

THE REGISTRATION “ROTARY DEVICE”



A summary of the known information
with a gallery of recorded examples

Maurice Buxton

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Updated March 2020 with one new cover and two new images (courtesy Andrew Lajer)

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THE REGISTRATION “ROTARY DEVICE”

Introduction

On 1st January 1878 the Post Office made a number of major changes to the registration system. The fee was reduced to 2d; letters were insured up to £2; stout postal stationery envelopes were issued. And there was a new method for making registered letters stand out in the mails – the blue crossed “string lines” that were once a familiar sight.

Generally speaking, these lines were hand-drawn in pencil if the envelope did not already have them printed on, but a number of covers are known from Liverpool (and one from Birmingham) in the period 1878-81 on which the lines appear to have been made by means of a “rotary device” working on the principle of a paint roller. The natural conclusion is that the use of these devices was the result of the Liverpool postal officials acting on their own initiative, but unfortunately no archival record that refers to them has so far been found.

Examples of covers with these “roller lines” are surprisingly scarce, as is information about them! This document aims to collate what information is available and discuss the various speculations that have been made, and includes a listing of recorded examples (with pictures where available).

Green string to distinguish registered letters

The original method of making registered letters distinctive, when the inland service was introduced in 1841, was to wrap each letter in a “green cover” – a system both cumbersome and time-consuming. It was discontinued in 1857, but as there was then little to distinguish registered letters from ordinary ones, mistakes increased sharply. From 1st July 1858 a new system was introduced which involved tying the letters round with green tape, string, or twine to make them stand out. Although this was also very time-consuming, it remained the method in use in the UK for the next twenty years.



A letter that has retained its original string, showing the typical “crossed lines” appearance that resulted from the way it was tied, and which was mimicked by the blue lines

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Blue lines instead of green string

A secondary change introduced in 1878 as part of the general package was that rural messengers (i.e. letter carriers in country areas) would now be allowed to register letters while on their rounds – as a convenience to the public, who might otherwise have to make a long journey to the nearest post office whenever they needed to send a letter securely. This minor innovation was however to turn out to have far-reaching consequences for postal practice in the UK and in the countries of the Empire that followed its lead.

Since it was considered impractical to have the rural messengers tying letters with green tape, it was announced in *Circular to Surveyors* No. 8 that instead they were to simply mark the letters with a cross of the same pattern in blue pencil in order to distinguish them. At this point the penny seems to have dropped, and it was realised that if the procedure were to be implemented more generally, it would be a considerable improvement on the current cumbersome methods.

Post Office Secretary John Tilley outlined the proposal and asked for feedback from senior regional postal officials in *Circular to Surveyors* No 10:

GENERAL POST OFFICE
1st November 1877

ABOLITION OF GREEN TAPE

SIR

WITH reference to the approaching changes in the system of registering letters, it has been suggested that the plan of distinguishing registered letters by means of blue pencil-marks, as prescribed in *Circular to Surveyors* No. 8 for letters registered by Rural Post Messengers, might with advantage be extended to letters registered at Post Offices; so that the use of green tape might be entirely discontinued.

It is considered that this change, while still securing a sufficiently distinctive marking for registered letters, would effect an appreciable saving in expense and labour, inasmuch as pencils are cheaper than tape, and it would take less time to mark a letter with a pencil than to tie it round with tape.

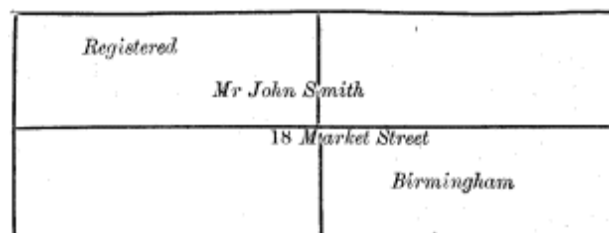
At the same time there is the further advantage that the pencil marks will not come off as the tape sometimes does.

I shall be glad if you will favour me with your views on the subject at your earliest convenience.

The majority of surveyors being in general agreement with the plan, it was written into the new regulations. *Post Office Circular* No 38 issued in December 1877 gave full instructions for the new system, and the section for rural messengers included a diagram:

Instructions for Rural Post Messengers as to Registering Letters for the Public.

... 6. If the letter is in a plain Envelope, and not in one of the Registered-Letter Envelopes sold by the Department, he will draw lines with the blue pencil across the front and back of it, thus:--



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The instructions for the more general use of the pencils referred back to this, but noted (with due regard to economy) that the green tape was to be used up first:

Abolition of Green Twine.

After the 1st of January 1878, the practice of tying registered letters with green twine will be gradually abolished and the plan of distinguishing registered letters by means of blue pencil marks, as described above in the instructions for Rural Post Messengers, will be generally adopted.

...

All the green twine in stock on the 1st of January is to be used up, and the blue pencils are to be brought into use as the twine becomes exhausted.

In Liverpool, they had other ideas about that ...

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Recorded Examples

This list was compiled from the sources available – my own collection and notes, the GBPS Newsletters, catalogues I have kept, James Mackay’s book on British registered mail¹, and the online archives of the (sadly few) auction houses that provide them. A number of covers have appeared in Cavendish sales, but I was unable to spot any examples offered by Grosvenor or Spink. Additional reports are welcome.

The ones with date in bold have an illustration in the image gallery following. Auction prices given are hammer prices (excluding premium if any).

Date	From	To	Provenance	Hatching	Notes
30 Mar 1878	Liverpool	London	Mark Bloxham (£40)	Left	Part cover (Fred Taylor collection)
10 May 1878	Birmingham	Montgomeryshire		Left	GBPS NL321 (Ian Baker collection)
8 Jul 1878	Liverpool Exchange BO	London	2002 VS/142 (£700)		“REGISTERED REGISTERED REGISTERED ...” (John Forbes-Nixon, see <i>GBJ</i> 53/2)
21 Aug 1878	Liverpool Ranelagh Place	Rheydt, Prussia	2003 Cav 641/862 (£190)	Left	Printed matter, 1d + 2d franking (MB)
3 Sep 1878	Liverpool	c/o Captain SS <i>Celtic</i> , Queenstown	2002 VS/132 (£440) 2004 Cav 652/1370 (£360)	Left	“Care of the Commander” letter, ½d + 1d + 1½d franking
31 Dec 1878	Liverpool Exchange BO	Port Madoc	2004 Cav 682/1443 (£700) 2015 Andrew Lajer (£850)	Right	
25 Jan 1879	Liverpool	Flintshire	1997 IL/1912 (unsold) 2011 Cav 745/2544 (£240)	Right	
17 Jul 1879	Liverpool	Leith	2010 S1/20236 (€380) 2018 Andrew Lajer (£750)	Right	Illustrated in <i>Registered Mail of the British Isles</i> , James Mackay (1982)
2 Aug 1879	Liverpool	London	1999 MW/1152 (£140) 2008 Cav 701/1153 (£240) 2014 Robin Cassell (£195)	Right	Front only, ½d + 1d + 1½d franking
Sep 1879	Liverpool	?	1997 IL/1912 (unsold)	?	Piece only, no illustration seen
Sep 1879	Liverpool	?	1997 IL/1912 (unsold)	?	Piece only, no illustration seen
24 Oct 1879	Liverpool	Lancaster	2018 Andrew Lajer (£950)	Right	
29 Oct 1879	Liverpool Exchange BO	London	2013 eBay 111206726800 (£15)	Right	3 × 1d franking (MB)
8 Dec 1879	Liverpool Ranelagh Place	Liverpool	2002 VS/144 (£650)	Right	Printed matter, ½d + 2d franking (John Forbes-Nixon, see <i>GBJ</i> 52/5)
2 Feb 1880	Liverpool Exchange BO	Venice	2008 Cav 707/722 (£500) 2010 S2/40206 (est. €600) 2016 Martin Townsend (£750)	Right	
16 Feb 1880	Liverpool	Weymouth	1999 MW/1152 (£140) 2003 Cav 637/1781 (unsold) 2003 Cav 641/863 (unsold) 2003 Cav 645/2575 (unsold)	?	Hatching indistinct (catalogue illustration too small)
5 May 1880	Liverpool Exchange BO	London	2013 eBay 360782909990 (£35)	Right	2½d + ½d franking (MB)
31 Jul 1880	Liverpool Exchange BO	Bordeaux	2015 eBay 381226003509 (£33)	Right	2½d plate 17 + 2d plate 15 (MB)
6 Oct 1880	Liverpool	USA	1997 IL/1911 (£160)	?	No illustration seen
16 Feb 1881	Liverpool Exchange BO	Whitehaven	c.2004 Mark Samwell (£95)	Right	Long envelope, damaged 4d pl 17, Whitehaven ST cds (MB)

MB Maurice Buxton collection

MW Martin Willcocks collection, Cavendish 25 Jun 1999

S1 Severn Collection part 1, David Feldman 13-14 Apr 2010

Cav xxx/yyyy Cavendish auction xxx, lot yyy

IL Ian Little collection, Cavendish 26 Sep 1997

VS Vivien Sussex collection, Cavendish sale 615 6 Mar 2002

S2 Severn Collection part 2, David Feldman 18 Nov 2010

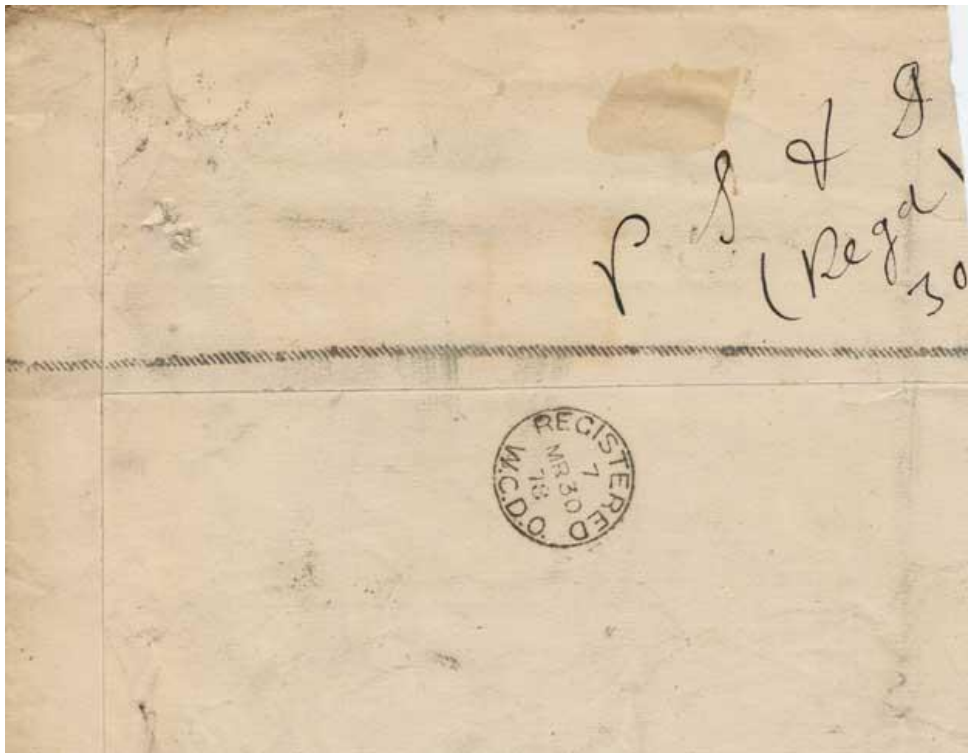
To this list should be added an example in fair condition that appeared (undescribed as such) on eBay circa 2005, and which from memory sold for about £110. If I recorded the details then, I have been unable to track them down now!

¹ James Mackay, *Registered Mail of the British Isles*, published by the author 1982.

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Image Gallery

Earliest recorded usage – March 1878



Fred Taylor

Liverpool head office?

30th March 1878 – part cover, **earliest recorded item**, hatching slopes left

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The two known "one-off" usages



Ian Baker

Birmingham

10th May 1878 – only non-Liverpool example recorded
Hatching slopes left



GBPS

Liverpool, Exchange BO

8th July 1878 – REGISTERED REGISTERED REGISTERED ...
Only recorded example of this unique style of roller

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August/September 1878



Liverpool, Ranelagh Place

21st August 1878 – printed matter to Prussia



3rd September 1878
(illustration from auction catalogue)

Cavendish Philatelic Auctions

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December 1878 – January 1879



Cavendish Philatelic Auctions

Liverpool, Exchange BO

31st December 1878



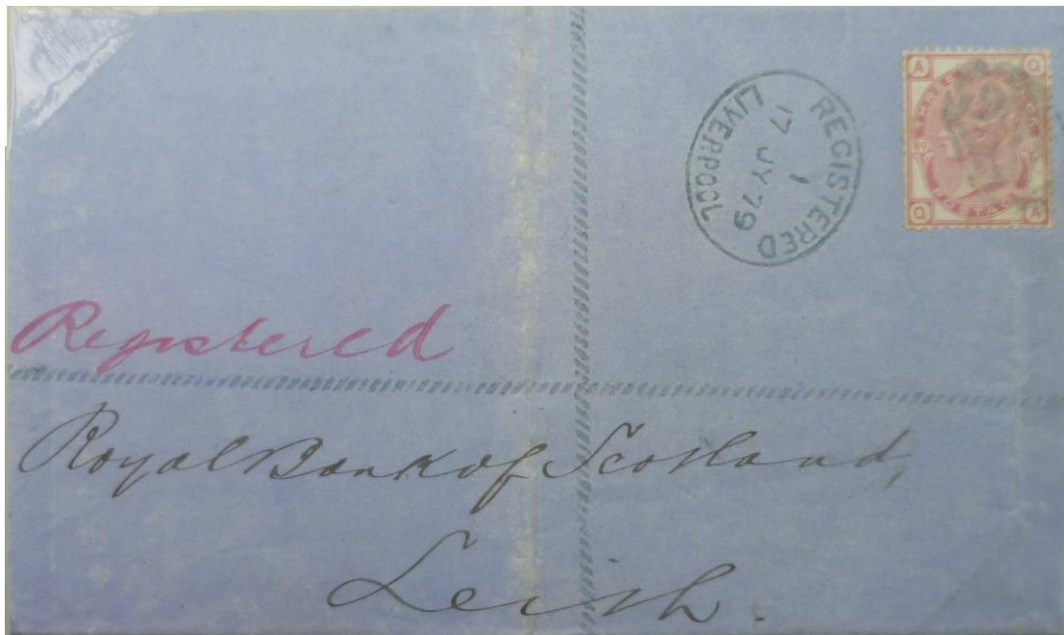
Cavendish Philatelic Auctions

Liverpool head office

25th January 1879

THE REGISTRATION "ROTARY DEVICE"

July/August 1879



(photo) Andrew Lajer stock

Liverpool head office

17th July 1879



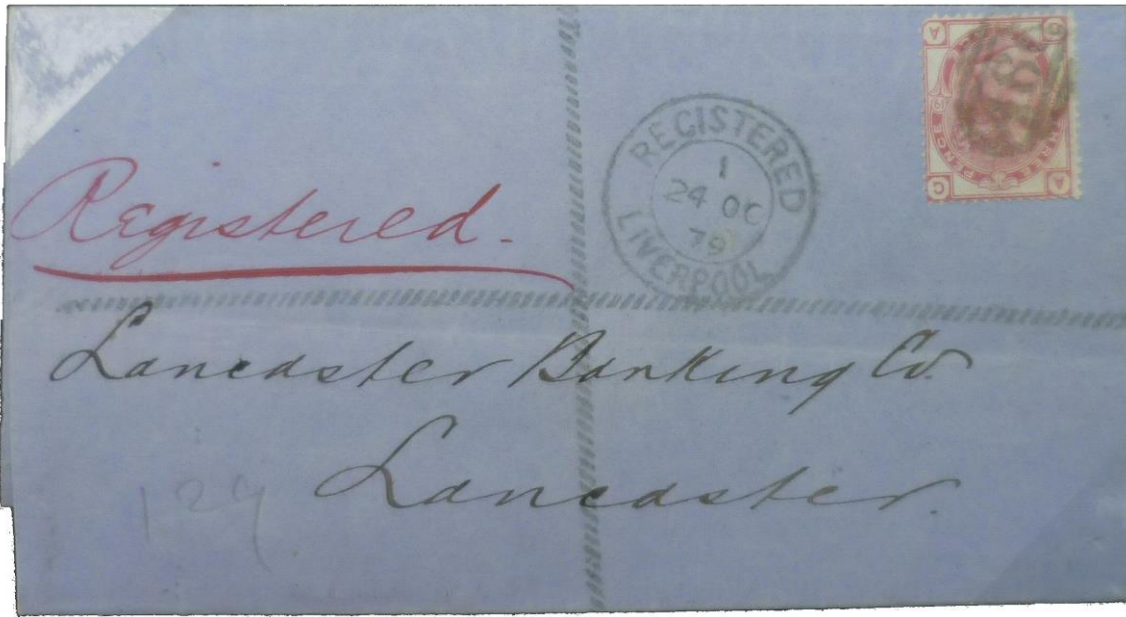
Cavendish Philatelic Auctions

Liverpool, Exchange BO

2nd August 1879, front only

THE REGISTRATION "ROTARY DEVICE"

October 1879



(photo) Andrew Lajer stock

Liverpool head office

24th October 1879



Liverpool, Exchange BO

29th October 1879

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December 1879 – February 1880



GBPS

Liverpool, Ranelagh Place

9th December 1879, Inland printed matter, an unusual rate



Cavendish Philatelic Auctions

Liverpool, Exchange BO

2nd February 1880 to Venice

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February 1880



Liverpool, Exchange BO

9th February 1880 – crayon cross *not* roller lines



Cavendish Philatelic Auctions

Liverpool head office

16th February 1880

(illustration from auction catalogue)

THE REGISTRATION "ROTARY DEVICE"

May/July 1880



Liverpool, Exchange BO

5th May 1880

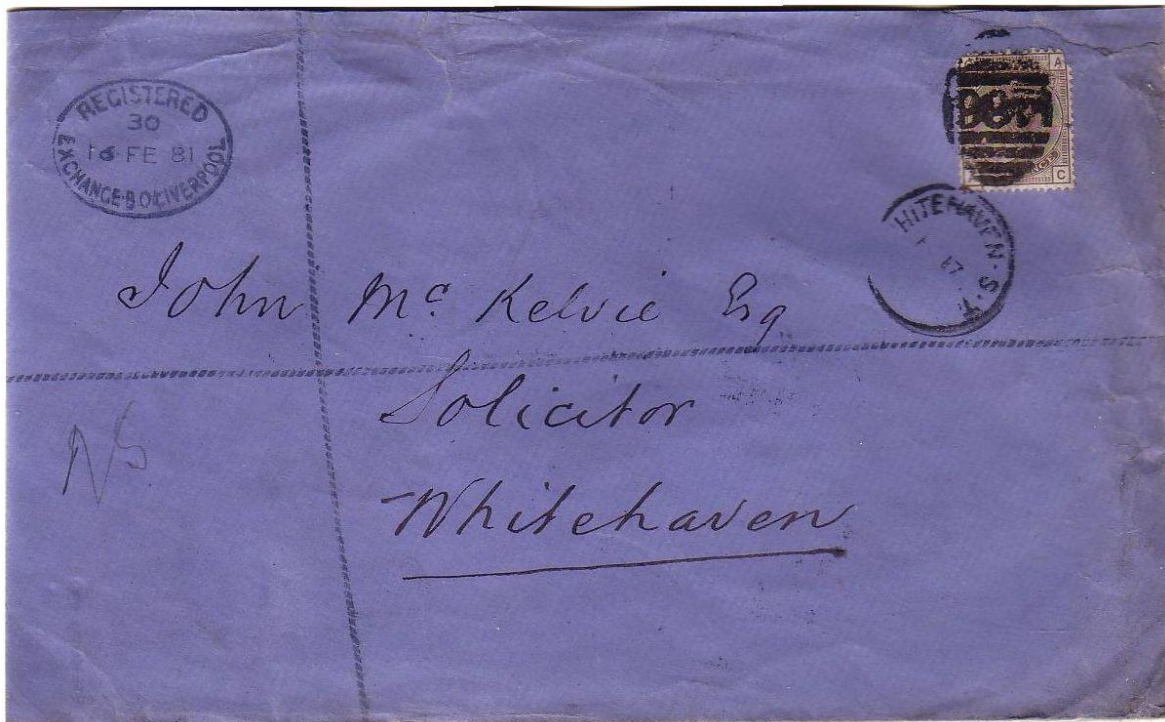


Liverpool, Exchange BO

31st July 1880 to Bordeaux

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Latest recorded usage – February 1881



Liverpool, Exchange BO

16th February 1881, latest recorded item

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Origin of the “Rotary Device”

As previously stated, these devices do not seem to be mentioned in the archives. There have been a number of discussions in philatelic publications, but these have been unavoidably speculative and based largely on inferences from the known items. In this section I have simply tried to present the various suggestions as clearly as possible, together with such data as I have from the archives that seems relevant (if only in a negative sense to show which ideas did *not* pan out!).

“Ernest Goodwin”

The first reference to the rotary devices that I am aware of² is a brief mention in James Mackay’s 1982 book on British registered mail³:

A cover in the collection of Mrs Vivien Sussex, shown here, has blue lines which, on closer examination, appear to have been impressed in blue ink by means of some kind of rotary device giving an impression of short oblique strokes. From the fact that this letter was addressed to a bank I am inclined to the view that it was a device used by a bank rather than the post office. On the other hand, it may be that this device was that suggested by Ernest Goodwin of the Liverpool post office who claimed some years later (February 1887) to have invented the blue lines on envelopes.

Goodwin’s was only one of several claims which were made in subsequent years by various postal officials seeking recognition (and compensation) for their supposed invention ...

The cover referred to was dated 17th July 1879 (see the image gallery). Many more examples have come to light since the book was published, and the variety of uses make the “bank” hypothesis untenable.

Mr Goodwin, however, seemed a more promising candidate. Vivien Sussex had an outstanding collection of registered mail which was sold in 2002, and my (admittedly hazy) recollection of a conversation with her in which the point came up was that she thought Goodwin might have patented the roller device. It was the theory I had generally assumed, used in my writeups, and put forward when the subject came up.

Unfortunately, on closer inspection it looks thoroughly unconvincing.

Mackay’s reference to Goodwin appears to be to a letter dated 17th December 1889 in a BPMA file⁴ that includes letters falling into two separate groups. The first is from 1877 – the surveyors’ actual replies to the circular mentioned above. The second is later correspondence to and from various parties who claimed to be the originator of the “blue lines” concept.

Chief among these was one James Buck, postmaster of Boston for 32 years, who stated that he had made the suggestion when “*the Surveyors of the Post Office sent out notices to their respective Postmasters asking if any and what improvements could be made in the despatch of registered letters*”. He first made his claim for recognition (and of course remuneration) via his former Surveyor Ernest Milliken in 1885, and then in a letter of his own in 1896. Another claim was made on behalf of a Mr Knight (1908), a justice in Natal who was said to have come up with the idea when inundated with registered letters during the Zulu war. Since this took place in 1879, more than a year after the method had been introduced nationwide in the United Kingdom, we can regard his claim as lacking priority ...

² No references were found using the most plausible search terms in the database of the Royal Philatelic Society, London (<http://www.rpsl.org.uk/catalogue.asp>).

³ Mackay, *op. cit.*, p.97.

⁴ POST 30/753A, “Registration system: suggested substitution of pencil cross marking in place of green tape”. Unfortunately Mackay did not specify sources by archival reference, merely describing them in general terms.

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Goodwin’s actual letter in the file reads as follows:

9 Brighton Rd
Birkdale
Southport

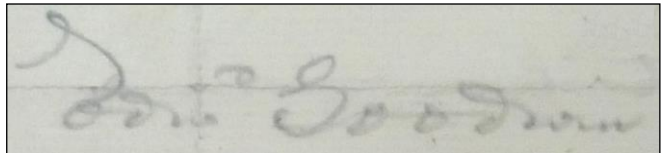
17 – 12 – 89

Sir

Some years ago when I was employed in the Liverpool Post Office, I submitted a plan, to the Postmaster General, by which the green tape used for tying around registered letters might be saved, and also much time, but some excuse was made at the time and I was merely thanked, through the Postmaster of Liverpool (Mr Browning), and my plan was laid aside. I find however that the exact plan is now in full working order, and I think therefore I am entitled to some recognition however trifling, and should feel very grateful if you would give me your opinion about it, as the plan in question was mine, and my friends are anxious to know the results of this application.

Yours respectfully
Edmd Goodwin

Incidentally, the date on the letter *is* clearly 1889 not 1887 (and endorsed as such in the file), and the signature at the end appears to be Edmund not Ernest (for example, compare the ‘d’s here):



This does not seem, on its face, to be referring to the invention or use of a specific device. It appears to be simply another claim to the “blue lines” method, and indeed reads as if the suggestion was both made and rejected at some earlier point than the discussions of late 1877, and that the writer has only now found out that it was subsequently put into operation. (Which seems disingenuous; Goodwin may not have personally been involved in implementing the new method, if he was no longer in the employ of the Post Office by 1878⁵ – but if he had sent, received, or even so much as *seen* a registered letter at any point in the succeeding decade, it is hard to see how he could not have noticed that it bore blue crossed lines!)

Regarding the patent suggestion, there are no relevant entries in the *Alphabetical Name Index of Applicants for British Patents* for the years 1874-1890 under either version of the name⁶.

The only response to Circular No 10 that suggests making the lines with anything other than the blue pencils available from H.M. Stationery Office came from a Mr Stow of the Metropolitan district, who answered on 14th November:

... I see no objection to the proposed substitution ... The only question that occurs to me is whether it would not be worth while in London to have some description of stamp suited to the purpose with which the Letters might be impressed. Such a stamp would secure something like uniformity of treatment and its impression would present a neater appearance perhaps than the ‘marking’ performed by so many different hands.

This suggestion appears to have been for a handstamp with a cross pattern, not a roller, and was not proceeded with: comments added to the response point out that it failed to take account of the differing sizes of registered letters, and that they often did not have a smooth surface to stamp.

The response from Mr Rich, the actual Liverpool surveyor, on 14th November merely offers brief agreement and makes no suggestion of any alternative to the pencils:

⁵ No Ernest Goodwin of Liverpool is listed for the appropriate period in the Post Office appointment books (available online and in the BPMA search room via ancestry.com), but there is a record for Edmund Goodwin, who was appointed as a clerk in the Liverpool office on 14th December 1840. His age at the time is not given, but he could well have retired by 1878.

⁶ Answers to email queries to the British Library, 6th January 2014 and 15th September 2015. The only patents attributed to “Goodwin E” were for cases for musical instruments (1888) and for stringed instruments (1890).

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With reference to the Circular to Surveyors No 10 I am of opinion that the plan of distinguishing registered letters by means of blue pencil marks as proposed would answer well, especially as regards saving of labour.

While preparing a response to Mr Buck, the Post Office discovered that the earliest similar suggestion of which they had a record was a formal proposal by a Mr Good at a Surveyors meeting, which dated back to 1865. Indeed, two Surveyors in their responses to the Circular in 1877 recalled similar proposals during the original discussions that led to the use of green tape. It seems to have been the sort of commonsense idea that would naturally have occurred to many people independently.

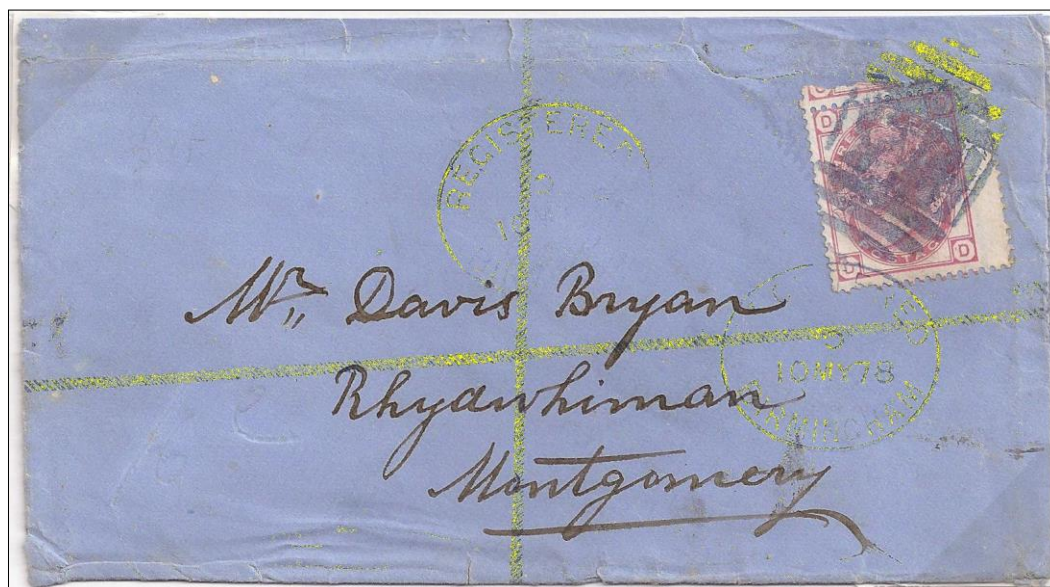
Birmingham workshops?

The devices were discussed in two contributions to the *GBPS Newsletter* by Ian Baker and myself in 2010⁷, At that time Ian’s example from Birmingham was the earliest recorded, and he asked:

Is it possible that the device was developed in the industrial workshops in Birmingham for the local postmaster? — the idea then passing to Liverpool, as both towns were in the same North Wales surveyor’s district and that an attempted improvement was made there by having the ‘Registered Registered Registered’ roller device made? This is only recorded on 8 July 1878 (Cavendish Auctions, March 2002, Lot 142), two months before Liverpool’s own hatched device is known used.

However, Fred Taylor’s part cover from Liverpool is now the earliest recorded example (and it turns out that the offices were not in the same Surveyor’s district⁸ anyway) – an illustration of how new data can spoil a promising theory! Of course, the same applies to my Goodwin suggestion, as shown above.

The Birmingham example is a unique and somewhat surprising cover – though there is little suggestive information relating to Liverpool, there is none at all about Birmingham. As the letter is addressed to Wales, one conceivable possibility is that the letter was originally tied with green tape being used up at Birmingham, and that the lines were added in transit at Liverpool. However, since the lines appear to be in the same ink as the Birmingham cancellation and oval datestamps, this seems unlikely:



Scan of the Birmingham cover with a blue shade from the lines replaced by yellow in Paint Shop Pro (at 10% tolerance); with similar results to the postmarks where the latter are on the envelope

This is a useful heuristic for judging similarity of colour from an image⁹

⁷ Ian Baker and Maurice Buxton, *Registration 'Rotary Device'*, *GBPS Newsletter* 321, Jan/Feb 2010, p.21.

⁸ On 1st March 1870, the surveyor of the North Western District was relieved of the charge of the two largest offices in the district, Liverpool and Manchester: each became (with its Sub Offices) a separate Surveyor’s District in its own right, with the respective Postmasters taking on the additional duties. POST 30/197A.

⁹ See Richard Frajola, “Expertising a Mexico-US Combination Cover”, <http://www.rfrajola.com/mexico.htm>

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Note that while the hatching lines slope *left* on the Birmingham cover, all except the earliest few Liverpool examples have the hatching sloping *right*. This would certainly be consistent with the method having been invented in one town and transferred, though perhaps it’s best not to read too much into this. As noted in the followup article in 2014¹⁰ – whichever office came up with the idea first, the other would surely have seen examples arrive in the mails shortly afterwards in the normal course of business, and either contacted them for details or deduced the nature of the lines and had their own device made.

Roller Cancellations

So what then was the origin of the “rotary devices”?

In the absence of documentary evidence, surely the simplest and most reasonable guess is that they were a variant of the “machine” in use at large offices that produced continuous roller cancellations.

This gadget had a number of canceller dies on a wheel which rotated against a felt pad with a built-in reservoir of ink. It was intended to speed up cancellation for items with more than one stamp, which in pre-Parcel Post days meant primarily registered items and higher weight packets that required a higher postage rate.¹¹



*Photograph of a surviving example of the machine
(this one was used at Manchester)*

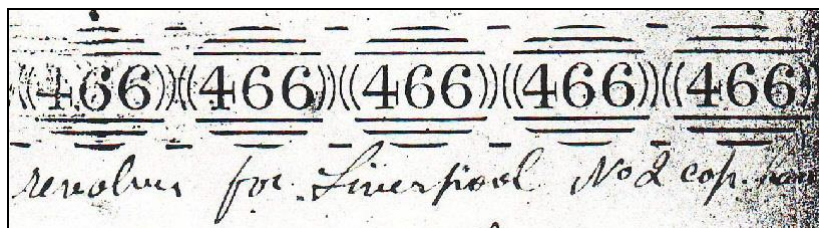
Machines of this type had been in use from the 1850s, and would have been familiar to staff at both the Liverpool and Birmingham offices, as both were supplied with devices of this type:

To the P.M.G.,

I beg to recommend that Mr Abbot be authorised to order as he proposes, twelve obliterating stamps from the pattern originally designed by the late Mr. F Godby at a cost of 25/- each.

It is proposed to distribute them amongst the following offices, viz.-

London (2), Edinburgh (2), Dublin, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, Birmingham, Bristol, Aberdeen and Dundee.¹²



Proof book entry of one of the Liverpool “rollers” from December 1856

One can imagine that the postmaster at (on the balance of probabilities) Liverpool might have decided to experiment with a device of this type for the new requirement of marking lines on registered letters, but in a simpler format that used the usual ink pad.

¹⁰ Maurice Buxton, *Registration Rotary Device Redux*, GBPS Newsletter 350, Nov/Dec 2014, p.31.

¹¹ Russell Taylor, “Roller (Revolver) Cancellations (showing office in numerals only)”, <http://gbvictorianpostmarks.co.uk/wp/roller-revolver-cancellations>

¹² Minute to the Postmaster General, 28th April 1856 (via Taylor, *op.cit.*)

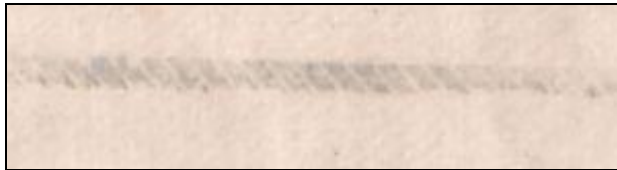
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Notes on Usage

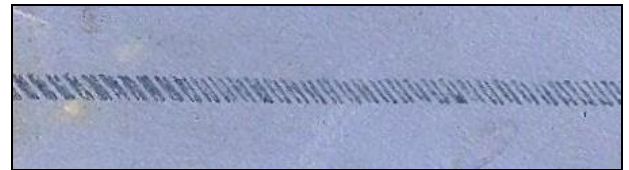
The following short notes aim to draw attention to one or two points whose significance may not be obvious from the list of recorded examples.

The Lines

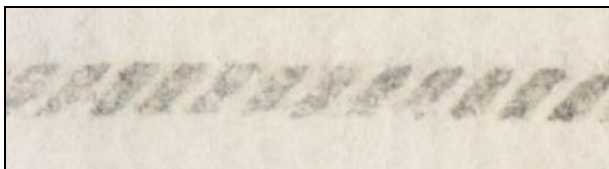
The wheel parts of the rotary devices were clearly cut with a pattern of diagonal grooves that give a “hatching” effect. This hatching slopes *left* on early example, *right* on later ones, with (so far) no crossover in the periods of recorded use:



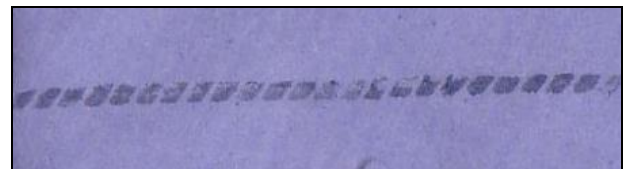
1878



1878 (Birmingham)



1879



1881

The pattern must indicate which way the wheel part of the rotary device was cut – the “handedness” would be the same whichever way round it was inserted into the device, and whichever direction the device was rolled. There is no particularly obvious reason why the pattern should be *consistently* different, especially if the wheels were an off-the-shelf component of some kind (which seems a reasonable supposition).

At Liverpool the lines seem to always be struck in the same colour as the dispatching office datestamp (with the exception of the unique “REGISTERED REGISTERED REGISTERED” roller), presumably done at the same time by the same clerk. This would indicate that the two Liverpool branch offices from which covers are known (Exchange and Ranelagh Place) had their own rollers. For all except the 1881 item (in the ‘correct’ blue) both datestamps and lines are in black, or at any rate greyish, ink. It should go without saying therefore that it would be wise to be wary of any roller lines on covers in an ink that does *not* appear to match that of the datestamp.

Period of Use

It is unlikely that the rotary devices came into use on 1st January 1878 at the start of the new system. Note that the *Post Office Circular* No 38 quoted above stated that the green twine method was to be “*gradually abolished*” and the existing stocks used up. The exact dates for when any given office had worked through its backlog of twine seem to have been subject to wide variation; I have seen Edinburgh covers without lines from as late as November 1878. So it’s possible that the first known dates for the roller lines in early 1878 might represent the approximate points at which Liverpool and Birmingham finally ran out.

However, note that one of the covers in the image gallery from the Liverpool Exchange branch office is within the dates of recorded use of roller lines there, but has the normal *pencilled* lines. The roller may simply have been out of commission at the time, but equally possible is that different clerks (maybe at different positions) preferred different methods. If so, and if this applied throughout the period of use, it

THE REGISTRATION “ROTARY DEVICE”

would go some way to explaining why the roller lines are so scarce – they were after all in use for over three years at offices in one of the major commercial centres of the kingdom.

The latest example recorded is from early 1881, and the use of the rotary devices is unlikely to have gone on much longer. Why did the Liverpool Post Office stop using them? That’s further guesswork, unfortunately. The national postal authorities may finally have objected to the non-standard arrangements, or a change in senior personnel in Liverpool may have resulted in a change of policy (although no appointments for the relevant period are recorded for the city in the *Post Office Circular*¹³). However, in the absence of some explanatory documentation it’s at least equally plausible to suppose that they were simply more trouble than they were worth, and that the blue pencils were much more convenient!

Final Note

There should in principle be a fair few more of these covers about. Reports (and even better, scans) of other examples would be welcomed – as indeed would examples of registered mail of this period from either city that do *not* have the roller lines, in order to build up a picture of the usage.

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September 2015

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¹³ Index to Post Office Circulars 1861-1912, “APPOINTMENTS” section.



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