

Chapter 13: Mail from UK sent from Durban by Sea in Late 1941

13.1 Introduction

Mail for the *Horseshoe Route* from the UK to India, Malaya, Australia and New Zealand was dispatched by sea to South Africa until late January 1942. However, from the middle of December, ordinary air mail was no longer sent from Durban by air for destinations east of Cairo, but was instead sent by sea. This affected mail sent from the UK in the second half of October onwards. According to letters from *BOAC* to the *GPO* quoted in [Win2]:

“Services are being reserved for urgent Government priority traffic and it is not possible to carry Post Office Mails.”

However, it is likely that ‘troop mail’ continued to be flown from Lydda by *KLM* and from the covers shown in Watson [Wat2], mail continued to be flown from Sydney.

It should be noted that there were major incursions by the Japanese in Malaya during December; Penang, for example, fell on 19th December. There was a complaint in the *Straits Times* of 3rd February that mail was still being sent to Kedah, Penang, Perak, Kelantan and Trengganu although they had been in enemy occupation for weeks [SN].

The *OMB Reports* [OMB41, OMB42] give the dates of the dispatches from Britain and Proud [Pr] allocates ships to each. Some details are also given in letters from the Pretoria P.O. [Win4]. The ships are shown in the following five tables in which the sailing dates to Cape Town are from Convoy Web [CW] except where stated.

13.2 Mail posted in UK in October – early November

UK Dispatch	Ship	UK – Cape Town Dates	Ship from Durban
8 th Oct	Gleniffer	24 Oct – 13 Dec (Durban)	By air??
21 st Oct	Umtata	31 Oct – 19 Dec [Pr] 7 – 28 Nov (Freetown) – ?? [CW]	UK 20 Oct cover sea to Bombay
27 th Oct	*City of Exeter or *Buteshire or *Clan Murdoch?	8 Nov – 17 Dec 31 Oct – 21 Dec (Durban) 5 Nov – 18 Dec	UK 22 & 24 Oct cover sea to Bombay
4 th Nov	Sussex	12 Nov - 18 Dec (Durban) [Pr]	UK 27 Oct cover for DEI, sea to Bombay
7 th Nov	Roslin Castle?	13 Nov – 11 Dec [Pr] 15 Nov – 24 Nov (Halifax) – ? [CW]	UK 4 Nov cover sea to Bombay
8 th Nov	Mataroa	12 Nov – 18 Dec (Durban)	??

Examples are described below of air mail postmarked in the UK to Malaya on 20th, 22nd, 24th October and 4th November together with an air mail to the Dutch East Indies postmarked on 27th October. The ships carrying this mail from the UK to Cape Town are in the above table. The covers all have a C 16 Bombay censor mark and were returned to their sender. That indicates that this mail was sent from Durban by sea to Bombay (possibly all on the same ship) although it is far from clear what then happened. Convoy *WS12ZB* which included ships such as *Capetown Castle* left Durban on 24th December and arrived in Bombay on 6th January. It could have carried this mail.

Details of the five examples, all with a Bombay censor mark, are:

1. Legg [Leg3] shows a cover postmarked in Dorset on 20th October 1941 and addressed to a Corporal in Malaya. It has a handstamp on four lines that reads: *It is regretted that / this item could not be / delivered to the / address stated*, an *Air Mail fee 1s 1½d refunded* handstamp in which the numbers have been entered by hand and an *Army Post Office* handstamp. There is no date showing when it was returned to the UK.

2. A cover postmarked in London on 22nd October and addressed to a company in Kuala Lumpur. It has a purple handstamp *No Service / Return to Sender* and has a London transit mark on 4th May.

3. A cover postmarked on 24th October to Negri Sembilan is shown in Figure 13.1. It has a purple handstamp *No Service / Return to Sender*, but no indication of when it arrived back in the UK. According to the Singapore press on 14th January, there were no longer any mail services to Malacca or Negri Sembilan.

4. The cover to the Dutch East Indies in Figure 13.2 is postmarked in Carlisle on 27th October and has a purple handstamp *No Service / Return to Sender*. It was redirected back to the sender and was backstamped on return to London on 5th May 1942. According to Proud, the mail that closed on 4th November was sent on the *Sussex* which left Liverpool on 12th November and arrived in Durban on 18th December. It then proceeded to Singapore where it arrived on 13th January [CW], but its mail from the UK would have been off-loaded in South Africa.



Figure 13.1: UK – Negri Sembilan, Malaya postmarked in London on 24th October with *No Service / Return to Sender* cachet and Bombay censor mark.



Figure 13.2: UK – Dutch East Indies postmarked in Carlisle on 27th October with *No Service / Return to Sender* cachet and Bombay censor mark. London receiving mark on 5th May 1942.

5. An air mail cover to Malaya postmarked in Malvern, Worcestershire on 4th November with the handstamp: *'It is regretted that / this item could not be / delivered to the / address stated'* and an *'Air Mail fee 1s 1½d refunded'* handstamp. It has an *Army Post Office* handstamp on the back, but no datestamp showing when it arrived back in the UK.

The cover to Singapore in Figure 13.3 is postmarked in Devon on 31st October 1941 and also has a purple *No Service / Return to Sender* handstamp, but no censor marks. It would be expected to have been sent on the same dispatch from London as the 27th October cover and so it would be expected to have been sent to Bombay on the same ship from Durban. Perhaps it was not dealt with by the censors as it was addressed to the *Naval Intelligence Centre*. Alternatively it could have been sent on the *Straat Soenda* discussed below. It was not received back in London until 24th June.



Figure 13.3: UK – Singapore postmarked in Devon on 31st October with *No Service / Return to Sender* cachet. London receiving mark on 24th June 1942.

A cover postmarked in Norwich on 6th November and addressed to Hong Kong has an air mail label, but is only franked with 6d. There are no postage due markings. It has a *No Service / Return to Sender* handstamp and was received back in London on 25th April.

13.3 Mail posted in UK in mid November

Information about the ships that carried the mail from Durban for various destinations is given in letters from the *Pretoria P.O.* [Win4]. According to a letter from the *Pretoria Post Office* on 13th February 1942, air mail that arrived in South Africa on the *Clan Macneil*, *City of Cairo*, *Glenartney* and *Rochester Castle* for India, Iraq and the Persian Gulf was sent on the *Shirala* to Bombay, mail for Ceylon and Burma on the *Isipingo* to Colombo (and on to Calcutta) while mail for other destinations was sent to Batavia on the *Straat Soenda* [AMS, Win4]. The *Straat Soenda* ran aground in the Sunda (Soenda) Strait on 20th January 1942. It was salvaged and towed to Batavia, arriving on 28th January. This is summarised in the following table.

UK Dispatch	Ship	UK – Cape Town Dates	Ship from Durban
13 th Nov	Clan Macneil	18 Nov – 26 Dec	Shirala 7 Jan – 4 Feb (Bombay) [Win2] Isipingo 6 – 29 Jan (Colombo) – 2 Feb (Madras) – 7 Feb (Calcutta) Straat Soenda ?? – 28 Jan (Batavia)
14 th Nov	City of Cairo	18 Nov – 31 Dec	
19 th Nov	Glenartney	25 Nov – 18 Dec	
25 th Nov	Rochester Castle	30 Nov – 28 Dec [Pr]	

The following covers would appear to have been sent on the *Shirala*. The cover in Figure 13.4 is postmarked on 18th November in Edinburgh and addressed to Bombay from where it was redirected to Ootacamund in South India is. It has a Bombay censor mark, and was redirected on 7th February 1942

and has Ootacamund receivers on 10th and 11th February. Another cover postmarked in Bedford on 18th November and directly addressed to Ootacamund has a receiving backstamp on 9th February.



Figure 13.4: UK – Bombay postmarked in Edinburgh on 18th November, redirected 7th February 1942.

A similar cover to India postmarked in Scarborough on 13th November was also redirected in Bombay on 7th February. I have three covers from Oxford postmarked respectively on the 10th, 17th and 22nd November that are addressed to Quetta, Baluchistan (modern day Pakistan). Surprisingly for India, they have no receiving date on the back although they all have 'Recd 10/2/42' in manuscript on the back. They also have a Quetta (I 2) censor mark. The dates on these six covers fit with being sent on the *Shirala* which arrived in Bombay on 4th February according to Lloyd's wartime daily list researched by Peter Wingent [Win2].

A cover postmarked in Bedford on 14th November and addressed to a regiment in Poona from where it was redirected to Malaya has the cachet *It is regretted that / this item could not be / delivered because the / addressee is reported / prisoner of war*. It would be sent on the *Glenartney* and then sent by sea to Bombay on the *Shirala*. It has a Bombay (C 16) censor mark, but the first of the backstamps is *Base Air Post Depot* on 2nd February which is before the arrival of the *Shirala* in Bombay. Possibly there was a mix up in South Africa and the cover was mislaid and sent on the *Esperance Bay* that left Durban later, but arrived in Bombay on 28th January. The cover has many indistinct datestamps including one in Bombay on 26th March.

A cover with an Indian censor mark (code I?) was postmarked in Edinburgh on 13th November and addressed to the *Base Post Office* in Basra. It has a redirection datestamp at the *Indian Section Base Office No 7* on 19th February which was said to be in Baghdad. The dates fit with it having been sent

on the *City of Cairo* or *Glenartney* to Durban and then on the *Shirala* to Bombay although it does not have a Bombay censor mark.

Watt shows a cover postmarked in London on 10th November and addressed to Selangor that was likely carried to Cape Town on the *Clan Macneil* and has a *No Service / Return to Sender* handstamp and arrived back in the UK on 28th May [Wat2]. A cover sent to Atjeh, Sumatra in the Dutch East Indies on 9th November also has a *No Service / Return to Sender* handstamp and arrived back in the UK on 25th June. Another similar cover was postmarked in London on 13th November and addressed to Ipoh in Perak. Its London return datestamp is '9 JU 42' which I interpret as being 9th June while another cover postmarked in London and addressed to Kuala Lumpur has a London return datestamp of '3 JU 42'.

A cover postmarked in Rickmansworth on 18th November and addressed to a soldier in Malaya has purple '*Addressee Reported Missing*', '*Undelivered for Reasons Stated / Return to Sender*' handstamps together with a red '*Air Mail fee 1s 1½d refunded*' handstamp and a purple '*Army Post Office*' backstamp. There is no indication of when it returned to Britain.

These covers to Malaya and Sumatra do not have a Bombay censor mark and so they are likely to have been sent on the Dutch *K.P.M.* ship *Straat Soenda*. Possible that the cover to Atjeh was off-loaded in Batavia before being returned.

13.4 Mail posted in UK in late November

UK Dispatch	Ship	UK – Cape Town Dates	Ship from Durban
27 th , 29 th Nov	Clan Macquarrie	30 Nov – 9 Jan	??

Redmond [Red] describes a cover postmarked in Middlesex on 26th November, and addressed to *RAF, Seletar* (the RAF base in Singapore) that has an *Air Mail fee 1s 1½d refunded* cachet together with *Army Post Office* and *Return to sender on Air Ministry instructions* handstamps. There is no date of when it was returned to the UK.

The air mail cover in Figure 13.5 is postmarked in London on 26th November and addressed to a commercial firm in Ipoh in the Federated Malay State of Perak. It has the usual *No Service / Return to Sender* handstamp, but no censor marks. It was received back in London on 18th June 1942 and so it seems to have been sent on from Durban in early January although Ipoh had fallen in December. I have the scan of another cover from London to Singapore postmarked on 26th November that also has a *No Service / Return to Sender* handstamp and no censor marks. It has no backstamp showing when it arrived back in the UK.

Proud lists the dispatch of mail on 27th and 29th November as leaving the UK on 30th November on the *Clan Macquarrie* that arrived in Cape Town on 9th January. It is not clear what happened to this mail in Durban, but it does not appear to have got to Singapore and so was not sent on the *City of Canterbury*.



Figure 13.5: UK – Perak postmarked London on 26th November 1941 with *No Service / Return to Sender* cachet. London receiving mark on 18th June 1942.

d) Mail posted in UK in early December

According to a May 1942 letter from the *Pretoria P.O.* [Win4], mail from the *Roxburgh Castle* for Iran, Iraq, Persian Gulf, India, Ceylon and Burma was sent on the *Esperance Bay* which left Durban with Convoy *WS 14* on 12th January and arrived in Bombay on 28th January [CW]. Mail for Dutch East Indies, Thailand, Philippines, Malaya, Australia and New Zealand was sent on the *City of Canterbury*. It left Durban on 13th January with the part of Convoy *WS 14C* that became Convoy *DM2* and arrived in Singapore on 6th February and Batavia on 9th February before sailing to Colombo on 12th – 21st February.

UK Dispatch	Ship	UK – Cape Town Dates	Ship from Durban
8 th December	Roxburgh Castle	13 Dec – 6 Jan [Pr]	Esperance Bay 12 – 28 Jan (Bombay) City of Canterbury 13 Jan – 6 Feb (Singapore) – 9 Feb (Batavia)

Other covers addressed to India were postmarked in UK on 4th and 5th December. The first was received in Assam on 5th February and the second in the North West Frontier of India on 7th February and so were presumably sent on the *Roxburgh Castle* and then the *Esperance Bay* taking some time to get to their destination after arrival in India.

Two covers postmarked in the UK on 6th December and addressed to Batavia and Soerabaja respectively and one postmarked on 8th December addressed to Soerabaja have *No Service / Return to Sender* handstamps. The second was received back in the UK on 8th June and the third in May. As they were dealt with by the UK censors, they may have missed the 8th December dispatch and so were not sent on the *City of Canterbury*.

13.5 Mail posted in UK in mid December

Details are given in the May letter from the Pretoria P.O. [Win4].

UK Dispatch	Ship	UK – Cape Town Dates	Ship from Durban
16 th December	Glenbeg	23 Dec – 27 Jan	Khandalla 17 Feb – 4 March (Bombay) [Rub]
18 th December	City of Manila	23 Dec – 29 Jan (Durban)	Tinhow ?? (Malaya)
19 th December	Dardanus	23 Dec – 29 Jan	Ceramic 27 March – 13 April (Adelaide)

Dispatches from Britain after 16th December 1941 for Australia and New Zealand were carried from Durban on the *Ceramic* [Pr] which left Durban on 27th March and arrived in Adelaide on 13th April, in Sydney on 29th April and in Lyttelton (New Zealand) on 20th May [CW]. It is likely that New Zealand mail would be off-loaded in Australia and flown trans-Tasman.

The *Tinhow* was bound for Malaya carrying mail for Ceylon, Burma, Malaya, Dutch East Indies and Philippines, but is not likely to have proceeded beyond Ceylon. The *Khandalla* left Durban on 17th February and arrived in Bombay as part of Convoy *WS 15B* on 4th March [Rub, not listed in CW] carrying *Horseshoe* mail for Iran, Iraq, India and Persian Gulf. Figure 13.6 shows a cover addressed to Bombay postmarked in London on 11th December 1941 and Figure 13.7 a similar cover postmarked in Birmingham on the 18th. They were likely sent on the *Glenbeg* and *Dardanus* respectively. Both have Bombay arrival backstamps on 6th March which fits with them arriving on the *Khandalla*.

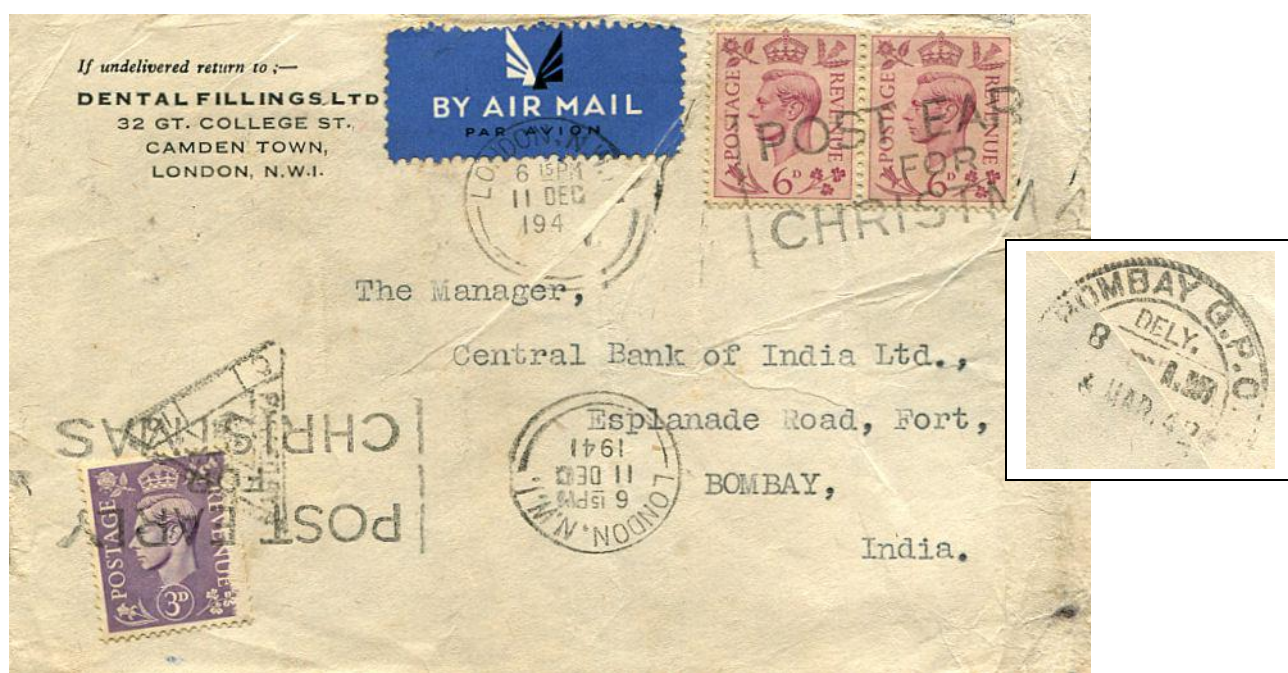


Figure 13.6: UK – Bombay postmarked in London on 11th December, Bombay datestamp on 6th March.

A cover to a Bank in Rangoon was postmarked in Scotland on 10th December and has a *No Service / Return to Sender* cachet. Rangoon was evacuated by the British on 7th March 1942. A cover postmarked in London on 11th December and addressed to Thailand also has a *No Service / Return to Sender* handstamp. It was opened by the censors in the UK and has a further London datestamp on 24th December and a *Received / 30 DEC 1941* boxed purple company handstamp on the back. After being

held up by the censors, it must have been decided that mail could no longer be sent to Thailand and so this cover never left the UK.

According to Stern, air mail posted in Cape Town on 24th January 1942 and addressed to Singapore was returned to sender in South Africa on 13th April with the violet cachet: *Mail Service Suspended / Posdiens gestaak* [Ste]. It was likely sent on the *Tinhow*. Mail for Hong Kong was not sent, but returned to sender.

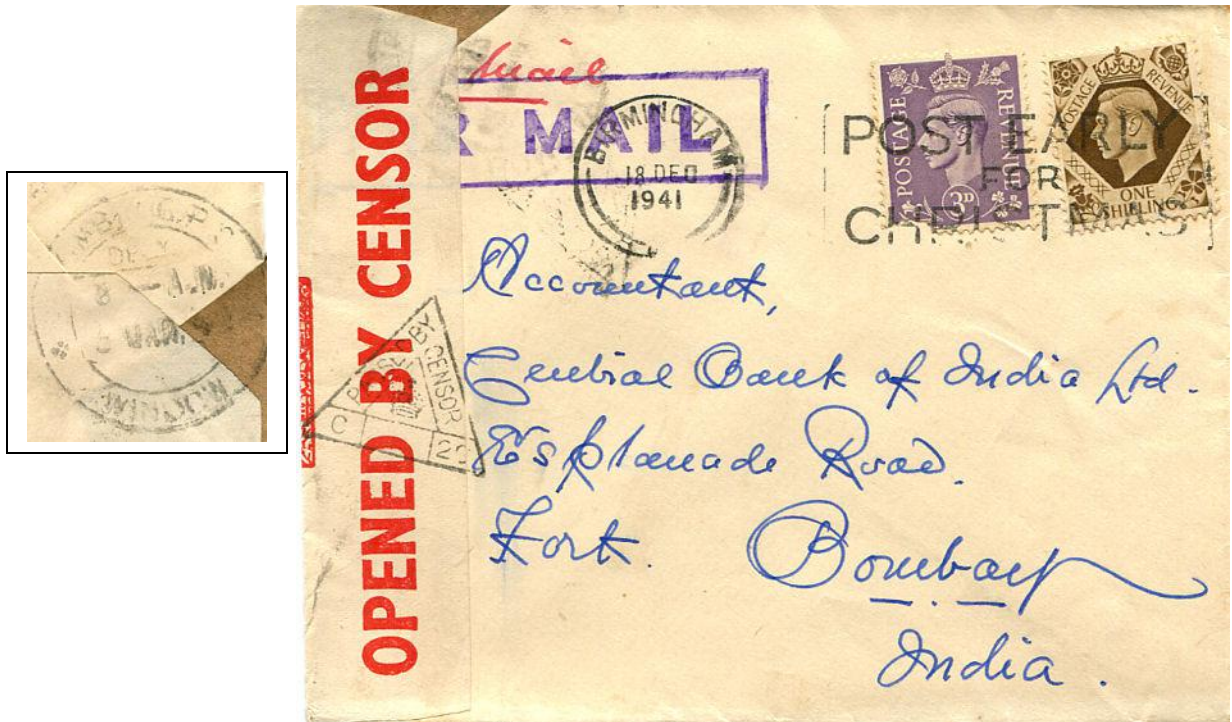


Figure 13.7: UK – Bombay postmarked in Birmingham on 18th December, Bombay datestamp on 6th March.

The cover addressed to Singapore in Figure 13.8 is postmarked in Devon on 16th December. The postage stamps have been cancelled with a purple *Postage Refunded* handstamp, but there are no further postal markings. I assume that it was sent to Durban, possibly on the *City of Manila*, arriving there on 29th January. Not clear if it was sent on from Durban on the *Tinhow* before being returned to the UK, but it was more likely returned from South Africa to the UK.

The cover in Figure 13.9 also has a *Postage Refunded* rubber handstamp and is addressed to Ipoh in Perak and postmarked on 19th December, shortly before Ipoh was invaded. So it is possible that it either never left the UK or was returned from South Africa.

Two covers from the UK to RAF personnel in Kedah and in Singapore have the handstamps *Return to Sender on Air Ministry Instructions* and *Air Mail fee 1s 1½d refunded*. The first is postmarked in Suffolk on 13th December and the second in Sussex on 30th December. The first has routing instructions *North Atlantic & Trans Pacific*, but the required franking for that was 5s 0d and so I assume that the instructions were ignored.

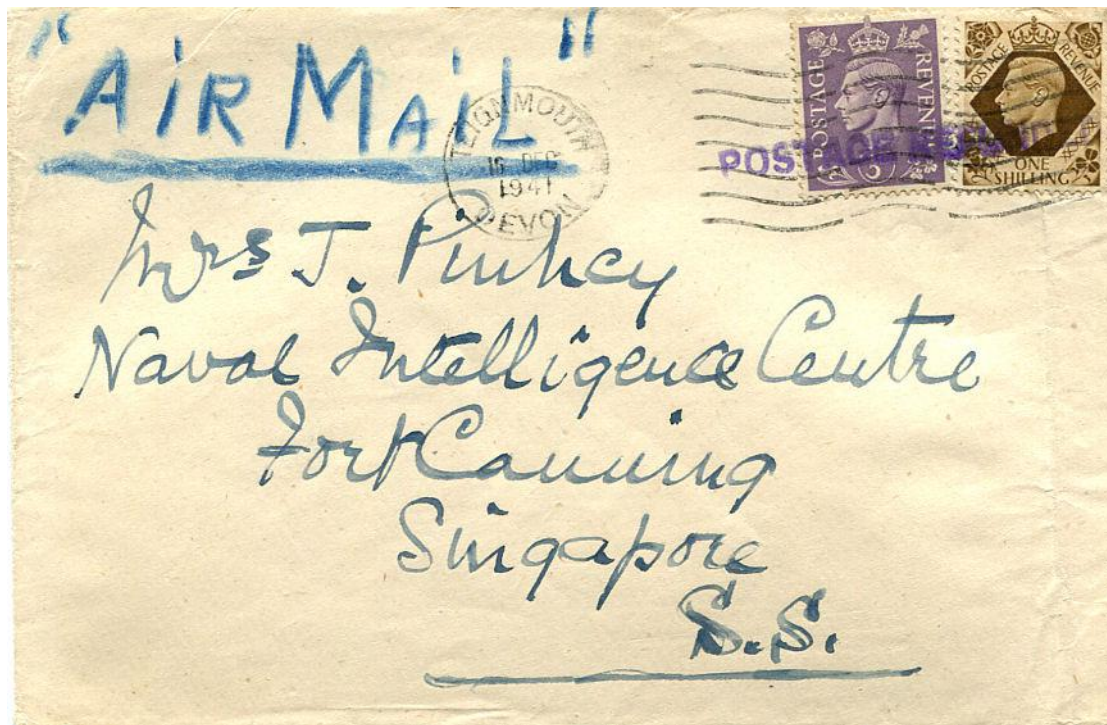


Figure 13.8: UK – Singapore postmarked on 16th December with *Postage Refunded* rubber handstamp.

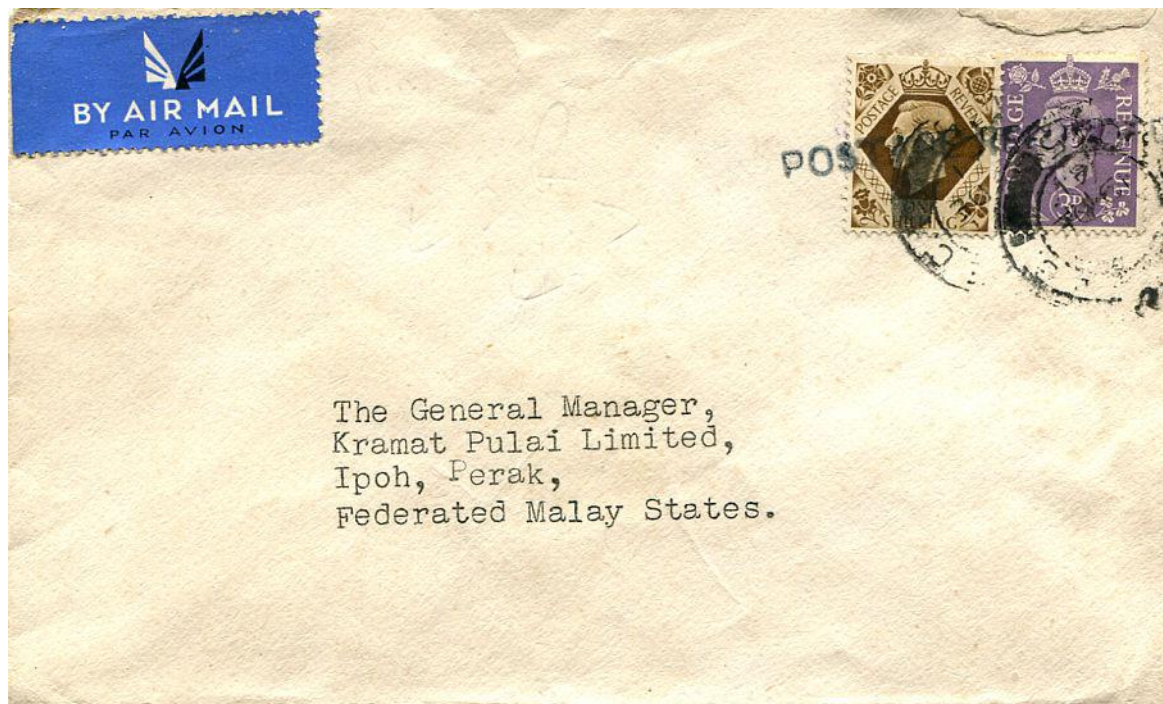


Figure 13.9: UK – Ipoh postmarked in London on 19th December with *Postage Refunded* rubber handstamp.

13.6 Mail dispatched from UK in January 1942

There was no dispatch of air mail from London on the *Horseshoe Route* between the dispatches of 19th December and 3rd January. The last dispatch of *Horseshoe* mail for Australia and New Zealand was on 27th January as after that air mail was routed via USA with the first dispatch on 5th February. London dispatches for Malaya for the air service from Durban continued with dispatches on 6th, 10th and 14th February. After that, the dispatches were only to destinations up to India.

UK Dispatch	Ship	UK – Cape Town Dates	Ship from Durban
3 rd January	Otranto	10 Jan – 13 Feb (Durban)	Kentar ?? - ?? (Colombo) Ceramic 27 March – 13 April (Adelaide)
5 th January	Richmond Castle	10 Jan – 5 Feb [Pr]	
8 th January	Ascania	11 Jan (Clyde) – 6 Feb	
8 th January	Dorset?	11 Jan (Clyde) – 10 Feb	
27 th January	Ben Ledi	30 Jan – 4 March	
14 th January	Sagaing	11 Feb – 12 March [Pr]	Congella 20 March – 17 April (left Colombo for Bombay) Ceramic 27 March – 13 April (Adelaide)
16 th January	Ceramic	23 Jan – 15 March (via Halifax and Rio)	
24 th January	Clan Skene	30 Jan – 5 March	
6 th February	Ormonde	16 Feb (Clyde) – 21 March (Durban)	Duchess of Richmond 25 March – 8 April (Bombay)
10 th February	Strathaird	16 Feb – 21 March (Durban)	
14 th February	Brisbane Star	16 Feb – 18 March	

The May 1942 letter from the *Pretoria P.O.* describes what happened in Durban to the UK January dispatches [Win4]. However, it lists the ship arriving in Cape Town on 6th February as being the *Ascanius*, but its dates given in Convoyweb do not fit while the dates for the *Ascania* do. I have therefore assumed that this is a typo in the Pretoria list. The list does not name the ship arriving in Cape Town on 9th February while Proud gives it as the *Dorset* which Convoyweb shows as arriving on 10th February [CW].

As with the London dispatches in the middle of December, mail for Australia and New Zealand was sent from Durban to Australia by sea on the *Ceramic*. The cover in Figure 13.10 is postmarked in London at 5.45pm on 14th January 1942 and is addressed to New Zealand. It is likely to have been carried from Durban to Australia on the *Ceramic*.

Mail from the *Otranto*, *Richmond Castle*, *Ascania*, *Dorset* and *Ben Ledi* for the Dutch East Indies was sent on the *Kentar* which sailed to Colombo. If it carried mail from the *Ben Ledi*, but not the *Clan Skene*, it must have left Durban around 8th March. Mail from these ships for Malaya and the Philippines was not sent and was returned to sender. Mail from the *Sagaing*, *Ceramic* and *Clan Skene* for Burma was sent on the *Congella* [Pr] which left Durban on 20th March and Colombo on 17th April while mail for Burma on the *Ormonde* and *Strathaird* was sent on the *Duchess of Richmond* [Pr].

A cover from Perth, Scotland to a Sergeant in the 2nd Echelon in Malaya is postmarked on 26th December and has the boxed handstamp: 'It is regretted that / this item could not be / delivered because the / addressee is reported / missing'. Another to the same person is postmarked on 29th January and has the boxed handstamp 'It is regretted that / this item could not be / delivered at the / address stated'. They both also have: 'Air Mail fee 1s 1½d refunded' handstamps, the earlier in red

and the second in purple. The first would have been sent on the *Otranto* and the second on the *Ormonde* and would have been returned from South Africa. By the time that *Ormonde* sailed from the Clyde, Singapore had already fallen.



Figure 13.10: UK to New Zealand postmarked on 14th January 1942. By sea from Durban to Australia.