

# 'A Few of My Favourite Things', Number Three: Treasure Through the Mail

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It has often been said and, for many years, it was Holy Writ that Australia's prosperity "rode on the sheep's back". However, since the earliest commercially viable gold discoveries of the 1850s, mining has played an increasingly important role in this country's fortunes. Gold has always been the economic and sentimental favourite and, with bullion prices at record highs, we still have plenty of skin in the game. Coal remains big, but not always in a positive vein (terrible pun!) given the chorus of objections to coal-fired power stations. Iron ore is closing in on coal as our most valuable export commodity.

The vastness of our island continent and its great geological age have created the conditions for Australia's miners to successfully pursue all manner of terrestrial treasure. Back in 1979, the discovery of diamonds at Lake Argyle in Western Australia made headlines around the world. Prior to then, the only gemstones routinely associated with Australia were opals from places like Andamooka and Coober Pedy in South Australia and Lightning Ridge in New South Wales. However, our industry in precious stones has its roots in the gemfields of outback Queensland.

Small numbers of sapphires were found in NSW gold deposits from the 1850s but there was no commercial mining until after World War I. By contrast, in the 1870s, discoveries in Queensland of sapphires and red zircons and, later, emeralds spawned a valuable industry that is still viable on a limited scale some 150 years later.

On 27 August 1930, the Rockhampton branch of the Bank of New South Wales (now Westpac) forwarded a parcel in the form of a linen or hessian bag by insured parcel post to a bank in Switzerland. At this time there were no scheduled air services so carriage was by land and sea. At the time of writing, the only comprehensive publication about Australian postal rates is Richard Breckon's series of articles in *The Australian Philatelist* (Summer 1987 to Winter 1989). However, because of their complexity, foreign parcel rates were not included.

So, how does one confirm the prevailing parcel rates? Richard's data were derived largely from the annual *Post Office Guide* (the 'Guide') published by the Commonwealth Postmaster-General's Department. These hefty volumes<sup>1</sup> detail the myriad postal regulations – including the numerous yearly amendments



– and are ‘must have’ publications for every postal historian.

In the 1930 edition, under ‘British, Foreign and Interstate Parcels Post’, the entry for Switzerland at page 169 gives rates of postage between 2/6d up to 2 pounds (abbreviated as lb, from the Latin ‘libra’) and 5/4d up to a maximum of 11lb (= almost 5kg). Our subject article is endorsed at the left “150oz 11lbs avoid” (= *avoirdupois*, perversely the British or Imperial system of weights), which is actually somewhat incorrect. At 16 ounces to the pound, 150oz = 9lb 6oz. So, the endorsement is mathematically wrong but postally correct(!) because the 1930 Guide states that parcels weighing **between** 8lb 1oz and 11lb could be sent for 5/4d.

You will be sensing, correctly, that the challenges of collecting and studying parcel matter are: (a) that surviving articles are often oversize; (b) that they are rarely complete; and (c) that the rates can be complicated.

The current subject is an entire makeshift paper addressing label measuring 200 x 172mm affixed to a slightly larger piece from the fabric wrapping. It does not tell the whole story, but still conveys a lot of information. As noted, the nett weight of the parcel was 150oz, requiring postage of 5/4d, with stamps to that exact value affixed at upper-right and cancelled ‘PARCEL POST/27AUG30/ROCKHAMPTON’.

But what of the additional 1/8½d in stamps at lower-right? The green on white ‘INSURED PARCEL’ label affixed above those stamps states ‘...This label is to be affixed only to a parcel on which an Insurance Fee has been paid...’ Referring back to the 1930 Guide, at page 185 under ‘Insurance of Parcels’ it states: “The fee for insurance...shall be prepaid in postage stamps... affix[ed] to the parcel...” and “The amount for which a parcel is insured must be clearly marked on the insurance label...” Note, a value of “£50” has been entered on the label.

The Guide then specifies the rates for insurance. Those to Switzerland are 6½d up to £12<sup>2</sup>; 10d not exceeding £24; 1/1½d for £36 value; and 1/5d to £48; in other words, 3½d for each additional £12 cover to a maximum of £48. You might expect that for an extra 3½d, or 1/8½d in total, one could obtain insurance cover up to £60. But, this is the Post Office, and you would be wrong! For your extra 3½d, you would be granted an additional £2 cover only. Measly, and bizarre. (In other words, the maximum insurance coverage available was £50.)

However, what is now clear is that our subject article was prepaid 5/4d for the maximum weight permitted, and 1/8½d insurance for the maximum value allowed, a total of 7/0½d. And, instead of the stamps being congregated as usual in one corner, they have been carefully segregated between postage at upper-right and insurance at lower-right.

The two colourful labels were both affixed in Switzerland. Only the red on salmon label is obviously Swiss, bearing the legend ‘via Genève 2’. However, both are inscribed in German, French and Italian, the three official languages of Switzerland. The upper label is inscribed ‘Poststück/aus Australien - colis postal/ de l’Australie - pacco postale/dall’Australia’ which in each case translates as ‘Parcel from Australia’. The black on magenta label states ‘Wertangabe/Valeur déclarée/Valore dichiarato’ = ‘Value declared’.

The required Customs label was presumably affixed to the reverse and is thus missing. That document should have given us a better idea of the contents of the package. It is left to imagination, the postal historian’s constant companion (and occasionally his nemesis), to envisage just how many rubies, sapphires, emeralds, garnets or whatever constituted the 150oz of gemstones *en route* to the proverbial Swiss bank.

We have not yet noted a further endorsement on our parcel-front. The sender was a bank, but the bank’s consigning client is named as ‘Levi Newsome & Sons’. Levi is a characteristically Jewish or Yiddish name, but Newsome is very English. The sender’s address is shown as “Sapphire via Anakie”, effectively confirming the contents as gemstones.

What do we know of Levi Newsome? The senior Newsome was known locally as Eli (further dispelling the notion that he may have been a Russian *émigré*, as were many of the Queensland miners, repatriating his wealth to Europe, possibly in anticipation of returning to his birthplace, or establishing a fund for his family. (See what I mean about imagination?) Thanks to tireless researcher (the late) Maurice Mishkel in Canada, we know that during the 1890s, Eli was a sleeper-cutter for the railways who chanced upon a small deposit of sapphires while he was working. He pegged a claim that proved very productive, and Levi Newsome & Sons traded as gem merchants for the better part of half a century, during which time we can speculate that his bank in Rockhampton sent a great many parcels of fine stones to his bank in Switzerland. The scion of the family was very much alive when our parcel was sent to Switzerland; he is recorded as having died in 1943 at the age of 83.

Mishkel also advises that the town of Sapphire was originally named Newsome’s Camp and, for a short period, Sapphires town. (As an aside, according to Joan Frew in *Queensland Post Offices*, the Sapphire Receiving Office opened only in July 1904, and was reclassified as a Post Office in or about March 1906.)

A welcome modern trend is the active pursuit of oversize articles by collectors who are keen on record frankings and the postal use of higher denominations. In particular, some very long envelopes adorned with high value Kangaroos have recently attracted spirited bidding at auction, despite the key values having small faults.

Although oversize, our subject gemstone parcel-front fits neatly on a standard album page, a factor that greatly enhances both its aesthetics and desirability. Add in the insurance element, the record rates, and the fascinating back-story, and it should be no surprise that this item is one of My Favourite Things.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> For example: the 1909 edition was 522pp; 1925 ran to 492pp; 1938 came in at 746pp; and 1950 was a whopping 974pp!

<sup>2</sup> It is expected that the minimum fee of 6½d equalled 3½d for insurance to £12 plus 3d per article for *de facto* registration, insured mail being recorded and signed for in the same way as registered articles.