

**SCHEDULED LOCAL MAIL SERVICES  
ALONG THE COASTS OF BRITISH WEST INDIAN TERRITORIES  
by the BWISC Maritime Mail Study Group**

The British West Indies Study Circle (BWISC) has several Study Groups on the philately of each of the territories in the former British West Indies (BWI). Recently a new one was formed - the BWISC Maritime Mail Study Group. Our first project is to research the scheduled transport of mail by ships along the coasts of territories within the remit of the BWISC & hence of the Study Group [<http://www.bwisc.org/Maritime.html>].

Local mail services within BWI territories were mainly established in the second half of the 19th Century. The terrain of some islands made it difficult to carry mail on foot or by pack animal. Carrying the mail along the coast to a schedule would be preferable, if a contract could be developed with a reliable shipping company. Fortunately several European steamship companies were competing to carry BWI mail. The first to do so, and the best established as a carrier of BWI mail, was the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company (RMSP) who were developing inter-island services in the BWI. If only the local authorities on the BWI islands could use them or a similar company to carry mail locally. After some trial and error, mainly with locally-based shipping companies, this is exactly what happened on the following islands:

**Dominica (1-5):** A coastal steamer service was soon instituted after local scheduled post started, in 1875. Steep slopes and poor roads made overland mail very difficult. A steamer sailed between Portsmouth and Roseau, stopping at an increasing number of settlements in between, as the service developed in the 1890's. RMSP started their coastal service for Dominica in 1901 with a 5 year contract for mail by a steamer of not less than 80 tons and a speed of 8 knots. This was undertaken by the YARE (299 tons [t.]) which was built in 1887, purchased by RMSP in 1901 & sold by them in 1915. By March 1901 this ship was providing a coastal service on Monday to Wednesday and Saturday & an inter-island service on Thursday and Friday. On 1st January 1909 RMSP's contract was renewed for 5 years. Schedules are available for 1909 & 11. RMSP threatened to stop the service from the end of January 1914. The local post office decided to provide a replacement service by canoe, between Roseau and Portsmouth, on Wednesdays & Saturdays. But the Governor intervened and RMSP YARE's service was temporarily reinstated between these two ports, as stops on a primarily inter-island service. RMSP's contract ended in 1915. From January of that year, a schooner GOLCONDA provided a coastal service on the east side of the island following an invitation for tenders, at the end of 1914, for the following:

- a service by schooner of at least 70t., between Roseau and settlements on the north, east and south coasts of Dominica; &
- a 25 to 30t. motor launch service to carry passengers and freight, including mail, between Roseau and Portsmouth.

The second of these services was provided by the motor boat REDWING twice a week, from January 1916. But by September 1916 it was proposed to use another motor boat, WINDRUSH, to provide a more frequent service that included stops at intermediate places - Mahaut, St. Joseph and Colihaut. A schedule for this service was then published. The coastal service after that was apparently sporadic, being provided in 1927 by a sloop LITTLE LAURIE and then by the schooner MERMAID CO, and in 1930 by a mail launch ADVANCE. Tenders were sought in 1933 for a coastal service between Roseau and Portsmouth, By 1938-9, a motor launch still provided a mail service between these two ports, but other routes were provided overland.

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**Grenada (2, 3, 5-7):** The inland postal service started in 1861, but was not cost-effective, stopping in 1862 and not restarting until 1872. By 1881 a local merchant provided a subsidised coastal service with one steam boat. But this proved unsatisfactory, so RMSP was given a contract in 1888 for two steamers, extended in 1892 to three steamers. Their contract, of 24th May 1892, was for five years, terminable at six months notice (annual subsidy: £1,500). By 1894 a daily steamer serviced mail to and from the parishes of St. John's, St. Mark's & St. Patrick's, in the north-west of the island. From 1st September 1902 to 31st December 1906 RMSP'S coastal service was provided by the TAW and WEAR (both 180 t., built in 1892 & sold in 1915), with the EXE (61 t.; built in 1893) in reserve. In 1905 the coastal steamer carried mail twice weekly. RMSP's contract to carry mail along the coasts of Grenada finished in 1914. After that local mail was increasingly carried overland, but some use was made of motor launches, e.g. KELVIN in 1917 & LA PERIA in 1927.

**Jamaica (3, 5, 8, 9)** was exceptionally early in establishing its inland post, in the middle of the 18th Century when mail was mainly carried on foot. One hundred years later an extensive system of postal routes and towns had developed across Jamaica, mainly using mules & mail coaches and then by rail. Nevertheless, the Atlas Steamship Company, provided a coastal service with the steamship ARDEN:

'This steamer, after being remodelled by Messrs. MacIlwaine & MacColl Ltd., went down the [Belfast] lough for trial on Saturday last. The Arden is a twin screw steamer of about 750 tons gross register, belonging to the Atlas Steamship Company, Liverpool, managed by Messrs. Leech, Harrison & Forwood, and plies in their passenger service round the island of Jamaica. She has been entirely rebuilt from the main deck up, and fitted with a large amount of first-class passenger accommodation, including a saloon, fitted in polished hardwoods, and extending across the entire breadth of the ship. Second-class passenger accommodation has been fitted forward, and ample means of ventilation throughout every part of the ship.....after a very satisfactory trial, where a speed of 11 knots was attained, with very inferior American coal, the Arden sailed for Newport, en route for Kingston, Jamaica.'

Northern Whig, Tuesday 22nd September 1891.'

Despite a successful refit, the ARDEN was soon replaced. From 1893 scheduled mail services along the coasts of Jamaica were provided by RMSP and then by the Imperial Direct West India Mail Service, established in 1901, using the steamships DELTA (585 t.; built in 1900) and then JAMAICA (1,138 t.; built in 1908, sold in 1912 to RMSP).

**St. Lucia (2, 5, 10-12):** A year after an inland post started in 1884, a timetable was published for the post to be closed before departure of the 'Coasting Steamer'. This followed an earlier attempt to institute a regular service by the St. Lucia Steam Conveyance Company. Apparently the one recorded cover carried on the latter service was subsequently lost in the post. An RMSP contract for five years & two steamers started on 1st August, 1892 (annual subsidy: £1,000). This contract was extended for five years from 31st July 1897. A route from Castries to Dennery, weekly for two years, began on 24th June 1901, with an annual subsidy of £250. The contract was changed again to one steamer only from 1st August 1902 to 31st December 1906. RMSP's contract for coastal mail was renewed from 1st January 1907. A sloop carried mail along sections of the west coast of St. Lucia in 1916, but it is not clear whether this was a scheduled service. RMSP's coastal service of St. Lucia finished in 1919.

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**Trinidad (2, 3, 5, 11, 13-17):** An inland postal service started in 1851, including a coastal service, after carriage of mail in 1847-9 between San Fernando and Port-of-Spain, by the LADY MCLEOD (67 t.; built in 1845). In 1890 tenders were sought for local steamship services e.g. between San Fernando and Icacos, via Oropouche, La Brea, Cap-de-Ville, Irois Forest and Cedros, twice weekly. Timetables for these were varied in 1891. RMSP was awarded the Trinidad coastal steamer contract in 1901. In 1905 a schedule for the coastal steamer SPEY (470 t.; sold by RMSP in 1913) was published. Coastal Steamer cancels have been assigned as follows to two RMSP vessels: no.1: KENNET [827 t.; scrapped in 1914] & no. 2: the SPEY (Figure 1). RMSP's contract ended in 1914. Other companies' coastal steamers may well have carried mail in the early years of the 20th Century.

In two BWI territories local services alone were used for mail along the coast:

**St. Vincent (10):** The Inland Post Act, 1872, established local postal routes. Mail was initially carried by horse. It has been proposed that by 1877 mail on the leeward coastal route was carried daily by the St. Vincent Steam Navigation Company Ltd. Certainly local vessels were used to carry coastal mail, at various times in the first half of the 20th Century - e.g. the MIZPAH, a canoe, in 1908 & the ST. VINCENT, a government motor launch, in 1920-32.

**British Honduras (18, 19):** mail still had to be carried north and south along the coast for many years. By 1921 Northern and Southern Services starting along the coast were established. The motor boat EML provided the Northern Service until 1923 when she sank. She was later replaced by SS ROMULUS.

Other parts of the BWI appear to have sent local mail overland, with little or no postal use of coastal shipping working to a schedule, even where long-established international seamaile routes sometimes touched more than once on the coast of a BWI territory, e.g. British Guiana (20).

We would welcome new information on any aspect of this intriguing topic: to [watson1967@live.co.uk](mailto:watson1967@live.co.uk), please.

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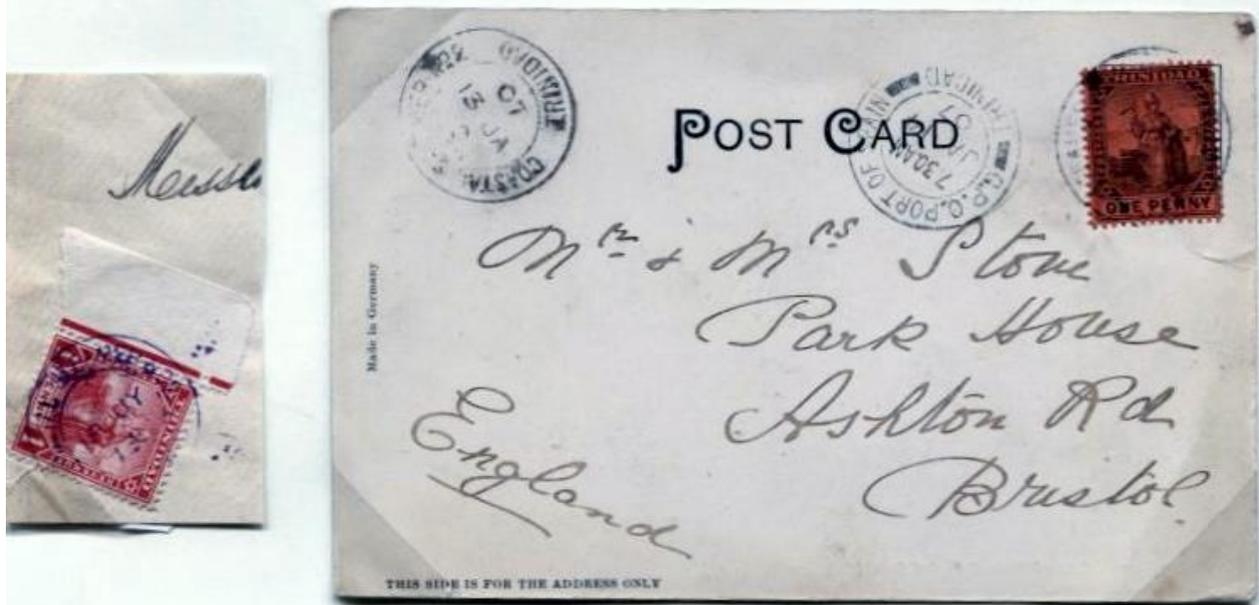
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**Figure 1, courtesy of Graham Booth**



A letter to Switzerland sent per "Kennet" during the first year of operation. The cover was franked with a ½d and 3 x 1d Trinidad adhesives which were cancelled in Port of Spain on 21<sup>st</sup> December 1901. The cover was back stamped in Zurich on 18<sup>th</sup> January 1902.



A postcard mailed on board the "Spey", addressed to Bristol, franked with a 1d Trinidad adhesive paying the Imperial rate. It was cancelled by Coastal steamer No2 on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1907 and again in Port of Spain on the 14<sup>th</sup>.