

Victoria's England-Bound Mail 1855-1857: The Crimean War Clipper Ship Era

Purpose

This exhibit illustrates the use of clipper ships for carrying Victoria's mail to England after contract steamships were commandeered by the Admiralty for service in the Crimean War. All sailings departed from Melbourne, the only port where clippers called for Australasian mail bags.

The exhibit documents that clippers, the world's fastest vessels, reliably carried the homeward mail in 80 to 100 days, an average of only two weeks slower than steamers but on a longer route and in much rougher seas.

Scope & Organization

The exhibit begins with an 1856 cover carried by the last contract steamship to depart Australia during the war, and continues in four sections:

- **Single-voyage mail contracts** in early 1855, as steamships became increasingly unavailable;
- **Continuous British mail contracts** from June 1855 and 1856 with the Black Ball and White Star Lines;
- **Single-voyage colonial Victoria contracts**;
- **Unscheduled noncontract sailings**, which occurred throughout the entire period.

The exhibit concludes with an 1857 cover that marks the post-war return of the first contract steamship service.

Postal rates, and many postmarks, changed during the clipper period. Because postmarks aid in identification of mail carried by clippers, basic information on them is briefly provided. **Rarest covers have red borders.**

Background

Great Britain and France declared war against Russia in March 1854. In November 1854 General Screw Steamship Co. and the P&O both withdrew from their Australian mail contracts when their ships were commandeered for war use.

Clipper ships perfectly filled the need for a reversion to sail. They were fast, reliable and sturdy enough to take advantage of the continuous gales below 40° S, the "roaring forties." They were also spacious enough to carry large cargos and many passengers, important revenue sources since mail-contract income was not profitable.

Clippers sailed from Liverpool, rounded the Cape of Good Hope, and called at Melbourne for the mail bags from South Australia, New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria, and New Zealand. Return was via Cape Horn. Every voyage was thus a global circumnavigation.

Last contract steamship from Australia after packet service terminated by war



Finest of
3 covers
recorded from
this voyage

Melbourne, 16 February 1856

Prepaid 1/4 for via Marseilles, but endorsed per General Screw *Hellasport*, bound for Singapore P&O steamships from Singapore to Galle, Suez, Malta, and Marseilles
Mails in London on 28 April, where rated 4^d due for far East mail: "More to Pay" 73 days

Hellasport was the last remaining contract steamship, and sailed only because she was sold for scrap to a buyer in Singapore.

Single-Voyage Contracts, Black Ball Line

January-May 1855

When the Admiralty dragooned steamers as war transports, no one knew how long the conflict would last, so the Post Office issued single-voyage contracts with sailing-ship companies, as subcontracts to the two existing steamship company contracts.

First contract clipper ship to sail from Australia



Castlemaine, 9 March 1855

Subcontract voyage of General Screw SS Co.

Paid 4/-
quadruple ship-letter fee
1-2 oz.

Black Ball *James Baines*
Melbourne 11 March
Liverpool 20 May

Liverpool rated 2/- due
quadruple 6^d uniform rate
70 days

**The fastest voyage to England
by any sailing packet**

Maiden return voyage of Black Ball *Lightning*

Subcontract voyage of P&O Steam Nav. Co.

Paid 1/- ship-letter fee

Black Ball *Lightning*
Melbourne 11 April
Liverpool 29 June

Liverpool rated 1/- due,
retaliatory packet rate
79 days

**First Australian mail
subject to the
British retaliatory rate**



Melbourne, 11 April 1855

Victoria had refused adoption of the 6d British Uniform "Empire" rate, initiated on 1 October 1854, so GPO London retaliated by charging all incoming letters from Victoria as if they were unpaid. Victoria adopted the uniform rate in July 1855.

First Continuous British Contract, Black Ball Line

June-December 1855

When it was evident the war would not end soon, Black Ball landed a contract for monthly sailings for June-December 1855.

First homeward packet under the British uniform rate

Paid 6^d uniform rate

Melbourne credited 5^d
to U.K.

Black Ball *Marco Polo*
Melbourne 22 July
Liverpool 20 October

Liverpool marked paid

Rec'd 22 October

90 days



Melbourne, 21 July 1855

Landed at Queenstown due to unfavorable winds



Geelong, 21 August 1855

Paid 1/- double uniform rate, Melbourne 10^d credit to U.K.

Black Ball *Oliver Lang*, Melbourne 23 August, Queenstown Ireland 26 November

Liverpool marked paid on 28 November, London the same day 97 days

Carried more than 12,000 letters, 6,000 newspapers, and four tons of gold



Paid 6^d uniform rate
 Melbourne credited 5^d
 to U.K.
 Black Ball *Donald McKay*
 Melbourne 2 October
 Liverpool 28 December
 Liverpool marked paid
 Rec'd 29 December
 89 days

Melbourne, 29 September 1855

Delayed by calms off Cape Horn

Paid 1^d newspaper rate to Melbourne;
 No postage for conveyance to U.K.

Black Ball *James Baines*
 Melbourne 28 November
 Liverpool 2 March

Loaded bags in Melbourne from New
 Zealand, Adelaide, and Sydney

Ireland arrival unknown

Made Liverpool in 95 days

Three Victorian wrappers
 from this decade are recorded



Geelong, 20 November 1855

Before January 1856, Melbourne had no credit or debit handstamps for postmarking letters under the uniform rate. Credits went to the contract holder: 5^d for a British contract, 1^d for a Victorian contract, 3^d to each post office for a non-contract sailing.

Landed in Ireland due to unfavorable winds



Geelong, 20 August 1855

Paid 6^d uniform rate

Melbourne 5^d credit to U.K.

Black Ball *Oliver Lang*

Melbourne 23 August

Queenstown 26 November

Rec'd 28 November 96 days



Only 3 clipper sailings landed mail in Ireland

Late fee paid to ensure conveyance by clipper

Paid 6^d uniform rate,
6^d late fee

Melbourne 5^d credit to U.K.

Carried mails from Hobart,
Sydney & Adelaide

Black Ball *Champion of the Seas*

Melbourne 27 October

Liverpool 25 January

91 days

Finest of 8
foreign-mail covers
bearing the world's first
TOO LATE stamp



Melbourne, 26 October 1855

Second Continuous British Contracts Black Ball Line

January 1856–March 1857

Unpaid accepted, despite prepayment requirement

Sent unpaid

Melbourne debited 5d
to U.K.

Black Ball *Lightning*
Melbourne 28 Aug.
Liverpool 20 Nov.

Liverpool rated 6d due

Received 21 November
87 days

Prepayment was
mandatory, so should
have been returned
for postage



Geelong, 26 August 1856

Paid only to England; American packet unpaid



Prahran, 25 December 1856

Paid 6^d uniform rate

Black Ball *Lightning* :
Melbourne 27 December
Liverpool 24 March

Liverpool 12¢ debit to U.S

Ocean Line *Washington* :
Southampton 26 April
New York 12 March

New York rated 33¢ due
for British debit, Am. Pkt.,
and U.S. inland

88 days

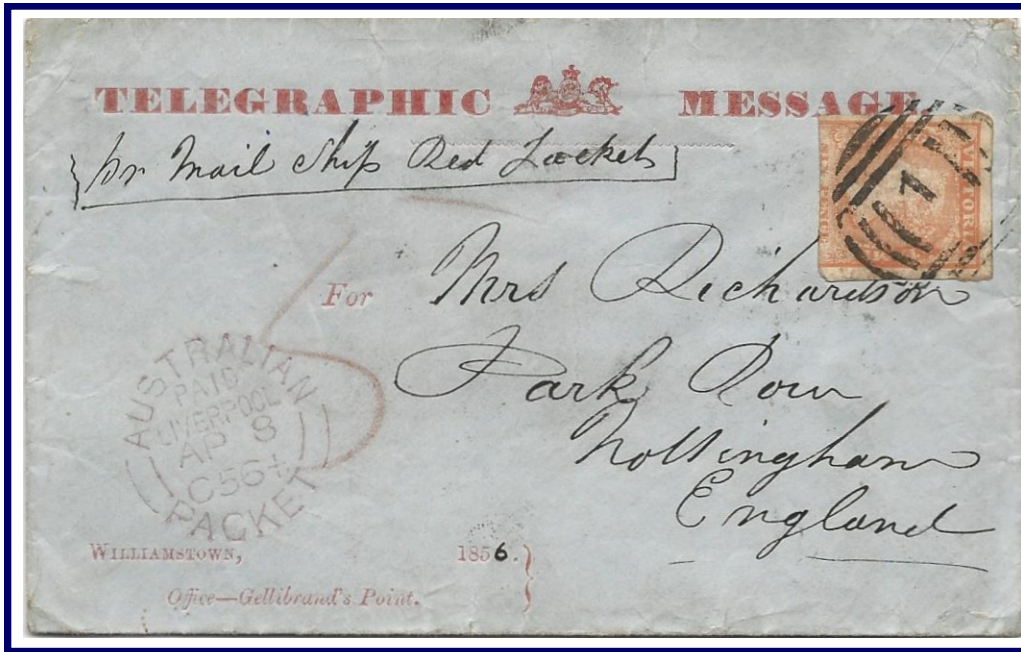
The 1856 Clipper Ship Contracts

Monthly sailings were required, and contractors had to pay for transport of mail from Melbourne to other colonies. Although contractors received 50% of postage and ½ penny per newspaper, a £100/day penalty was levied for late departure from Liverpool, and £20/day for Melbourne arrival after the 78 day limit. A £20/day bonus was to be paid for beating the 78-day limit.

Second Continuous British Contracts
White Star Line

January 1856–March 1857

Wired to Melbourne, where posted from the GPO



Paid 6^d uniform rate

Melbourne 5^d credit to U.K.

White Star *Red Jacket*
Melbourne 10 January
Liverpool 8 April

Rec'd 9 April

91 days

From 1854, messages could be wired to the GPO for posting. Fewer than ten examples are recorded.

Melbourne, 9 January 1856

Registration applied only to departure point



Melbourne, 7 March 1856

Paid 6^d uniform rate, 1/- registered, Melbourne 5^d credit to U.K.

White Star *Mermaid*, Melbourne 13 March, Liverpool 9 June

Liverpool rated 6^d due for registration

98 days

Colonial Contracts
White Star Line

January 1856–March 1857

Shipped to Melbourne for the packet sailing

Paid 8^d double Tasmanian
packet rate to U.K.

Steamer *Lady Bird*
Launceston 8 January
Melbourne 9 January

Red Jacket
Melbourne 10 January
Liverpool 8 April

London rated 1/- due,
double 6^d uniform rate

Rec'd 9 April

89 days



Hobart, 4 January 1856

Carried 4.3 tons of gold, 47 mail bags, 28,000 newspapers



Geelong, 23 August 1856

Paid 6^d uniform rate, Melbourne 1^d credit to U.K.
Lightning, Melbourne 28 August, Liverpool 20 November

84 days

Too late for *Kent* sailing, sent via *Sardinian*



Paid 6^d uniform rate

Melbourne applied
1^d credit to U.K.

“Too late” for *Kent* sailing;
White Star *Sardinian*
Melbourne 27 June
Kinsale 11 September

Rec'd 13 September

75 days

Melbourne, 27 June 1856

Double rate; landed at Gravesend

Paid 1/-
double uniform rate

Melbourne 2^d credit to U.K.

White Star *True Briton*
Melbourne 13 September
Gravesend 8 December

Rec'd 10 December

86 days

Eight of these
2d postmarks are
recorded



Echuca, 29 August 1856

When adverse winds prevented landing at Liverpool, ships were required by law to land the mails at the nearest port, from where mail bags were then conveyed overland to London.

The only clipper sailing via the Indian Ocean

Paid 11^d: 6^d uniform rate,
 5^d French transit, <1/4 oz.
 Melbourne retained 5^d, 6^d credit to U.K.,
 French transit and British inland
Formosa, Melbourne 31 July
 Galle 1 September
 P&O steamers to Galle, Suez & Trieste
 Rail from Trieste (11 Oct) to Ostende
 Rec'd 14 October 99 days

The only Victorian cover paying the 11^d rate



Melbourne 28 July 1856

To Prussia via Liverpool and Aachen



Melbourne, 27 September 1856

Paid only to the U.K., 6^d uniform rate, Melbourne 1^d credit to U.K.
 White Star *Red Jacket*, Melbourne 2 October, Liverpool 29 December
 Unpaid to Prussia via Ostende and Aachen at 8^d (7 Sgr) rate effective July 1852
 Aachen exchange office mistakenly added the 1d credit, and rated 8 Sgr due
 94 days

Four covers are recorded as paying this rate to Prussia

Earliest shipment of Australian wines to England



Melbourne, 16 May 1855

Paid 2/- double ship-letter fee, $\frac{1}{2}$ -1 oz.

Private clipper ship *George Marshall*, Melbourne 16 May, London 6 August

London rated $\frac{1}{4}$ due, double the 8^d retaliatory rate against Victoria
for not adopting the 6^d British uniform rate

86 days

Clippers were famous in Australia after Scotsman James "Bully" Forbes, Captain of the Black Ball Line's Marco Polo, set a world speed record in 1852, averaging 15 knots over four days, and arrived at Melbourne from Liverpool in a record 68 days. In 1853 there were more than 200 full-rigged ships at anchor in Melbourne harbor, yet owners of private clipper ships such as the George Marshall knew they could easily compete for outbound freight in that very competitive market.

Towed into Liverpool amid strong easterlies



Paid 6^d uniform rate

Melbourne 3^d
credit to U.K.

White Star Line *White Star*,
Melbourne 29 August
Liverpool 27 November

91 days

Melbourne, 29 August 1855

Strong north easterlies force landing in Ireland, towed to Liverpool

Paid 6^d uniform rate

Melbourne 3^d credit to UK

Eagle Line *Albatross*

Melbourne 18 January

Crookhaven 2 May

Inland to Dublin, Kings-
ton-Holyhead packet

115 days



Dublin

2 recorded by Tabcart



Melbourne, 16 January 1856

12 May 1856, London Daily News: "The Eagle Line ship *Albatross*, Captain Allen, which for the last fortnight has been beating about the channel owing to adverse winds, was towed into the Mersey on Saturday evening [10 May]. She left Melbourne on the 18th of January and has 18,000 ounces of gold."

Non Contract Voyages

January 1855–March 1857

The Wigram Line of London

Paid 6^d uniform rate,
6^d registered

Melbourne 3^d credit to U.K.

Wigram Line *Kent*

Melbourne 11 June

London 2 September

London rated 6^d due for
registration

98 days

One of only two
Wigram Line sailings



Maryborough, 31 May 1856

The Eagle Line of New York



Geelong, 26 February 1856

Paid 6^d uniform rate, Melbourne 3^d credit to U.K.

Eagle Line *Eagle*, Melbourne 28 February, Gravesend 22 May

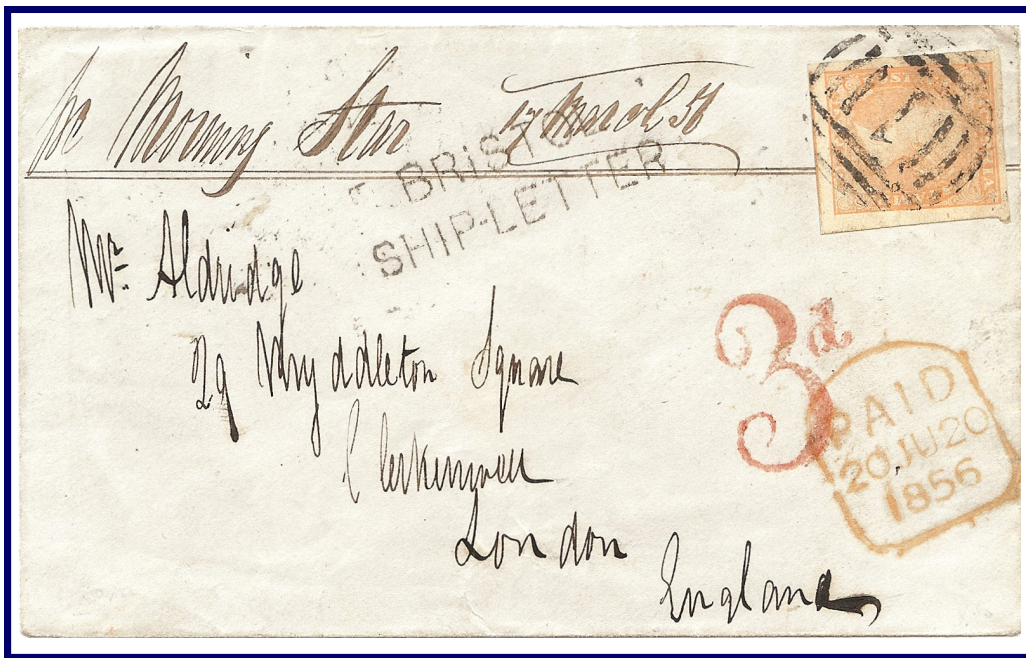
86 days

One of only two Eagle line sailings; not listed in Tabcart

Non Contract Voyages

January 1855–March 1857

Landed at Bristol



Paid 6^d uniform rate

Melbourne 3^d credit to U.K.

Morning Star

Melbourne 20 March

Bristol 19 June

Liverpool 20 June

Rec'd 20 June

94 days

BRISTOL
SHIP-LETTER

Earliest recorded use

Melbourne, 18 March 1856

To New Hampshire via London

Paid 6^d uniform rate

Melbourne 3^d credit to U.K.

Sydenham

Melbourne 6 February

Gravesend 3 June

London 3^c debit to U.S.

Havre Line *Fulton*

Southampton 3 June

New York 16 June

New York rated 24^c due

137 days



Melbourne, 31 January 1857

Effective 1 January 1857 the sending country kept all postage, with no accounting. The above 3^d credit was thus applied in error.

Black Ball's first non-contract sailing after termination of their mail contract



Geelong, 26 November 1856

Paid 6^d uniform rate, Melbourne 3^d credit to U.K.
Black Ball *Ocean Chief*, 26 November, Liverpool 23 February 1857

90 days

*She walks the water like a thing of life
And seems to dare the elements to strife.*

Lord Byron, on clipper ships

Beginning of the end of British contract clipper service

The Treaty of Paris, formally ending the Crimean War, was signed in March 1856. The Admiralty advertised for renewal of steamship service to Australia, planned to begin in early 1857. In August 1856 Admiralty contracts with the Black Ball and White Star lines were terminated. The last British contract clipper was Black Ball's Donald Mackay, which left Liverpool on 5 October 1856. All six clipper-ship packets after September 1856 were under colonial contracts; another five sailed as private ships.

**Return to Steam
British Contract Steamship**

Overland via Marseilles

European & Australian Royal Mail Co.

Second homeward sailing under the contract



Melbourne, 14 February 1857

Paid 9^d, 6^d uniform rate, 3^d French transit (to ¼ oz.)
E&ARM *Simla*, Melbourne 15 February, Suez 26 March
E&ARM *Jura*, Alexandria 28 March, Malta 31 March
E&ARM *Cambria*, Malta 31 March, Marseilles 3 April

Marseilles rated 5 decimes due for inland
49 days to Marseilles

The earliest of 3 Victorian letters to pay this rate, effective 1 January 1857

The New Steam Contract

The Admiralty signed a five-year contract with E&ARM in October 1856 for monthly service between Southampton and Alexandria via Malta, and between Suez and Sydney via Galle and Melbourne. Very challenging schedules were set in hours, as were times for mail deliveries. Financial penalties for non-adherence were steep.

E&ARM lacked the ships and experience to succeed. Breakdowns were common, and fines for lateness threatened the company. E&ARM underwent a partial merger in July 1857 with the Royal Mail Steam Packet Co., who assumed full responsibility for the contract when E&ARM failed in April 1858. Clippers may have been marginally slower, but they were far more reliable.