The Cape Post Office 1795-1910: A Final Report
by Franco Frescura

FOREWORD

This paper is based upon data gathered during the course of field research conducted between 1979 and 2002, and although I have published much of this information previously, it has never been subjected as a whole to a process of systematic analysis. A number of the individual Office Date Stamps (ODS) described here have been the subject of separate papers (Frescura, 1982, 1983b, 1984, 1989) but, to date, I have not made an attempt to bring the information together on a comparative basis (Frescura, 2002). In a way, therefore, this should be read as my final report on the subject.

In a general sense, some of the trends described here have been understood for some time, but have never been quantified, while a number of assumptions I made previously have now been brought into greater focus. Happily this analysis has yielded a number of original conclusions which have increased my understanding of the daily affairs of the Cape Colonial Post Office, although it is now also clear that many other aspects are still in need of additional investigation.

INTRODUCTION

The use of Earliest and Latest Recorded Dates (ERD and LRD) as a means of establishing patterns of usage for hand-held postal cancellers is a research methodology based upon the assumption that, in the era before mechanization, the documentary data presented by a postal marking was reliable enough to be accepted at its primary face value. This can certainly be held to be true in the majority of cases involving clear strikes delivered by an ODS, and usually includes information relating to the place of posting, and the date and time of processing. This was backed up by a range of postal rules and operational procedures which specifically regulated the behaviour of postal officials and the use of their office cancellers.

The need to monitor the progress of mails through the postal delivery system must have been realised at an early stage in the history of postal affairs, and although the British Post Office only introduced postal adhesives for the first time in May 1840, by the mid-1850s its postal markings and processing procedures were held to be reliable enough to be used as evidence in a court of law.

In the Madeleine Smith murder trial, for example, which was held in Glasgow in 1857, a young woman of respectable middle class background was charged with poisoning her French lover, one Pierre Emile L’Angelier, who was employed as a clerk in a seedpacking company. The affair cooled after a few years, and when Ms Smith became engaged to William Minnoch, a wealthy bachelor and a rising star in the Glasgow business world, she asked L’Angelier to return her letters. Suspecting that he was “onto a good thing”, the man refused to break off the liaison, and threatened to make public her correspondence. After suffering from a short bout of stomach cramps on 19 February 1857, he fell ill again on 22 February and died early the following morning. After his employers requested that a post mortem be carried out on his body, it was found that the cause of his death had been arsenic poisoning. Because of these circumstances, Smith became the prime suspect in the police investigation that followed, and was eventually charged with his murder.

During the course of their passionate courtship the couple had exchanged some 500 letters, but as Ms Smith had destroyed those sent to her by L’Angelier and had never dated hers, the postal markings upon her surviving envelopes took on additional significance. The Crown was never able to prove that the couple had met on those dates, or that Smith had been in possession of arsenic on the 18 February, and its case ultimate came to rest upon a letter which, it alleged, proved that the couple had met briefly on the night of 22 February. The letter was merely headed “Wednesday” without a date, but the postmark on the envelope had been carelessly struck and was virtually illegible. In his evidence, Rowland Hill McDonald, Controller of the Sorting Office at the Glasgow Post Office, examined the postmarks and pronounced them to be “illegible”, but subsequently stated that the one figure could have been a “2”. Thus the letter could have been sent either on 2 February, or on 22 February or on some other date thereafter.

Had the Crown been able to prove conclusively in its evidence that the letter had been posted on or after 22 February 1857, then its contents would have indicated that Smith could have met L’Angelier on that date, and could therefore have had the opportunity of administering the poison. Fortunately for her the judge found that the strike delivered by the Glasgow Post Office upon the envelope was not distinct enough to be considered definitive beyond reasonable doubt, and Smith escaped the gallows (Mackay, 1984: 41-47). In the aftermath of post-trial publicity, public opinion turned against her, her fiancé broke off their engagement, and after moving to London, she went on to marry an associate of William Morris, became secretary to Karl Marx’s son-in-law, was a pioneer socialist and suffragette, and eventually died at the age of 93. The Glasgow Post Office, on the other hand was roundly pilloried for failing to apply a legible strike to an item of commercial mail entrusted to its care.

In South Africa, the practice of processing mails was similarly held to be reliable, and it remained common practice, right up to the 1970s, for government departments to accept country tenders forwarded by mail provided the date and time of posting reflected on the canceller strike preceded the closing time of the tender. In 1913 the Union Post Office’s “Instruction to Postal Agents” enjoined that:

“Great care must be taken to see that the stamping is clear and legible, and that the stamps on letters etc. are properly obliterated, and that letters reaching your office are date-stamped on the back at the hour of receipt. The date-stamp must be
changed daily at the commencement of business, and it should be cleaned frequently … The cancellation of unused postage stamps for the purpose of stamp collectors, or for any other than official purposes, is strictly prohibited.

“The date-stamp, sealing pliers and seal must not be used except for postal or telegraphic purposes, and no person other than a postal official must be allowed access to them” (Union South Africa, 1913: 5-6)

The reliability of this system was also based upon a number of additional assumptions based upon the internal performance of the postal service. These included that:

1. Post office staff was able to process mails within a reasonable period from the time of its posting.
2. Post office cancellers provided clear and unambiguous information on an envelope relating to the place, date and time of its posting.
3. Mails could be delivered to the addressee within an acceptable time frame.
4. Post office officials could not be “persuaded”, for a consideration, to amend their ODSs to reflect a more “convenient” date, and
5. The post office itself had an infrastructure in place capable of monitoring its own processing procedures and delivery times.

In one instance, in 1893, the French Consul stationed in Cape Town complained to the Postmaster General of the Cape that his personal mails were being subjected to untoward delays. After an investigation of its own records and procedures, the General Post Office in Cape Town found that mail to this gentleman was not being subjected to any unusual hold-ups, and although no formal charges were ever laid, the Post Office was able to exonerate the personnel concerned.

Because of the volumes of mail carried by the modern Post Office, today the effective implementation of the above requires a process of registration and monitoring with a computer-regulated tracking system. However, a century ago postal officials in the field could still be called upon to explain any undue delays experienced in the delivery of an ordinary letter on the basis of evidence provided by the Post Office’s procedural markings. To this end the Cape Post Office had in place a system of office date stamps which bore the date and place of posting as well as, in some instances also, the time period of processing.

DAILY LIFE AT THE POST OFFICE

At the start of every working day the postmaster issued to counter staff their designated cancellers, a strike of which was made in the Impressions Book and signed off against the official concerned. This person was then held to be responsible for that canceller until the end of the working day when it was returned to the office safe for overnight storage. If, for any reason, such as illness or early departure, the canceller had to be transferred to another member of staff, then a small change might be made to its make-up, which was then recorded in the Impressions Book and signed off by the replacement. Such changes could include the inversion of the time code, the reversal of the year date, or the substitution of a number for a letter, such as “5P” for “SP”, denoting September. Any other changes made to the canceller during the course of the day, such as alterations to the time code, were similarly recorded. Consequently, any delays or irregularities experienced in the progress of an item of mail, from posting through to delivery, could be traced back to the official responsible and dealt with internally (Frescura, 1989).

Of course this assumed that other aspects of post office administration would also be able to keep pace with the changing needs of its field agencies. One such problem which arose regularly each year, towards the end of December, related to the timely requisition by country postmasters, from Central Stores in Cape Town, of additional date stamp lugs to reflect the new year-date. Although reminders were published in Post Office Circulars in November of each year, postmasters were notoriously slow in meeting this deadline, or, as sometimes happened, the small type was lost in transit in the mailbag. They were then forced to improvise to meet their short-term operational needs. One such incident took place at the end of the nineteenth century when many rural post offices found themselves without the double zero required to denote “1900”. As a result many small establishments, such as Lady Grey, in the Division of Aliwal North, resorted to using the figures “19” until the required lugs could be forwarded from Cape Town. Postmasters were also expected to meet the cost of lost lugs from their own pockets. Despite all this however, it can generally be assumed that the information provided by the Cape’s ODSs was generally correct within a high rate of probability.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

As a result, today the existence of a single unambiguous reading can normally be taken as evidence of the existence of a post office within a specific time frame, making such information valuable in the documentation of the history of an individual town or a village. Unfortunately the methodology suffers from the signal drawback of being open-ended, and without supporting archival data, can only be used to arrive at approximate conclusions.

Fortunately Earliest Recorded Date and Latest Recorded Date methodology is not based solely upon an assumption that postal data is accurate, but also upon its availability on a broad scale. This means that although one single strike of an ODS might not have significant meaning within the larger scheme of a postal infrastructure, the picture changes significantly when that single strike is supported by a body of similar data. Thus, although the methodology remains open-ended, when the information from an individual case is read in the context of similar information drawn from parallel case studies, we can arrive at certain conclusions within a high degree of probability.

One case in point might be drawn from the issue to the Cape of a Single Circle ODS with the words Cape Colony at its base (SC.CC) (Illustration 1). Archival information states that at least one such canceller was forwarded to Cape Town, from London, on 2 May 1864. Field data tells us that this canceller was in postal use on 21 June 1864. If we can allow for the fact that, at that time, it would have taken a period of at least 42 days for the package to reach Cape Town by mail-boat (Cattell, 1884), this
means that the earliest date that the canceller could have been brought into operation was on or about 14 June. As it definitely was in use by 21 June, this gives us a window of about one week within which an ERD could have been located. In addition, field data also shows that ODSs of a similar configuration were in use in Port Elizabeth on 15 August 1864, and in Grahamstown on 28 July 1864. Taking into account the length of overland mail delivery at that time, it seems probable that these two cancellers were forwarded to Cape Town in the same shipment of 2 May.

The chronological tables reproduced below are the product of such a research process, and although each line is clearly open-ended, they can be used to identify similar windows of time. In addition, the trends that they show are the result of hundreds of readings drawn from personal collections and archives from all over the world. Thus although each bar line might not be exactly correct in terms of archival fact, it can be held to be

Illustration 1. Summary Typology
generally correct within a high degree of probability for both each canceller and for the group as a whole.

This evidence become yet more conclusive when the results arrived at in the small sample chosen for discussion in this paper can be shown to hold true for those of another thirty documented case studies omitted from this paper for the sake of brevity.

The chronological tables arrived at in this article are representative only, and have been chosen to illustrate particular points made in this paper. Because many of the cancellers recorded in my original typology never found general use in most of the Cape’s towns and villages, the number illustrated in this chronology has been reduced to six basic types. As a result, the following groupings have emerged:

1. The Obliterating Instruments, whose primary function was the defacement of postal adhesives. This includes the Barred Triangle CGH Obliterator and the BONC, although the latter was also used, to a lesser extent, as a town identifier. A number of other dumb obliterator may also have had local or regional significance, but no record of this has been found in the colonial records.

2. The early ODS, used primarily to deliver an inked strike bearing the place name and date of processing. Although initially this was limited to outgoing and incoming mails, eventually the system was extended to include points of interim handling and rerouting, thus allowing the Post Office to monitor the progress of mails through its system of transport and delivery. This group included both the Double Oval (DO) type of canceller, first issued in 1853, and the Double Arc (DA), first issued in 1857. In the case of both instruments their engraved brass stamp head was attached to the main canceller as a screw-on plate. In time this proved to be a patent defect in their design. Because of the repeated impacts it was subjected to, this was susceptible to wear and tear on its inner thread, known as stripping, and was thus in regular need of maintenance and re-cutting. After 1869 the screw-on pattern began to be replaced by the more efficient pivot patent design, whose mounting made it less liable to damage from repeated impact. The brass used in the manufacture of older instruments was also replaced with steel, which was more durable.

3. The Single Circle ODS (SC), whose introduction probably coincided with the switch-over to a pivot head design, and whose eight major types came to dominate the processing of mails in southern Africa for the next three decades.

4. The Experimental group of cancellers, including the Squared Circle (SQC) and, to a much lesser extent the Squared Octagon (SQ.OCT), the Compass Wheel (CW), the Hooded Circle (HC) types of ODS. Subsequent research seems to indicate that the early issue of a Double Circle (DC.EMB) ODS to Cape Town, recorded to have been in use from at least 27 August 1892, might also have been part of this experimental group of cancellers.

5. The Double Circle ODS, in all its variant forms, which was issued in a large scale to post offices from about 1900 onwards.

Therefore, for graphic purposes, some canceller types have been used as generic representatives of their group. Thus the Squared Circle (SQ) stands for all experimental cancellers from that period, the Single Circle (SC) and Double Circle (DC) represent a whole range of similar instruments, while the BONC is used to denote all BONC types, 26 of which have been recorded to date. A simplified typology has been included in this text for easy reference (Illustration 1).

THE SURVEY

This research was conducted over a period of some 23 years, between 1979 and 2002, although the collection of field data was at its most intensive during the 1980s. Thereafter the process concentrated upon collation and production, resulting in a number of interim working papers (Frescura: 1982, 1983a, 1983b, 1984) and one book. The results of research into the Barred Oval Numeral Canceller (BONC) were published in 1991 (Frescura and Nethersole, 1991), while the remainder was only published in 2002 (Frescura, 2002).

One of the most notable sources of frustration I experienced during the course of this research has been the paucity of original archival data. Not only has it proved impossible to verify the chronological history of Cape cancellers provided by Jurgens (1943), and subsequently republished by Goldblatt (1984), but not a single copy of an Impressions Book, which could have pin many issues beyond doubt, has been recovered. Instead I have had to rely upon field data, which has frequently been in contradiction to the conventional wisdom of other authors. The Large Single Circle Relief Cancellers, for example, were not issued from 1902, as claimed by Jurgens, but from at least 1898, and possibly earlier. This conclusion was not arrived at as the result of one isolated (and possibly misread) strike, but of at least eight separate recorded instances. The evidence of the field data is therefore beyond doubt. Similarly the use of a Double Circle ODS did not take place in the Cape from 1900 onwards, but has been recorded in Cape Town from as early as 27 August 1892. It seems almost certain that, as more field evidence is gathered, more of Jurgens’ “archival” dates will also be brought into question.

Thus, like much of his philatelic reputation, the fate of Jurgens’ archival research also stands in the balance. Despite extensive searches in the Cape Archives, no record of such documents has ever been found, although the subsequent theft of historical documents by archival staff does not mean that these could not have been disposed of subsequently on the international philatelic market. On the other hand it is not known whether the cosy relationship existing at the time between Cape Archivist, Graham Botha and Adriaan Jurgens did run to the latter being given permanent ownership of such correspondence. If so, then the Jurgens estate, wherever it may now be, needs to be re-examined for such records.

The fate of the Post Office’s Impressions Books is equally problematic. The Cape Archives are singularly devoid of Post Office material after the early 1880s, and it is believed that, at that stage, the GPO stopped sending its correspondence files to a central depot. What colonial records there were in 1910, it is alleged that the GPO in Cape Town forwarded them to Pretoria at the onset of Union. Certainly none were found in the Union...
Archives, although a small number of ZAR and OFS post office files were discovered there. Anecdotal evidence from post office employees during the 1920s seems to indicate that, by that stage, the GPO was in the habit of incinerating its voluminous paper documentation on a regular basis. This appears to have mostly involved old telegraph forms and office paper work, which may explain why bundles of these still appear on the philatelic market from time to time.

It seems incredible though that its correspondence files, old contracts, and Impression Books could have been dealt with in a similar manner. Graham Botha reportedly conducted a “cleaning” of the Archives in about 1927, as a result of which many Colonial records were similarly burnt, but I have never found an itemised listing of his culling. Personally, I still live in the hope that a roomful of Impressions Books may yet be discovered in some dark vault beneath the Union Buildings, but I dread the thought that a latter-day Botha could still get their bureaucratic clutches upon them.

SOME GENERAL FINDINGS

The basic data gathered during the course of this research was published in 2002 (Frescura) when, even without the benefit of the chronological tables set out below, a general historical sequence was confirmed in principle, even if not in detail.

The Barred CGH Triangle Obliterator, a crude instrument whose shape was designed, presumably, in emulation of the Cape’s elegant triangular postal adhesive, was probably introduced in 1853 and, with a few notable exceptions, was gradually superseded in most post offices by the Barred Oval Numerals Canceller, or BONC.

The Double Oval (DO) and the Double Arc (DA) ODS were introduced from 1853 onwards and, in their time, some 171 post offices were issued with such a canceller. For the sake of this paper, they have been treated as one type, even though eleven post offices were issued with both. As the structural and operational shortcomings in their design began to be exposed, so then they were superseded by the Single Circle (SC) ODS.

In the 1880s a number of experimental cancellers found limited usage before the Colony eventually settled, in the new century, upon a combined dating and cancelling instrument with a double circle format.

The chronological tabling of this information, however, seems to illustrate a number of interesting sub-plots. Firstly, let us deal with the group of obliterator, the BTO and the BONC.

1. It is now evident that the BONC was not allocated according to some fixed master plan. An analysis of its geographical distribution does not reveal any consistent pattern of use, and it now seems probable that these instruments were ordered in batches, which were then retained in stock by the Controller of Stores in Cape Town, and issued on an ad hoc basis, as and when an order for a new obliterator was received from a post office. There is good reason to believe that, in time, such distribution might have been delegated to Regional, or even, Divisional Head Offices. The dream of finding some master list of BONC distribution to post offices, such as the one published by the Orange River Colony, is probably wishful thinking on the part of postal historians (Weinstein, 1972). A close look at the complex and seemingly chaotic procedures followed by the ORC Post Office in its administration of its limited stock of BONC instruments should provide us with enough reason to suppose why postal officials in the Cape never attempted to keep such a record. On the other hand, the daily record book of the Cape Stores department would make for interesting reading should such a document ever be found.

2. BONCs were not allocated in one operation, which might also presuppose a pre-arranged geographical or hierarchical pattern of distribution, but were generally issued over a period of time to replace BTOs in established post offices, or when requisitioned by the postmasters of new establishments. This was supported by empirical data which shows that of the 70 post offices positively recorded to date to have used both types of obliterator, 37% made the changeover in the 1860s, 34% during the 1870s, 17% during the 1880s, and the remaining 12% after the 1890s.

3. BONC instruments were ordered in batches. The first was delivered to Cape Town some time in June 1864 and involved numbers 1-4. They were all in the 3.3.3 format and, with few exceptions, are marked by “chunky” numerals with a somewhat squat, inelegant typeface. The second distribution, involving numerals 5-39 was probably made between 1865-9. A third distribution involving numerals 40-78, was made in 1868 or 1869, many of which went out on loan to Natal Colony, and were returned to the Cape after 1879. It seems probable that numbers 79-200, mostly distributed to the Cape, were part of this delivery.

4. Thereafter orders appear to have been made in batches of 200, each being noted for marked differences in the size and form of their numeral typefaces.

5. Other than Natal, other groups of BONCs were also sent out on loan to other postal administrations in southern Africa. BONCs 851-874 were sent to the British Central Africa Company, while a more scattered group, ranging from 809-957, was allocated to the BSA Co; the ORC was sent a range of individual BONCs from numerals 1093-1398, while a handful were also sent to the Transvaal, probably in the era preceding the establishment of the ZAR. At least two of these are known to have been used in Swaziland, and were never returned to stores in Cape Town.

The patterns of ODS usage established by the chronological tables are equally revealing.

1. There was no clear pattern of usage indicating that the transition from one type of canceller to the next took place on a replacement basis. This was particularly noticeable in the case of the Single Circle ODS (Illustrations 7-11), whose use in many postal agencies is marked by substantial overlaps in time. This indicates that many offices retained their old cancellers and continued to use them together with the new ones, presumably until the former became unusable and had to be scrapped.

2. By the same token it would seem that once issued to an office, a canceller remained there for as long as it continued to be functional. This includes the large single circle relief canceller issued by the Cape GPO to country post offices from...
1898 onwards. Significantly, none of the larger regional offices, including Port Elizabeth, East London, King William’s Town and Kimberley, are recorded to have been issued with a relief canceller of this description, presumably because there was no shortage of other cancellers available for daily use.

3. A more intensive recording of dates of usage of the large Single Circle Relief Canceller (SC.RLF) also seems to indicate that although it remained with the office of issue, it only saw sporadic use and was not issued daily. This must reinforce the original findings, namely that this was a designated “relief” canceller subject to use only when the primary ODSs were sent to Central Stores for repair.

4. This therefore leads us to question whether other cancellers already issued to post offices, but overtaken by more recent and new types, were not, in fact, kept back for precisely this same function and also acted, from time to time, as ad hoc relief cancellers. Regrettably we did not keep a complete record of every one of the thousands of strikes recorded, but now that the periods of overlap usage are known, more focused research may become possible.

5. One area where the use of the relief canceller has left a number of questions unanswered, has been its failure to find more widespread distribution during and immediately after the South African War of 1899-1902, when Republican forces routinely made it their business to burn down any of the postal establishments they encountered. Effectively very few of the post offices affected by the conflict were issued with such an instrument, and none were recorded in use in the period following the cessation of hostilities when, presumably, the need for relief cancellers would have been the greatest.

6. The last point to be highlighted by many of the chronological tables drawn for individual towns, is the ambiguous role played by the Single Circle class of ODS with no bars or markings at the base (SC.BAB). While in some instances, such as Malmesbury, Molteno and Nelspoort they clearly form part of a transitional process, in other instances, such as Aliwal North, Beaufort West, Burghersdorp and Richmond (not illustrated), their use overlaps with not one but many subsequent canceller types which were supposedly issued in its stead. One must therefore question why this canceller type had such a sustained period of usage when other types of ODS had a much shorter life span. It may be argued that it had an applied and much more limited designated function, such as the Telegraphs Counter, which might explain why it appears on so many surviving telegraph forms. This would seem to support Goldblatt’s contention (1984) to this effect, although there is nothing to separate this canceller from others of a similar type which were not necessarily used for telegraph purposes.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL CHARTS

For the purposes of comparative analysis the divisional centres of Aberdeen, Aliwal North, Mossel Bay, Oudtshoorn, Paarl and Wellington have been selected for discussion. However, these are supported by at least 25 other case studies which were examined in similar detail.

The post office of Aberdeen (Illustration 2) was opened on 10 August 1857, but its documented postal history does not begin until 10 November 1861, when its Double Oval (DA) ODS was first recorded in postal use. Its Barred Triangle Obliterator (BTO) was similarly first recorded in use in November 1861, probably on the same entire. It seems fairly certain, therefore, that the two instruments were issued to the postmaster, Mr CF Heugh, at about the same time, and quite soon after the opening of his establishment. Similar conclusions could be drawn from most of the case studies opened after 1853 under examination.

In the case of Aberdeen, no further BTO usage was recorded after 28 August 1874, but its use of BONC 205, associated with this office, was only noted for the first time on 7 July 1883. It seems sensible to assume therefore, that the transition between the two instruments took place during this hiatus, from 1874 to 1883, a wide gap that can only be reduced contingent to the discovery of additional field data. This point was perhaps better illustrated in the instances of Oudtshoorn, Paarl and Wellington where the gap between obliterating instruments was less than 18 months (Illustrations 2 and 4-6). Even more remarkable was the case of Bedford (not shown), where the transition period has been narrowed down to a mere 16 days.

It is significant to note that the time line for Aberdeen’s BONC 205 comes to an end sometime in about 16 October 1903, and that the town’s Double Circle ODS came into use on or before 7 December 1904 (Illustration 2). This was a pattern of usage between these two instruments which was found to hold true for all of the 30 offices chosen for detailed study. Given the fact that the new generation of ODS, which came to be typified by the double circle canceller, set out to provide the Post Office with a dating and obliterating facility, it appears sensible to conclude that the era of BONC obliterator effectively came to an end upon the introduction of the double circle ODS.

This also included the range of Experimental ODS, first introduced to the Cape in 1882, which only had a small but influential distribution in the Colony. Their issue to Aliwal North, Oudtshoorn, Paarl and Wellington also brought to an end the use of BONC instruments at those post offices, and illustrates my argument for the replacement of BONC oblitters by the new generation of dating and obliterating instruments. Obviously this did not take place at once throughout the Colony, but on a staggered basis as each post office requisitioned a canceller of the new type to replace its ageing Single Circle ODS.

This is an important conclusion in the study of Cape cancellers, for it establishes a series of potential latest date of usage for any postal agency where both the BONC and the double circle ODS had been deployed. This does not mean that overlaps between the two instruments are not possible, just that such occurrences must have been extremely rare. To the best of my memory only one or two instances were ever brought to my notice over the whole period of my research where both cancellers had been used on the same proving cover (Frescura and Nethersole, 1991).

It also marks a significant turning point in the history of the Colonial Post Office, as it heralds a time when its management, finally made the transition from the obsessive obliterating of postal adhesives to a more rational approach towards the processing of mails. There is no doubt that this was probably forced
by the growing volumes of mail that it had to process on a daily basis, but it is also the result of a more realistic attitude towards the employment of postal staff in a more productive and time-efficient manner.

The use of various types of postal instruments issued to all thirty post office establishments under consideration shows a steady transition from the earliest dated town cancellers, both the DO and the DA, through a series of single circle cancellers of various configuration, to the Experimental cancelling and obliterating instruments, and finally to the Double Circle ODS. There is ample evidence to show that such transitions were not sudden, but usually involved prolonged periods when two or more types of canceller were used at the same time (Illustrations 2-6).

This point is perhaps best made by the chronological tables showing the use of Single Circle ODS at both Mossel Bay and Wellington, although charts for almost every other case study might have made the same point equally well (Illustrations 8 and 11).

Significantly, in a few cases, such as that of Aberdeen, the results for the Single Circle ODS proved to be inconclusive, but this could be ascribed to an absence of field evidence rather than the fact that these represented exceptions to the rule. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the Single Circle ODS, in all of its variant forms, was the workhorse canceller of the Cape Post Office, and the processing of its mails from the 1870s through to 1910 are dominated by this canceller type.

These chronological tables also revealed a number of additional points of potential importance. The Single Circle ODS with the post office name inscribed both top and bottom (SC. NTAB), did not feature strongly in almost all of the case studies chosen for closer analysis, and its place in the historical hierarchy of cancellers remains undefined. Quite clearly, therefore, its status in the context of its broad type and era of usage is still in need of clarification and additional research. Similarly a number of other cancellers, although well documented by field data, are shown to have played a relatively minor role in the running of the Cape Post Office. These include the various idiosyncratic Experimental Cancellers, and the Single Circle Relief ODS (SC.RLC), none of which had a prolonged usage or a significant distribution in the Cape’s postal establishment. A few post masters appear to have welcomed the Squared Circle ODS and kept it in use for a decade or more, such as in the case of Mafeking and Wellington, but in most other cases the type was abandoned just as soon as it could be replaced by the seemingly more efficient Double Circle ODS.

In the case of Victoria West, which was not chosen for detailed investigation, its SQC.ODS was retained in service for over 28 years, from 1896 to 1924, well beyond its expected functional and political life span, but then this post office had a previous record of longevity for other ODS. Its elderly Double Oval cancellers, of which it had two, were in use consecutively from 1854 to 1880, before they were replaced by a Single Circle (SC.BAB) instrument in March 1882. Perhaps, therefore, some
towns developed an attachment to their post office cancellers as part of a regional or civic identity, much as the postal adhesives of a country contribute to its national identity.

The Single Circle Relief ODS, on the other hand, only enjoyed a small and widely scattered distribution, and although there is evidence that, in some instances, it remained with its office of issue, it does not appear to have entered service as an ODS in its own right. I have never been able to examine personally a specimen of this canceller type, but I can only surmise that it had a structure which allowed for the use of movable fonts, which would have made it unsuitable for prolonged use on a post office counter. Nonetheless, its use was extremely limited.

Given its status within the overall history of the Cape postal system, I would like to suggest that a separate research programme needs to be instituted for each of the Single Circle class of cancellers.

The chronological tables produced for the various post offices in this study all show to a remarkable degree the same patterns of canceller usage over time. The details of their chronology did obviously differ, but the broad patterns of canceller usage remained essentially the same. The time charts for Aberdeen, Aliwal North, Oudtshoorn, Paarl and Wellington are reproduced here (Illustrations 2-6), but any one of the other 25 establishments in this study might have done just as well. The broad patterns of usage for the ODSs as a whole, as well as those relating to the Single Circle type (Illustrations 7-11) all follow the same paths of development indicating the fact that their design was not a matter of individual and haphazard choice, but the subject of deliberate choice and experimentation.

Unfortunately, a lack of archival documentation does not allow us to establish what policy decisions were made, who was responsible for making them, and who implemented them. It appears likely that much of this resided in one person, Somerset French, later to be knighted for his services, whose arrival at the Cape in 1880, and subsequent appointment as PMG in 1892 oversaw a period of rapid expansion in the postal and telegraphic infrastructure of the Cape, when key decisions would have been necessary on a monthly basis. It is not impossible, therefore, that the plethora of ODS designs that appear during this time was not the result of systematic long term planning, but rather the outcome of short term attempts at problem solving.

This would have been complicated by two factors: the changing nature of ODS head technology, moving from the screw-type mount to a swivel head, and eventually to a more efficient but increasingly more expensive movable type; and the need to run a postal infrastructure economically and often under less than desirable field conditions.

These chronological tables therefore provide an useful continuum within which to plot out events of a social, economic and political nature external to developments within the postal system. They also make it possible to map out areas of inconsistency and breakdowns of continuity. Aberdeen, for example, is recorded to have used two different instruments of the Double Oval type (Illustration 2), and a change-over must have taken place sometime between 3 July 1866 and 9 August 1872. The
CONCLUSIONS

It is perhaps unfortunate that when, in 1979, Michael Nethersole, David Morrison and I began to research the history of the Colonial Post Office at the Cape, we did not keep, from the outset, a more detailed record of every postal strike we examined. Had we begun our project five years later we might have had the benefit of newly-developed PC technology, and our mindset might have been quite different. At that stage we were more concerned with the historical documentation of postal establishments, and the possibilities of statistical analysis at some future time were never considered. Michael Nethersole, who did keep a meticulous record for some types of cancellers was eventually able, as a direct result, to arrive at some key conclusions regarding the large circle relief cancellers (SC.RLF). The idea of using the ERD and LRC as an applied methodology only came to me in about 1982 when I began to examine the body of often conflicting data that surrounded the documentation of the BONC (Frescura, 1982).

This is also, by the way, when the acronym BONC was “struck”, a nice onomatopoeic pun which preceded by a couple of years the arrival at Wimbledon of “bonking” Boris Becker.

Consequently, when Michael and I eventually concluded that the published data of our colleagues was not sacrosanct, and that the information derived from our field research provided a strong support base for the research decisions were now being called upon to make, we were forced to re-evaluate our documentation strategy. By then all of our work had been transcribed onto computer, so this became a relatively easy matter to achieve.

By that stage we had all moved on to new lives, and new aspects of our careers, and publication of the work as it then stood became a priority ... but that is another saga whose telling will probably require strong moral fibre and sound legal counsel.

Today my life is still as complicated as it ever was in the 1990s. I get up every morning at about five, and braced by a good cup of coffee, enter into a time machine to travel back to 1873, or thereabouts, where I try to unravel the mysteries of colonial Durban and its urban development. A history of Johannesburg and its mines is next in my sights. Therefore I must ask my colleagues for forgiveness if I now make this report my last word on the subject. The data base, as it stands, is now in the public domain and I hope that other researchers will be able to

reasons for this are not known, but must surely represent a riddle for local historians to resolve.
put it to good use in future years.

The memory of Michael Nethersole looms large over my writing, and I know that he would have been delighted with some of these findings. Hamba kahle old friend.

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Illustration 11. Wellington, Division of Wellington, opened 25 March 1846

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