

The curious case of the Myrtle Bank Hotel Cover

Have you ever looked at an item of postal history and thought that something about it isn't quite as it should be? In a special postal history feature John Tingey presents a late-Victorian 'Whodunnit, Howdunnit and Whydunnit'

'When you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth'

Sherlock Holmes in *The Sign of the Four*
by Arthur Conan Doyle

A mysterious piece of postal history was brought to my attention recently when a fellow collector alerted me to the existence of a cover (figure 1) listed on the website of a dealer who specialises in the stamps and postal history of the British West Indies (BWI). The description on the website read:

MYRTLE BANK HOTEL,
Jamaica postal history

Postally applied blue ink (temporary) rubber datestamp for MAR 8 1900 on New York USA 4c rate cover to undecipherable destination. Returned as instructed to Forest Hill, England (per reverse) showing FULHAM JA 29 00. Forwarded Villa de Regal, Kingston, Jamaica arriving K/FE 23 00 where red 'Opened in error/returned' and blue MYRTLE BANK HOTEL added. At Kingston ADVERTISED, UNCLAIMED with RETURNED LETTER BRANCH AP 9 00. 'Sealed at GPO, Jamaica' with stamp selvage and dated Kingston 7 C/ AP 9 00 before returning to USA where DEAD LETTER OFFICE MAY 14 1900 handstamps applied.

The key feature listed was the application of a blue oval Myrtle

Figure 1: cover bearing four US 1c postage stamps and various postal markings



Bank Hotel date stamp (figure 2) which, so I understand, was previously unrecorded and therefore of significant scarcity and interest to collectors of BWI postal history. The fact that the cover had also been redirected and accumulated a nice variety of postal markings simply enhanced its

attractiveness and desirability.

According to the Caribbean Photo Archives, the Myrtle Bank Hotel was originally converted from a shipyard into a select boarding house and offered personal advice on health issues. By 1875 when downtown Christmas Bazaars became popular



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and drew large crowds, the Myrtle Bank became a recreational and social centre. A music stand was erected in the centre of its tropical garden and The West India Regiment Band entertained large crowds twice a week. Eventually the property was acquired by the government and a modern hotel (figure 3), with long French windows that opened on all sides into verandahs, was built on the site in preparation for the Great Exhibition of 1891. It was destroyed in the 1907 earthquake, reconstructed in 1918 and sold to the United Fruit Company. At that time it was the largest hotel in Jamaica with 205 rooms and a filtered salt-water pool.

A Post Office, located inside the hotel, was issued with its own handstamps of which, prior to this cover, the earliest known dated example being recorded was 20 January, 1901.

This may all appear quite straightforward but there are various clues on the cover that indicate that it was in fact a rather ingenious deception:

1. There is a Fulham postmark, dated 29 January, 1900, tying the US stamps to the cover that pre-dates all of the Jamaican marks. Whilst this may appear to be a simple receiving mark it didn't look quite right.

2. The cover had been redirected to



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Above, left: a previously unrecorded date stamp used by the Myrtle Bank Hotel

Above, picture postcard of the Myrtle Bank Hotel before it was destroyed in 1907 (the lamps on top of the posts were not replaced when the hotel was rebuilt)

Below: two pairs of US 1 cent postage stamps and the original strip of four

Below, right: the address to which the cover was redirected

what was probably a non-existent address in Jamaica.

3. There is a request to return the cover to an address in England when it had apparently been posted in the United States.

These features warranted a closer examination which, in turn, led to the inescapable conclusion that the cover held a mystery that had probably lain hidden for over 100 years.

Fulham Postmark

The fact that the Fulham postmark just touches the bottom perforations of the right-hand pair (figure 4) led me to look much closer at the US cancellation on the stamps.

No part of the US postmark can be seen tying either of the pairs of stamps to the cover. At least a portion

of the textual component of the mark should be evident on the left pair but is conspicuous by its absence. Also worthy of note is that the bars of the cancellation of the two pairs are not quite aligned; those on the left pair are slightly lower than the ones on the right and they slant down to the left whereas those on the right are horizontal. All this leads to the inevitable conclusion that these stamps had been used on a different item of mail prior to being affixed to this cover.

A further problem lay with the fact that the correct postage rate from the US to a foreign destination was 5 cents whereas this cover only bears stamps to the value of 4 cents.

With my suspicions aroused I decided to have a bit of fun and submitted the stamps to some Photoshop manipulation. I created separate images for each pair,



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Right: picture postcard of King's House, the residence of the Governor of Jamaica

straightened and then swapped them around before re-joining them (figure 5). The results were quite revealing since it is clear that they started out as a used strip of four that had been split into two pairs and 'reversed' presumably to mask the fact that the cancellation was incomplete. On the original mail the missing section of the cancellation probably tied the stamps to the envelope.

Conclusion – this was a previously used strip of four that had been separated into two pairs and swapped around before being affixed to the envelope.

Redirection

The cover has been redirected to Villa du Regal (figure 6) the existence of which I can find no record. There is a King's House (figure 7) which was, and still is, the official residence of the Governor of Jamaica. Conclusion – the address to which the cover was redirected was deliberately misleading.

Request to return

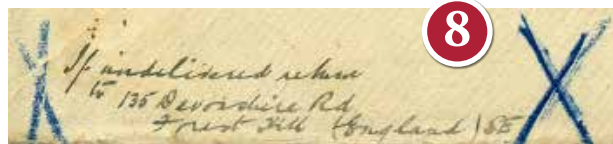
The most damning evidence of all is found in the bottom left corner of the reverse side. Here is a handwritten request (figure 8) to return the mail, if undelivered, to an address in England.

It is this small statement that proves that the cover is not what it seems. The key to the deception, for that is what it is, lay with the postal antics of W. Reginald Bray (figure 9) whose family occupied 135 Devonshire Road, Forest Hill (figure 10) at the time this cover was posted.

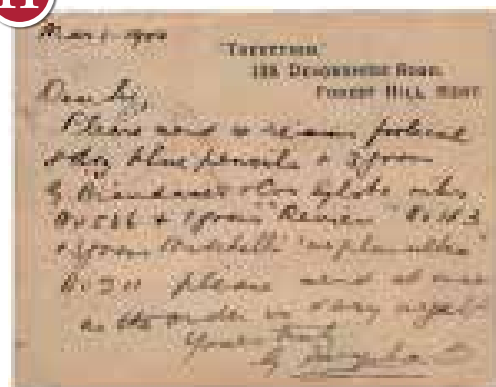
Since 1898, Bray had been creating and mailing all manner of postal curios to satisfy his desire to test the postal system. Bray was also an avid postmark collector and devised many unusual methods to have mail delivered to his home from all four corners of the globe hopefully bearing new and exotic marks that would further increase his ever expanding collection. Over a period of a few short years he amassed more than 10,000 examples, a feat that led him to claim to have the largest collection in the world. Conclusion – this cover was devised by W. Reginald Bray.

Time to look again

Having established that the cover was created by Bray to fool the postal authorities into thinking that it had failed to find its legitimate recipient and thus required redirecting to Jamaica, it becomes necessary to look at it



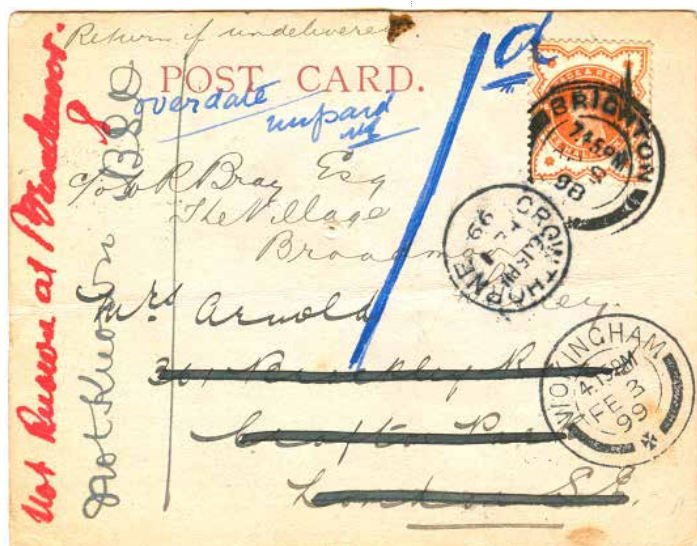
Request to return the mail, if undelivered, to 135 Devonshire Road Forest Hill, England. Note the similarity between the handwriting used to write this instruction and that to write 'Villa du Regal'; W. Reginald Bray posting one of his mischievous creations at Chislehurst Station, Kent; A Penfold pillar box outside 135 Devonshire Road, Forest Hill (2010)



Postcard sent from Peru, dated May 1900



Envelope sent from Catford to a fictitious address in Zanzibar with instructions to return to England if undelivered.



from a completely different perspective.

Foreign stamps

The use of foreign stamps by Bray to further his cause was not unique to this cover; he had employed similar means of misdirection with other items of mail although not necessarily in quite the same manner.

In May 1900 Bray hid a stamped self-addressed postcard (figure 11) inside a bulky newspaper which he then sent to a fictitious address in Peru. When the newspaper duly arrived at the Peruvian Dead Letter Office the hidden card was discovered and since it bore the appropriate postage it was delivered to England the following month.

In 1899 Bray addressed an envelope (figure 12) to himself using a fictitious address and an unused Zanzibar postage stamp. Despite the fact that the stamp was invalid for mail posted in England the card still managed to get to Zanzibar, albeit with a 1d

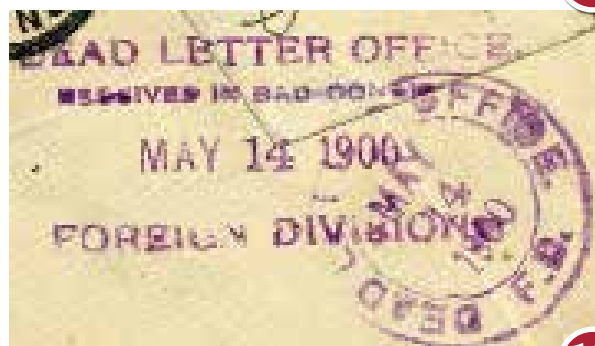
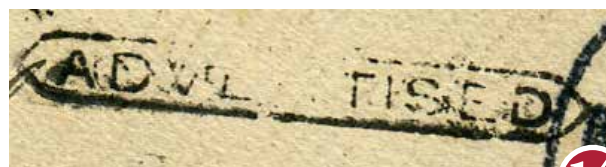
fee applied, before being returned according to the instructions he wrote on the back.

Original address

The addressee was a Mr. Arnold, no doubt referring to Ernest Arnold who was Bray's best friend and co-conspirator in his experimentation with the postal system.

Bray would often send strange items of mail to Arnold or use his name to redirect mail to him at false addresses (figure 13) always ensuring that he included his standard request that they be returned to Bray in the case of non-delivery.

At the time of writing I have been unable to decipher the first address on the Jamaican cover. It may well be that this has been deliberately written so badly that no one, not even the postal authorities of the time, could read it and thus prevent it being despatched to Jamaica. This kind of deception was well within Bray's capabilities.



Top: four postal curios that involved Ernest Arnold, Bray's friend and co-conspirator in his postal system experimentation

Above: an advertised Instructional Mark; the United States Dead Letter Office marks which Bray would have been very pleased to see

After much research it is possible to reconstruct the events that led to the creation of this quite remarkable cover employing a combination of facts and suppositions (in the table below), the latter of which are stated in *italics*:

A nice bit of Postal History

Once the Post Office had fallen for Bray's craftiness the cover was despatched to what we now know was a non-existent address in Jamaica. It may well be that the Jamaican postal authorities thought that the sender probably meant for it to be delivered to one of the more prestigious hotels on the island, hence the application of the coveted Myrtle Bank Hotel mark.

Having failed to find the correct recipient, even after a period of being advertised (figure 14) as 'unclaimed mail', the Jamaican postal authorities decided that the cover should be returned to the United States since the stamps indicated that it had originated from there. This is apparent from the United States Foreign Division Dead Letter Office markings (figure 15) found on the reverse of the cover.

The blue crayon crosses (figure 8) either side of the return instructions indicate that Bray's request had been noted and duly acted upon. Bray would have been hoping to receive back the cover with some Jamaican postal markings. It was probably beyond his wildest expectations that it had also travelled to the United States acquiring two very nice Dead Letter Office marks, let alone to have been franked with a very scarce Myrtle Bank Hotel postmark.

Whilst there may need to be a few minor adjustments made to this sequence of events we clearly have a cover that started in England, travelled to Jamaica, went on to the United States and eventually arrived back in England all the time having no intention of actually being delivered to the original addressee.

The final verdict

Whodunnit?

W. Reginald Bray

Howdunnit?

Reusing old US postage stamps and redirecting to a false address in Jamaica

Whydunnit?

To test the postal system

To increase his collection of postmarks

...because he could

...Elementary my dear reader.

Date	Event	Reasoning
January 1900	Bray asked a friend or relative to address an envelope to Ernest Arnold using a fictitious address	Address not in Bray's handwriting. The lack of other marks indicated that the envelope had not previously passed through the postal system
	Bray split a used strip of four US 1 cent stamps into two pairs and affixed them onto the envelope, swapping their positions around	US postmark only appears to be contiguous with the two pairs positioned in the correct order
	Bray crossed out the fake address and redirected to Villa du Regal in Jamaica	Written in Bray's handwriting
29 January, 1900	Posted in Fulham	Fulham postmark
7 February, 1900	Cover despatched via Royal Mail Steam Packet to the Caribbean	From official records
23 February, 1900	RMSP docked in Kingston, Jamaica	From official records. Kingston, Jamaica receiving marks
<i>February 1900</i>	<i>Jamaican Post Office unable to ascertain to where the mail should be delivered</i>	<i>Fictitious address</i>
<i>March 1900</i>	<i>Cover delivered to the Myrtle Bank Hotel in the hope that Mr Arnold was a guest</i>	
<i>March 1900</i>	<i>Opened at the Myrtle Bank Hotel to examine the contents</i>	Hand written instructional mark 'Opened in error returned'
8 March, 1900	Returned to the Head Post Office	Myrtle Bank Hotel postmark
March 1900	Sealed by Jamaican Post Office with selvedge from the edge of a sheet of postage stamps	Hand written instructional mark 'Sealed at G.P.O Jamaica'
March 1900	Advertised as unclaimed mail, <i>possibly in the Kingston Gazette</i>	Unclaimed and Advertised instructional marks
9 April, 1900	After a month without being claimed shipped 'back' to the United States	Jamaican postmarks on front and back
14 May, 1900	Received at the United States Foreign Division Dead Letter Office, marked as received in bad condition	US FD Dead Letter postmarks
May 1900	'If undelivered address' identified and returned to England	Blue crayon crosses either side of Bray's address in Forest Hill
<i>Unknown date</i>	<i>Second attempt to open cover to examine contents, possibly by a future collector/owner. Alternatively this might have taken place at the Head Post Office in Kingston to determine if there was a US address to which it could be returned</i>	<i>Partly opened selvedge. Second set of initials on back</i>