

Harry Layne wrote a series of articles for *GSM*, published June, July and August 1998, on the Triangular Postmarks of Great Britain, which were subsequently expanded upon and appeared in book form in 2003. The articles will be found, of course, on the *GSM Archive*, but are no longer available in magazine form and the book is also long out of print. In this new article, he returns to the subject, looking at the background to the telegraphic codes and their appearance in triangular, and other, cancellations.

# The Triangular Marks of Great Britain Revisited—the Telegraphic Codes

By Harry Layne BSc

Many collectors have had untold problems trying to locate the source of triangular handstamps containing letters within them, which were actually the Telegraphic Codes of the office at which they were applied. The numbering system was much the same as that for the 1844 cancels containing two or three digits, details of which have been published many times in the past, including in the recently updated edition of *Collect British Postmarks*.

Therefore the following notes will refer only to the Telegraphic Codes, which were incorporated into, but not confined to, the triangular markings in 1893, and may be seen in use on many other postal markings. The codes were originally introduced during 1870 to identify the transmitting and receiving offices of telegrams. From 1883 they were also used on parcel post labels and sometimes on registration labels and a variety of datestamps and other postal markings, many of which will be described within these notes.

## The numbers

In 1870 the Post Office took control of the telegraph network within the British Isles and produced a system of numbers that served to identify each telegraph office. These numbers were placed within the cancelling die and used to cancel adhesives on telegram forms. Although they appeared in many shapes and sizes, they seem to have been shown very little interest by collectors in the past, as they were telegraphic and not postal. Later, markings appeared that were of a postal nature and some of these have now become good property, and are keenly sought by collectors.

## The letters

The identification of these codes appears to have posed a major problem for collectors of this type of material, and although a listing was published in 1981, the information contained therein was somewhat lacking and much of the photocopied Post Office files, were unreadable. A new book is therefore in preparation which will add more information to the Post Office listings, by way of approximate dates of usage, and a checklist for those codes known to have been in use. (Details of the new book will be given at the end of this review. Ed)

Some offices were given new codes from time to time due to a change of postal address

or designation, and deleted offices' codes were sometimes re-allocated to new offices. But although some 17,500 codes could be made from the two-or three-letter combinations, only about 7000 had been allocated by 1917, when the Post Office decided to phase them out in favour of the original numeral index system of 1844, brought back to life during 1924.

Only a small proportion of the codes that were allocated to telegraph offices were used postally, and this accounts for the many vacant combinations within the lists. Information is based on the official lists shown in the 1909 code book and the subsequent Post Office circulars, documents and proof books.

The telegraphic code lettering system became obsolete from 1924, but as is usually the case, many have survived into later years when other uses were found for them, although they were mainly superseded by the numeral system.

Each telegraph office had a code which consisted of a two-or three-letter code, which was in use as a sort of shortened address for the purpose of signalling telegrams to identify the transmitting or receiving office. The time taken for transmissions was considerably reduced with the use of the Morse Code system, which was at the time employed in many fields.

Samuel Finley Breese Morse, invented the system in around 1832, whereby each letter of the alphabet was transmitted in a series of dots and dashes by a electric telegraph system, and the receiver was based on an electromagnet. Morse set up the first US telegraph from Washington to Baltimore in 1844, and his system is still in use today in some fields, although more elaborate equipment is now used.

The Morse alphabet system is shown below.

## Two-letter codes

Most of the important offices were allocated two-letter codes, starting with the letters AA for Aberdare, AB for Aberdeen, AC for Accrington and continued through the alphabet to YX for Yoxford, YY for Yaxley and YZ for York. Many of the two-letter groups, including ZA to ZZ, were never allocated and of those that were, some were only in use for a short time, while others may not have seen use at all.

Some attempt was made to allocate codes appropriate to the office name, such as taking the first and last letters of the office name (AD for Ashford), or the first two letters of the office name (AC for Accrington). Some codes took the initial letter and one other letter from the beginning of a syllable (AF for Alford). Others had the correct initial letter, while the second letter appears to have been chosen at random (BQ for Birr). These two-letter codes were, it seems, confined to offices having the same initial letter, which accounts for the large gaps in the Q, Y and Z lists.

## Three-letter codes

The three-letter codes, which ran from AAA to ZZZ, could provide for some 17,576 office combinations, but like the two-letter codes many were never allocated or only in use for a short time, if used at all.

It therefore follows that although an office was issued with a triangular or other handstamp containing the telegraphic code, it may never have seen use, and while this as far as possible will be indicated in the lists, the writer has obviously not seen every stamp that was in use, and collectors of local material will no doubt be able to update the listings in their particular area of interest.

### The International Morse code characters are:

A ..	B ...	C ---	D ...	E .	F ...	G --	H ...
I ..	J ....	K --	L ....	M --	N ..	O ---	P ....
Q ---	R ..	S ...	T -	U ...	V ...	W --	X ....
Y ....	Z ....	0 -----	1 -----	2 -----	3 -----	4 -----	5 -----
6 -----	7 -----	8 -----	9 -----	Full stop -----	Comma -----		

The codes having three letters followed the same format as the two-letter codes, but were much more flexible. Far fewer codes had letters matching the first three letters of the office name and there was a tendency for the second and third letters to bear no relation to the office name at all.

Although it appears that attempts were made at first to allocate the codes according to the office initial, the system was not strictly adhered to. When town sub-offices or branch offices were allocated telegraphic codes, in some cases the first letter of the code corresponded with the initial of the head office, regardless of the sub-office name. Where many place names began with the same initial letter (such as L), the lists soon became full and later allocations with the same initial letter had to be placed elsewhere in the lists and given codes from the less frequently used letters.

Many offices having the initial L were filed under the letter U, and a number of offices having the initial W were given codes under the initial V. Offices beginning with the letter B were filed under the letter Q, while the letter X was used solely for office names with the initial letter S.

In the past these factors have caused problems for collectors of these coded postal markings, for although an index to all the Telegraphic Office Codes in the UK was published in November 1909, some 35 per cent of the codes were not entered and, over the years, as the smaller offices were upgraded to the status of telegraph office, many new additions have been entered into the code book.

Some offices were closed or replaced by offices in adjoining streets, while other offices were renamed. When this happened sometimes the office code was retained by the new office, but in most cases an entirely new code was issued, leaving the original code vacant.

Many of the codes were, in fact, re-allocated, and dates have been included in the listings where possible, giving details of when these changes occurred, much of this information coming from Post Office circulars, up to 1924 when the codes became obsolete.

As already stated, the original code book is difficult to read and many entries have been struck through and a new office entered, sometimes with dates added.

## London offices and their codes

The telegraphic codes of the London offices were integrated into the national system and tended to develop their own characteristics due to the size and the complexity of the metropolis.

In the early 1870s, when the codes were adopted, a mixture of initials and compass points were used.

The London Chief Office, which was sited in St Martins le Grand, was allocated the code SM while the Chief Inland Letter Sorting Office, then known as the Mount Pleasant Factory, was given the code MTP, but in more recent years has been using the code MTIS [Mount Pleasant Inland Section] in its charge and explanatory marks.

The ECDO (East Central District Office) known earlier as the London Chief Office, had the code SM until 1910, when it was

moved to the King Edward Building in King Edward Street, and was then allocated the code KE, that was previously in use at the Kendal Office, which in turn was re-allocated a new code KL.

The remaining District Offices codes were based on the compass system but were a little inconsistent, and those offices named after the main points of the compass incorporated letters which denoted 'District' or 'District Office', for example ND, WD and EDO.

Those offices using the subordinate points of the compass showed them in two-letter codes,—SE, SW, WC and NW.

When the London area was divided into ten postal districts during 1857, each area was denoted by the cardinal points of the compass, using the initials EC, SE, WC, etc, and these were used quite extensively in many types of cancellations, surviving well into the 20th century.

From 1870, the district initials were also incorporated into telegraphic codes, although some modifications were found to be needed, but of the ten original designations the North Eastern was amalgamated with the Eastern in 1867, and likewise the Southern was abolished and divided between the South Eastern and South Western during 1868.

However, for some 50 years the code NE continued to be used in datestamps, until 1917, when the use of this code ceased and no further code was allocated to any London Office with these initials. The code NE was allocated to Newport, Monmouthshire.

Most of the more important offices within the London area had a wide variety of datestamps and obliterations incorporating their initials—from 1844 onwards, postmarks may be found with initials such as B or P for Borough or Paddington or LS for Lombard Street, VS for Vere Street and OCS for Old Cavendish Street. From 1865 onwards other prominent branches were allowed to cancel mail, and double stamps and obliterations also used these and other initials such as BG for Bethnal Green, C for Chiswick, MH for Maida Hill, TA for Throgmorton Avenue and T for Turnham Green, but none of these coincided with the telegraphic codes that were issued later.

There were however two exceptions—SMP (St Martins Place) and CX (Charing Cross) which were both in the Western Central District, and are known in use incorporating these initials into the early 1900s on newspaper cancellations as well as single and double datestamps.

When the 1909 code book was published, the code SMP was in use at South Brent, but CX continued in use at Charing Cross railway station, the earliest use known to the writer being 1873.

When other London branch offices were issued with telegraphic codes, they consisted of three-letter combinations—Bow used BLS while Paddington used PAM.

A further reorganisation of the London postal network took place during 1917, when sub-district numbers following the district initials were introduced, and the part of the area served by the district office was given the number 1, and the sub-district offices followed in alphabetical order e.g. Abbey Wood = SE2, Blackheath = SE3, Camberwell = SE4, Greenwich = SE10, Woolwich = SE18. The telegraphic codes were gradually phased out in favour of the new district designations,

but as is always the case, some remained in use for much longer periods.

## Postal use of telegraphic codes

There were two main categories of postmarks that employed telegraphic codes, which sometimes appeared in a variety of datestamps as well as charge and explanatory stamps and other types of miscellaneous marks.

## Parcel post

Special printed labels were issued to almost every office in the UK when the Post Office introduced the Parcel Post service on 1 August 1883. The Parcel Post labels themselves are outside the scope of this work, and only a brief description will be entered here, but they were introduced in a variety of styles between 1883 and 1918, with later survivals into the 1920s.

Distinctive types were produced for England and Wales as well as for Scotland and Ireland, and where applicable the telegraphic code of the office, or its parent office, was incorporated into the design using a wide range of types and settings (Fig 1).



Fig 1 (Reduced)

Special oval datestamps, usually struck in red, were also employed, mainly for use on bulk postings of parcels that were prepaid in cash. In many cases these early markings had the telegraphic code placed after the office name in brackets (*Fig 2*).

The use of the code letters in this way was short-lived, but they were used in the label datestamps of the late 1880s onwards that were issued to the larger offices, some of which appear to have been experimental. An early example shows the date below the frame (*Fig 3*), while later types were in the form of simulated labels, (*Fig 4*).

Just before the First World War (1914-1918), new types of rectangular datestamps were introduced, at first much like their earlier counterparts with a section of diagonal bars inserted at the right of the stamp, which was intended for the obliteration of the adhesive, with the telegraphic code continuing to appear after the office name (*Fig 5*). Examples may also be found with the telegraphic code letters inserted within the diagonal bars at the right.

All of the aforementioned types had a coat of arms incorporated into the design, but in 1916 a further type was issued in which the code almost exclusively replaced the coat of arms, and also appeared in the diagonal obliterating bars.

Head Offices had their name inscribed between thick parallel bars (*Fig 6*), while sub-offices had their name placed below that of the head office, often placed within brackets (*Fig 7*). As with the earlier labels and datestamps, there are many varieties to be found.

Those offices that did not have a telegraphic code, usually had parallel bars inserted in the appropriate places instead. This type of parcel datestamp was in use until 1924, when it was discontinued and replaced by a type omitting the telegraphic code, but there were a few later survivals and those with the code having dates of 1925 and beyond are relatively scarce.

The Irish Free State had inherited the British system of parcel markings during 1922 and continued to use the telegraphic codes for some years. These are also found in datestamps that have been inscribed in Gaelic (*Fig 8*), and some offices were still using parcel stamps of this type as late as 1936, even though they had been obsolete for many years.

### Triangles

The Triangular Marks have already been discussed at some length in my earlier articles and in the book, *The Triangular Marks of Great Britain* and their lengthy story will not be repeated here as this article is intended to deal with the Telegraphic Codes. Therefore only a general description will be included here.

The main use of the telegraphic codes can be said to have been within the triangular marks and they are seen in this form more frequently than in any other.

In May 1892 a halfpenny rate was introduced by the Post Office for printed circulars. A year later it was announced that typewritten circulars might be accepted if they were posted in bundles of not less than 20, also that all items were to be identical and presented at the counter of a head post office.



Fig 2



Fig 3

18 DEC 1887



Fig 4



Fig 5



Fig 6



Fig 7

Fig 8



Fig 9

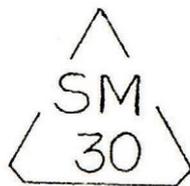


Fig 10



Fig 11



Fig 12



Fig 13



Fig 14



Fig 15



Fig 16



Fig 17

Each item would be cancelled with a special handstamp to show that it had been examined and conformed to the regulations. The first of these special stamps was issued in May 1893, and were triangular in shape and issued to many London district branch and sorting offices. These markings were inscribed with the telegraphic code of the office to which it was issued. Further issues to the London offices were made between August 1893 and early 1895. These triangular markings were also issued to the provincial offices in the British Isles from 17 May 1895 onwards.

The London Chief Office and the EC (East Central) District Office were located in St Martin's le Grand and had the telegraphic code SM. The handstamps were made of brass and were issued in batches with a stamper's number as well as the telegraphic code. The numbers in the first series of stamps ran to 150 and showed the telegraphic code breaking the sides of the triangle (Fig 9).

The second series of triangular stamps was numbered 1 to 100 and had the lower corners of the triangle mitred (Fig 10), but a third series of stamps was made of rubber and rather unusually showed albino letters and numbers on a solid background, and was also numbered 1 to 100 (Fig 11).

The ECDO moved to the King Edward Building in 1910 and had the telegraphic code KE in two series of stamps both of which were numbered 1 to 100. One series of stamps was similar to Fig 9, while the other series had stamps with all three comers mitred (Fig 12).

Charing Cross railway station, mentioned earlier, continued to use the telegraphic code CX, but the sorting office stamps were different and showed triangular markings with CH+ (Fig 13). Charing Cross was not alone in this respect as other London offices had triangles which used abbreviations other than the telegraphic code, such as BED.ST. for Bedford Street.

There are also triangles with LONDON placed across the base and examples of recent times showed LONDON IS MLO, being employed in the Inland Section Mechanised Letter Office, although triangular shaped stamps had generally been discontinued everywhere else.

Although the Mount Pleasant Factory was the main parcel sorting office, it also handled a reasonable amount of printed matter and its sets of triangular dies were quite varied and included those having a totally enclosed telegraphic code and numerals (Fig 14), those where the numerals broke the triangle at both sides (Fig 15), and those where both the numerals and the telegraphic code broke the triangle, either with or without full stops after the code (Fig 16).

Other district office triangles may be



Fig 18

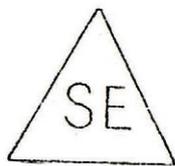


Fig 19



Fig 20

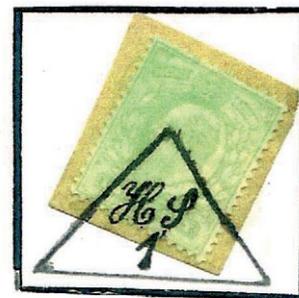


Fig 21

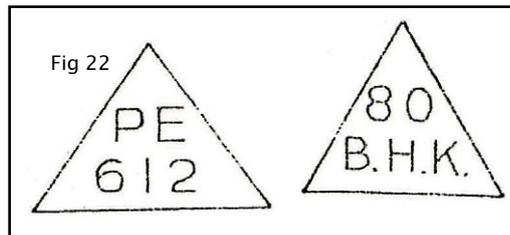


Fig 22

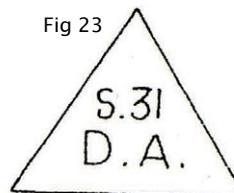


Fig 23



Fig 24

found with the numerals above or below the telegraphic code, the numerals often being employed to identify sub-district offices, e.g. ND/3B which was in use at Hornsey sub-district office (Fig 17).

Triangles in use at the South Eastern District Office used a series of stamps having cuts in the sides of the triangle for identification purposes (Fig 18), which were replaced in 1911 by a new series having taller, narrower triangles (Fig 19).

Most of the triangular stamps used in the British Isles varied considerably in size from office to office, and there were differences in the degree of the angles and the thickness of the frame lines. Those with either a two-letter or three-letter telegraphic code may be found with partial or complete punctuation.

When more than one stamp was in use at an office, sometimes a numeral was added (Fig 20). Hastings and Worthing are exceptions to the rule and had their letters and numerals in italic script (Fig 21).

After 1924, triangles were issued with Post Office index numbers and although those stamps having the telegraphic code were gradually phased out, they were still being used at some offices for many years, and this overlap gave rise to many examples of triangles having both a telegraphic code and an index number (Fig 22).

Until the late 1960s, Dunfermline had a triangle (introduced in 1924), showing the letter 'S' (Scotland), followed by a number placed above the telegraphic code DA, which was formerly issued to Drogheda (Fig 23).

The Irish Republic also had a few examples of this type in use, and during the 1950s Carrick-on-Shannon employed a triangle incorporating the telegraphic code letters, as well the office number that was allocated in the 1844 listing (Fig 24).

*To be concluded.*

## References

- 'Triangular Marks of GB', *GSM* June, July and August 1998.
- *Triangular Marks of Great Britain* (Book), published 2003 by the writer.
- The writer's late father's note-books and diaries.
- The late RM Willcocks for help deciphering the note/code-books and diaries.
- The Post Office Record Books staff.
- Various up-dated information, from various writers in the Philatelic Press over the years from time to time, far too many to warrant individual mention. Also all the collectors who have sent bits and pieces of information and diagrams.
- Hugh Jefferies for his kind encouragement, from time to time.