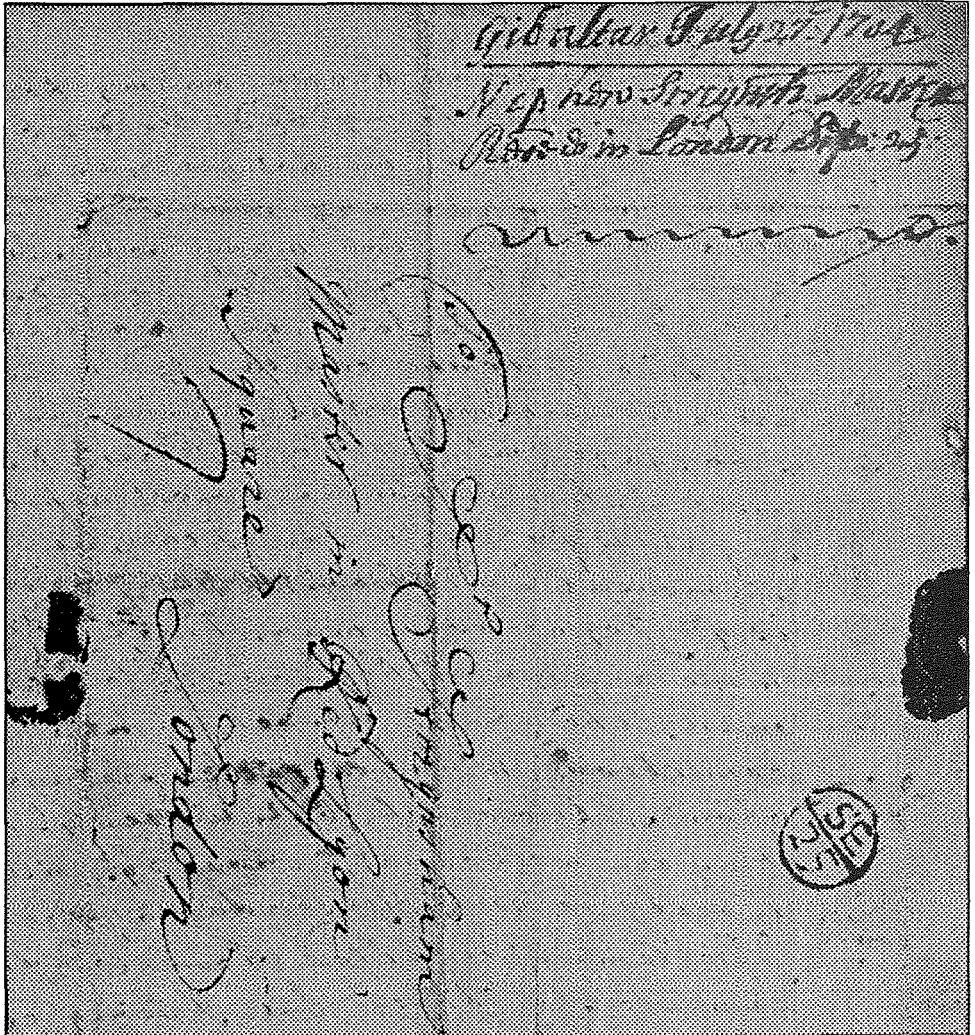


The Capture of Gibraltar in 1704

by George Coates

One definition of postal history is the evolution of systems available to the public for sending and receiving letters. For the postal history of Gibraltar, some knowledge of the social and political history of the Rock is needed; and for the British collector of Gibraltar, history must be viewed from the British viewpoint.



Our connections with Gibraltar go back over 300 years. Cromwell expressed an interest in it as a base for the Royal Navy to command The Straits. However, that remained an idea until Samuel Pepys, Secretary to the Admiralty in the reigns of Charles II and James II, visited and assessed the naval base at Tangier, which had come to England as part of the dowry of Catherine of Braganza on her marriage to Charles II. He found it inadequate and expensive. It was therefore closed, and prior to 1684 a Victualling Office was set up in Gibraltar by arrangement with the Spanish authorities.

By 1686, one Jonathan Gauden was British Naval Factor on the Rock, and in 1687 a whole English squadron operated from there. These facts explain two quite early Gibraltar letters of 1683 and 1684 written by Englishmen and addressed to London, both having arrival Bishop Marks. Naval stores and Victualling Offices would need regular supplies from England and personnel to manage them, so a British community must have been resident there for a time.

The capture of Gibraltar in 1704 by Sir George Rooke is graphically covered in the letter of Streynsham Master reproduced here. Gibraltar over the years of British occupation was subjected to many sieges. The most serious and longest was that of September 12, 1779 which lasted over three years until February 3, 1783. It will be recalled that England was at that time preoccupied with the American Revolution and the Spanish considered that she would be unable to reinforce the garrison of the Rock due to lack of troops and shortage of transports. However in 1780 Sir George Rodney brushed aside the Spanish Fleet and brought in urgently needed food and military supplies. In addition the garrison with a successful sortie destroyed most of the siege works on the Spanish land side.

Two technical advances were instituted by the garrison — firstly the mounting of guns on a carriage which allowed a large angle of depression, enabling the gunners to fire at the Spanish vessels with considerable accuracy. Secondly, the use of heated shot against wooden ships, nothing new, but employed more successfully than ever before.

In 1782, the Duke of Crillon had specially built ten ships, considered unsinkable and armed with heavy guns with armoured protection above to allow the solid shells to slide off. The walls of these vessels were of green timber six to seven feet thick.

The attack began on September 13 and at first seemed to be successful however the guns on the Rock opened fire with their red hot shot and by Noon the next day all the fleet had either been sunk or burned to the waterline.

The Siege was kept up for several months but the heart had gone out of the

invaders and General George Augustus Eliot and his garrison had survived the Fifteenth Siege of Gibraltar.

All this time Gibraltar had the status of a Fortress and a Garrison. It was administered by a Governor, always a military officer, and much later by a Governor-in-council. It was not a Colony. The civil population was small and subject to military orders, with curfews, control of exit and entry from Spain and a requirement for letters to and from Spain to go through the Civil Secretary's office for censoring if need be.

Letters from Gibraltar in the eighteenth century fall into two groups. Those from the Garrison, that is army or navy or establishment personnel, and those from the civil community in the town, including letters from ships' captains calling at Gibraltar. They travelled by one of two routes: by sea either in naval or merchant ships, or 'overland', the term used for letters sent across the Lines into Spain for onward transmission by the Spanish Post Office.

Overland mails were of course subject to relations with Spain, and with France if their destination was England. throughout the eighteenth century a state of war existed with either or both of these nations as often as not. In fact, for only 37 years between 1704 and 1804 was the border open.

The Battle of Trafalgar, 1805, gave Britain undisputed command of the seas. Next year the Falmouth Packets extended their service to Gibraltar and Malta. A Packet Agent was sent out from England to set up the Gibraltar Packet Office, dealing solely with the receipt and despatch of packet mails. Overland mails continued with the Civil Secretary's Office. Most ship letters generally avoided both post offices for another fifty years. The Battle of Waterloo finally ended hostilities in Europe, so from 1815 the overland mail continued without interruption. Europe settled down and gradually trade and commerce increased. Commercial shipping through The Straits, much of it calling at Gibraltar, increased. So the Town became responsible for more of the correspondence we collect today.

Steam vessels replaced sail in the Falmouth Packet Service in the early 1830s, and in turn were replaced in 1837 by contract steamers of the Peninsular Company, later to become the P & O Line. With the extension to India and the opening of the Suez Canal, Gibraltar became even busier and more prosperous.

It was in 1857 that the great improvement in postal services took place. The two post offices, that is the Packet Agency and the Civil Secretary's Post Office amalgamated and came under the GPO London. Stamps of Great Britain were provided and are recognised by the "G" and the "A26" cancellations. Spanish postage stamps, which had been required for letters for Spain, were also sold at

the new combined Post Office until 1875. A decade later, from January 1, 1886, the GPO turned the administration of the Post Office over to the Gibraltar authorities who set about providing their own adhesive postage stamps. The modern postal system had arrived.

Bibliography:

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Gibraltar Postal History to 1885, G.A. Osborn GM, Gibraltar Study Circle, 1995

Transcript of the letter sent by Streynsham Master, Lieut. HMS *Ranelagh*, 'off Gibraltar' to his uncle in London written in very bad spelling and English:

Sir,

The Charles Galley going for England to give an acct of our transactions in these parts and what hath happened since we have been out is as followeth We have mett with no French Fleet tho Sir George Rooke was in Sight of them in the Streights but they made for Thoulonne where they now lie.

Upon our goeing towards ye Streights we met Sir Geo, Rooke wht all his fleet lieing off Lagos whereupon a councill of war being called ye result of wch was to goe tup to Malaga but before our arrival there my Bro was ordered wth some ships for Cadiz in order to exchange Prisoners from thence having joynd Sr Geo. we saild for Fungeroll neare Malaga where we landed our Marines to secure our watering but ye countrey People drawing into Parties & alarming ye camp & continually firing at us from ye Hills we burnt four or five houses & a mill or two & so left yon poor Souls frightned & terrified, & not without Cause & maeing ye best of our way out of ye Streights we met with an Express from Lisbon wth orders from ye King of Spaine to take some towne in Andalousia so my Bro wth abt sixteen English and Six Dutch Ships and two Dutch Bombs was ordered in to Batter against Gibraltar & upon Sunday ye 23rd of this month being July we drew into a l;ine of Battle & about five in ye morn we began to bomb & canonade ye town wch is built all of Stone & lies at ye foot of ye Hill fortified with may Strong batteries; but we plyd yre so briskly wth our shot they ceased firing by one of ye Clock abt wth time peveiving a fort to be extremely battred & ye gund Dismounted we mand ye boats & attacked it wth sword and pistoll in our hand being Landed and marching up to ye castle, Ye spaniards sprung a mine & blew up ye castle ye stones of which as big as mountains fell upon some of our men & smote yon on hip & tigh, crushed some to death, bruised others on their heads Legs & arms, no parts escaping. What befell me was one knock on my pate wch made me to bend and a great many were maimed by this Stratagem but many are killed and many will die of their wounds & many will for ever be disabled; abt this time ye towne capitulated & they are all marching out wth their bagg & baggage men, women, children, horses asses mules all laden.

A most deplorable sight as for their houses they are immovable as also ye terra firma wch is ye joy of every mans heart, so that move anyone wch had bowells to see so many thousands in such a miserable condition.

What articles are agreed upon I know not but those that will stay are welcome & those that will have liberty to goe;

Yesterday a French gentleman revolted from Cadiz and came to this place but I being confined to my bed heare nothing of him nor what acct he gives so hoping youl consider my condition youl pardon what is a miss, but believe me to be

*Yor most Dutyfull Nephew
& humble Servt
Streyntsham Master*

*Few men lost in ye
Engagement no body
of note*

Service to my Lady & Co.

of Gibraltar

July 27th, 1704