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Gosport Tax Marks – The British Post Office Makes a Mistake

By Ken Snelson

On a recent visit to the Post Office Archives in London I found a file giving the original internal memoranda that led to the standard British design of tax mark with a ‘T’ within a hexagonal frame and the office identified by letters or numbers below the hexagon.ⁱ The full details of how this design came about have been published recently in the Postage Due Mail Study Group Journal.ⁱⁱ A mistake was made and, much to the surprise of the local postmaster, a set of tax marks intended for an International Office of Exchange were sent to Gosport, a small coastal town near Portsmouth.

The discussions took place in 1887-1888. Up to that time the standard tax mark had been a ‘T’ with no frame and heavy serifs. The Post Office wanted the new design to identify the office where the tax mark was applied. In February 1888 a suggestion was made by Mr. Tombs, a Post Office official in London, that the offices could be identified by the telegraph code of the office under the hexagon. The telegraph code for larger offices was a two letter code which was often the first and last letters of the office name.ⁱⁱⁱ Mr. Tombs included in his memorandum a handwritten list of 18 offices that would need tax stamps. This list included Greenock near Glasgow. The correct telegraph code for Greenock was ‘GK’ but Mr. Tombs incorrectly showed it as ‘GT’, which was the telegraph code for Gosport.

This error apparently went undetected for some time. On April 28, 1888 London was issued with marks in the new design and on June 5, 1888 the Controller of Postal Stores wrote a memorandum saying that the new stamps had been issued to all of the offices referred to. A later attachment in the file shows the official record of the issue of the following marks to Gosport on June 5, 1888.



The postmaster at Gosport was very surprised and wrote on June 8, 1887 “Will you kindly say for what purpose these stamps are intended; I have as yet received no instructions as to their use.”

There followed a number of memoranda between the Secretary’s office and the Controller of Postal Stores. The Controller insisted that he issued the marks as instructed and the Secretary’s office insisted that Gosport was not on the list. They eventually found the error in the telegraph

code for Greenock in the original list and, on June 14, 1888, the Controller wrote that the stamps would be recalled from Gosport, modified to 'GK' and issued to Greenock as soon as possible.

Since the Gosport stamps were never used they do not form part of my listing of UK tax marks.^{iv} The Greenock marks will form part of the listing if any of them are reported used or proof marks are found. As yet no image of the marks with 'GK' has been seen. Until this file was found it was not known that Greenock acted as an Office of Exchange for taxing mail. Most mail from this part of Scotland was taxed in Glasgow with tax marks identified by the Glasgow telegraphic code of 'GW'. I would be very interested in any report of a cover with a 'GK' tax mark.

ⁱ UK Post Office Archive, Finding No. Post 29/459C, T Stamp indicating unpaid or insufficiently paid items. New distinctive pattern adopted c 1888.

ⁱⁱ The Genesis of the U.K. Hexagonal Tax Marks, Ken Snelson, PDMSG Journal No. 44 December 2007 Page 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Telegraphic Codes of the British Isles 1870 – 1924, James Mackay Published by the author 1981.

^{iv} UK Tax Marks for International Mail 1875-2000 – Usage and Listing, Ken Snelson published by the author in association with the PDMSG 2007.