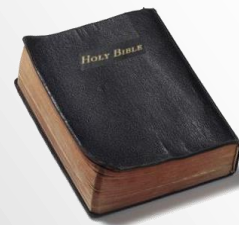




THE ELISHA INDEPENDENT CHAPEL POST



Non-conformist chapels are a feature of Wales. Even the smallest village will have had at least two, so that a villager could point to one and say 'that's the chapel I don't go to'. Invariably they would point to the Elisha Independent Chapel. If you wanted 3 hour fire and brimstone sermons – starting at 7:30am in Welsh and behind locked doors - this was for you. The Elishas were so strict and dour that they made the Scottish Free Presbyterians seem like hedonistic Saturday night revellers. It comes as no surprise that this denomination is now virtually gone. They viewed all outsiders as sinners and were dissuaded from mixing with sinners making it hard to gain converts. But congregations really fell after the 1965 decision by the Elders, based on a typo in their texts, that proscribed sex before *and* after (and presumably during) the wedding ceremony.



Their self imposed isolation from others, ie sinners, infiltrated to all aspects of life including their letters. They didn't want their post mixing with letters written by sinners and so they instituted their own private postal service in 1959. Letters would be placed in a collection box (usually a cardboard box, nothing fancy) in the chapel. Whenever any members were going to another village or town they would collect any post that was on their way and deliver by hand. So delivery was irregular and erratic, but the Chapel staunchly supported it. It was purely the fall in congregation numbers that caused its demise 10 years later. This service would seem to fall foul of Post Office regulations as it broke their monopoly of postal services. Some official correspondence on this, regrettably lost, suggested that any legal action would be seen as bureaucratic and would serve no real purpose. This may have been a mistake as it has let the doors open for other postal services of a private nature. Perhaps this series may uncover some more of these.

The postage rate was 2d + 1d for the chapel funds for any item. This regular rate lasted for the duration of the postal service. The stamps were typically religious depicting scenes of doom and gloom from the Old Testament or the Book of Revelations – Elijah destroying the messengers of Ahaziah, The Vision of the valley of Dry Bones, The Vision of the Four Chariots and the Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse. These stamps could then be used to illustrate a sermon while promoting it at the same time. Unfortunately there were only a few different scenes used; any more would have been seen profligate. The 10 commandments were

originally proposed as designs, but were clearly too many. And this idea's fate was sealed during selection of illustrations of neighbour's asses and, even worse, adultery! The final designs embody the sect's unwitting anti-aestheticism. The different stamps came in subtly different shades of grey, but most noticeable from a philatelic point of view results from some changes made to the main design when they were reprinted in 1965. Prior to this the stamps had no value tablets, but these were added, presumably to make the cost of the post clearly visible. The one on the left was 2d and the one on the right 1d. Some specialist collectors claim to be able distinguish between other different print runs from minor changes to the designs, but a listing of those is beyond the scope of this article. However, should any of these turn up they could be distributed at a later date.

Most stamps were destroyed after use, as collecting them was close to idolatry. Surprisingly there was an Xmas issue in 1967, with 2d going to the chapel; surprising, as the Elishas merely recognised Christmas rather than celebrated it. That would be close to having fun! This issue was something of a revelation, because not only was not printed in a shade of dark grey, but it was printed unnecessarily and unsuccessfully on glossy paper.

As previously mentioned, letters might linger a while in the chapel before dispatch. Here they were subject to multiple cancellations or religious slogans made up on John Bull Printing sets by the faithful. For those unfamiliar with this toy it is very easy to use and very easy to make all kind of mistakes with!

Of course, you can believe as much of this as you want.