

# TIME IN CODE LETTER FORM

by

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## PART I

Code letters have appeared on many hand-stamps obliterating mail in Malta. Many Postmark collectors have questioned their significance but very little work has been done on them. However, much evidence has been assembled to indicate that "letters" were used to code times for specific box closings until "time in the clear" had been adopted.

W.G. Stitt Dibden in his exhaustive study of 'The Squared Circle Postmarks' noted that from the early 1800's the Post Office in Great Britain, used a day code in stamps, that is, "A" was given to the first day of the month, and advanced each day, thus the 25th of the month, say, was indicated by the letter "T". In 1896, the Too Late Code "Z" was used for Too Late first despatch and "ZZ" for Too Late last despatch.(1)

Towards the end of the century, the public knew the details of a "clock code" which had been in use by the telegraph service for many years. The Postmaster of Liverpool suggested a modification of this "clock code" thus:

letters A to M for the hours (excluding "J")

letters A to L for the minutes in five-minute intervals (excluding "J"), that is, the coded time for 10.45 a.m. appeared on the handstamp as KI; Anti-Meridian and Post-Meridian being denoted by the letters "A" or "P" in combination with the hour and minute letters, so KI A on the handstamp indicated 10.45 a.m.

But on August 11th 1894 it was decided to scrap the "code time" and to introduce "time in the clear"; after August 2nd 1899, it became the rule that clock time was not to be used in counter handstamps. Then it became obligatory, after July 7th, 1902, to use the asterisk in place of code or time letters and figures where the use of the handstamp did not include cancelling letters from box closings.(2)

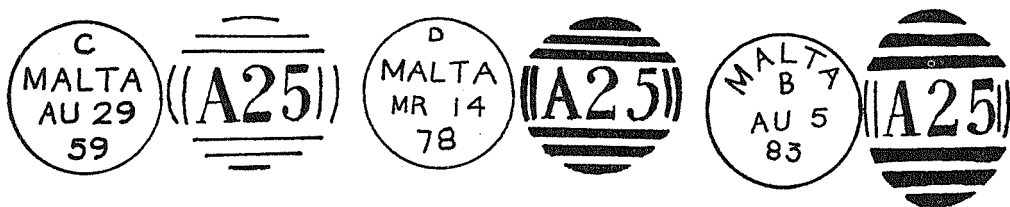
## EARLY POSTMARKS

In Malta, code letters have featured on many handstamps. The following are the coded handstamps used by the Central Office, Post Offices, Postal Agencies, Sub-Post Offices and Army and Field Post Offices in Malta to date:

The earliest recorded type of a handstamp with Code Letters in Malta is a 19 mm diameter c.d.s. type struck in red alongside the M Cancellations or perhaps on the back of such letters and entries in the years after 1857. Only strikes with the code letters A and B have been recorded. Maybe this same strike was used to cancel early half-penny yellows in the early sixties.

Copies of the unwatermarked Half-Penny Yellow, Blue Paper and White Paper, have been cancelled with this type of handstamp, but in black ink, in the early in 1861, '62, '63. In the '70's, this handstamp is known used, back-stamping mail. In 1873, mail coming from the east, via Constantinople, mostly ribbed with disinfected slits, is backstamped with this strike, in black, bearing code letters "A", "B", and very rarely "C", (Fig. a).

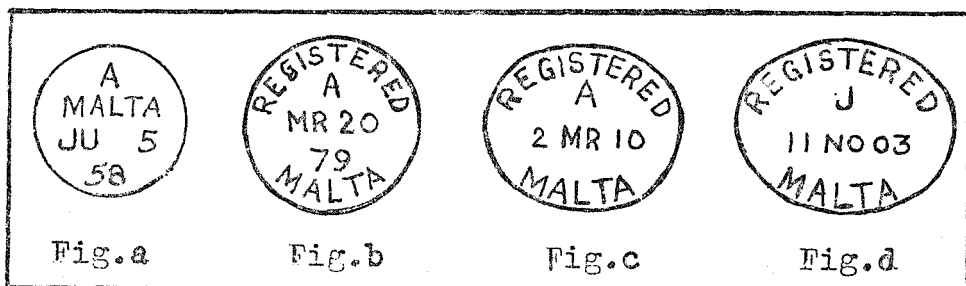
The A 25 Duplex Circular, with thin or thick bars employed between the years 1859 and 1881 bear the code letters A to E. The early morning strikes bear the Code Letter "A"; as the day advanced, Code letter slugs were changed alphabetically, those with the Code letter "E" being the ones employed in the evening. The Code letters lie above MALTA in these types of handstamps. The use of the "E" code letter in such handstamps is rather scarce.



The A 25 non-duplex horizontal oval was used on Registered Mail but together with the 23 mm Registered Circular Handstamp in red or deep red with Code Letters "A" and "B", the former struck in the morning and the latter in the afternoon and evening, (Fig. b).

In 1881 and after, the A 25 Duplex Oval types were used cancelling Great Britain stamps used in Malta as well as the Half-Penny Yellows and Greens, consignments 24-30,(3) (Said Nos. 17, 18, 19, 20), and the 1885 Queen Victoria Definitives, with Code Letters A to L, including the Code Letter "J", the use of which was completely ignored as Code Letter in Great Britain on Post Office handstamps.

The non-duplex A 25 vertical oval was used on Registered Mail cancelling Said Nos 30, 32, 33 and Edward 1903-04 Set ( $\frac{1}{2}$  green to 1/- grey and violet) and also the "ONE PENNY" over-prints, never alone, but in conjunction with the Registered oval with code letters (Roman Capitals) "A" to "Q"(4) to date the Registered Cover. Red ink was used up to about 5 DE 90 and for a short period from 9 OC 02 to 20 FE 03; otherwise the Registered Oval with code letters is found with black ink.(5) Other types of Registered Ovals, sometimes cancelling also the stamps, are without code letters following the regulations by the U.P.U. that Counter use of the handstamp should not include any code letter. The cancellors on the counter have none or sometimes an asterisk as had been the custom at the Forces Post Offices, Field Post Offices and also on the G.P.O. (small letters) types, Trade and Industry Exhibition, Malta, in 1959, and on the Qormi S.P.O. 24 mm metal stamp since 1974.



The Registered Oval types (Figs. c & d), with the code letters "A" to "Q" are also found in conjunction with

(i) the 'bar' cancellations (Four Types) — two with the horizontal bar passing through the word "MALTA", from about 1 MR 93 to MY 03<sup>(6)</sup> and the other two with the centre bar discontinued so as not to pass through "MALTA" employed between SP 01 and MY 05.:

(ii) The Maltese Cross cancellor from 3 AP 05 to JA 22;(7)

(iii) the handstamp with large R for Registration together with the Valletta 30 mm double ring with crosses.

Mr. J.G.C. Lander, the Malta Study Circle Official, in charge of the Organisation and Publishing of Study Papers, in his detailed study of the Valletta G.P.O. Postmarks, reports more than 120 different time slugs in the early years of the twentieth century, exactly between the years 1901 and 1921. This could be perhaps the reason for the range of Code Letters "A" to "R" listed by Messrs. Said in their 1977 Malta Stamp Catalogue.

There were indeed more than one type of the "Malta" 19 mm/20 mm diameters c.d.s. in use. Code letters "A" to "R" were reduced to "A" to "K" during and after World War I, even though, Lander, in his article 'Valletta G.P.O. from 1897 — Part 2' (Malta Study Circle Newsletter, Vol. 8, No. 2, Spring 1975) states that the MAL — 1 c.d.s., that is, the handstamp in question, was used on about half the mail from April 1916 to April 1917.

The code letters on these postmarks represented definite times corresponding to the "times in the clear" shown on the modern postmarks. Thus letters with

Malta A/JY 5/11 addressed to Notabile, bears Notabile C/JY 5/11 on the back;

Victoria A/MR 26/97 addressed to Valletta bears Malta G/MR 26/97 on the back;

Malta A/OC 1/19 addressed to Cospicua bears Cospicua B/OC 1/19 on the back;

Malta A/MY 22/93 addressed to Ghain-Sielem, Gozo, bears Migiarrro B/MY 22/93 on the back;

Malta A/JU 5/08 addressed to Sliema, bears Sliema 7.45 a.m./5 JU/08 as backstamp;

Malta F/DE 24/07 addressed to Sliema, bears Sliema 4.15 p.m./24 DE/07;  
but with

Malta D/FE 16/20 addressed to Sliema, bears Sliema 9.00 a.m./17 FE/20 (that is the day after). This proves that the time represented by the Code Letter "D" in the 80's, 90's and early 20th Century, does not correspond with the same time expressed by the Code letter "D" during and after World War I.

Thus, during the period of use of this circular stamp (Malta 1)<sup>(8)</sup> it may be assumed from the hundreds of items studied, that Code letters "A" to "E" were struck before noon; the code letters "F", "G", "H" on mail to Valletta and branches before 6.00 p.m.; "I", "J", "K", and "L" on mail to Valletta only or abroad; whilst the code letters "M" to "R" (rather scarce), as Late or Too Late Mail. In fact some covers bearing the c.d.s. with these code letters "M" to "R" are cacheted 'Too Late Fee'. The use of the code letters "M" to "R" has been recorded mainly on Queen Victoria stamps between the years 1887 and 1901. One the most most striking examples of the code letter "M" is that struck on Queen Victoria 5/- rose, and dated SP 10 97.

During the second period of use of the c.d.s. Mal. 1, however, it resulted that code letters "A" to "D" were employed on the morning mail, "E" to "H" on the afternoon and evening mail, whilst "I" to "L" on late box closings.

#### REFERENCES

- 1 & 2 "Squared Circle Postmarks" by W.G. Stitt Dibden.
- 3 "Malta Half-Penny Centenary" by Major Fred Orme T.D., published on 1/12/60 as supplement to "The Philatelist and Postal Historian".
- 4 "Said Malta Stamp and Coin Catalogue — 1977" — Registration Marks Section, pp. 178, 179.
- 5, 6 & 7 Malta Study Circle's "Malta Newsletter" Vol. 5, No. 7, April '68.
- 8 "Valletta G.P.O. From 1897, Part 2" by J.G.C. Lander in "Malta Newsletter" Vol. 8, No. 2, Spring 1975.