

IRISH POSTMARKS

SIMPLIFIED

Some thoughts on collecting with a computer

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INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, I found myself on an internal flight in the USA stacked for a seemingly interminable age over Chicago waiting to land. Inevitably I found myself talking to my neighbour who was, as so many Americans seem to be, a senior vice president with his company. I never found out what the company did, but I learnt one philosophy from him which has stood me in good stead on many occasions since....K.I.S.S. - 'Keep It Simple Stupid'. I have attempted to do the same with my hobby and particularly in this brief work.

My own collection of Irish postmarks terminates as at 31 December 1999 and I am now seeking to write it up 'properly' in order to display not only the various markings used at each office to best advantage but also in so doing to find out more about those postmarks....when did this type first come into use?...how many of that type of postmark were cut?...was this a short lived type?...was it only used in a certain area of the country? etc. The questions are endless and if addressed properly will give much extra purpose to one's collecting. Other collectors must have the same problems but I suspect that, like me, they have tended at times to feel somewhat overwhelmed by the subject.

In this short work I seek to create a little order. My aim is to provide a relatively simple standard coding system that will enable collectors to make better sense of their collections, codify what they have and share the information with others. I hope the simplistic analysis I have used and the system I have adopted for my own collection might serve to inspire others.

Most collectors now have home computers. Naturally, they want to put details of their collection into their machine to record both what they themselves have and what they are missing but also, perhaps, to enable them to exchange information with others. However, for every 100 collectors there are probably 100 different ways in which information is recorded; thus the detail of any one collection is either unusable by others, or at best difficult to follow. This small work seeks in part to provide a remedy by suggesting a coding system so that collectors of Irish postmarks may identify the standard types and, thus, data may be recorded and exchanged in a way that might one day enable a full catalogue of all known postmarks of Ireland to be produced.

To enable this information to be adequately recorded there are in fact two requirements. Not only does a standard list of postmark types need to be drawn up but also thought must be given at an early stage as to the format of any database and what information should be contained therein. Whilst it is useful to have the use of a computer, it is by no means essential as in the past many good databases have been built up using card index systems and such will no doubt serve many well in the future.

Consideration must also be given to the period to be covered. Does one begin at 1840? Does one finish at any point of time? The answer to the first question must be a categorical 'NO'. Maximum value will only be achieved in preparing a full listing from earliest known markings (c1700) but up to what date? The difficulty about recording current markings means that any listing will be out of date before it reaches

the press. However we have in recent years seen one of the biggest changes in handstamps for many years with the steady replacement of counter handstamps with the 'new style' self inking handstamps. It seems a pity to ignore these. Certainly, my own collection contains as many examples as possible of markings used up to, what is my self imposed termination date and I do believe any data gathering system must be capable of covering right up to the present time, thus enabling the greatest possible volume of data to be accumulated.

What constitutes a standard type? When is it meaningful to break these down into sub-types? What should be included and omitted? Is the aim to build up a range of families (single ring, double ring, duplexes, killers, machines, skeletons etc.) and then subdivide these into standard groups each divided into a number of types and sub-types? What constitutes a family etc. etc? How much detail is necessary and what can be left to the imagination? We are already asking more questions than was ever envisaged when this task was commenced, and it is crystal clear that the mere determining of the range and depth of any listing presents more problems than might at first sight be apparent.

Above all we must not lose sight of the long term objectives. There are, I believe, several. Firstly, a standard coding system should assist the county collector, with input from others, to build up a complete record of what has been used in 'their' county. Perhaps, with the accumulation of information in a common form, in course of time, a series of booklets could be published covering the postmarks of all 32 counties, plus Dublin and Belfast. Secondly, with that accumulation, analysis can be made of certain types of postmarks (e.g.: mileage marks, skeletons, parcel cancellations etc) either in far greater depth than has been possible in the past, or for the first time. This is not to decry the work of others but it is only now that the 'mass computer age' is arriving in every home making detailed in length listings practical. There are of course many other facets of postal history that will be much enhanced by accumulating information in standard form ranging from the study of mail routings and local history to, with the recording of information additional to that proposed in this work, the study of stamp usage, overseas mail etc....in fact the potential is endless. The first task is to record information, and then we collectors must share it and use it.

One inescapable fact is however certain. A standard system is essential and above all it needs to be kept as simple as possible.

In conclusion I have to express my thanks to, amongst others, Bill Kane, Maurice Barrett, Brian Warren, the late Tony Graham and Colin Peachey (of British Postmark Society fame) for their helpful suggestions and advice and particularly to my better half, Nicky, for proof reading; she knows a lot more about Irish postmarks than when she started!

Every success to your collecting.

Stan Challis
Guernsey

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1. WHAT HAS BEEN WRITTEN BEFORE

A good starting point is to review what others have written in the past. Perhaps what we are seeking to achieve has already been completed by another author(s)? The subject has indeed vexed several authorities over the years. There is no point in reinventing the wheel and before committing one's own thoughts to paper much can be gained by surveying the work of other writers. Whilst the end conclusion is that no previous author has, it seems, covered the subject in the way we are seeking to do at present, the following works, inter alia, have, nevertheless, been of value and influence:-

For prestamp material there is no doubt that the standard work is Feldman and Kane's - 'Handbook of Irish Postal History'. Useful information for this period is also to be found in R.M. Willcocks' 'The Postal History of Great Britain and Ireland'. That the latter covers all parts of the then United Kingdom and enables comparison to be made with English and Scottish practice is of much value. However, neither volume goes much beyond 1840 and whilst this provides a firm base on which to build, we must look further afield.

James Mackay: 'Irish Postmarks since 1840'. The absence of pre-1840 information can, with a little imagination, be overcome (see previous paragraph), but overall the author, whose many illustrations must be commended, goes into too much detail with those illustrations, sometimes seeing differences in type when the only variation is little more than the spacing of the lettering within the postmark. A coding system based on this work would depend entirely on the numbering of the illustrations provided and although the book covers a vast amount of ground there are gaps where no illustration is provided (i.e.: pre 1840 items). In consequence the numbering system employed by Mackay cannot give the basis which is presently sought.

James Howley: Various articles in 'Irish Philately' and elsewhere, particularly 'Postmarks of County Sligo' (1984). The difficulty here is that the author concerns himself solely with postmarks after 1922 (and, in this case, only those of one county) and, in consequence, his coding system, which in any case is somewhat complicated, has to be regarded as unsatisfactory.

Michael Richards: 'The Datestamps of Ireland'. A series of articles in 'Irish Philately' commencing in December 1976. This article concerned itself primarily from the period 1894 to 1922, although it covered some later rubber postmarks. No coding system was proposed, but perhaps what is most interesting is the author's comment in the initial article that he was hoping to produce a listing of all datestamps used in Ireland. Sadly Michael died suddenly some years ago and we shall never know what response he got, but his writings are of great value. Michael also wrote a series of articles (late 1970's to mid 1980's) in the same journal on the subject of Ireland's machine postmarks which are well researched and constitute the most detailed information gathered together on this subject.

Frank and Stange: 'Irish Post Offices'. This remarkable work published in Germany by the FAI (the German Irish collectors' society) in 1990 lists all Ireland's post office with dates of opening and closing. It is an essential work for any serious student of Irish Postal History and illustrates many postmarks. It allocates each office a number and states what main types of postmark have been recorded from each office. At first sight this enormous volume might seem already to have achieved what this work is attempting to do, but all that is recorded by Frank and Stange is the fact that examples from a main group (or family) such as 'single ring datestamps' have been seen from a particular office and no attempt is either made to split those main types into sub types or state how many different postmarks have been recorded from any office and what dates of use have been recorded. Such detail, for individual offices, is beyond our present scope, but the need to codify the main types, and the sub types of postmarks, a topic not covered in Frank and Stange's fine work, remains and is essential if one is to achieve the ultimate goal of establishing what was used where and when (and perhaps also why).

Dr Whitney's 'Collect British Postmarks' (as updated by Colin Peachey and Brian Crookes) is also worthy of mention. This title, now in its seventh edition, covers a huge field but concentrates on British material. Nevertheless, there are several good listings of Irish material (RSO marks etc) not reproduced elsewhere and for this alone it is of value to the student of Irish postmarks. Yet, because no mention is made of the post 1922 markings of the Free State and the Republic, and also for other reasons, it cannot form the basis for any coding system.

In 1986 the then editor of 'Irish Philately' (Michael Richards) was good enough to publish in the December edition an article I penned at that time on Irish postmark types. Over a period of years and with more material added to the collection, dissatisfaction with the proposals then made has set in. That the system had gaps for 'unfound' types was somewhat illogical; dates prior to 1900 were ignored; the coding system for the rubber postmarks left much to be desired etc. Yet it was a start, on which with the benefit of hindsight one can build.

Many other articles have appeared in philatelic journals over many years but nowhere has a simplified coding system been designed that covers the whole of Ireland's postmarks from earliest times to the present day.

Hence, whilst drawing on what has been done before, it is clear that it is necessary to start in effect from scratch. However, before we do so, let us give some consideration to what we are seeking to achieve and what the end result might look like.

2. THE DATABASE

In the introduction it is noted that one of the prime purpose of establishing a coding system for Ireland's postmarks is to enable that new and frequently derided workhorse of the present age, the home computer, to be set in motion and for information to be stored in a database and shared with other collectors.

Those who have used computers at any level are well aware, often from bitter experience, that if the basic layout and structure either of the input of information or the subsequent output therefrom is faulty or badly constructed the value of the end result is of much reduced, if any, value. Hence, one must seek to determine at a very early stage what tasks the computer is likely to be asked to perform. Thus, the first step in dividing Ireland's postmarks into families, groups, types and sub-types is not, I suggest, the obvious one of determining the 'family' groupings and postmark types, but that of resolving what information one might reasonably wish to store in a database.

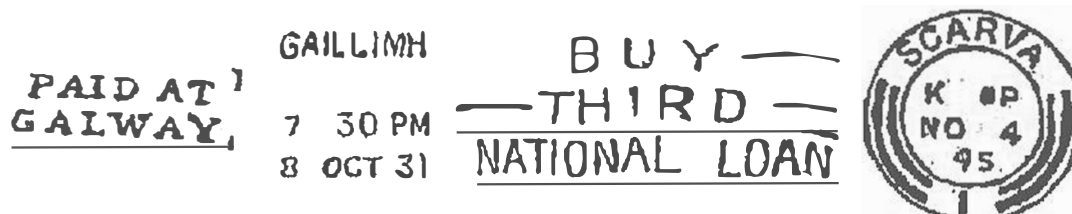
Just how much detail would one realistically need to know about any specific postmark? Each collector will have his, or her, own priorities but it is suggested that the following categories would serve the needs of most enthusiasts.

1. A reference for the postmark
2. The Office of use and the County in which that office is situate. (Cross referencing to Irish office names is best done in a separate listing)
3. The actual inscription of the postmark
4. A code which identifies the family, group, type or sub type to which it belongs
5. Its measurements
6. The earliest known date of use
7. The latest known date of use, or, if the mark is still believed to be in use
8. Colours known (other than black)
9. Any unusual features the postmark has (RSO etc.)
10. Any relevant notes and for the individual collector:-
11. Where the example(s) in their collection are kept
12. Source of information if not from own collection
13. How many of an item has been seen
14. Other details on covers in the collection..... etc.

For now we will ignore the final categories (11 to 14) for that is up to the individual to determine and any other suggestions such as cross references within the database that

the individual collector might wish to record but concentrate our efforts on the first ten numbered points which contain general information which all collectors could reasonably wish to know.

The layout of the print output from a database is very much a matter of individual choice. Using the examples below, the typical record for any known postmark (and, indeed, this is basic format I use myself) might look something like this:-



Ref	Office	Co	Inscription	Type	Size	Earliest	Latest	Cols	Features	Notes
234.123	Galway	GY	PAID AT/GALWAY	PDAT	32x12	24.4.1841	17.7.1851	B		Blue Jan 1844 to Jan 1847
234.327	Galway	GY	GAILLIMH	KR4		22.6.1922	23.5.1935			Various slogans
81.15	Scarva	DW	SCARVA/1=	DR1	29/19	1.11.1894	27.7.1907	TC		Time in code 1895 to 1900

The above examples are completely hypothetical and the printout clearly needs to be in landscape format (page turned sideways) to give sufficient space for all permutations to be fitted in (some inscriptions have well over thirty letters) but this should nevertheless serve to show what sort of basic printout might be produced from a database and from which sorting by office, county, type, date etc. as required can be achieved with relative ease. What then is the next step?

Building up a database is time consuming and no one collection will have enough material to be any better than indicative of what might exist and it would clearly be several years before draft listings of all 32 counties could be in circulation. Each of the fields will need entering for each known postmark.

My first inclination was not to give each postmark a number because it is quite impossible to know whether or not one has recorded examples of all marks issued. Yet some form of reference seems essential. It is proposed that the reference number (column 1) falls into two parts. The first part is the office reference and the second part relates to the individual postmark. A typical example could thus be 112.56 - ie: postmark 56 from office 112. A well recognised system of numbering offices has been established by Frank and Stange, although I find some frustration with their putting town sub offices alphabetically through each county rather than immediately behind the town in question. The requirement to keep postmarks in a sensible order can only be overcome by leaving gaps in the numbering as has been done in Willcock's County Catalogues of England and Wales. Hence, in the absence of fuller information, in our listing typically 112.59 would come immediately after 112.56 leaving space for two additional marks to come to light.

For the county abbreviation it is probably best as far as possible to follow the system employed for car numbers in the Republic (WW = Wicklow etc.) but using a two letter code for those counties where the plates use only one letter, so GalwaY becomes GY etc. The system can be extended to Northern Ireland so AntriM then becomes AM, Fermanagh is FH etc.

A few words are necessary about inscriptions (column 3). This should be shown as nearly as possible as inscribed in the postmark. It is convention to separate the top and bottom halves of a datestamp by a slash (/) and this practice should be followed. If there is no bottom inscription in the datestamp clearly there is no need for the slash. Bars (or arcs) are shown by a dash (-); parallel double bars by an equals sign (=) etc. The main difficulty arises when the name of the post town is inscribed horizontally above (or below) the date, this being a feature of some postmarks of the 19th century and also some of the 'rubber' postmarks (in use at some offices until about 1950). This can be overcome by putting horizontal inscriptions in brackets. Where the name of the post town is above the date, it is suggested the part in brackets precedes the slash, and vice versa. Code numbers in some of the early skeleton postmarks are best treated in the same manner. Examples of horizontal inscriptions are shown below.



Respectively –

LISBODUFF (COOTEHILL)/Co. CAVAN
CNOC RÁTA/(RAT DROMA) CO. CILL MANTAIN
CILL DAMHAIN (FEARNA)/CO. LOCH GARMAN
FETHARD (26)/CLONMEL

(The code numbers in these early skeletons permit them to be traced on their travels around the country and are therefore of some importance)

Before leaving the subject of recording inscriptions, consideration must be given as to the best treatment of accents (the fada) and aspirants. A 'windows' based word processing package such as Word, is capable of incorporating accented letters (É, Í, ú, etc.) which is of great use and also various other shapes and symbols which we are unlikely to need. As yet, amongst the many symbols available in the Word package, I have not been able to trace the aspirant, which is used in many postmarks introduced in the late 1920s and early 1930s, although, I am advised by those with a greater computer knowledge than my own that it is perfectly feasible to create aspirated characters.

The purist will not unreasonably insist on the inclusion of accents and aspirants. But do we really need them? I feel it is very much a matter of personal choice. In practice there will be very few instances in which the inclusion or omission of a fada or aspirant is the sole distinguishing identification of a postmark. My own preference is to show fadas as this can easily be achieved with the Word programme but omit aspirants when entering inscriptions, but in those few cases where they are important a suitable entry can be made in the notes column.

Standardisation of the Type number (column 4) will cause the most difficulty and inter alia forms the *raison d'être* for this booklet. The subject is explored in depth in the next section. It is, however, useful to note at this stage, that, as far as is feasible, the type number should be as easy as possible to remember and to achieve maximum benefit that it would be prudent to set aside up to 7 column spaces (characters) for this field.

Measurements (column 5) are not as simple as might appear at first sight. Always shown in millimetres, differences of 1mm or more are not unusual from impressions of the same postmark dependant on age, how hard it is struck etc. Measurements are taken across the diameter from the outside of the rim in circular datestamps, or at the point of greatest width and greatest height in rectangular marks. Width is always shown before height (e.g. 25mm x 8mm) and in the case of double rimmed postmarks the outer diameter before the inner (e.g.: 33/18).

Dates should be obvious but can cause confusion. British date format (day, month, year) is recommended, the month being abbreviated in letters (e.g. Apr, Oct, etc.) rather than the use of figures throughout. A date shown as 28/04/25 is as confusing to a North American reader as 04/28/25 is to a European! Dates in postmarks are frequently unclear. Where the year only can be ascertained it will be necessary to insert the date as either 00.00.1925 or if the programme refuses to accept 00.00 (as mine seems to) my choice is to use 1 January unless by reference to the stamp or other factors it is clearly wrong. Clearly a minimum of two copies of the same postmark is necessary to establish earliest and latest dates.

It is suggested that the database shows colours other than black in a colours column (8). A simple code will be necessary. R for Red, V for Violet, B for Blue, G for Green and BG for Blue Green - much favoured in the early 1850's. It must be remembered that in the early days, (I purposely do not volunteer a date for any standardisation in the absence of tracing any official notice) postmasters were responsible for mixing their own ink, so many variations exist some of which have survived better over the years than others. It is suspected that most postmarks that appear brown today started life as being struck in red ink, the browning arising as a result of oxidisation. Most such marks are some 150 years old today so some discolouration is to be expected. Other colours can be recorded in the notes column. We must record what we see but I am nevertheless somewhat suspicious of postmarks reportedly struck in more unusual colours, for example, yellow, grey, orange etc. suspecting this merely to be ink that has faded or changed colour over many years but I am fully prepared to be corrected-

The features column (9) serves to give space for an additional coding by which marks can be identified and sorted. RSO for the Railway Sub Office marks is an obvious category but other feature identifications could include REG for registered, OF for Official, PD for paid, or just a star (*) to show the mark is unusual in some way. The use of time in code (used for a year or two after 1894 in some postmarks) could also be identified in this column. Another use of this column would be to identify those items only recorded in proof books, but for which no commercial use is recorded. The (*) for something unusual is best explained in the next column - notes.

Hence, the notes column will cover any unusual detail or such comment as 'reuse' after a mark reappears after having apparently been out of use for a period etc. Although even in a landscape format printout there is space, perhaps, for no more than 40 characters to be printed without going on to a second line, it would not be unreasonable to format one's database so that this field is much larger - say up 200 characters, to allow for considerable comment should one wish it.

Finally, before considering database programmes, a word of caution about office names is appropriate. A computer sorts strictly alphabetically. For example, St

Margaret's falls between Srahmore and Stamullen. Therefore, it is probably best to enter abbreviated names in full - i.e.: Saint Margaret's.

Another problem area is how to show town sub offices. By way of example, Frank and Stange list King Street, Waterford, between Kilrossanty and Kinsalebeg. Personally I prefer to keep all offices in one town together and would list this office as Waterford - King St. In reality it probably matters little what one chooses to do so long as one is consistent.

It is inappropriate here to discuss the choice of databases available. Much as one might dislike the dominance that is presently being demonstrated by the Microsoft Corporation, I have settled for their Access database. It generally comes with the 'office' package and although there are features in it which are difficult for a layman to understand there is no doubt the programme is capable of shifting a lot of data very fast. For smaller databases Excel appears perfectly adequate and is, in my opinion, much easier to use. Excel data also has the advantage of being capable of being converted to Access format.

The best advice that can be given to those who like myself find the world of computers a minefield is 'talk to your expert', whether that expert be found at work, the golf club or the local computer store! Take professional advice, make sure you are happy working with whatever programme you get and that it is compatible with other major databases - your expert will advise you!

Before leaving the world of computers it is also worth mentioning another 'toy' of the modern age - the scanner. With a little computer technique and the right hardware it is now quite possible to scan into one's machine images of postmarks and then enhance them. The possibilities are of course endless. The ultimate, I suspect, will be when collectors of Postal History treat the Postal Service itself as History and all information will be exchanged via the Internet! That is some way off yet but I believe collectors will have great fun experimenting over the next few years. However, whatever system you may choose to employ to assist with the development of your hobby, above all, take professional advice and see the programmes in action before you buy. The programmes mentioned here may not be right for your machine, and by the time you read this better programmes may well be on the market.

3. WHAT TO INCLUDE and WHAT TO OMIT

We must now give consideration as to what to include and what to omit. I have set out to include all standard postmarks. Therefore, we must seek to determine what constitutes 'a standard mainstream operational marking' and what might make a postmark unusual or special and as such to be considered beyond the scope of this booklet. There are many other questions: should Northern Ireland be included? Should Dublin and its many specialised non-standard postmarks be omitted? Should special purpose postmarks be included? What about meter marks?

Perhaps we should start by attempting to define an operational postmark. I suggest... 'A mark or cancelling device designated for use at a particular office which may or may not be used for the cancellation of stamps and remaining in daily use in the course of that office's normal postal and related business.'

Surely this applies to all postmarks? Not quite, I think. First, I suggest, broadly, we should exclude all marks not intended at any time to cancel stamps.

The observant student will, on reading the preceding paragraph, be asking about pre-stamp postmarks. With considerable naivety I have chosen to include those general groups of marks which one suspects might have been used to cancel stamps, had they existed, in this early period, and the receiving house stamps detailed in Bill Kane's 'Undated Namestamps of Ireland' (q.v.) which, with a few exceptions, fall into definitive types.

However we omit such exotic prestamp items as the Inspectors' Crowns, 'Charity Letter', 'Member not in Ireland' etc, and various explanatory marks of that period. In any case, these are well covered in 'Feldman and Kane'. However, we do bring to account the many provincial Penny Post marks as these form definite standard types.

There are other marks such as the cachets used in connection with the collection of postage due and the redirection of mail ('More to Pay'...'Not to be Found' etc.). These explanatory marks, whilst being found on commercial mail and forming an interesting study, are too complicated for a work such as this and better dealt with in a separate study. I intend that they too be excluded.

Next we should exclude private cachets and meter marks, the latter not being Post Office marks.

I would propose that all postmarks designed to serve at merely one special event be excluded. Those that are of varying pattern and with rare exceptions do not cancel commercial mail.

What, then, makes a postmark unusual or non-standard? How long is a piece of string? What is common to one will be rare, unusual or unknown to another. A postmark of a type never employed in one county might be in common elsewhere in Ireland; another of a type rare today, might have been in common usage 50 years ago etc.

Therefore a standard has to be adopted. The yardstick adopted (with a few exceptions) is that if three or more postmarks of a particular type (or sub-type) have been noted, then that type (or sub type) is deemed to be a standard. If fewer than three (from different offices) have been seen the item is not included as a standard in this booklet, but must of course be included in a database by way of note. An example that just squeezes in is the Hammerhead, German style, double ring datestamp employed at Dublin, Cork and Dundalk for a short period in 1923. An example of a well documented postmark treated as non-standard pending more sightings from other towns is the octagonal mark used at Belfast c1906.

There are two areas in which the above 'three office' rule is broken. For the first I am indebted to Bill Kane (see above) who having listed all known types of the undated receiving house marks in his 'Undated Namestamps of Ireland', has been kind enough to permit me to use his type numbers. It would be both illogical and ungracious to omit a handful of the sub types on the grounds that less than three are known; hence,

all are included. The other area in which I have allowed myself a little licence is that of machine cancellations. All known types of machine cancellation have been included although less than three offices are known to have used certain types.

Many collectors have ignored Northern Ireland since 1922 whilst some others only collect those six counties. Prior to 1922, postmark types were, of course, identical in all 32 counties and although first instincts were to concentrate solely on the Republic on reflection it seems logical to include all those standard types (which in themselves are identical to types used elsewhere in the UK) used in Northern Ireland after partition. In fact, many of the pre 1922 types survived in the North for a number of years and to include those Counties, whilst adding relatively few additional types, there having been far greater uniformity north of the border, gives the opportunity to follow the development of postmarks in the entire island. Interestingly with the introduction of the Self Inking Datestamps (SID) on both sides of the border in recent years we now have a 'coming together' unseen in the previous 70 years.

Dublin presents a different problem with many types of postal markings being unique to Dublin Head Office. The subject has already been substantially covered in 'Postal Markings of Dublin' by Bill Kane (published 1981) and 'The Baile Atha Cliath Postal Handstamps' by Noel Langton (1963). Although there clearly have been developments since the publication of Langton's work some 30 years ago there has since been little introduced in Dublin that is 'non-standard'. The unique Dublin types include many prestamp markings (Mermaids, Octagons, Diamonds, various Paid and Free marks) and later items such as the late Victorian Octagonal Registered marks and no doubt many more. Of those postmarks there were several, more or less identical, in the same format, employed simultaneously, but to my knowledge never at more than the one office - Dublin Head Office. Hence on these grounds, it has been decided to omit those types that were unique to Dublin Head Office; those postmarks will have to await a subsequent review of Dublin's postmarks. In practice the majority of marks used at the Head Office since the mid 1850's are indeed of standard type and are, in consequence, effectively covered in this work, as are those postmarks used at Dublin's many city sub offices. A selection of Dublin marks is shown in Appendix 1 but they are not discussed in this booklet.

We must now consider whether to include special purpose postmarks. In this context I interpret the words 'special purpose' to refer those postmarks used on 'special categories' of mail such as parcels, registered, prepaid and official mail. Although some collectors would regard these as 'non standard' the vast majority of such postmarks do fall logically into standard types. Some, such as the rectangular parcel markings, require a little imagination; others such as many of the marks for use on registered mail fit easily into the standard single and double ring series.

It is by no means unknown for one to find these postmarks used for purposes other than those for which they were originally intended. An example of misuse sometimes found is the use of a 'registered' handstamp applied to undeliverable mail when returned to sender. In consequence there is little doubt that all these types postmark should be included and given standard codings, the three office rule applying as previously discussed.

In summary, and after much heart searching, the following are regarded as non-standard (or non operational) and are, therefore, left out at this time and are not described:-

- Any postmark of a type used at less than three offices, unless noted above.
- Marks individual to and used only at Dublin Head Office (largely dealt with by other authors - see above)
- Ship letter and maritime (paquebôt) marks (see 'The Maritime Postmarks of Ireland' by Bernt Dienelt - FAI c1988)
- Railway and TPO marks (covered by Ward 'Irish TPOs' (1938) and Wilson 'The Travelling Post Offices of Great Britain and Ireland' (c1996's), although in practice most belong to standard types)
- Surcharge and explanatory markings, including mis-sent, postage due etc. (a specialised subject outside the scope of the present work and necessitating a separate study)
- Special event postmarks and cachets (generally these marks are non-operational)
- Meter marks (outside the scope of this work)

In consequence we limit our concern to the standard operational postmarks of all Ireland's post offices with the exception of those types used solely at Dublin's Head Office (later the sorting offices at Sheriff Street and now the DMC at Naas Road). All told, there were well over 3,000 such offices at the peak immediately prior to partition, but far fewer today, all parts of the island having been affected by closures.

4. GROUPINGS

Prior to the allocation of type numbers, basic groupings must be established... This is not as difficult as it might appear at first sight. I have looked at literally thousands of marks applied to mail covering a period of nearly 300 years. There are some very clear cut off points and indeed the change from one style of postmark to the next at many offices, particularly the smaller ones, is quite predictable. I suggest that Ireland's postmarks (ignoring those outside the scope of this volume) can be broken down thus:-

Prestamp types which can be subdivided

Town namestamps used prior to c1808

Mileage marks

Undated

Penny Post markings

Paid marks (but only the standard types)

Types of the Victorian era

The Maltese Cross

Killers

Spoons

Duplexes

Standard dated types

Steel single ring handstamps

Steel double ring handstamps

Rubber handstamps used (generally) at smaller offices

Skeleton, or temporary postmarks, made up from loose type

'Signet ring' marks introduced at a few offices in the late 1850's

Hooded or scroll handstamps used at four offices in the 1880's and early 90's

Self inking handstamps

Machine postmarks

Special purpose datestamps

Registered ovals

Packet and Parcel marks

Triangular marks

Paid and Official marks (where they do not fall into another type)

These will all be explored in more detail in chapter 6

Before moving on to consider the requirements of any coding system, it is useful to note some basic concerns which must kept under constant review in developing the system. These include the following:-

- The system has been designed primarily to facilitate the storage of information in a database so that it can be made available to other enthusiasts. It is inevitable that

this must involve a high degree of standardisation. The database has already been covered in Chapter 2.

- The system must be capable of expansion if the user desires it.
- In determining types and type numbers the 'nearest illustrated' ruling applies. Some sub groups are well defined and clearly distinct; others, indeed many, are not. To illustrate every permutation would be all but impossible. Hence, a degree of subjective thought will always be necessary. It must be remembered that postmark size and certain features will change with wear. The thin narrower lettering of a pristine new mark may become worn and all but illegible before being withdrawn. The postmark impression on your item of commercial mail may be far removed from a proof impression made on plain paper when the postmark was new, but it is the self same mark!
- Proof books are not available (with the exception of the 1844 series of diamonds, certain of the rubber postmarks introduced prior to about 1905 and some Northern Ireland material since 1922). Hence we have no sure knowledge of what has been issued, let alone can we target on completion.
- Past authors have often placed much emphasis on the layout of the lettering in the datestamp. i.e.: office name and inclusion (or not) of post town, county etc. For purposes of this study no emphasis is placed on the actual inscription itself. It is the size and style of engraving, or font, which is paramount. Marks with just the office name, can be and are found in the same group as marks with office name, post town and county inscribed around the rim when the typeface is similar.
- The engraver will only inscribe a datestamp with what he has been asked to engrave. If, by way of example, he has an order to engrave thirty letters around the rim of a datestamp, naturally those letters will be closer together and probably individually smaller than if he were asked to engrave eight letters. Yet his basic style would be unchanged. Hence, both datestamps would be given the same type number.
- It has been attempted to put a date of introduction and period of use against many types. It is inevitable that many of these dates will be incorrect; they should therefore be accepted as a guide, better for some types than others. Indeed, in many cases where a type has been generally withdrawn (or, rather, fallen out of use) the occasional 'straggler' will persist, sometimes for many years, or it can happen that an old postmark can suddenly be resurrected for no obvious reason. Such is the appeal of collecting!
- In some cases an office will be issued with two or more identical or practically identical marks, used simultaneously. In these instances I would not advocate that collectors seek to locate minute differences but merely satisfy themselves by way of note in any listing or register to the effect that two or more similar marks may exist. Nevertheless, in general, I suggest that students will be surprised how little overlap exists.

Many collectors will inevitably disagree over the sub groupings. They will have in their collections items from a type (or sub type) which they consider not to be illustrated. Whilst there is no doubt that there will be omissions, the overriding intent has been to keep this booklet small and simple. I ask the reader to bear with me and remember that not every postmark can be illustrated.

5. THE CODING SYSTEM

It is now relevant to turn to the coding system in more detail. Any such system must be flexible and ideally should be capable of easy recognition, at least in part, by the user.

The format of the coding inevitably varies from group to group. In some cases it is very simple and leaves little room for doubt - e.g. MX for Maltese Cross. Other codes are more complex. For the majority of the dated handstamps the code has two parts (with in some cases a suffix where needed). The first part will be a letter(s) to identify the basic group. Thus all steel 'single circle' (or single rim) datestamps are prefixed with 'SR', all double circle (or double rimmed) datestamps are prefixed with 'DR' (see below); all rubber postmarks (including the scarce rubber skeletons) are prefixed with 'R', and finally the steel skeletons with 'SK'. The second part of the code will be numeric with the order very broadly following the order of introduction of the various types.

Sometimes a closing suffix will be required. Any closing suffix will comprise one or more stars (*) to indicate bars (arcs to some readers!) at the base (and sometimes the sides) of the handstamp, or some other feature such as an 'H' to indicate horizontal inscription. This system will need to be at its most flexible to cater for the rubber cancellations.

I make no apology for the fact that it is inevitable that there will be inconsistencies. An obvious example is in the use of code SL for the Straight Line town namestamps employed before the introduction of mileage marks in (generally) 1808 and of code UD1a which is given to what are in effect identical marks, but introduced later as 'non Head Office' receiving house marks (these generally from the 1830's onwards).

The reasoning behind this apparent inconsistency is simple. The SL town-names were universal prior to 1808 but the undated marks came into use from about 1823 and represent a separate series but in an old style. It is probable that there was no overlap, the mileage mark having become universal for a few years, at least, after 1808. The code UD1a is taken from Bill Kane's 'Undated Namestamps of Ireland'.

The numeral cancellations (diamonds) of the Victorian period and the rubber postmarks which were used from the late 1880's, but particularly those of the 1920's and 30's are the families which cause the most difficulty. Despite the fact that they are of very different appearance they share certain common characteristics.

Both families started in a common standard format - the diamond killers of 1844 (type 1844 - see next chapter) form a long and clearly defined series. So do the standard very plain rounded lettered rubber datestamps issued in the years prior to 1904 and

beyond (type R1.1). These were generally introduced to offices as they began to issue Postal Orders. Both families were cut originally in Britain, or at least the proof books are available to us at Post Archives in London implying UK manufacture.

Both types lasted for a long period of broadly 50 years; both were widely used, the commoner duplexes being relatively easy to find, the rubbers generally quite difficult, but some of the small office duplexes are perhaps the hardest of all. Both families were, after the initial issues, produced (it is believed) locally in Ireland and both families finished up being produced with many varieties and sub varieties, styles and configurations necessitating a substantial range of type numbers to give the collector a chance of sensible codification and categorisation. Therefore, for both these groups the coding system has had to be extended well beyond the simple standard of code letter(s) followed by a number - the DR1 and SR2 etc. which is what is adopted for most types.

There are other families where separate detailed studies are required, too complicated for a short work such as this. Typical examples are the various 'Paid', 'Post Paid' and 'Paid At' marks of the 1830's and 40's, and equally the rectangular marks used at larger offices for cancelling stamps on parcels. The former series have been well documented by past authors. Examples of these postmarks range from common to exceedingly rare, but on grounds of age for no better reason, are universally expensive for the average pocket, whilst the latter, although of little value, can rarely be found well enough struck and in sufficient quantities to build up an adequate record of types and changes in format, although James Mackay has provided many illustrations in 'Irish Postmarks after 1840'. Hence whilst it is important that these are noted in any standard listing such as this, the groups are not broken down into sub groups, or sub types at this time.

Before reviewing the postmarks it is appropriate to make brief reference to the way in which the date and time is shown in the circular steel postmarks, families SR and DR. Until the end of 1913, or early 1914, the date was shown Month/Day/Year, thereafter the more familiar Day/Month/Year format was adopted, but 'wrong way' examples can be found both before and after the changeover. Prior to 1894 time was never shown in the postmark, but collections and/ or deliveries were represented by a letter code (A, B, C, etc), and earlier by M for Morning etc. In 1894 the 'Time in Code' system was introduced but not universally. The code was relatively easy to crack, F•M being 6am, H•P being 8pm etc. In consequence a decision was taken late in 1894 to show the actual time of the collection a policy which has continued to this day, but 'time in code' continued in use for up to 10 years or more at a few offices and the letter codes can be found well into the 20th century. In the years after 1894 types SR8 and DR1 were in general use. These normally, but not invariably, have the facility for the time and date to be shown in 4 lines, viz: PM/8.45/AU 28/04, but the same datestamp can also be found with the time and date shown 7 PM/15 NO/17 in 3 lines. No attempt is made to break down these types down into 3 and 4 line datestamps; nor is any attempt made to differentiate between postmarks showing a star in lieu of a clock time in the time slot, the star normally being employed where there is but one collection a day from a rural office, or the handstamp is used on the counter at a large office.

It is inevitable in a listing such as this that there will be omissions and areas in which the breakdown is insufficient for some students and too complicated for others, for it has been the target to steer a middle path.

It has also been necessary to lean heavily on what has been written by others; indeed, I have to confess that my prime object in putting this booklet together has been that of providing a brief summary of the results of the research of others but in a standardised format, merely adding comment as necessary. If they feel I have either been too brief, or misinterpreted their work, I hope they will forgive me. In consequence readers are urged to use the bibliography at the end of this booklet and acquire as many as possible of the works referred to therein, in order that they obtain far greater detail about the types of postmark that particularly interest them than is possible (or necessary) in a work of this nature. Above all, I hope this brief work will help collectors to obtain more pleasure from researching their collection.