

## **NUMERICAL CANCELLATIONS OF THE BRITISH POST OFFICE**

With the introduction of the postage stamp in 1840 some means of cancellation was deemed necessary to prevent their re-use. This "means" was to deface or obliterate them using a hand-stamp for this purpose. All post towns, and certain sub-offices, were supplied with an obliterator in the form of a so-called 'Maltese' cross. As all the obl iterators were of the same design, with slight variations, thus giving no clue as to where the cancelling was done, even though the name of the office was sometimes impressed or even applied during transit, a method was adopted whereby a different number was given to every office at which the cancelling was done. These new obl iterators were put into use in May 1844. To avoid having more than three figures in an obliterator, a different pattern was used for each of the following series:-

- (a) London Inland Office;
- (b) London District Office;
- (c) England and Wales;
- (d) Scotland; and
- (e) Ireland.

In each series the numbers began at '1', but at first certain numbers were omitted which, when inverted, could be read as another number, e.g. '9' which might be read as '6', the lower number being generally used, but in some cases the lower number was omitted and the higher one used. As may be expected, and this applies to present-day post offices, many of these ceased to exist and the obl iterators were withdrawn and re-issued to other offices. Thus it is possible to find an obliterator used on a Q.V. 1d. imperf, and the same number used on a K.E. stamp, but the post offices can be quite different.

Some notes on the different series may be found to be interesting.

- (a) **London Inland Office.** In all the early obl iterators used at this office the number appears in a diamond, within an oval of bars, but these numbers do not show the different offices at which they were used, but only distinguish the different obl iterators in use.
- (b) **London District Offices.** This department dealt with the circulation of local London letters, and, originally, numbers up to 49, except '9' and '19', were allotted to suburban offices, and the numbers from 50 upwards were used in the Chief District Office. But the list of suburban

offices was not alphabetical but was based on the routes on which the letters were carried. The number of the district was contained in a circle, within an oval of bars.

In 1855, the London District was divided into 10 districts — North, North East, N. West, South, South East, S. West, East, East Central, West, West Central. The design for this obliterator was a circle or oval of bars, two spaces being formed by cutting away the inside of the bars as required, and inserting the letters and numbers.

- (c) **England and Wales.** Numbers were, at first, allotted to towns in alphabetical order, but with the closing down of certain offices and the opening of new ones, no attempt was made to preserve this order. The number itself had two curved bars on each side and straight bars above and below, which gave the obliterator the appearance of an oval, with the curved bars forming the sides. In time, the numbers ran from '1' to '999'. In order to avoid using more than three figures a new series was introduced, commencing at '001' and running to '099'. After all the numbers in the series had been issued, another series was introduced commencing with 'A01' to 'A99', in which the Maltese 'A25' is very familiar, followed by the letters B, C, D, E, F, G, H, J and K. The last list to be issued was the one beginning with 'L', which finished with "L05".

A glance at the Gibbons catalogue section "British Stamps Used Aboard" shows that those 'A' obliterations used in Jamaica and the West Indies are very desirable items.

- (d) **Scotland.** The design for these cancellations was a horizontal rectangle of bars with the centre cut away to leave an oblong space in which the number was placed. Here again the list at first was alphabetical, but later additions were made without regard to alphabetical order. The numbers ranged from '1' to '755'.
- (e) **Ireland.** The design for this series was a diamond of bars, with a square cut in the middle in which the number was placed. The numbers ranged from '1' to '564'. There was much chopping and changing with these numbers, a number being given to an office and then withdrawn. The office was then given another number and this subsequently withdrawn and then given the number which had originally been allotted to the office. It is thus possible to find offices using two different numbers, and at the same time to find different offices using the same numbers!

For the benefit of any of my readers who may be interested in this fascinating subject, there are several books available by such authors as Hendy, Westley, Daniels, Marshall, Vallancey and particularly, G. Brumell whose book 'British Post Office Numbers 1844 — 1906 (1946 edition) is my guide, and to whom acknowledgement is made for much of the information given above.

S. STANAWAY