

# 'A Few of My Favourite Things', Number Eighteen: A Ha'penny for Your Thoughts

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Unless you were born before the 1960s, you were not required to learn how to do calculations with the imperial system of pounds, shillings and pence. I have learned, though, that many of my fellow Baby Boomers – who *were* drilled in this darkest of dark arts – no longer have the capacity to reckon with this long-dead currency. I suppose it is a bit like conjugating French verbs: if the last time you had to do it was in Form Three (Year Nine, for the more junior among us), chances are you have lost that skill.

The introduction of decimal currency on C-Day, the 14th of February 1966, (as was incessantly heralded by an annoying cartoon character named Dollar Bill), was a time of joy for everybody who had previously struggled with calculating invoices or knowing if the change from the corner shop was correct. Everything was now in multiples of 10 and 100. Genius! [1, 2]

Now that almost 60 years have passed since dollars and cents became part of our daily lives, I expect that most of the people we meet have completely forgotten about the old British currency, or have no knowledge of it having existed. And this is why it is important that we stamp collectors and postal historians step-up and embrace the important task of keeping shillings and pence alive. This is part of our culture; part of our history; part of who we were for hundreds of years.

Can you imagine the need for a half-cent coin? Back in the good old days of the 18th and 19th centuries, fractional currency was all the rage in Britain. Farthings were four to the penny, and they even had a need for coins denominated one-third and even one-quarter of a farthing (which was one-sixteenth of a penny). English farthings were still circulating locally when I was a lad but decimal currency did them in once and for all. Previously, the half-penny or ha'penny was our smallest coin. Now there was no ½ cent. Our base coin was the 1 cent piece, featuring Stuart Devlin's stylised feather-tailed glider.

By now, regular readers will know that my principal collection is of Australian mail to overseas destinations in the period from Federation (1.1.1901) to the short period of permitted pre-decimal and dual-currency frankings from 14.2.1966 to 14.2.1968.

One of my display collections is of Penny Rates, again all to overseas destinations. This runs to about 200 written-up pages and demonstrates just how many variations there were on the penny theme. Yet, not all that long before decimalisation, we even had halfpenny postal rates, and the ½d war tax added to postage in 1941 was still hanging around in 1949.

The idea of sending a piece of mail to an overseas destination for half a penny is almost awe-inspiring. With the current rate for even a domestic letter being \$1.20 (or 12/- in the old currency),

you can see what great value the Post Office provided 100+ years ago. You could actually send 288 halfpenny articles overseas for the cost of posting one lousy local letter today.

Not surprisingly, halfpenny rates to destinations abroad were limited in their scope. Still, reference to "Australian Commonwealth Postal Rates 1901-1966" by Richard Breckon [3] reveals not one, not two, but three different overseas Halfpenny Rates.

From the 19th century, the policy of most governments around the world was to encourage the dissemination of the written word to help educate the masses. This policy resulted in enormous concessions being provided for posting newspapers and other printed materials.

## NEWSPAPERS



1901 (Nov 9) New South Wales ½d grey-green Wrapper to "Broziak [error for 'Brodziak'] & Co/Fiji"

The pre-1901 colonial rates generally moved seamlessly into the Federal period. So, from 1.1.1901, we find that a single newspaper weighing up to two ounces (2oz) could be sent for a ½d to British New Guinea (renamed Papua in 1906), New Zealand and its Dependencies, or Fiji. Tasmania, quite remarkably, even allowed carriage of a single newspaper to New Zealand for free!

The newspaper rates for the six States were rather complex so, in late 1902, they were standardised, and made even more generous. From 1 November 1902, the newspaper rate throughout Australia and to New Zealand, its Dependencies, and Fiji was ½d per *ten* ounces. Previously, a newspaper weighing between 8 and 10oz cost 2½d to send to our near neighbours. (Technically, the ½d rate continued into 1920 but, from 28 October 1918, ½d War Tax was added.)



The article shown above is a marvellous example of the standardised rate. Even the KEVII 1d Wrapper from Tasmania is difficult to find commercially used; the ½d is like the proverbial hen’s teeth. This 1913 example is a gem. Used from the tiny settlement of ‘RINGAROOMA’, in the remote north-east of the island, it is addressed to New Zealand, not to one of the major centres but to the town of Masterton in the Wairarapa District of the North Island.

## MAGAZINES and PERIODICALS

Victoria was alone in allowing a magazine or periodical of less than 4oz in weight to be sent to British New Guinea for ½d. Richard Breckon states this anomaly was removed “later”, and again doubled to 1d. I am yet to find an example of the initial ½d magazine rate so, if any reader can provide even an illustration of such an item, I will be chuffed. Raise that to “extremely grateful”, if the item itself is offered.

## PRINTED PAPERS

Finally, from 1.5.1911 until 27.10.1918, a wholly-printed article weighing less than two ounces (2oz) could be sent to New Zealand or “the British Pacific” for one halfpenny. This applied to postcards and also unsealed envelopes. Up to five words were permitted to be written. If even six words were used, the article was inevitably taxed.



The envelope illustrated above qualified for the Halfpenny Printed Matter rate. Addressed to “Norfolk Island”, it is

arguable whether it was, or should have been, treated as a domestic letter or as a letter to the British Pacific. At the time, Norfolk Island was administered from New South Wales. The datestamp introduced in 1915 was inscribed ‘NORFOLK ISLAND/AUSTRALIA’. So, the destination could be construed as domestic or of a possession in the Pacific. This is actually a moot point because in either case the rate was ½d.

The addressee was RE Noble, an employee of the Pacific Cable Board who, at this time, was based on Norfolk Island. However, when the letter arrived, Noble was in Fiji, perhaps on leave. The article was therefore forwarded to “Suva”. It received an arrival backstamp of 9/AUG/1917 and was taxed ½d. A Narrow Setting ½d Postage Due (SG D5a) was affixed and cancelled with the Suva sunburst device used at the local GPO. But why? Fiji was also a British Pacific possession, so the same rate of postage should have applied.

The Abacus library unfortunately does not include the annual ‘Post Office Guide’ for 1917. The closest we have is for 1925, but the Regulations are likely to have been similar eight years earlier. At page 49 of the 1925 edition, it is stated that “printed papers” could be sent in a number of ways but “must be made up in such a manner that [the] contents may be easily withdrawn for examination”. In other words, if sent in an envelope, the flap could be tucked-in but had to remain unsealed.

It is interesting that the cover was not taxed at Melbourne but was surcharged in Fiji. This suggests that the flap was not sealed for the original posting, but that the forwarder on Norfolk Island did seal it. That action caused the letter to cease to be treated as printed matter. The letter rate was 1d, so the ½d deficiency was levied on arrival at Suva. Usually in this period, the postage due was double the deficiency. In this case, that would have been 1d. However, the postal clerk at Suva may have recognised that the nature of the article had changed in transit and therefore assessed only the short-payment of the postage as payable.



The situation with the next featured item is somewhat different. Dated 2 December 1914, it could also have been sent at the ½d printed papers rate to New Zealand. However, if the flap was tucked-in, the impact of the all-over advertising on the reverse for Brandt Bros Ltd [4] would have been lost. The flap was therefore sealed, meaning that the letter rate to New Zealand of 1d should have been paid.



The error was apparently not noticed at the Sydney GPO because there is no indication of the envelope having been taxed at the point of departure. However, the eagle-eyed clerk at the Auckland post office detected the sealed flap and inscribed the face in red pencil "T1d". To obtain the letter, the addressees, Briscoe & Co [5], were required to pay double the short-payment of ½d.

This is the first column in which I have discussed more than one postal article. I chose to do so on this occasion to highlight the elusive halfpenny rates as a group. Three of them could certainly have been the subject of individual articles, but I considered that the context of the five, and at least the mention of the yet-to-be-discovered magazine rate item, highlights an important element of our postal history. It is demonstrated that there was a time when the Post Office really was a facilitator of government policy, in this case fostering widespread literacy by offering

extremely generous rates for posting advertising material and newspapers etc. [6].

They may be paid at the lowest rates, represented by a coin worth only one 480th of a pound (= \$2) but that is their charm, and a big part of why they are among My Favourite Things.

### References & notes

[1] It was not all good news. Sweets that used to be two for a penny or twelve for 6d, were now two for a cent (which sounds fine), but only ten for 5c. What a rip-off!

[2] It is a pity not all imperial measures were scrapped in 1966. For another seven years, we had to labour with pints, quarts and gallons, and inches, feet and miles, to say nothing of the more arcane roods, pecks, hundredweight, bastard firkins and fluid scruples (don't ask!).

[3] "Australian Commonwealth Postal Rates 1901-1966" by Richard Breckon, serialised in *The Australian Philatelist* between Nov/Dec 1987 and Winter 1989.

[4] Brandt Bros Ltd was a Sydney firm that specialised in importing and manufacturing domestic lighting. Their building at 236 Pitt Street was called Lamp House. By 1914, they had expanded into commercial and domestic appliances, on one occasion selling an ice-making machine to the King of Tonga!

[5] Briscoe & Co, now Briscoes NZ, is a corporate descendant of an 18th century English firm of the same name. It is a major retailer of homewares with stores throughout New Zealand. It also owns the Rebel Sport brand in New Zealand.

[6] Postal policy could hardly be more different today. Just as I was preparing this column, it was announced that letter deliveries would be cut-back from a daily occurrence to once every two days. The parcel delivery business, once the black sheep of the postal family, is now the golden-haired child. But, since Book Post was killed-off on 30 September 1973, there have been no concessions for people to send books through the mail, which is a key reason why the trade in philatelic literature has become moribund. Fortunately, we now have e-books, e-zines and the marvellous resource that is the internet. But, for those of us who love books on our shelves and by our beds, keeping hard-copy works in production is an increasing challenge.

# The Packet Letter Mark on Australian Mail

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Before 1846, mail from Australia to the UK was carried by private ship or, very occasionally, by British Royal Navy vessels. In February 1844, a Packet Service, operated by the Toulmin Brothers, was introduced using contract sailing vessels which left the UK on the 1st or 2nd of each month from Gravesend, occasionally calling at Falmouth.

Administrative delays resulted in the return Packet Service not commencing until 4 January 1846. The brothers were paid £150 per return voyage to compensate for their often departing with an incomplete cargo as sailing dates were fixed.

UK inwards single ship letters by private ship were rated in increments of 8d, those by Packet in increments of 1/-. The outwards single ship letter rate from Sydney was 3d.

Voyages of the return Packets averaged 130 days; those of the outward Packet averaged 126 days. Not one of the 62 outward or 42 return Packets bettered 100 days and, by 1849, their intended replacement by a steamer service resulted in termination of the contract, the last return Packet leaving on 7 June 1849. It was a further three years before the steamer service started, so it was a return to private ships for the interim period.

Eleven examples of Australian mail bearing the boxed PACKET LETTER hand-stamp have been recorded. Eight examples are illustrated in this article.

## 1846 Sydney to UK by First Return Toulmin Packet (Examples 1 to 4)



Example 1: Cancelled PAID SHIP LETTER SYDNEY JA\*1 1846  
Back-stamped at London 27AP27 1846 in red – Author's collection

Prepaid 3d at Sydney and charged 1/- in the UK being the single Packet rate

This entire, **Example 1**, was written on 24 December 1845 by Robert Ross in Sydney to Sir Culling Eardly Smith, Treasurer to the London Missionary Society, requesting that £1,120 in bills be honoured.

It was carried by the first Homeward Toulmin Packet, the 466-ton