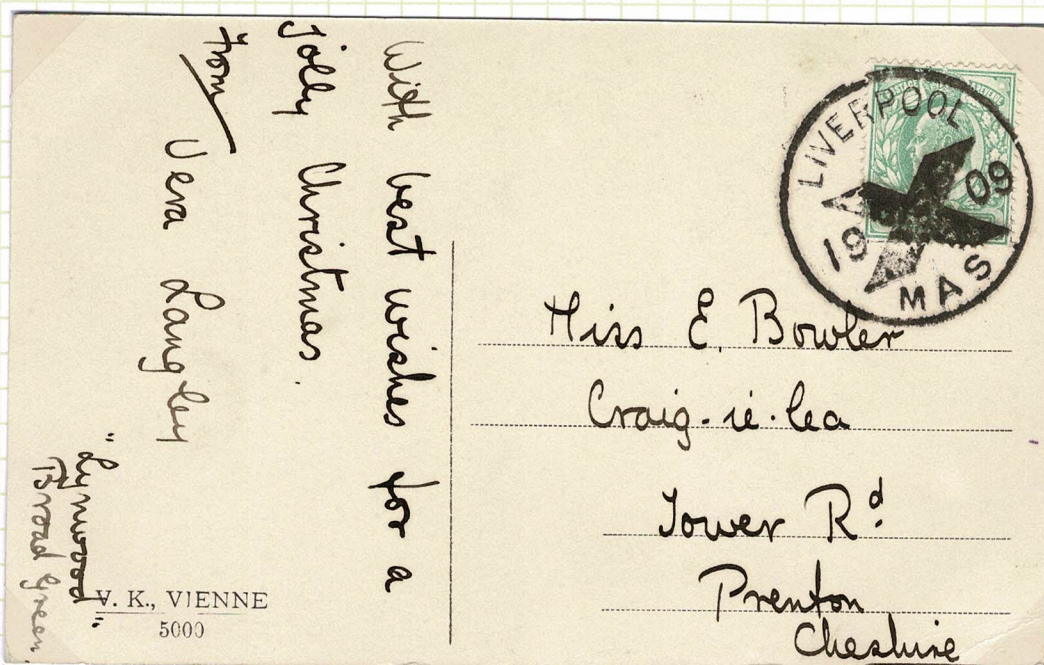
Edition Fr. Voster & Co., Jerusalem. 7

Extract from 'The Palestine Exploration Fund'  
 Quarterly Statement April 1908

Copy of front



This last card in the Christmas cancellation series was posted in 1909 in Liverpool and carries a broad X Christmas cancellation; 1909 was the last year in which the advance posting arrangements operated. The sender gives her address as Broad Green, an eastern suburb of Liverpool. The card is addressed to someone in Prenton, Cheshire, on the other side of the Mersey near Birkenhead. Although the distance between the two is only about ten miles, the Mersey lies in the way and to avoid a road trip of about 35 miles, at the time the card was sent the only way to travel between them would have been by train or ferry; there were several ferry services and the Mersey Train Tunnel was opened in 1886. The first road tunnel under this part of the Mersey was built in 1934 and the first bridge in 1961.



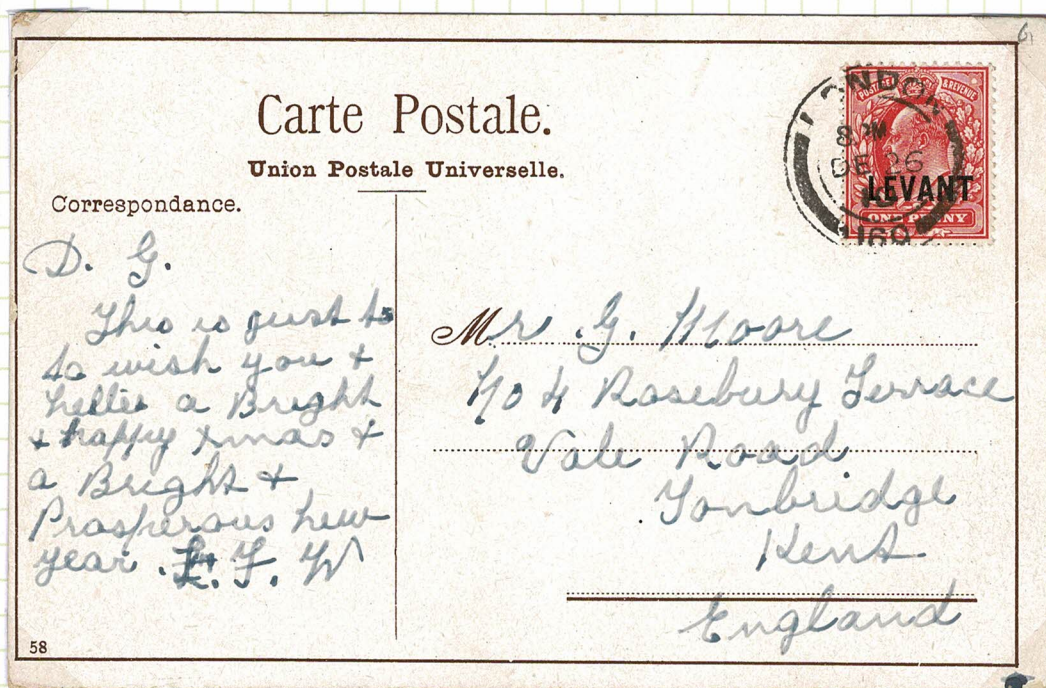
Copy of front



## Edwardian Cancellation with a Difference

The postcard below carries an Edwardian 1d stamp with a LEVANT overprint. These stamps were sold in the five British Post Offices in the Ottoman Empire and normally carry cancellations from those POs; they were not valid for postage in GB. Nevertheless the cancellation is London 160; the explanation is that such mail was posted on board ships returning to the British Isles, in this case from a Mediterranean cruise that must have stopped in Constantinople. On arrival at the home port, the ship's bag of mail, carrying stamps affixed during the voyage, would be taken to the appropriate post office where it would be accepted into the British postal system, despite the stamps not necessarily being normally valid for postage in that system. In London, ship's bags would be taken to the Chief Office in St Martin's Le Grand in the City of London. The Chief Office had literally hundreds of designated numbers, of which 160 was one.

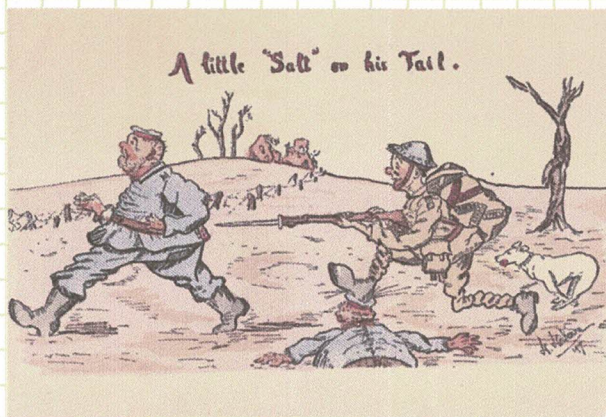
Although the card shows an artist's view of Constantinople, the message is one of Christmas greetings. That said, it is cancelled on 26th December 1910, so arrived slightly too late.



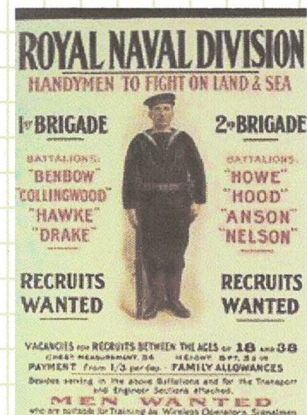
Copy of front



The card below was printed in France by the Royal Naval Division. Despite the name, this was an infantry division originally formed from Royal Navy and Royal Marines reservists and volunteers not needed for service at sea. After early action in Belgium, the Division was one of only two British divisions to fight at Gallipoli. After the Allied withdrawal it was sent to France and in 1917 was involved in the second battle of Passchendaele, where it sustained heavy losses. With true Tommy grit, the card is humorous rather than maudlin, despite those losses.



Reduced copy of cartoon inside card

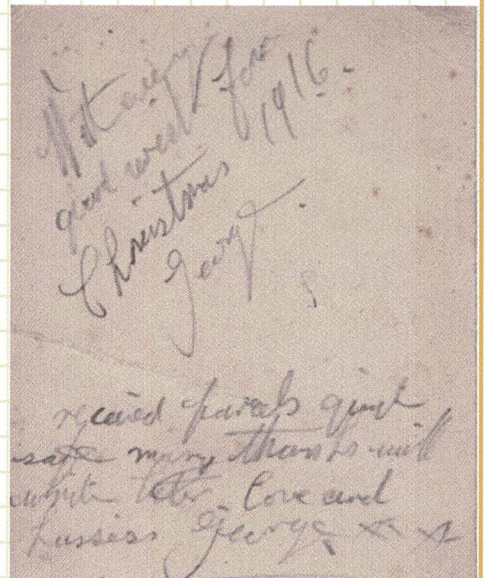
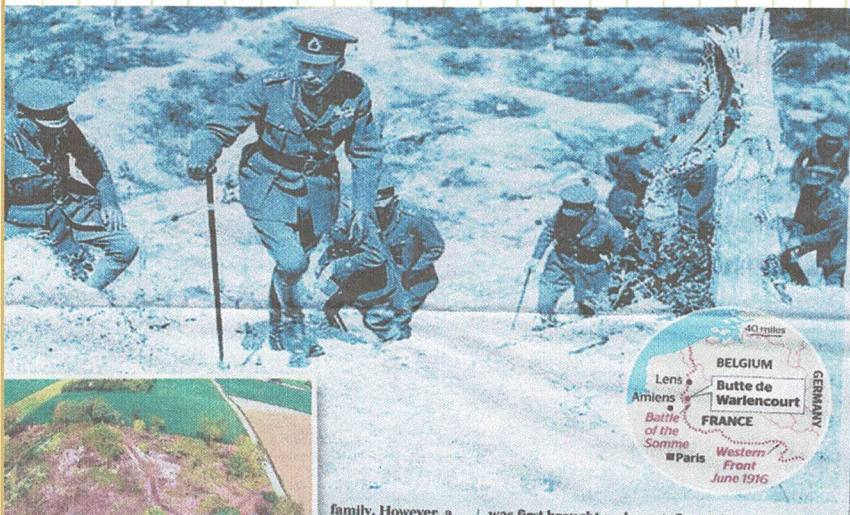


RND Recruitment Poster



The postcard below has a sadder story. It was sent by George Pretty, who was my wife's great uncle, to his family in England. George was a Lance Corporal in the 2nd Battalion, the Wiltshire Regiment and had been fighting in France since April 1915. In late 1916 his battalion was in the Battle of the Somme, trying to take a key German redoubt known as the Butte de Walencourt. George wrote this card, with Christmas greetings, in October 1916 and was killed soon after, on 18th October 1916. The card may never have been posted, just sent back with his effects, as it carries no army postal marks or censor's cachet. George was buried in the Walencourt cemetery, from which the Butte de Walencourt is clearly visible.

The Butte was eventually taken, after heavy losses, in February 1917 and later visited by George V. It was recaptured by the Germans in their major offensive in March 1918 and then recaptured by the Allies in August 1918. Its strategic significance was that it was a crucial vantage point for miles around, which is why it was fought for so heavily.



Photograph of George V in the Butte de Walencourt and Location Map

Reduced copy of rear of card



The Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force was part of Allenby's Army and fought its way up into what is now south eastern Turkey from Baghdad. In late 1917 it took Kara Tepe, an ancient ruined city that had one time controlled the route from eastern Anatolia into Syria. The Indian Army provided troops for the Force and the card below was probably printed for them, as it has a caption 'Presented by the Women of the Bombay Presidency' and was printed in Bombay. It shows a heliograph mounted on a part of the ruins at Kara Tepe. Heliographs, which go back to ancient times, were a simple and effective form of communication - basically they were line of sight machines that sent the sun's rays to the receiving station and by alternating a handle the rays blinked, so that they could transmit messages by morse code.



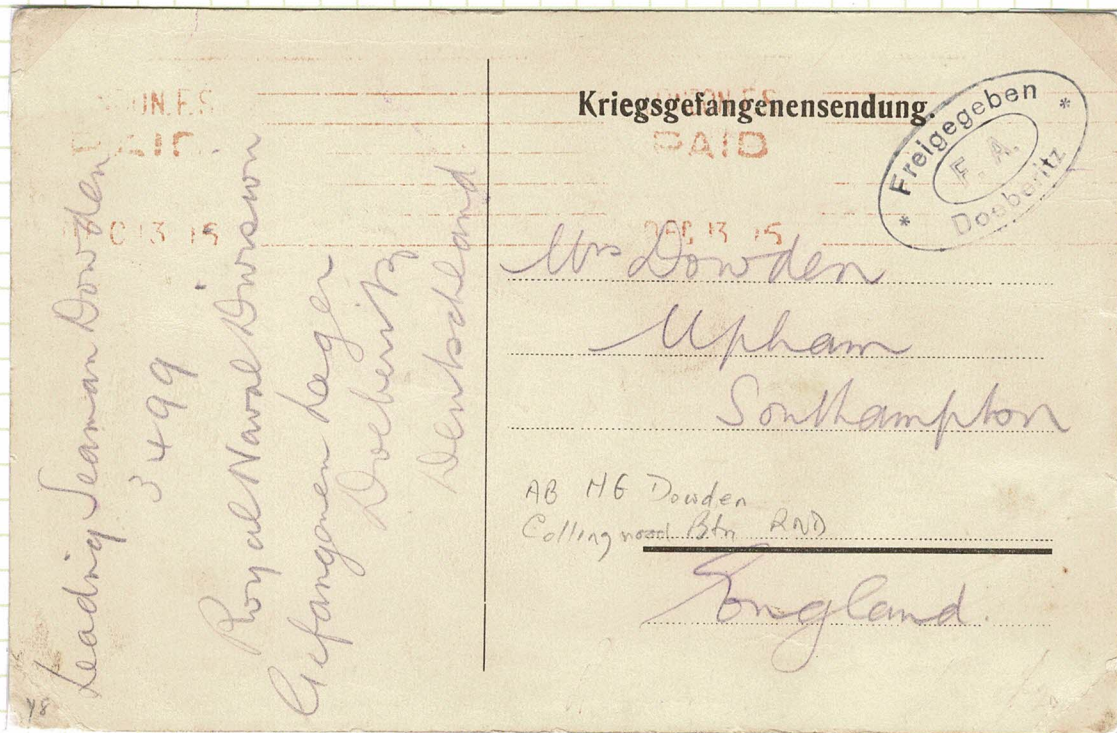
Unused Postcard Showing Kara Tepe



Turkish prisoners taken at Kara Tepe



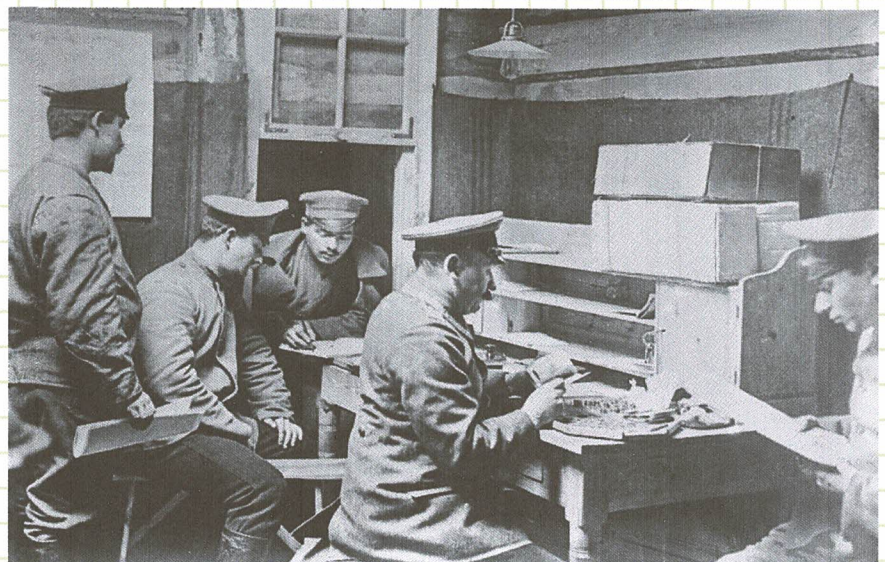
The card below was sent from Doberitz PoW camp in Germany to Southampton in 1915. The camp had become world famous the year before when, during a fracas with German guards, Private William Lonsdale punched one of them and was sentenced to death. Following international condemnation, the sentence was commuted to 20 years in prison in January 1915 and later the Kaiser, seeing a propaganda opportunity, pardoned Lonsdale. The card carries a German camp cachet.



Undated Postcard Doberitz to Southampton 1915



Reduced Copy of Front



Contemporary photo of mail censors at Doberitz camp



The card below was sent in 1916 from Dorchester PoW camp to an address in Hamburg. The camp was started as a small operation to house civilian internees but then started to take PoWs as well and was moved to Poundbury, where it eventually held some 4,500 men. The card carries a PC cancellation; during the war, PoW mail did not require postage.



Undated Postcard Dorchester to Hamburg 1916



Reduced Copy of Front



Contemporary photo of camp



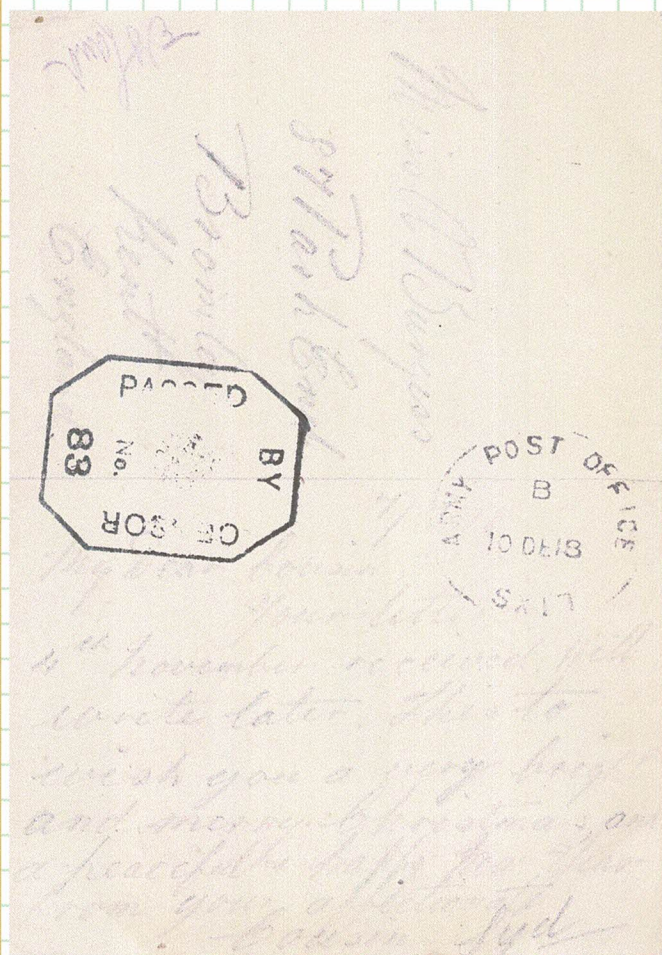
Memorial to men who died at Dorchester



**Last Christmas in Salonica**

The card below is a Christmas card from the Salonica front. The card is dated 10th December 1918; the war had been over for nearly a month on the western front and slightly longer on the eastern, where hostilities ceased on 30th October. The cancellation is Army Post Office (FPO) SX17, which was based in Sarigol at the end of 1918, a town to the west of Salonica.

The card was printed by the 8<sup>th</sup> Field Survey Company, which had been based on the Salonica front for the duration of the campaign. Field Survey Companies were responsible for surveying and accurate mapping, vital tasks for artillery whose range meant targets were often not in direct line of sight. Once an area was surveyed and mapped, the unit had to produce printed maps and as a result became specialist printers. By December 1918 the Company had moved to Constantinople, becoming part of the Army of the Black Sea. It printed this card, and a very similar one for the New Year, and the cards were then distributed to troops in the theatre. The censor number 83 indicates that the card was posted by a member of 483rd Company, Divisional Train; this and other companies provided horse-drawn transport. The 483rd was part of the 27th Division and when the card was sent the Division was moving back to Salonica, where in later December and early January it embarked for Batoum in Georgia, an important oil exporting port on the Black Sea.



Rear



Front

Postcard Salonica (Sarigol) to Bromley, Kent.  
 APO SX17 10 Dec 1918 cancellation and  
 crown censor 83 handstamp on rear



The envelope below was sent by airmail in 1934 and on the back in manuscript is written 'Taken By Kingsford Smith'. Although the envelope is printed 'Australian National Airways' it was sent from London and bears stamps totalling 1/4d, around £4.33 in today's currency - clearly airmail was a luxury in those days.

In fact the envelope relates to a by then defunct airline. Kingsford Smith was one of the two founders of ANA in 1930, but two of its fleet of five aircraft crashed in 1931 and the airline folded in that year (a later airline took the name in 1936, but was no relation to the original ANA). The 1930/31 ANA did not operate to London, so presumably this envelope was sent by someone associated with it who was in London for Christmas 1931.



Envelope London to Sydney Australia. London Two Ring Cancellations 17 Dec 1931

ANA 1931 Advertising Poster



Australian 1931 Issue of Kingsford Smith Stamps, Airmail at Bottom



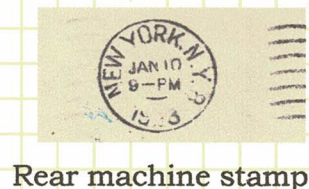
## Christmas Back and Forth

The letter below was redirected several times but due to various labels affixed during its journey some of the addresses cannot be read. Also what follows is to some extent guesswork, based on the many additions to the original envelope. It was sent on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1927 from Danbury, Connecticut, and carries a 2c stamp, the correct internal rate at the time, so presumably was sent to an address in the USA. As the envelope is marked 'Bell System' and as it has a see through panel, it might well have been a telephone bill. The envelope was then redirected to an address in Berlin and the US postal authorities wrote 'T 30 cts' on the envelope, denoting the underpaid amount for a foreign letter (the cts refers to centimes, the international standard for tax payments, not cents). The letter arrived in Berlin on 22 December 1927 and was redirected again, this time to London; the manuscript '30' at the bottom right may be a further underpaid charge levied in Berlin. It was then assessed as underpaid when it arrived in London, as evidenced by the 3d handstamp applied by the Foreign Branch (F.B). A 3d Postage Due stamp was applied in London but the letter was refused and a surcharge handstamp was applied, together with a cancellation of the postage due stamp, the latter dated 25<sup>th</sup> December 1927.

Although refused, the letter did not go back to Danbury but was redirected to the Lambs Club on 44<sup>th</sup> St in New York. The Lambs was (and is today) an upmarket club for theatrical people so perhaps the recipient was an actor who was moving between engagements. The letter arrived in New York on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1928, as evidenced by the receiving handstamp on the rear, but did not stop at the Club; it was again redirected, this time to 2345 Broadway, an upmarket apartment block known as the Euclid Building. Surprisingly, the letter does not carry any additional unpaid markings when it arrived back in the USA; it should have had US postage due stamps applied at that point, but perhaps the complexity of the envelope meant the US authorities simply gave up trying to work out what was due.



2c Red on Envelope Danbury Connecticut to London  
Danbury Single Ring Dec 7 Cancellation on front, together with  
Berlin 22 Dec 1927 transit handstamp, London Foreign Branch 3d  
handstamp, Surcharge handstamp and 3d Postage Due stamp with  
London SW1 25<sup>th</sup> December 1927 cancellation.  
New York Jan 10 1928 receiving machine stamp on rear





There are at least four Christmas Islands, but only two that issue stamps. One is near Australia and is now an Australian territory. The other was one of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, now split into Kiribati (Gilbert Islands) and Tuvalu (Ellice Islands). Christmas Island is now in Kiribati.

The envelope below was sent in 1939 and carries several Christmas Island cancellations. The stamps are the seven lower value denominations of the 1939 Gilbert and Ellice Islands pictorial issue which has been issued the month before. It is addressed to H E Maude; Harry Maude served as District Officer, Native Title Lands Commissioner and Resident Commissioner in the islands from 1929 to 1948. The envelope is sealed and apparently unopened but empty so presumably was sent to Maude as a philatelic item.

Arthur Grimble, who wrote the famous book 'A Pattern of Islands' about his time in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, was a contemporary of Maude and handed over the role of Resident Commissioner to him in 1929. He had left the Islands to become Governor of the Seychelles by the time the envelope was sent to Maude.



Envelope Christmas Island to Gilbert Islands  
 Christmas Island Single Ring Cancellations 14 Feb 1939



There are several contenders for the title of first Christmas commemorative stamp, depending in large part on precise definitions. The earliest is the Canada issue of 1898.

At a Universal Postal Union conference in Washington in 1897 British Empire delegates, especially Canada's Postmaster General William Mulock, lobbied to get an overseas penny post for Empire nations; at the time the standard UPU rate for international postage was 2½d. He lost that battle, but in July 1898 another conference in London allowed Empire countries to opt into an Imperial Penny Postage rate (2c in Canada). Canada, due to Mulock's influence, moved quickly and the design below, without the Xmas overprint, was submitted to Queen Victoria soon after the conference for her approval, as always happened at that time. Apparently a post office official told Her Majesty that the new stamp could serve as a tribute to the prince, referring to the then Prince of Wales whose birthday was on November 9, the original date selected to release the stamp. The Queen asked 'Which prince?' in a tone that suggested she would not be pleased with a royal connection other than to herself. The official, quick on his feet, replied "Why, madam, the Prince of Peace," referring, of course, to the Christ child. True or not, it's a good story and for whatever reason the stamp was not released until December 7, 1898. It bore not only the map on the essay shown to the Queen, but also the words "XMAS 1898", the date when the new Imperial Penny Post arrangements first came into place.

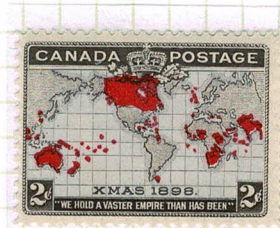
The map is important as, whilst it shows the whole world, it is probably not a coincidence that Canada is shown in the middle, symbolically linking the east and west spheres of the empire 'on which the sun never sets'. The map is very similar to one used in Canadian schools at this time to emphasise the place that Canada played in linking the empire together.

The words at the bottom seem hubristic today and are a line extracted from "A Song of Empire" composed by Sir Lewis Morris in 1887 to celebrate Victoria's jubilee.

This was the first multicoloured stamp printed in Canada and perhaps quality control was below par as there are three versions with different colours for the oceans.



2c Lavender



2c Greenish Blue



2c Blue

Whilst it is correct to say that this was the first stamp anywhere in the world to show the word Xmas, so, whether or not it can be accepted as the first *commemorative* Xmas stamp is open to doubt. Apart from the reasoning above regarding the Empire Penny Post, if it was a commemorative issue, then why did Canada wait another 66 years until 1964 to issue another Christmas commemorative stamp?



3c Scarlet



5c Ultramarine

The Canadian Xmas commemorative issue of 1964



The next contender is a seal issued by Denmark in 1904. Although some claim this as a Christmas stamp, it is clearly a seal and as the card below shows, had to be used with a normal postage stamp - it was no good for postage on its own. It was issued close to Christmas to raise money for sick children, but is hard to count as a Christmas commemorative stamp despite claims by some Danish philatelists.



1904  
Christmas Seal

1904 Christmas Seal on Postcard With 5 Ore Green for Postage

The next two contenders were both issued to the British Forces in Egypt. In 1932 the Egyptian postal authorities raised the international postage rate for the second time in two years. The Army decided to help the troops and arranged a bulk deal with the Egyptians, paid for by the purchase of what at the time were termed postal seals to be printed and sold through the NAAFI at lower rates than charged by the Egyptian post. Two values were available, 10 milliemes for normal postage and 3 milliemes for Christmas postage. The Christmas 3 Milliemes issues, in 1932, 1933, 1934 and 1935, all carried the word 'Seal', as did the early 10 milliemes issues, although they were prepaid items affixed to envelopes to enable postage, which sounds an awful lot like a stamp. The same plates were used to print the seals in each year, but in a different colour. The first seal in 1932 is shown opposite.



1932 Christmas Seals

In 1935 there were two Christmas seals or stamps. As well as the seal above, printed in vermillion, the standard 10 milliemes stamp was issued overprinted Xmas 1935, as shown opposite.



1935 Christmas Stamps

Both types of seal or stamp carried the words Xmas. Good contenders for the crown of first Christmas commemorative, but some argue that they were seals not stamps (I disagree). The other drawback is that they *had* to be issued because of the lower Xmas postal rate - does that make them true commemoratives?



The next contender is Austria, which issued the stamps opposite in 1937; in Gibbons they are listed as 'Christmas Greetings'. The stamps show a rose and signs of the Zodiac, hardly Christmas themes. An expert philatelist has a first day cover which has a cachet indicating that the stamps were to be used on birthday letters, which explains the signs of the Zodiac. The Austrian postal authorities have confirmed that the first Christmas stamps that they issued were in 1953.



12g Green

24g Red

Next is Brazil, which issued a series of four semi-postals; you had to pay extra above the postage rate on the stamp and the additional money went to charitable causes. One of the stamps shows the Three Wise Men and the Star of Bethlehem, leading some to suggest that this is the first Christmas stamp. But the stamps were issued early in 1940, too late for Christmas 1939 and far too early for Christmas 1940. Gibbons lists them as 'Child Welfare' as the additional money went to children's charities, so I do not think this issue can easily be counted as the first Christmas commemorative. Nor do the Brazilians; the Brazil Post Office says that it did not issue Christmas stamps until December 1966.



100r+100r violet



200r+100r Blue



400r+200r Olive



1,200r+400r Red

A number of experts discount all the previous examples for one reason or another and go for Hungary. In 1943 in the midst of war Hungary issued three stamps late in the year, each with a Christmas theme - Message to the Shepherds, Nativity and Adoration of the Magi. Philatelica Hungaria, founded in 1950 by the Hungarian Post but now a private dealer, have stated that this was a Christmas issue, but being a dealer perhaps they would say that. Nevertheless these were stamps issued at Christmas and showing only Christmas themes.



4f Green



20f Blue



30f Red

From the early 1950s onwards, more and more countries started issuing Christmas stamps. The first Commonwealth country to do so was Australia in 1957.



3½d Scarlet



4d Purple

Personally I would like to go for the British Forces in Egypt issues as they were specifically for Christmas postage. But it is hard to argue that camels and sphinxes are Christmas themes, so for me the Hungarian 1943 issue is the first real commemorative issue.