

BRITISH WEST AFRICA MAIL PACKETS TO 1900: RATES, ROUTES AND SHIPS, OUT AND HOME, BY COLIN TABEART

REVIEWED BY RICHARD F. WINTER

This long-awaited book covering the British mail packets to the West Coast of Africa has finally become available, but only in a very limited print edition of 100 copies. This is unfortunate because the book is a very important one and most likely will sell out quickly, making the valuable packet sailing data unavailable to many.

Since its formation in 1950, The West Africa Study Circle, an international specialist society for the study of stamps, postal stationery and postal history of West Africa, has wanted a detailed record of the 19th century mail service between the United Kingdom and West Africa, where the British had important colonial interests. The principal regions were the Gambia Colony and Protectorate (Gambia today), Sierra Leone, Gold Coast (Ghana today), and the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria (Nigeria today). British West Africa does not include the British colonial interests in southern or eastern Africa. Various attempts to provide this record have started during the past 30 years, but failed to reach satisfactory conclusions.

In 2011, based on his award-winning books of the British packets services to the Australian/New Zealand region, Colin Tabcart was approached and asked if he would undertake the project. When I first met Tabcart in 1985, he was a British naval officer working in London. He showed me preliminary work he had done to document the African Steam Ship Company mail voyages to West Africa up to 1859. It was clear that he had an interest in this area.

The Royal Navy had established the West Africa Squadron in 1808 to suppress the Atlantic slave trade by patrolling the coast of West Africa, an effort that continued until 1870. Even as early as 1820, the Americans assisted in that effort, first with a few ships and later with a permanent squadron of their own. The need to communicate with these squadrons as well as economic interests ashore begged for regular postal communications.

Tabcart always has had a deep interest in Royal Navy history, which soon blossomed into maritime postal history. These interests combined with his successful publications made him an obvious choice to undertake this work, but would he agree to help? The answer was yes, but only if the Study Circle would accept his carefully laid scheme to accomplish the work.

They did, and he started on what he thought might be a two-year project. I think he reluctantly agreed to do the project, not because he collected West Africa postal history, which he did not, but because there was a very obvious hole in existing published information that needed to be filled and he knew how to do it. Well, it took four more years, but he finally completed the work, which is a massive tome and one which the postal history community should be very pleased to have.

Those who know Tabcart's earlier books that provide sailing data for mail steamships will immediately recognize the style in which he presents the West African steamship voyage data in this book. It is organized chronologically by voyage, identifying all the

stops along the way that he can. The trips are in order by year, first the outbound voyages from England followed by the homeward voyages for that year. Since covers often have markings identifying the place of origin as well as the place of entry into the British Isles, it usually will be easy, using the tabular information, to find the mail voyage on which these covers were carried. The key date often is the arrival or departure of the steamer at its home port. Since there were no newspaper sources identifying calls at the many small African ports along the steamship routes, those calls have to be identified by arrival information provided when the ships returned to England.

Tabcart's careful study of each of the mail contracts negotiated between the government and the shipping companies also helps to identify the expected itineraries. Even so, there are many data pieces that don't exist from the voyages. Where there is additional source information related to a particular voyage, he notes that information as it appeared in the sources that he used. This additional information is provided immediately following the voyage listing and not listed as a note at the end of a chapter. This extra information can be quite useful. As the author has stated to me, "at one time or another, these ships seem to have visited just about every mud hut on the West African coast."

My evaluation is that each Tabcart book profits from the author's experience with previous books and each is stronger than its predecessor. It is as if Tabcart places himself in the user's shoes, understands just what information is important to the reader, and then arranges that information in an easy-to-use form in just the right place. This is demonstrated by his use of the powerful tools available today for this type of research. He has extensive experience using the documents held at the Post Office Heritage, the new name for the Post Office Archives at Freeling House, London. He is equally comfortable with the Colonial Office and Admiralty records held at the National Archives, formerly the Public Records Office at Kew, London. But most importantly, he has benefited from the rapid growth of contemporary newspaper sources available on-line.

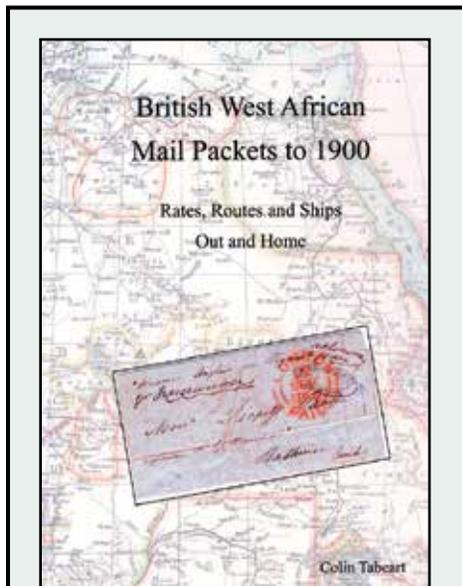
Unfortunately, digitized newspaper information was not available 30 years ago when I collected sailing data for the pioneer book of the mail steamers operating on the North Atlantic. The growth of digitized newspaper information available on-line has been staggering. Websites such as that of the British Library now provide 19th century newspapers that were absolutely critical for this work. With experience Tabcart has learned which sources are the most reliable and how to maneuver around the available newspaper data, which, by the way, requires considerable learning experience. In his words, "Without these superb facilities, 19th century postal history would be infinitely more difficult to research and the results correspondingly the poorer."

Tabcart's first chapter, "An Overview of the 19th Century," is essential to understanding how his book is organized. Here he provides a summary of the information that will be found in each of the subsequent chapters. His chapters cover the mail sailings of a particular period, mostly influenced by the mail contracts negotiated first with one company and later with two competing companies.

One of my favorite parts of Tabcart's books that cover the Australia/New Zealand mails and this new book on the West Africa mails is that early in each book he devotes a complete chapter to the postal rates for the mails carried by the packets whose voyages he is about to reveal. The rate information in this case is for mail sent directly between the United Kingdom and British West Africa (Chapter 2). It includes packet letter rates as well as ship letter rates, the progression of rates, postcard and registration rates when known, as well as the complex privilege rates for the armed forces.

His comprehensive knowledge of postal rates goes back to his very first book, published in 1990, *United Kingdom Letter Rates Inland and Overseas*, in which he published a very detailed account of British postal rates worldwide. In his subsequent books he con-

tinued to include rate information appropriate to the mail carried by the packets whose voyages he detailed, exactly where it would be immediately useful to the reader. In the current book he provides an excellent summary of the British West Africa rates. At the end of this chapter he provides a very helpful, short section explaining the accountancy markings often seen on British mail to and from West Africa. These red and black numerical markings, sometimes made with handstamps but often in manuscript, have puzzled many collectors and require explanation, which he now provides. This is just one more example of information important to collectors that Tabcart has thoughtfully included.



British West African Mail Packets to 1900, Rates, Routes and Ships Out and Home, by Colin Tabcart. Published 2015 by The West Africa Study Circle. ISBN 978-1-905647-21-7. A4 format (8.3 x 11.7 inches). 560 pages including a bibliography, two indexes, 104 illustrations (covers, documents and ships) and eight maps. Hardbound \$108 including surface postage, inquiries to Ian Anderson at Ghanastampman@aol.com. Also available from Leonard Hartmann, P.O. Box 36006, Louisville, KY 40233, at \$120 delivered to a U.S. address.

Before 1848, there were no contract mail sailings to West Africa. The Admiralty sent mail by ships of opportunity, including naval vessels to and from the West Africa Squadron. In mid-1847 the Admiralty informed the Postmaster General that it intended to operate a monthly packet service by naval vessels out to the West Coast of Africa, commencing on the first of each month (Chapter 3). This service began in 1848 and lasted until the first mail contract for this area in 1850. Thereafter, HM ships still were used on occasion to convey mails. While naval vessels carried mail out, there was no regular return mail service, that being done again only by ships of opportunity. In this chapter he identifies the Royal Navy vessels that conducted this service.

In 1850, the first contract mail service was initiated with the General Screw Steam Ship Company, a service from England to the Cape Colony, with a stop on the West African Coast (Chapter 4). Since the service to the Cape Colony was more important than any stop on the West Coast en route, this stop was soon eliminated, and it was determined that a separate service just to the West Coast region was needed.

Starting in 1851 the first of three contracts with the African Steam Ship Company went into effect with special service just to the West Coast and calls at the Madeira Islands and the Canary Islands en route (Chapters 5, 6, and 7 for each contract).

In January 1869 the British & African Steam Navigation Company began operations from Glasgow, Scotland, to the West African ports via Liverpool. A serious trade war ensued between the two companies for the West African mail service. A compromise was reached during the period from 1870 to 1872, establishing standard passenger rates, freight fees, and coordinated schedules. The African Steam Ship Company still had a contract until 1872 and the British & African Steam Navigation Company had some agreement with the government to carry mail also.

During the period between 1872 and 1873, there were no contracts and both lines

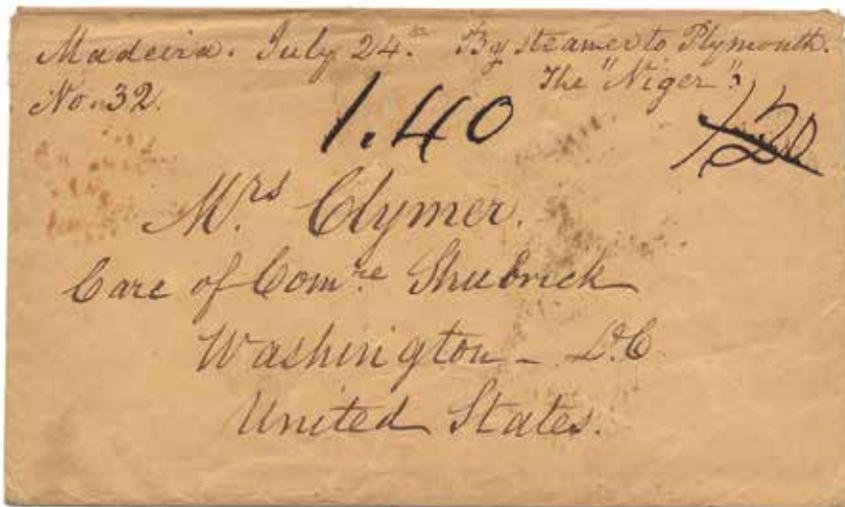


Figure 1. Cover from Funchal, Madeira, carried to London by the *Niger* of the African Steam Ship Company, thence to America in the summer of 1856.

carried mail, not as packet letters but as non-contract ship letters (Chapter 8). The rates charged on the letters and the appropriate accountancy marking were different than when the mail was treated as contract or packet mail. From 1873 to the end of the century, shared mail service existed between the lines (Chapter 11) with postal agreements for both lines to carry contract mail on a bulk-weight payment scheme.

In 1879 the steamship services provided by the two lines branched out to many new and different locations (Chapter 12). While maintaining the regular service to British West Africa, their ships would sometimes leave Liverpool bound for Hamburg, then via Le Havre and Plymouth to pick up mail and passengers for West Africa. Calls at Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and even South American ports were included in some voyages. The voyages began to get very complicated as the ships branched out to more unusual places besides the normal West African ports. As the chapter was getting much too long, Tabcart broke up the period between 1879 and 1900 into multiple sections (Chapters 12 through 15). I can't image how difficult it must have been, even using the modern tools available for data collection, to assemble information for the last 11 years of this book. This period resulted in 65 percent of the 500 pages of voyage data in the book!

As a transatlantic mail student I was anxious to see this work. As expected, it filled a hole that had existed for contract mail sailing data. Mail to and from the West African coast from the United States normally was sent via the United Kingdom and their mail services beyond. Having this data now would enable a much better understanding how the mail was carried to this part of the world.

In 2011, a portion of a very large and exciting correspondence came on the market. It was from the George Willing Clymer archive. Dr. Clymer, a graduate of Princeton in 1823, studied medicine at the University of Pennsylvania and in Paris, then served in the United States Navy for 37 years. For many of those years he was a naval surgeon attached to various vessels in American naval squadrons operating around the world. During 1855-57 he served as fleet surgeon of the African Squadron, sailing on the USS *Jamestown*, flagship of the squadron operating from Funchal, the capitol town of the Island of Madeira. He had regular correspondence with his family in Morrisville, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. The covers that came onto the market usually included lengthy letters inside. In those letters as well as in docketing notations on the envelopes, Clymer wrote very detailed comments



Figure 2. Reverse of the Figure 1 cover, showing Madeira origin marking, Plymouth Packet mark (“JY 30 1856”) and Boston exchange-office marking.

about when and on which vessels the letters arrived or left from his location.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the front and reverse of one of the Clymer covers. This envelope, noted in the upper left corner as “No. 32,” was written at Funchal on 23 July 1856, addressed to Clymer’s wife in Washington, D.C. Their home was there as a result of his previous tour of duty (1850-55) at the Naval Observatory. Clymer noted at the top of the Figure 1 envelope that the letter was to leave on 24 July and travel to Plymouth on the steamship *Niger*. This was a contract packet of the African Steam Ship Company, which called at the Madeira Islands on the way home from West Africa. Tabcart documents this voyage of *Niger* on page 69 of his book. The ship called at the Madeira Islands on 23 July and arrived at Plymouth on 29 July 1856. Two post office datestamps on the reverse of the envelope (Figure 2) confirm this voyage, a faint, black datestamp of Madeira dated 23 July 1856 and a black rimless circular datestamp of Plymouth, dated 30 July 1856, showing arrival on a mail packet. From Plymouth the letter was sent to London to be prepared for the transatlantic mail service to the United States. It arrived at London on 31 July 1856, shown by the red circular datestamp on the reverse. Here the letter was placed in the mail bag to be sent to Liverpool for the 2 August sailing of the Cunard steamship *Canada*, which reached Boston on 13 August 1856. A Boston exchange-office datestamp on the reverse confirms the arrival of the letter at Boston. Presumably the letter reached Mrs. Clymer in Washington a day or two later.

At London this unpaid letter was marked in the upper right corner for a debit to the United States of \$1.20. A single-rate letter from the United States to Madeira at the time cost 65¢ per half ounce. Of this amount the United Kingdom was entitled to 60 cents if the letter was carried across the Atlantic by a British contract steamship. Since this letter weighed between one half and one ounce it required two rates, making the debit to the United States \$1.20. At Boston the letter was marked for \$1.40 postage due, apparently in error as the United States was entitled only to 10¢ to be added to the British debit.

I consider this West Africa mail book, the ninth book to be published by Colin Tabcart and by far the largest, to be an essential element of the library of any postal history student interested in maritime mail. Tabcart is to be congratulated for completing a very difficult task. As with each of his previous books, he has provided quality reference information. My hope is there will be sufficient copies for all those interested. ■