

## THE BRITISH MAIN LINE MILITARY RAILWAY POST OFFICE IN EUROPE IN 1919

Following the Armistice on November 11, 1918, Allied forces moved east to occupy designated portions of the Rhineland area of Germany. The British Sector was in the northern part of this area, with headquarters in Cologne. In order to provide a more efficient service for mail moving from the troops to friends and relatives in the home country and vice-versa, the military authorities decided to inaugurate a railway mail service by bringing ten railway mail cars over from England, which were operated by ten teams (plus one in reserve) of four clerks each.

Service was initiated on a daily basis in each direction starting on January 9, 1919 (per Kennedy & Crabb) and continued until at least September of that year. Westbound trains were scheduled to leave Cologne at 3:16 pm and arrive in Boulogne at 7:10 am the next morning, making 13 stops along the way. Eastbound trains were scheduled to leave Boulogne at 10:20 pm at night and arrive in Cologne at 1:15 pm the next afternoon. Mail from APOs would be picked up during stops (generally of 5 minutes duration) at Duren, Namur, Charleroi, Valenciennes, Lille and Calais along the way.



Picture of a TPO car being loaded in the main railway station at Cologne.

Most of the activity in the TPO cars was the sorting of mail from bags picked up from the APOs. However, special postmarks were provided to the clerks for use on letters and cards not previously cancelled and for mail handed in at the cars. The earliest version was a "skeleton" type, consisting of a single-circle cds in three sizes (28, 30 and 36 mm diameter) and was inscribed "BEF Main Line TPO," with "Up" or "Down" at the bottom to indicate whether the train was traveling east or west at the time. These are recorded as used from January 10 to April 2, 1919.

A second, "permanent" type of cancel had a double circle and was inscribed "B.E.F/Main Line T.P.O. Up" or "Down.". This postmark is recorded as used from April 5 to September 13, 1919. Since most of the mail carried on the cars had already been cancelled at the APOs and only needed sorting on the trains, examples of the TPO markings are generally quite elusive.



BRITISH MAIN LINE TPO SERVICE  
 Skeleton Cancel – Up – 28 mm Diameter

The first postmark used in this service was a single-circle "skeleton" type inscribed "BEF MAIN LINE TPO/UP" or "DOWN." This cancel has been recorded as dating from January 10 to April 5, 1919. There are three sizes of the cds: the smallest with a diameter of 28 mm, a slightly larger one at 30 mm and the largest with a diameter of 36 mm. These appear to have used essentially simultaneously. Nearly all of these markings had a code letter above the date to indicate which team of clerks handled a particular piece of mail. Except for a very few examples, most of these were coded with A, B or C. However, there are some with X or +.

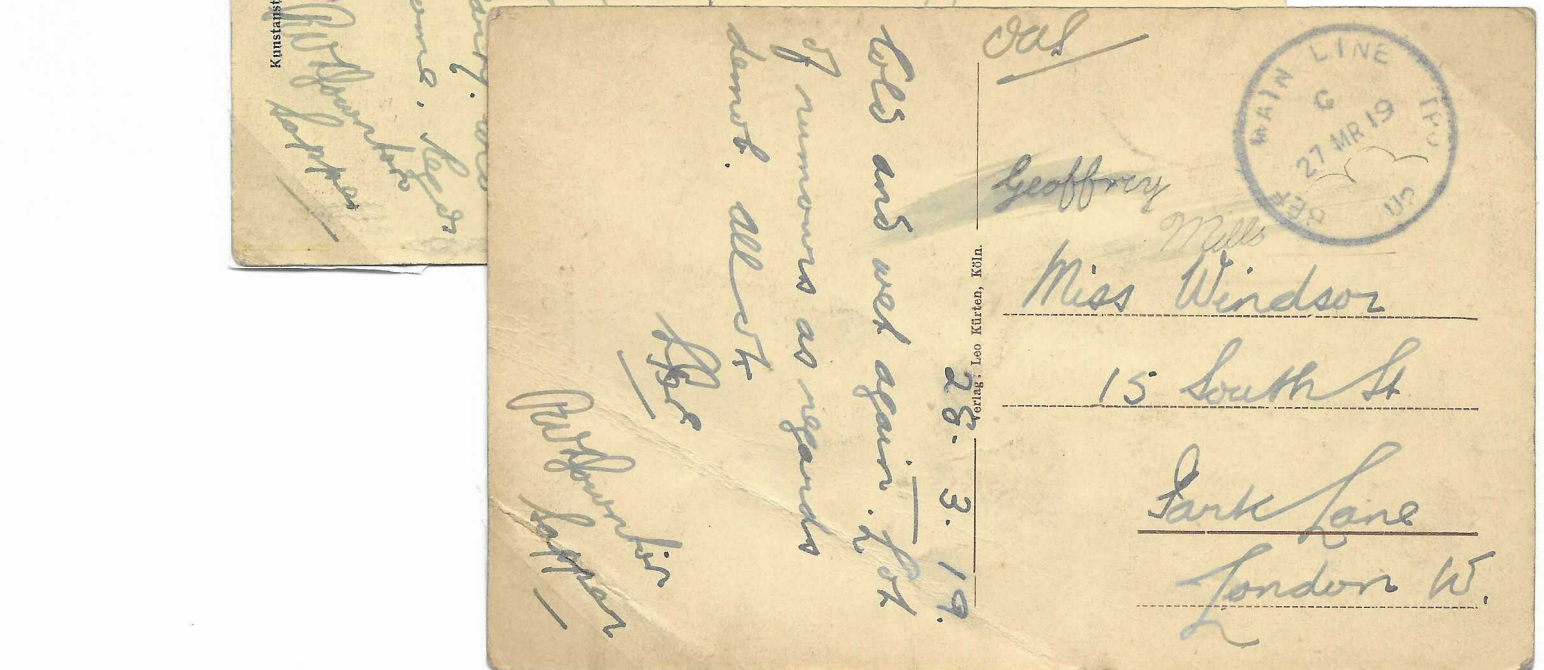
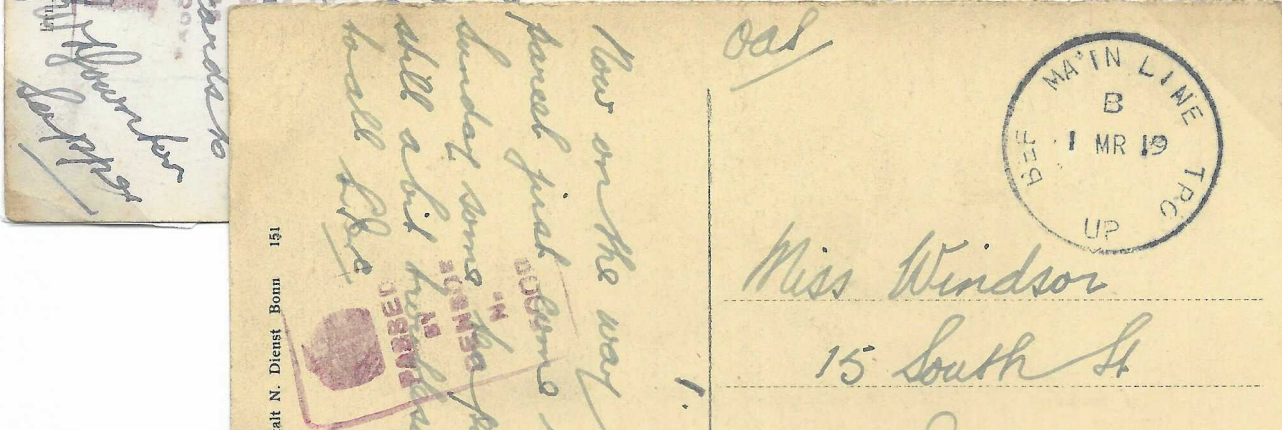
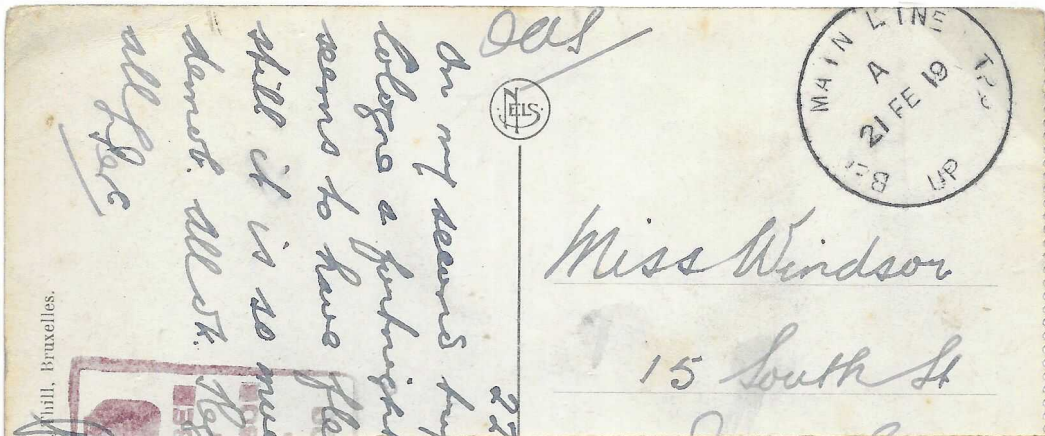
Earliest Recorded Example



Active Service envelope above has the earliest recorded TPO date of January 10, the second day of service. It is the only example of the code letter "X" in a postmark of this type known to the exhibitor. The cancel on the postcard with code "A" is also very early, sent just four days later.



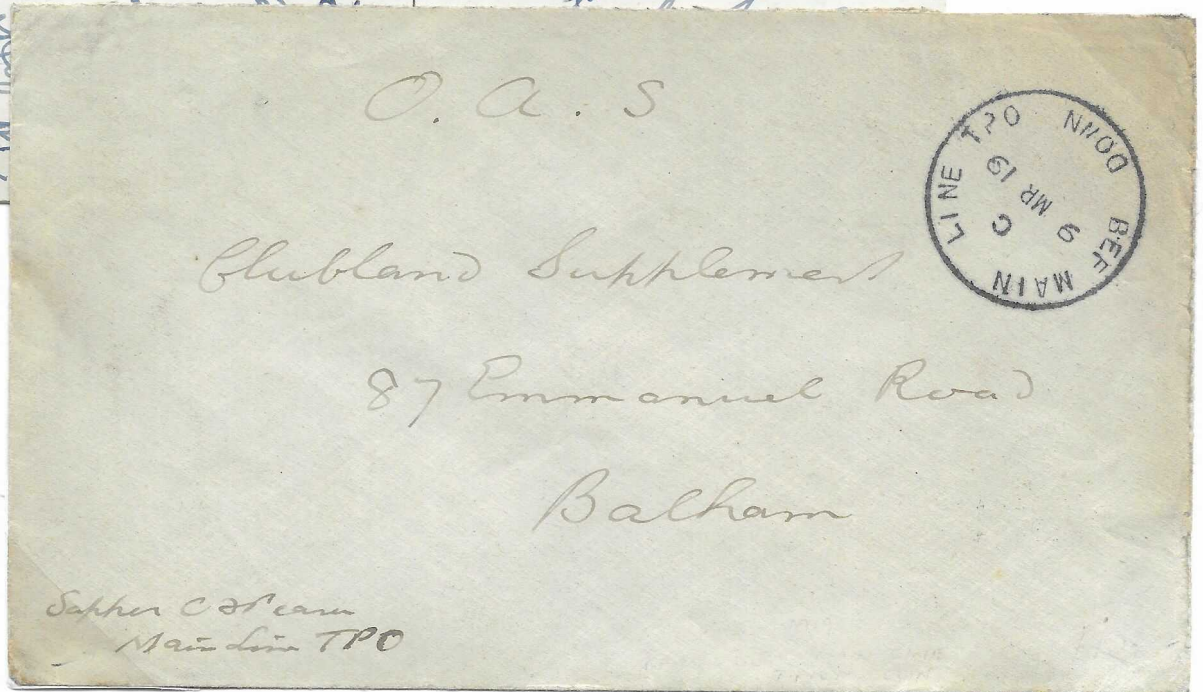
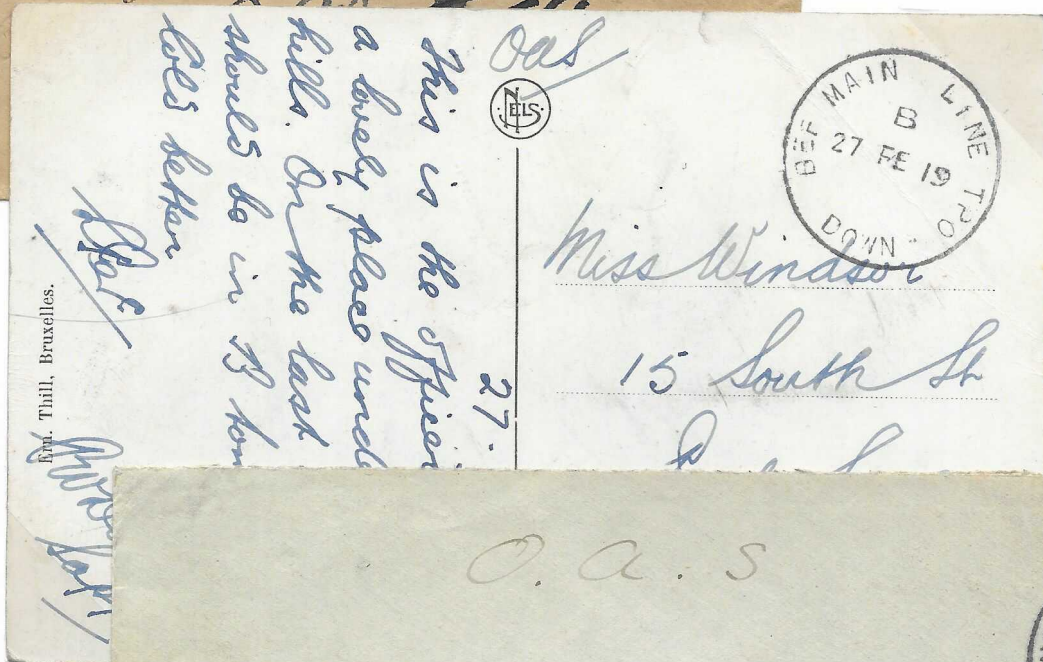
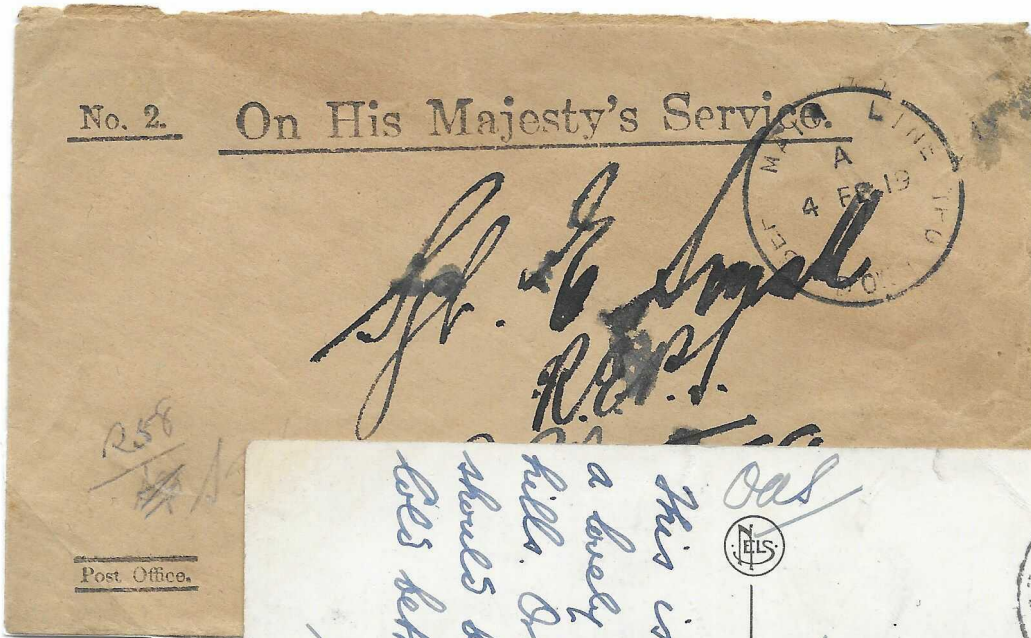
BRITISH MAIN LINE TPO SERVICE  
 Skeleton Cancel – Up – 28 mm Diameter



Sapper Downton was the originator of a substantial number of pieces of mail with TPO markings, He was a clerk serving on the mail cars and wrote postcards regularly to his girlfriend, Miss Windsor, in London. This page shows a set of "Up" postmarks with three different code letters from A to C, extending over the period from February to March.

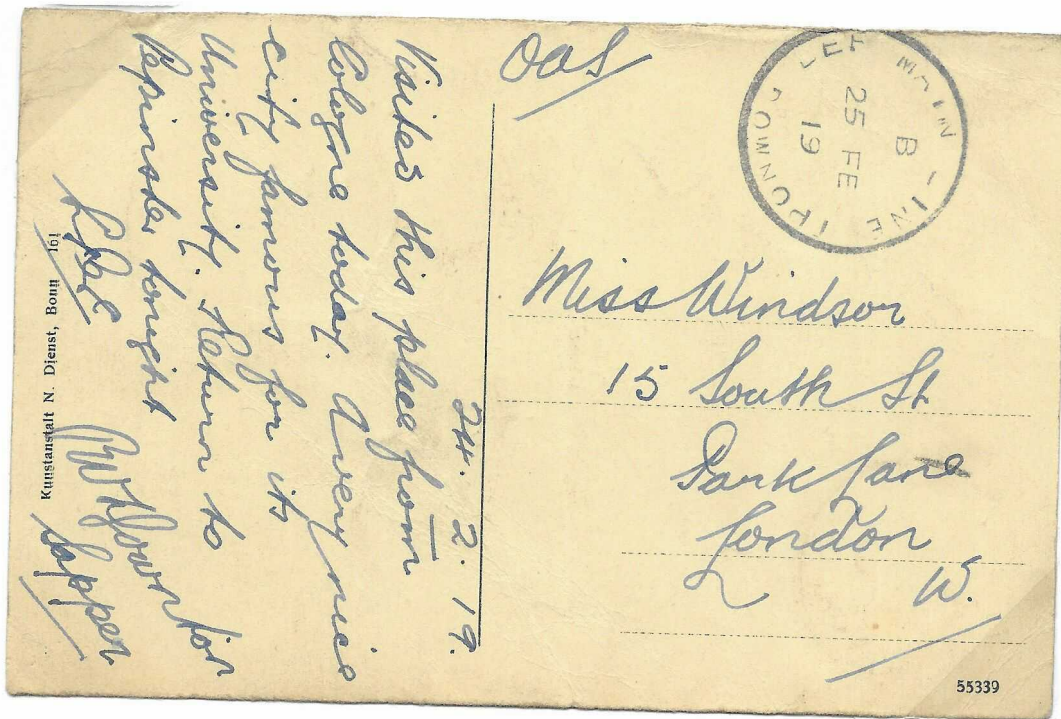


BRITISH MAIN LINE TPO SERVICE  
Skeleton Cancel – Down – 28 mm Diameter



This page shows a set of "Down" postmarks with three different code letters from A to C, extending over the period from February to March.

BRITISH MAIN LINE TPO SERVICE  
Skeleton Cancel – Down – 28 mm Diameter

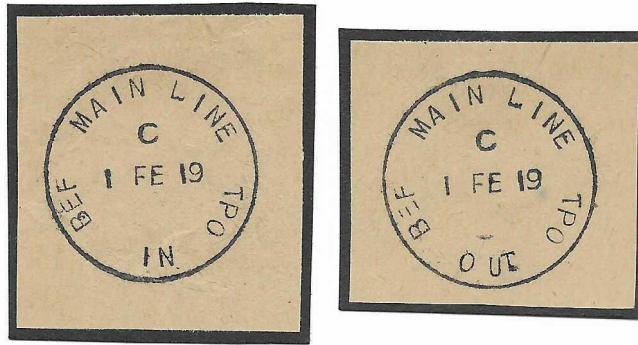


Because all of the text of the skeleton postmarks was inserted in the cancellations by the postal clerks, it was probably inevitable that there would be occasional misplacements. Thus, the postmark on the card above shows an example with the “TPO” and “DOWN” run together without the normal space between them.



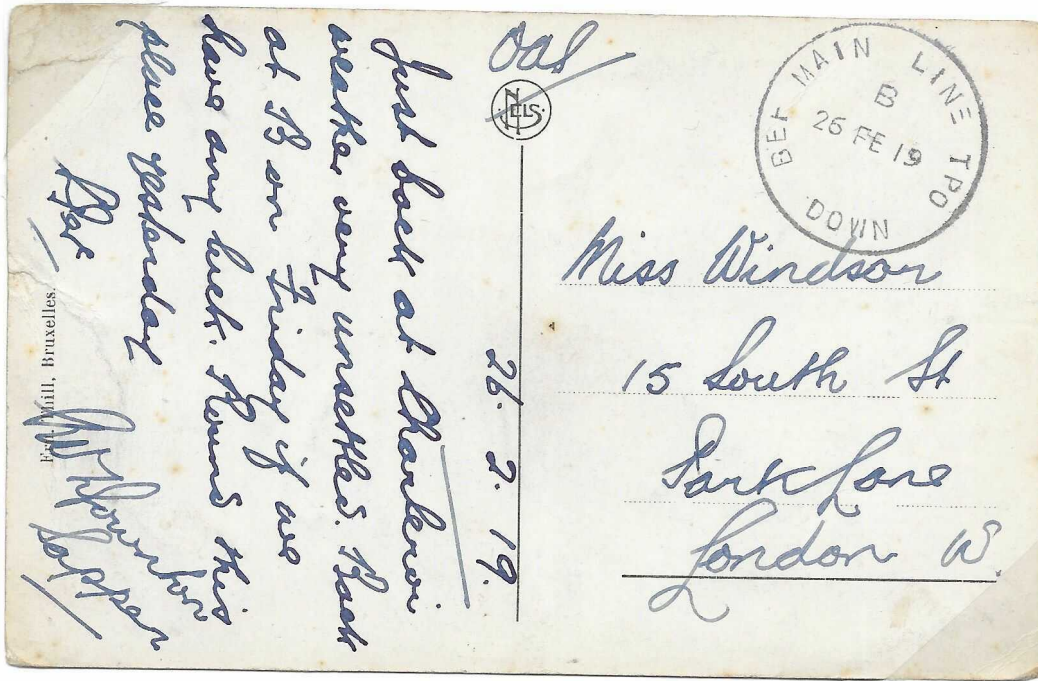
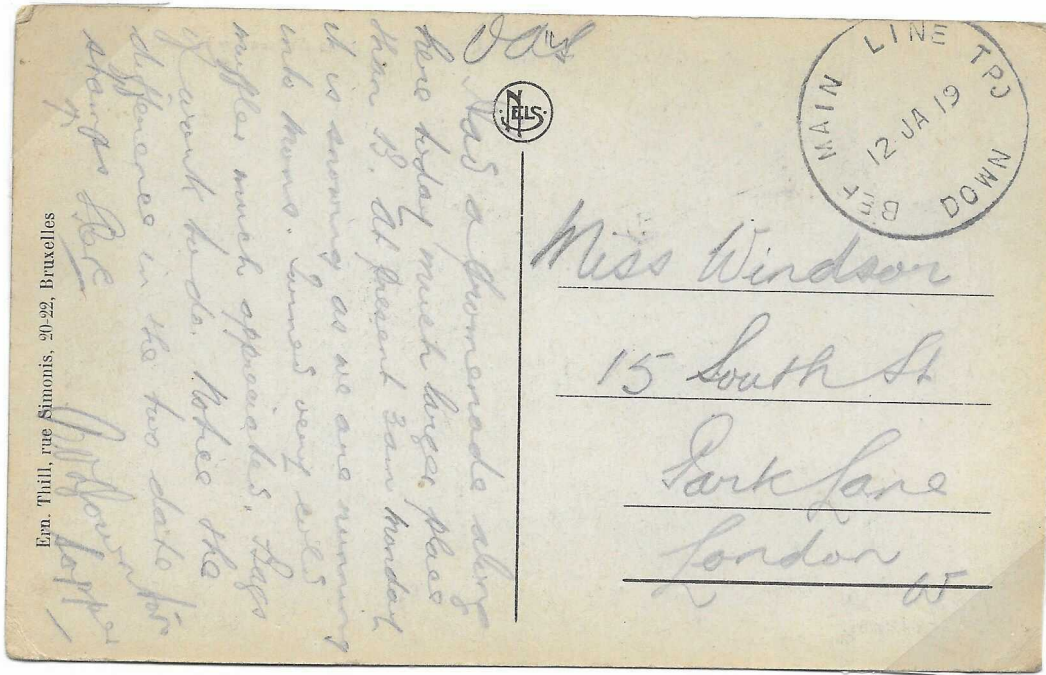
BRITISH MAIN LINE TPO SERVICE  
Skeleton Cancel – In/Out – 28 mm Diameter  
Proof Strikes

At one point, presumably in late January or early February, consideration was given to making cancels with “In” and “Out” instead of “Up” and “Down.” In fact, proof strikes with such nomenclature are depicted in the Kennedy & Crabb handbook. In any event, the change was disapproved. Examples of the proposed cancels are shown here.



Picture of the interior of a TPO car during its visit to the Cologne main railway station.

BRITISH MAIN LINE TPO SERVICE  
 Skeleton Cancel – Down – 30 mm Diameter

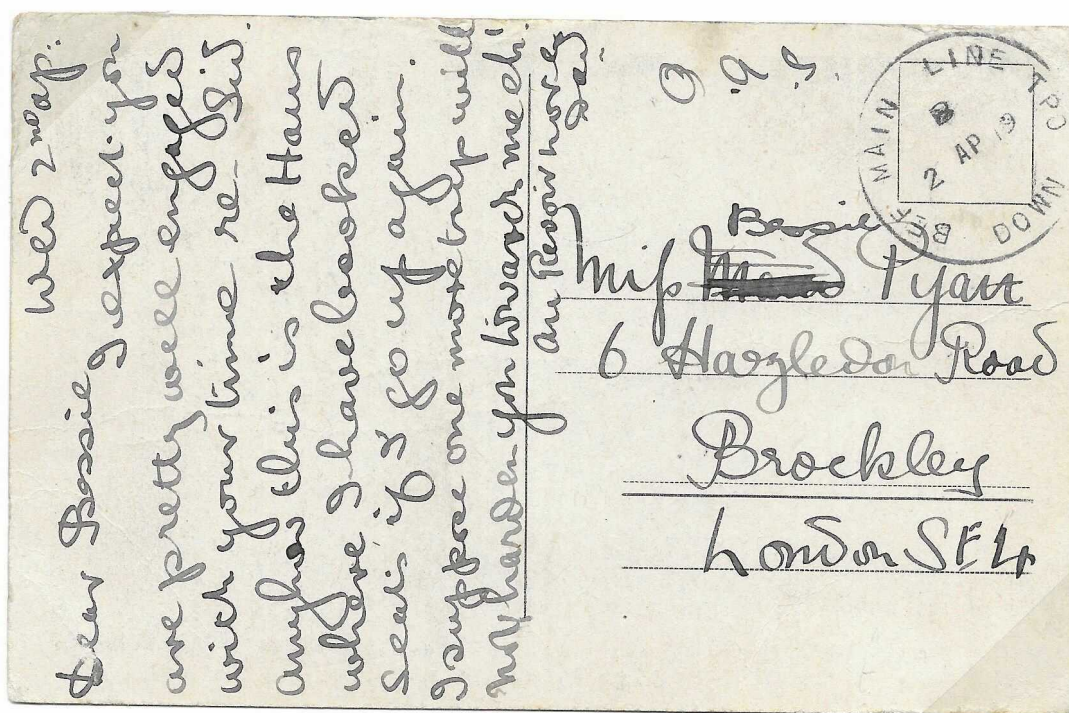


Postcard above has the earliest recorded "Down" postmark of January 14, 1919. Unlike any of the other examples, it has no code letter above the date. Card below is from the following month and has a B code near the top.



BRITISH MAIN LINE TPO SERVICE  
Skeleton Cancel – Down – 30 mm Diameter

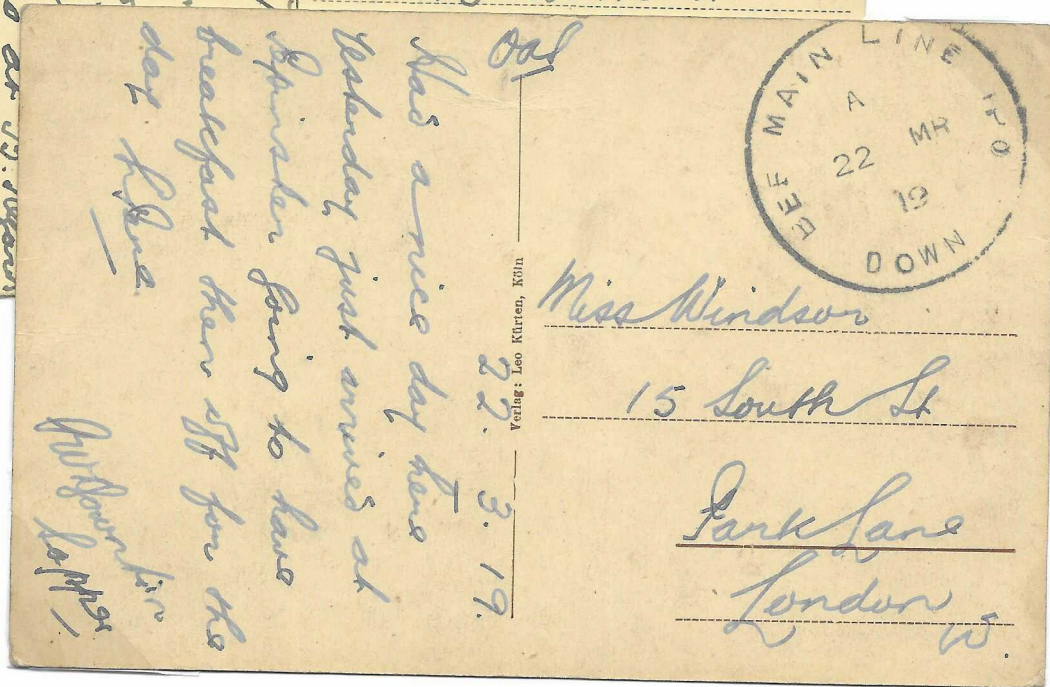
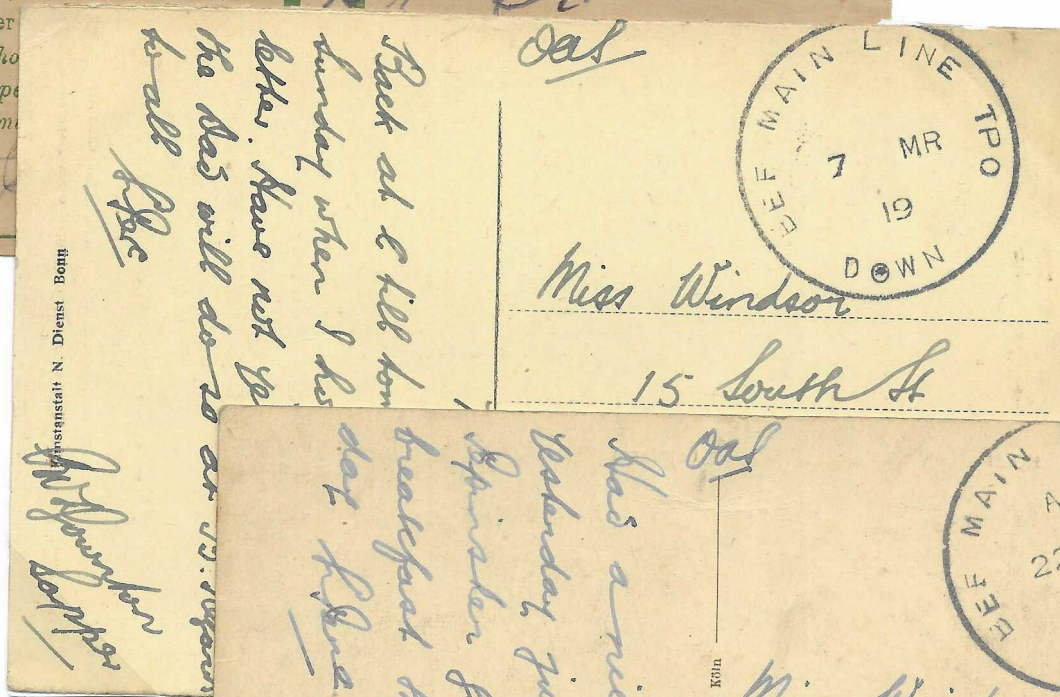
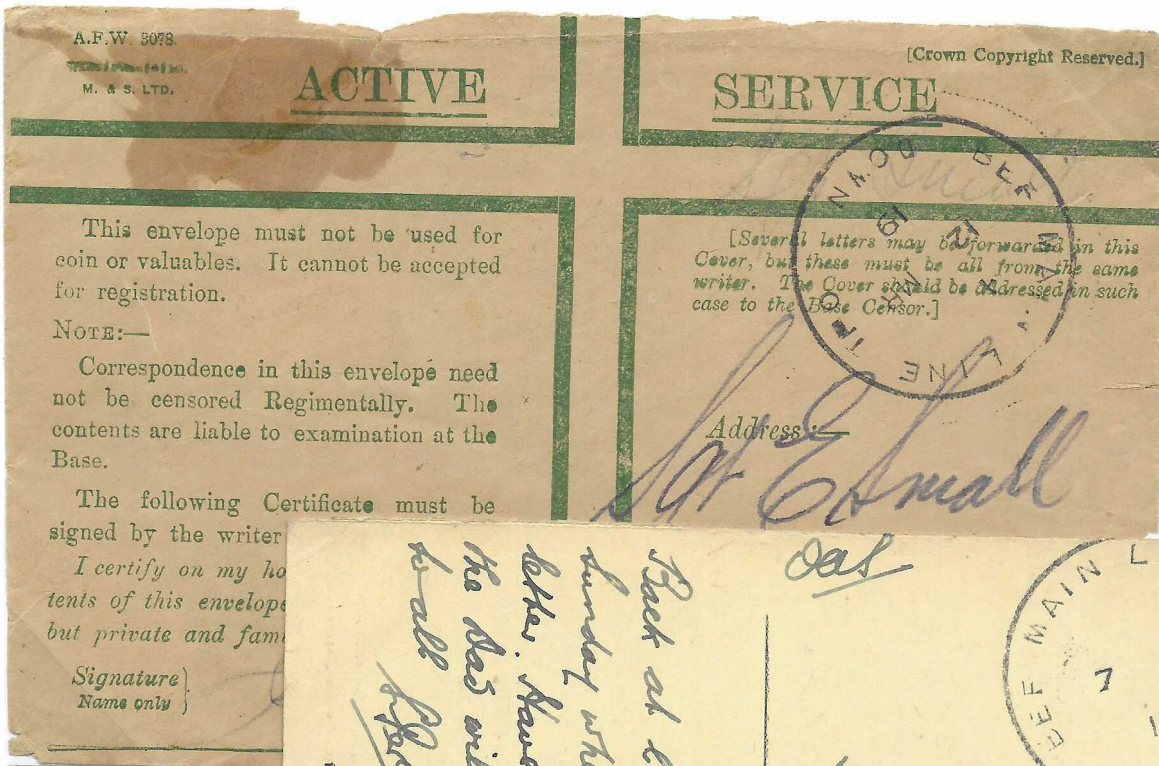
Latest Recorded Example



The postmark on this card is dated April 2, 1919, which is the latest recorded example of the skeleton cds. It has a B code above the date.



BRITISH MAIN LINE TPO SERVICE  
 Skeleton Cancel – Down – 36 mm Diameter



These postmarks are all of the 36 mm size. The differences are in the code markings, which range from + to none to A. All have February or March dates.



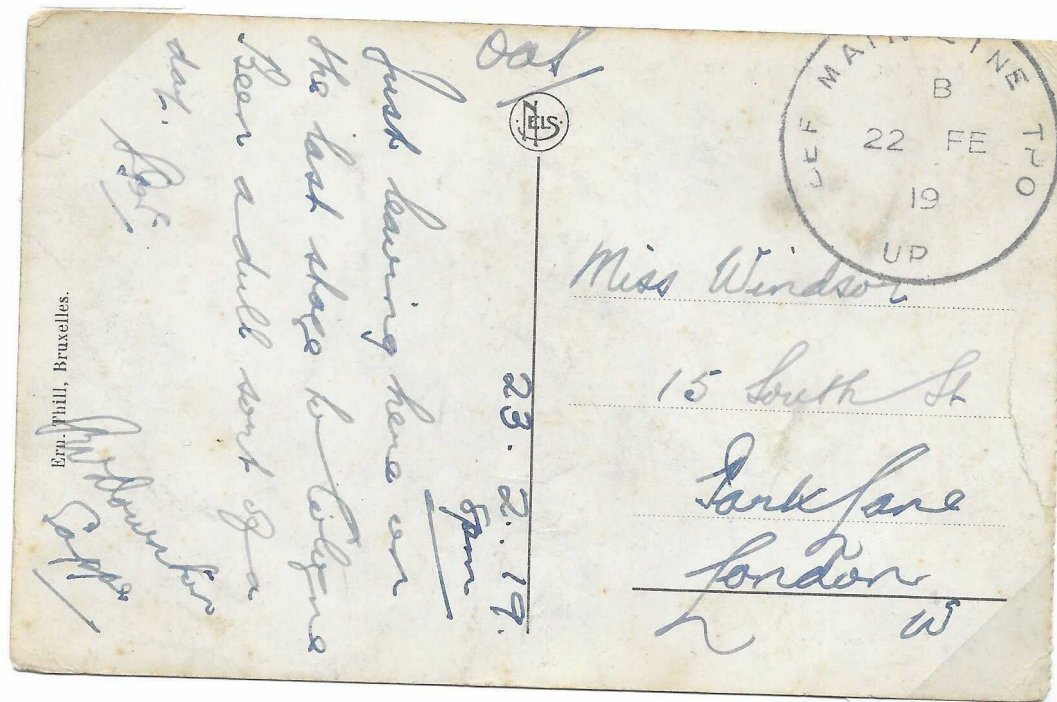
BRITISH MAIN LINE TPO SERVICE  
Skeleton Cancel – Down – 36 mm Diameter



O.H.M.S. envelope with  
36 mm diameter DOWN  
postmark; addressed to  
FPO T58, which was in  
Peruwelz, Belgium in  
in February 1919.



BRITISH MAIN LINE TPO SERVICE  
Skeleton Cancel - Up - 36 mm Diameter

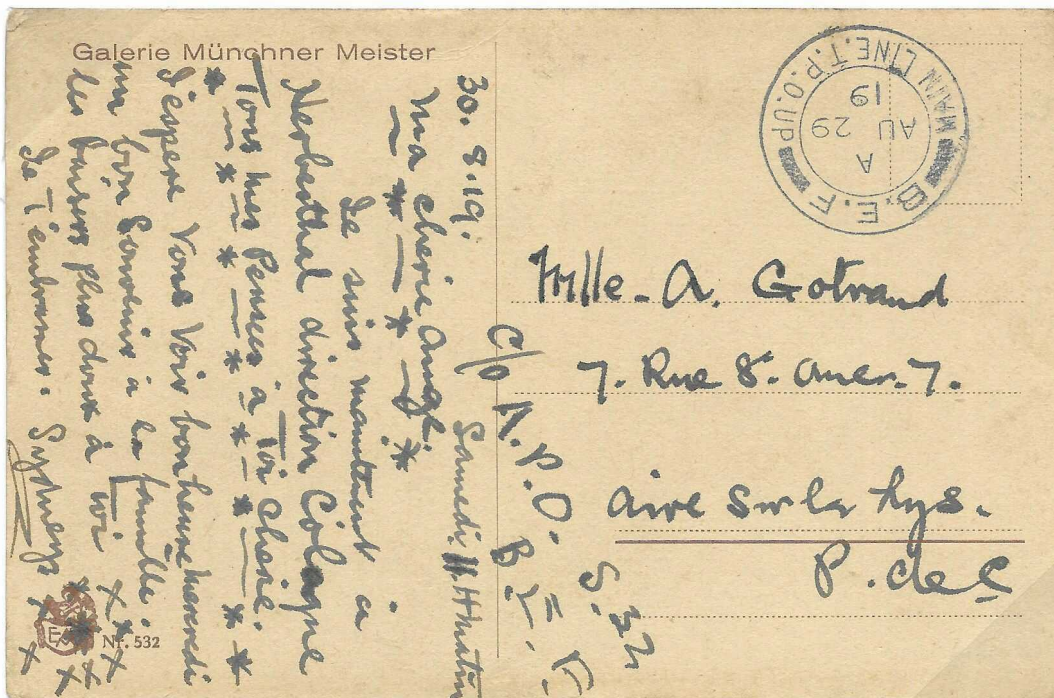
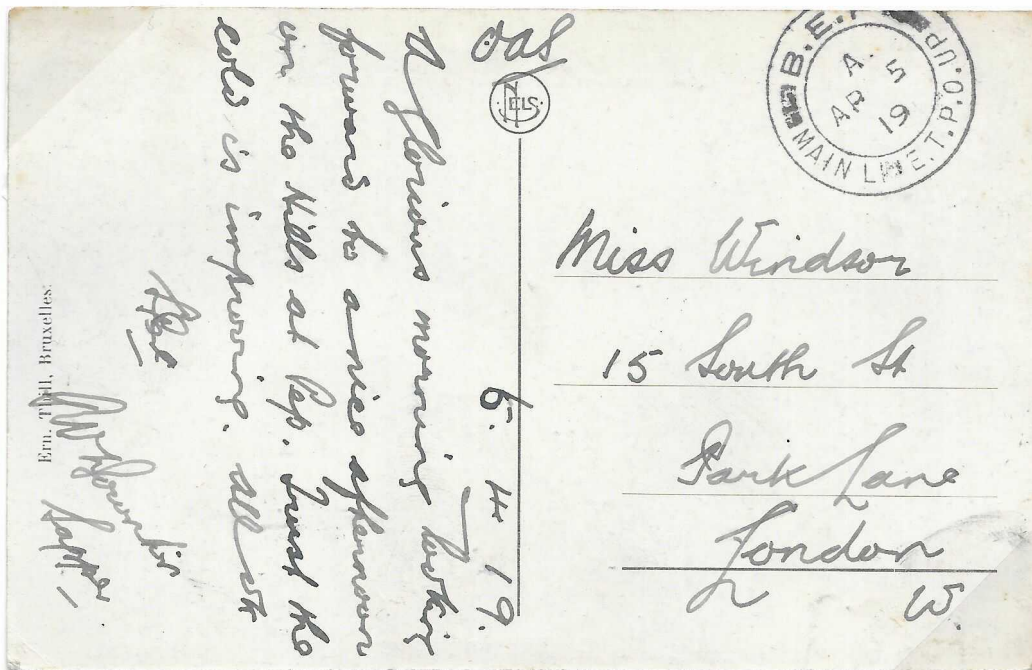


The large 36 mm diameter UP postmark seems unusually elusive, this being the only example seen by exhibitor. It has a B code and February date.

BRITISH MAIN LINE TPO SERVICE  
Permanent Cancel – Up

Permanent TPO markings were provided in the early spring. Proud states that the new “up” markings were sent out on March 21, 1919 and the “down” version on April 4. In fact, the earliest example recorded is dated April 5.

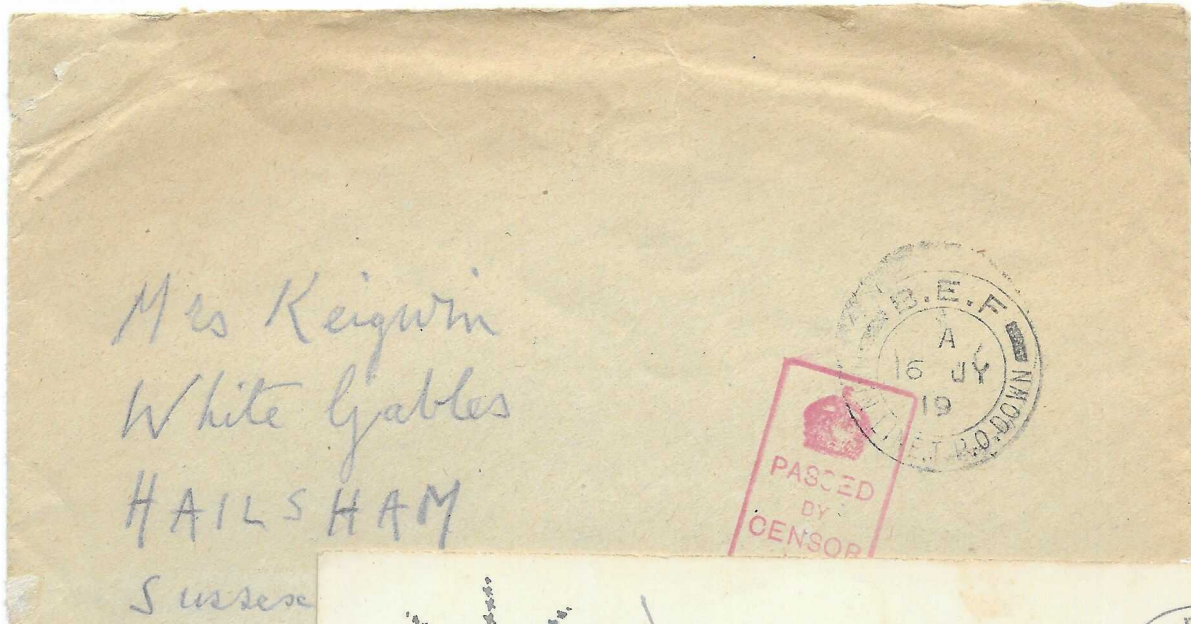
Earliest & Latest Recorded Examples



Early and late usage of the permanent markings inscribed “Up.” This postmark is seldom seen, with the only examples recorded having the code letter A.

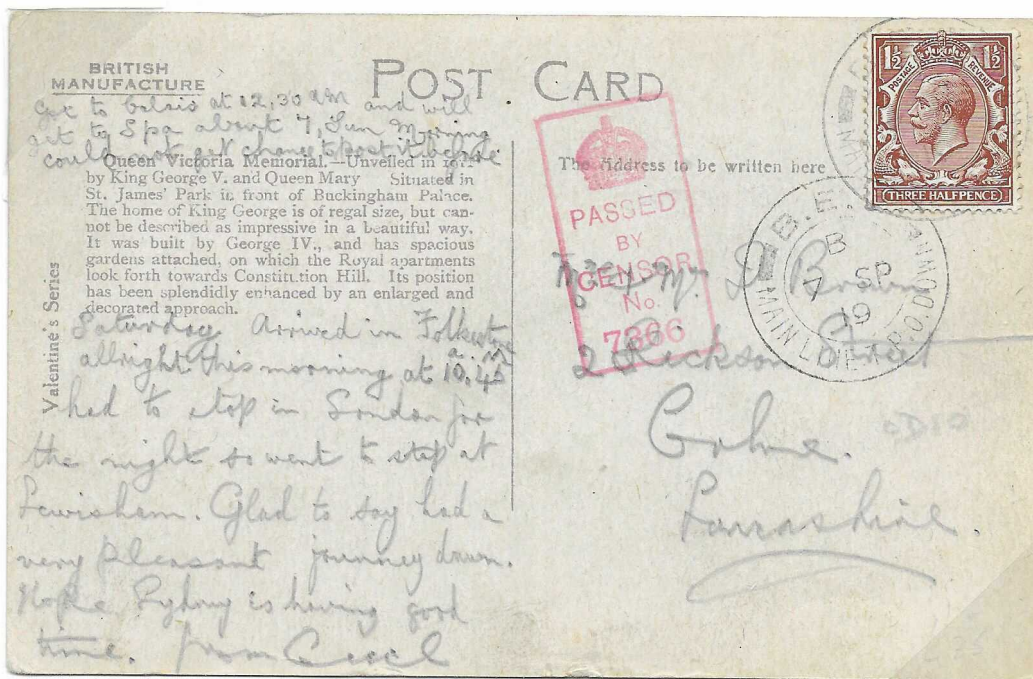


BRITISH MAIN LINE TPO SERVICE  
Permanent Cancel – Down



This page shows a set of "Main Line TPO Down" markings, with three different code letters from A to C, extending over the period from April through July 1919.

BRITISH MAIN LINE TPO SERVICE  
 Permanent Cancel – Down



The latest date for the TPO cancels is reportedly September 13, 1919. Thus, the above picture postcard with a September 7 postmark is a very late use. Because the soldiers' free frank was still in effect at that date, the affixing of a stamp suggests that the writer is not a military person but probably related to the service as a news correspondent or YMCA worker.



BRITISH MAIN LINE TPO SERVICE  
Permanent Cancel – Down



All of the text between the circles was imbedded in the postmarks as sent out from England. Thus, the only thing that needed to be changed by the clerks was the dates. However, even this could be done incorrectly. Normally the TPO markings would be in European style, with the day first followed by the month. On occasion, a date would be inadvertently entered American style with the month first followed by the day. Examples are seldom seen.

BRITISH MAIN LINE TPO SERVICE  
Permanent Cancel – Down & Up

Very unusual official cover with both Up and Down TPO markings. It was posted on a westbound car but addressed to a Sergeant in the Royal Engineers Postal Service in Germany; it needed to be sent on an eastbound train two days later.

