

'A Few of My Favourite Things', Number Fourteen: Another Common Item in Uncommon Circumstances

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I did not plan to expand on the theme of my last contribution. However, one of my most significant recent acquisitions caused me to “hold that thought”. So, for the second time in a row, I invite you to consider the merits of one of my collecting tenets: “Common Items in Uncommon Circumstances”.

Many readers are probably aware that I have an extensive collection of the datestamps of Melbourne. I have been acquiring these usually boring markings since I was 10, and I am now 67. Believe me, when you obsess over minutiae like comparing diameters and the distance between letters, identifying recut strikes or replacement of a lost time indicator, you need items that break the monotony. It is a bit like collecting the shades of the Georgian Penny Red, or flyspeck flaws on stamps produced by photogravure. These are fields that are yawn-inducing for all but the most rusted-on enthusiasts.

You may also be aware that for the past 30+ years, I have been planning to write and publish the definitive study of Melbourne’s hand-held datestamps. Before you switch-off entirely, let me hasten to assure you that the book, which is about 80% complete, will feature full-size colour illustrations of dozens of outstanding postal history items, on most of which the Melbourne datestamp will be almost incidental...as is the case with this edition’s Favourite Thing.

In 1861, Melbourne introduced a series of duplex cancellers with the datehead inscribed ‘MELBOURNE’ and the ‘killer’–half inscribed ‘VICTORIA’ within a series of horizontal bars. At the same time, simple circular datestamps came into service as transit or arrival markings. They are almost always found on the reverse of envelopes. All of these daters feature a numeral, usually indicating a counter position, and an upper-case letter that signified the time-period of the day. [1]



An interesting exception is in respect of registered letters during the 1870s, on which non-duplex datestamps ‘11’, ‘12’ and ‘13’ were routinely struck on the *face*. Of these “twins”, number ‘12’ is the more usually seen. In fact, it is a ‘garden variety’ marking in this scenario. But, that is the only common component of our featured cover.

To begin with, the envelope was mailed without stamps, in defiance of a regulation that had been in force since 1 January 1855 requiring postage on most classes of mail to be prepaid



Township of Eaglehawk, ca. 1875, Caire N.J. (creator), State Library of Victoria Collection, Accession No: H32513/37

using adhesive stamps. And, it had a thematically-appealing origin: a town on one of Victoria’s earliest goldfields.

The settlement of Eaglehawk was established in 1852, at the height of the rush to the Bendigo Diggings, and only 6km NNW of the principal settlement of Sandhurst, to which our cover is addressed. [2]

Despite the geographical and proverbial “stone’s throw” between the two villages, the failure of the unknown sender to pay the required 2d postage caused the cover to be sent directly to the Dead Letter Branch (DLB) at the General Post Office in Melbourne. Note that the Eaglehawk postmaster’s endorsement partly obscured by the 6d stamp probably reads “Detained for 2d postage”. If it was “Returned for 2d postage”, as it has been referenced elsewhere, the sender would have had an opportunity to correct his fault.

There is an octagonal DLB arrival datestamp of MY27/78 on the reverse and it is obvious that the envelope was opened there. This action revealed that the enclosed letter also harboured an item of value, possibly a small coin or piece of gold. This represented a further breach of the postal regulations, which required that an article containing a valuable enclosure must be registered, for

which the fee – in addition to the postage – was 6d.

Thus, the original endorsement at upper-left was scored-through, a light but fine strike of the extremely rare vertical oval ‘/TO PAY./D.L.B.’ handstamp was applied to the face and “8d”, the total owing to the Post Office, was inserted by hand. [3]

To ensure that the addressee, Mr Henry Jones (I originally interpreted his patronymic as the Iberian “Torres”, but that would be an almost fantastical touch!), understood the reason for the 8d fee, a very fine strike of the rounded-boxed ‘DLB /REGISTERED’ handstamp was also struck on the face. The large space in the upper line was to permit an insertion which, in this case, should have been the word “Officially”. (Note that what might appear to be a brief Arabic inscription at the right of the upper line is the remnants of the letters ‘P.B.’ – the meaning of which is unknown – that were excised sometime after 1873.) [4]

As an aside, the green ink used for all three of the DLB markings is not found anywhere else in the 19th century philately of Victoria.

Following its trip to the DLB, our cover was then returned to the main postal stream, as signified by the humble ‘MELBOURNE/12X’ cds of MY29/78, which was applied, as noted at the outset, in the Registration Section of the General Post Office. Examples of the *Laureate* Design 6d blue and *Bell* Design 2d lilac were affixed at upper-left to pay the 8d fee due from the recipient.

However, there is a dilemma here. The obvious question is, “Who paid the 8d due?” The Post Office, in an act of unprecedented generosity? Some kind-hearted but misguided postal clerk? Or was a debit docket raised, with Jones being requested to remit 8d to the GPO? And, because the strikes of the killer are quite light, who applied the bold manuscript latticework, and where?

Both stamps have been cancelled with what I have always thought was one of the numeral ‘1’-in-bars ‘killers’ introduced at Melbourne from the late-1850s. [5] These markings were usually applied to envelopes that arrived at the GPO with the stamps uncanceled. So, at the very least, what we have here is a most unusual usage.



Killers reproduced from *The Barred Numerals of Victoria* by Hugh Freeman (2018) (page 8)

And that caused me to carefully examine the killers. I started by reviewing the various sub-types recorded by Hugh Freeman. In this instance, Mr Freeman cut corners; instead of distinguishing between the various implements, he lumped them together with a note: “Various killers were in use. Thickness of the solid ‘1’ varies between 3mm and 4mm...the number of bars is probably (!) 17, 18 or 19...”

Not very scientific, yet still helpful. But more importantly, he did identify two sub-types of a variant with a rather fine numeral ‘1’, either 1½ or 2mm in height, within a device of 15 bars.

Neither strike under current examination is clear enough to draw a definitive conclusion about which of the markings illustrated by Freeman is represented here. Initially, I could not detect a numeral ‘1’ at all, and certainly not a digit that was 3-4mm wide. However, when looking again, this time with the envelope inverted so the 2d stamp was correctly orientated, I detected the upper portion of a thin ‘1’ with a serif inclined downwards peeping out of the manuscript lattice cancellation.

The problem thus exposed is that the fine ‘1’ types illustrated by Freeman are recorded by him only from (in?) 1899. Our subject cover is dated 21 years earlier, which is quite a date-extension.

A further aid to identification is the number of bars. For the bold ‘1’ cancels, Freeman notes 17, 18 or 19 bars. For the later fine ‘1’ types, he notes only 15 bars. Because neither strike is very fine, counting the bars is quite a frustrating exercise. I believe there are 15 bars (but it might be 14). It is enough to confirm that this marking is unrelated to the 1850s-on group first identified by Freeman. Because so little of the numeral can be discerned, it is impossible to say if it is either of his 1899 duo.

However, on the balance of probabilities, I consider what we have here to be much earlier strikes of the 1899 pattern. It might even be a different implement altogether.

Dear reader, you are probably wondering why identifying the killer even matters. Well, it does to a pedant like me, because it confirms that the strikes were applied at Melbourne. If the central ‘1’ had not revealed itself, a whole new line of enquiry would have developed based on the premise that the killers were applied at Sandhurst, which would have represented an entirely new marking for any office in regional Victoria.

Frankly, that would have resolved the issue regarding payment of the 8d due. If I could be confident that the killers were applied at Sandhurst, it would be consistent with the addressee attending that office to pay for and take possession of his precious and overdue letter.

That this appears not to have been the case, we must return to the question about who actually paid the 8d and how, if at all, Jones had reimbursed his benefactor. The notion of a debit docket requesting payment be sent to the DLB or the GPO now seems quite likely.

If any reader can resolve this issue, I would be grateful to receive that information.

Regardless, by any measure, this is a wonderful item of postal history: an unusual goldfield posting; an extraordinary taxed cover; a confluence of rare instructional handstamps; and a visual delight. Despite the vexing issue of how the Post Office received its due, is it any wonder that this is one of My Favourite Things?

In closing, please note that I did not acquire it for any of those compelling reasons. I paid SFr2,300 for this delightful cover [6], just to acquire an example of a very common postmark in uncommon circumstances. If the Melbourne cds was incomplete or otherwise sub-standard, I would not have even bid for it. Madness? I think not. Eccentric? *Mais oui!*



References & notes

[1] See *The Cancellations of Melbourne 1861-1912* by Don Davies & Guy Linfield (undated; c.1980) at page 8 where codes 'A' (the night shift, 6pm to 7.30am) to 'Z' (5.30pm to 6pm) are identified. The original document identifying the schema is illustrated at page 7. Formerly owned by Guy Linfield, it is now in the author's collection.

[2] The original post office on the Diggings was opened 1 July 1852 as Bendigo Creek. On 1 January 1854, office names incorporating 'CREEK' or 'RIVER' or 'MOUNT' were all discarded. Bendigo Creek was renamed Sandhurst. However, about June 1891, Sandhurst reverted to Bendigo (no creek). Shakespeare posed the question, "What's in a name?" Sometimes more than is generally appreciated. On 1 December 1952, a new post office named Sandhurst East was opened 2km E of Bendigo. It still operates under that name, despite which Victoria's Place Names Committee, in their infinite lack-of-wisdom, permitted an area NE of Carrum Downs, at the head of the Mornington Peninsula, to be named Sandhurst. Groan!

[3] Only one other example of the ' /TO PAY/DLB' marking has been recorded. Formerly in the collection of EA (Alan) Walker from Bombala NSW, it was Lot 1059 in the Prestige Philately auction #110 of 15.5.2004. It now

reposes in another Melbourne collection.

[4] See 'VICTORIA: featuring Max Watson's Franks and Les Molnar's TPOs' Mossgreen/Prestige Philately auction catalogue of 3 April 2017, Lot 174, which comprised Dead Letter Office 'RETURNED LETTER' Envelopes with the original (1873) or the recut (1886) versions of this handstamp.

[5] See *The Barred Numerals of Victoria* by Hugh Freeman (2018) at page 8.

[6] I acquired this cover at the Corinthia 'Dubois' auction of 29 November 2022, where it was Lot 10387. I was surprised that the catalogue entry gave no provenance. For many years, I have banged-on about provenance, or pedigree, being as important in philately as it is in the world of multi-million-dollar paintings. So, for the record, I can advise that the cover was formerly in Hugh Freeman's exceptional collection of Instructional Markings of Victoria. I acquired it privately from Freeman and sold it as Lot 625 in Prestige Philately's Second International Rarities Auction, of 24 January 2004. It was bought by Michael Silvasich of Melbourne for \$4,032 (including the 15% buyer's premium). Only two years later, Silvasich consigned his very fine collection of Victorian Postal History to Prestige's Fourth International Rarities Auction, of 22 April 2006. As Lot 475, the cover was sold to the prominent insurance broker, Hugh Wood ('Dubois'), for \$7,475.

Early Registration Labels in Australia:- Western Australia, Part 2: More Experimental Labels

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The period of identically numbered labels passed, probably, as mentioned in the last article, that it was just as easy to write the number on the receipt as to stick on a label. It also halved the number of labels required. The size of labels remained large, issued as pairs as shown in the example below.



Type W5: This label has been classified as W5 and appeared with three sub-types: W5a was issued for Perth only, W5b and W5c with printed post office names at large country offices, showing two different numeral fonts, also as blank labels for smaller offices¹.



3 December 1898: W5a on domestic cover from Mundijong. The post office opened as Jarradale Junction December 1893, name changed to Manjedal 23 April 1897, then to Mundijong 14 July 1897². The town is an outer suburb of Perth.



3 August 1921: W5c on cover from Geraldton to Leicester UK, arrival date unclear. The post office opened on 1 July 1851 as Champion Bay, name changed to Geraldton 5 June 1874³, and still operates. The town is 400 km north of Perth. This label is the only example I have seen with the smaller numerals.

Then followed three large labels, issued in strips of five. Although the only dates seen on cover are in the 1920s or later, they were possibly issued before 1918 as there is no code "R.6" on the label – either that or they forgot to put it on! Turley records an Earliest Recorded Date (ERD) of 18 August 1921³. Two numeral fonts exist, but there are so few examples that it is not possible to sub-type them with current knowledge.