



Some Postal History Covers



A little diversion this month, with some unusual covers providing a little bit of postal history. And a few stamps of course.

Firstly we return to the events of the Patagonian War, a subject that provides inspiration and background for some of the events in the Aberystwyth novels of Malcolm Price. This war is often described as the Welsh Vietnam. A group of Latin rebels rose up against the peaceful Welsh settlers living in the autonomous region known as Y Wladfa. At the height of the war the Welsh Foreign Legion was capturing many rebels, who were sent to Wales as prisoners of war. They were kept in a large camp at Clarach Bay, just north of Aberystwyth. To these were added many rounded up from the Latino quarters of Swansea and Ebbw Vale. At its busiest there were over 8,000 POWs incarcerated at Clarach. Within this camp an internal postal system evolved for letters between inmates who were segregated, a bit later and for post home.

The organisers of the service were granted permission to have a printing press and they used whatever source of paper they could make or spare. Consequently the few general designs are, for collectors, a delight for the variations are numerous. Different home made gums were used too, but you are advised not to lick any stamps that retain their adhesive; you wouldn't want to know what they used to make the gums. The earliest design shows just Spanish text in a frame of barbed wire. These, as the others, are found either roulette perforated or straight cut. The second series shows the south-west watch tower against a background of barbed wire, which is bluish for the 1z value and reddish for the 2z. Mostly they are roulette perforated, but some imperforate versions are known. Lastly the third issue shows a camp scene from a painting by an inmate who when under the pseudonym of "El Gecko". The stamps are valued in carrots, or zanahorias in Spanish. While these were convenient items for barter, the use of carrots was an in-joke with the prisoners, for they soon found out the Welsh for carrot was 'moron', their slang name for the guards. The rates were 1 carrot for internal post, and 2 for letters to Patagonia. These stamps were not professionally produced, and have been stored in a shed for the last 50 years. Consequently few are ever found in a pristine state, and in some cases the home-made paper has become quite brittle, especially that made from seaweed. Most collectors try to obtain one of the so-called Izal issues, in recognition of the sacrifice made by the prisoners. However they make a contrasting addition to any stamp collection.

The cover here is one sent by a peasant prisoner to his father, sheltering from the war in the Argentine capital. By arrangement with the Red Cross letters posted in the camp would be taken back to South America and delivered. The letters were of course censored. Sometimes this included the stamps as well as the letters, and sometimes if feeling mean the censor would block out parts of the address!

Clarach Camp is still there, un-restored, and in use as a holiday camp. It is often said that the prisoners had a higher degree of comfort and freedom than today's holidaymakers.

Way out in the Bristol Channel lies the rock known as St Penga's Isle (or Ynys Penga). Considered part of the United Kingdom, sovereignty is disputed by Republic of Ireland, the Welsh Government in Exile, Argentina and North Korea. The island has been used over the centuries to house those with incurable diseases. Tradition has it that it is named after Penga, the patron saint of things that move involuntarily, and this is why it was used when South Wales experienced outbreaks of St Vitus's Dance in the 15th Century. In reality it was named by Idris the Sick, when he landed there on his return from Antarctica, because the guillemots living there reminded him of the penguins he had seen - though they were not as tasty apparently. Since then entire villages have been exiled on St Penga due to outbreaks of blue tongue, Tregaron Bog Fever, infective flatulence, Black Mountain scrofula, Damp Foot, Madru's madness and inflated groin. Most recently was the 1953 epidemic of Llanwyrtyd Leprosy, a most virulent form.

It was this community that demanded a postal service to the mainland - weather permitting. Thus the Penga Twppeni Post was born, with two stamps issued. The green stamp was for mail from the mainland, and the red stamp for mail from the island. This difference made it easy to see which items required disinfection, and so one of these unusual covers is included here. This worked well until a mail sorter with colour blindness was employed. Note the perforations which were used during fumigation of the contents of the letter. The stains on the outside are due to a quick cleansing wipe using the same hygienic technology that cafeteria tables get on a busy day. The outbound red stamps also had natural herbal antiseptic (made from *Artemisia foetida* or Trowsus Henddyn) used in the gum. Some 13500 items of mail were carried during the period of that exile.

St Penga's Isle has now been returned to the wild. The blockhouses used as accommodation are home to herds of feral goats and only students of archaeological epidemiology are granted licences to land there and have a working holiday (and possible return to the mainland).

Lastly (da daah), many of you will be familiar with the (in)famous eaten by snails covers that the Royal Mail has delivered on occasion. Wales has one unique version of this; the Infested with Sheep Ticks cover. The combination of a sheep farmer who hasn't washed his hands before posting a letter and the shelter of a mail box on a cold day will attract the ticks. These can be quite messy if the ticks have recently fed. The British Postal Museum would dearly like a genuine one of these for its collection. You are strongly advised not open this cover.