

Letters to Malaya in the 19th Century

Iain Dyce looks at the development of the mail system between Europe and the Far East

'From the absence of all correspondence from home to exhilarate my spirits and the monotony of my present life, I must try whether there is any magic in your name to inspire my flagging pen. I am tired of ringing the charges of complaints against ships, winds and waves that deny me my letters and I must wait patiently till the melancholy star that now sways them withdraws its influence.'

William Jack, Bencoolen, 1821

The early years of the 19th century were still fraught with the dangers and privations of the Napoleonic War. Until 1813 and the abolition of the Hon East India Company's monopoly of trade with India, nearly all British mail to the Far East was carried on the Company's vessels making the long journey down the Atlantic and round the Cape of Good Hope. Sailings tended to be infrequent and irregular, in 1812 there were ten departures of convoys from England and the round trip by any particular vessel could take up to a year and five months. It is of little surprise then that nearly all private letters are full of complaints at the lack of news from home. What is remarkable is that by the end of the century letters were being carried by P&O in about four weeks on a regular fortnightly sailing to Singapore with alternatives available from French and German shipping lines.

Developments

This revolution in the transport of mail to the Far East was dependent on two factors, the development of steam power, which by the end of the century had all but eliminated the sailing ship, and the development

of the overland route across Egypt to the Red Sea and the subsequent opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.

The history of the Malayan mails in the early years was inextricably linked to those of the sub-continent, the settlements being 'India' and not 'India used abroad' as is so generally assumed. Three trading settlements had been acquired along the eastern side of the Straits of Malacca on the Malay Peninsula. They had a strategic importance in protecting the sea passage to China from the French during the Napoleonic War and local pirates for a large part of the 19th century.

The first of these was Penang, ceded by the Sultan of Kedah in 1786. The East India Company had high expectations of the possession and in 1805 it was raised to the status of the fourth Presidency of India. These hopes were unrealistic, the administration cost excessive and in 1830, it was amalgamated with Malacca and Singapore and placed under the administration of Bengal.

Malacca, the oldest European possession in south-east Asia was captured by the Portuguese from the Malays in 1511. They held it until 1641 when it fell to the Dutch. In 1795 during the Napoleonic occupation of the

Netherlands it was taken by the British and returned at the end of the war. The Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1824 resolved the territorial interests of the two powers in the East and it formed part of the exchange of possessions, becoming British the following year.

Singapore

Singapore, which was to become by far the most important of the Settlements was founded by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. Located at the very southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, it was of strategic importance for both military and commercial reasons.

Its growth as a trading centre was phenomenal. This was in no small measure due to Raffles' insistence on it being a 'free port' without the restrictions of customs duties.

Within a few years it had outstripped Malacca and Penang in importance and became the administrative centre of the Straits Settlements in 1832.

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1812 Penang to Scotland by the Cape of Good Hope. P.O./P.W.I. (Post Office/Prince of Wales Island) is the first postmark used from the Straits Settlements





1841 letter from an American missionary at Sambas in Borneo. Carried to Singapore and forwarded by James Ballestier, trader and American Consul

The relationship between the Settlements and the East India Company was a difficult one. They did not readily conform to the culture and requirements of India. With the loss of the Company's monopoly of trade with China in 1834, their value to India was virtually at an end. They now lay on the periphery and looked more to the large Malayan archipelago and China for trade and wealth. The administration was not seen as an avenue of advancement for the careers of aspiring Indian civil servants after 1827 and the trading community, the most powerful strata of Singapore society, was constantly fearful of the Indian Government's attempts to impose restrictions on trade and interfere with their 'free port' status. There were two parallel currencies in operation; the Indian rupee for official Government transactions

and the Spanish silver dollar, the universal eastern trade currency, for almost everything else.

It was apparent that the Straits Settlements did not really belong within India and after lengthy negotiations they were transferred from the administration of the India Office to that of the Colonial Office in 1867.

The overland route

The ending of the East India Company's monopoly of trade with India in 1813 meant that private vessels were free to sail there and to carry mail. They still had to make the long, difficult and time-consuming voyage round the Cape of Good Hope, but by the beginning of the 19th century interest was growing in the shorter, faster connection to Europe by way of the Red Sea and the overland crossing of Egypt to the Mediterranean. This alternative had been used occasionally since the 17th century but it was the efforts of Lt Thomas Fletcher Waghorn between 1826 and 1830, on behalf of the Calcutta merchants, that demonstrated the route to be a viable alternative. Most of the letters he carried are between Britain and Calcutta or Bombay, but a small number exist to or from Singapore and beyond.

Pressure was mounting for a better postal system and in 1837 the East India Company inaugurated a steamer service from Bombay to Suez, with the *Hugh Lindsay* carrying the mail to Mocha and two other vessels

alternating on the remainder of the trip. The desert crossing to Alexandria was made by camel and donkeys and the mail taken onward to Falmouth by Admiralty packet. The return mail for Bengal and onward for Singapore and China was generally carried across northern India by dawk postal runners and reshipped from Calcutta.

The most important development in the carriage of mail to India and the Far East came in 1841 with the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company's contract to carry mail from Suez to Calcutta. On 17 January 1843 the *Hindustan* sailed from Calcutta by way of Madras, Galle in Ceylon and Aden to Suez to inaugurate the service. Two years later the service was extended with the 'China Line' connecting at Point de Galle and sailing east, via Penang and Singapore, to Hong Kong and China. The time for a letter from Southampton to Singapore had now come down to about seven weeks.

Forwarding services

Sailings were initially once per month but in 1853 were doubled to once a fortnight. The arrival of a fast regular service to Europe made Singapore, in particular, an important hub in the collection and onward distribution of mail to south-east Asia. A feeder service was inaugurated almost immediately to connect with Batavia, a vessel meeting the P & O mails at Singapore, carrying them to

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1878 Singapore to Spain carried by French Ligne N. Octagonal red sorter strike of SS Andry



1891 postcard from Penang to Sumatra showing the sorter strike of the Netherlands Postal Agent, Penang

Java and returning with the replies in time in time to meet the steamer on her home-ward run.

For more remote destinations, mail tended to be collected and distributed by the mercantile houses. Captains of trading vessels would carry letters to their Agents in Singapore or Penang to be forwarded by contract steamers. For letters in the opposite direction the Forwarding Agents with their local contacts would be best able to move the mail on by local steamships and trading vessels.

As the Dutch established themselves over the vast Malayan archipelago they developed a very efficient and complex inter-island shipping network. To help with a speedy distribution of mail, particularly to Europe and China, postal agencies were set up in Singapore and Penang. They were closely

linked with the Straits post offices and it was their function to collect the mail, incoming and outgoing, sort it and put it on the appropriate steamer for onward transmission. The Dutch agencies were first established in 1878 and eventually closed in 1920.

The second European nation to operate a steamship line to the Far East was France. In 1862 the Messagerie Impériales, with the fall of the Second Empire renamed Messagerie Maritimes, ran a service from Marseilles to Hong Kong. Initially it was an overland route across Egypt until the opening of the Suez Canal to commercial traffic in 1870. This service became 'Ligne N' and was, later in the century, extended from the original Hong Kong terminus to Shanghai and Yokohama.

French and German services

In 1863 the French opened a feeder line from Batavia to Singapore connecting with the 'Ligne N' mail steamers. This was designated 'Ligne P'. The line continued in operation after the French involvement in it ceased in 1866.

Germany introduced a steamship connection in 1886, eventually running between Bremerhaven and Shanghai. This ran once a month and called at Singapore. A branch line was opened at about the same time connecting Singapore with Herbertshohe on the island of New Britain then part of the German New Guinea colony.

By the end of the 19th century P & O were sailing every two weeks and if letters were sent via Brindisi to connect at Port Said, the time to and from Singapore was a little over three weeks. The French service was also fortnightly and together they provided a speedy and frequent mail service. To further speed up the movement of mail at its port of disembarkation, mail sorting on board was carried out. French vessels carried a postal agent and the ship's cachet is to be found on most covers and cards as a postmark or transit strike. British sorting was done on certain sections of the route, Aden to Bombay, Penang to Singapore and Singapore to Hong Kong. Here again a range of transit strikes was applied but on this occasion the postal sorter only travelled between the two ports carrying the post office canceller with him.

For most of the first half of the 20th century this system continued to work well. It was not until the 1930s that airmail had developed sufficiently to be able to challenge the mail steamers. The War and the development of aircraft hastened the end and by the second half of the century most of the shipping lines as major passenger and mail carriers had disappeared and an era was at an end.

And what of Dr Jack writing home to his young sister in Aberdeen in 1821? His letter arrived in April the following year after a reasonable passage of six months. He is unlikely to have read the reply as five and a half months later at the age of 27 he had died of malaria.

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