

by the purser. Mail boxes were closed when the ship was in territorial waters. All letters were date stamped; at first this was the date of sailing, but later it was made the date the letter was posted on board. There was also a stamp with the letter T and the words UK-SA Sea Post.

The sorters were treated as second class passengers (at that time mail ships carried passengers in first, second and third class accommodation). They ate with these passengers in the dining saloon and were issued with passage tickets. They were shown on the lists as mail sorters but did not sign the ship's articles. They wore a specially designed uniform, with "British Sea PO" on the cap.

The sorters were paid a maximum of £2. 1s. 6d. a week plus a trip allowance, for an 11-hour day outward and a 10-hour day homeward, the latter being under more tropical conditions.

The first sailing was by *Armada Castle* from Southampton on September 27, 1913, when mail sorting was carried out on board. From South Africa there was a trial run in *Kildonan Castle* which left Cape Town on September 6, 1913, but no live sorting was carried out on the voyage.

It was the outbreak of war in 1914 that brought the interesting service to an end. The last sailing from Southampton when it operated was on August 1, 1914; after that the port was closed to commercial shipping. The last voyages from Cape Town had to be diverted to Plymouth.

During the 1914-15 the service was operating, all the regular mail ships and the reserve ship were used. The ships involved were:

<i>Armada Castle</i>	<i>Kildonan Castle</i>
<i>Balmoral Castle</i>	<i>Kingsfarms Castle</i>
<i>Briton</i>	<i>Norman</i>
<i>Edinburgh Castle</i>	<i>Saxon</i>
<i>Kemilworth Castle</i>	<i>Walmer Castle</i>

System was a success

An official Post Office minute indicates the success of the Sea Post Office system. On outward trips 1700 bags a month were carried on average and at Christmas 1913 there were 2,500. Not all those required sorting as "closed" bags were also carried. On the homeward journey the average was only 260 bags per trip, with 2,000 registered letters in addition. This postal sorting at sea had made substantial savings at the London end, both financially and in achieving earlier delivery times. Presumably this was equally true at the South African end. In the first six months the total cost of the service came to £2,453, half of which was paid by South Africa. From April 1914 until the service came to an end the cost was £1,190.

A further Post Office minute in December 1914 expressed the confident opinion that the service would be renewed after the end of hostilities, but alas this never happened.

Are there any CLANSMAN readers who can remember when the Post Office came to sea, or who have pictures of the uniformed postmen on board ship?

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