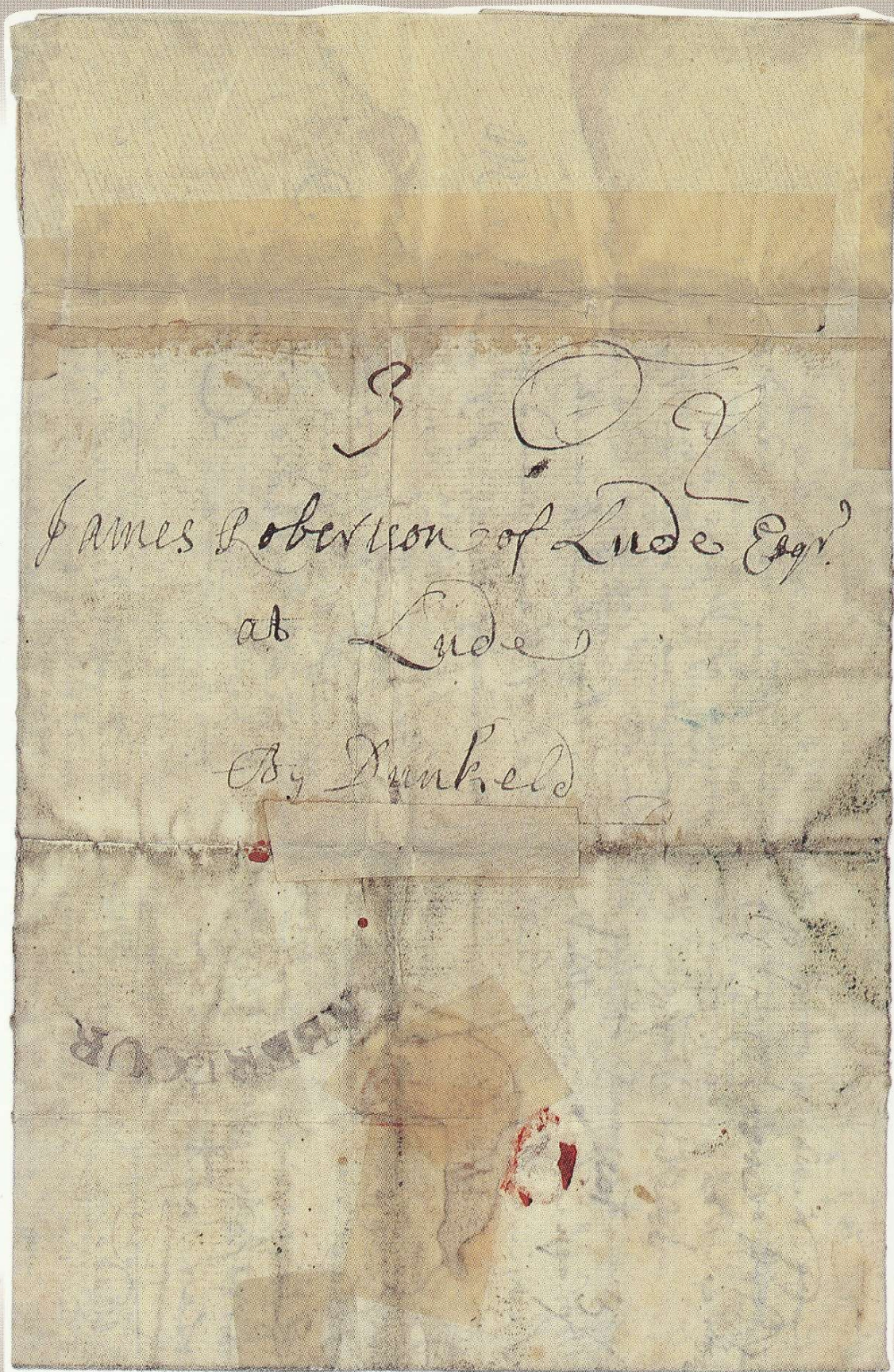


*The Postal Services of*  
**ABERDOUR**  
Post Office

*by W. T. Cochrane*







*The earliest recorded handstamp: 1757 (12 Aug) EL probably carried privately from Breda and landed at Aberdour (a newly opened PO) addressed to Lude by Dunkeld with a curved 'Aberdour' handstamp*



# The Postal Services of Aberdour Post Office

Aberdour post office was first established six months after the start of the "Seven Years War" on the first of February 1757 at a time of 'scarcity and dearth' in our village and continued to operate with it's own sorting and postmen until 1967, a period of over two hundred years, during which time many aspects of life for the population changed radically - including the way we receive our mail.

The postal service in Great Britain as a whole, however, developed slowly from the need of monarchs of the realm to keep in touch, on a regular basis, with their officers of state, local government officials, and even ambassadors abroad. It was Henry the Eighth who appointed Sir Brian Tuke as the first 'Master of the Posts' in 1510.

At that time, messengers on horseback carried mail throughout the land covering about 20 miles at a time before the necessity to change horses for the next stage of their journey. The word 'post' came to be applied to the points at which their horses were changed. These messengers became known as 'posts' and were generally mature people in spite of being called 'postboys'. A 'deputy' - later to be called 'postmaster' - was appointed to each place and was usually an inn keeper with stabling facilities and rooms to let who was held responsible for the smooth running of the posts along his section of the road. Doubtless this was the situation when Aberdour gained it's first 'post' - most probably where 'The Aberdour Hotel' now stands in the High Street, due to the stabling facility which stood next to it then.

It is probable that our post office was occasioned, not only because the community stemmed and had grown from medieval times, but also by the fact that, at that time, various types of sailing craft 'put in' at Aberdour harbour. Added to the craft from other parts of Scotland and England and the continent, a regular ferry also operated from Leith which may have at times brought mail in addition to it's usual cargo of grain. Aberdour in 1795 had a population of approximately 1280 people, who relied upon farming (there were 23 farms in the parish), weaving (there were 36 weavers) and fishing (about 60 seamen) and towards the end of the eighteenth century a small business was started manufacturing spades and shovels etc. It should be stated that in spite of all this activity, Aberdour in postal terms, was always going to be a sub-post office to the Office in Burntisland, which was a small burgh.

The sending of mail 'by the post' in those days was not normally for ordinary folk. Few could read or write, and those who could (clerics, lairds, lawyers, or merchants) made



their own arrangements to send or receive letters. Friends travelling, soldiers going or returning, even pedlars and chapmen might be willing to carry messages. A letter which was sent from Breda a small town just north of Antwerp, through Aberdour, to Dunkeld in 1757 was sent by a man called 'Robertson' to 'James Robertson of Lude' by Dunkeld with a friend who presumably consigned it to the postal service by handing it in to the postal service for delivery, perhaps on disembarkation at Aberdour, bears what is thought to be the earliest known Aberdour handstamp (illustrated on the inside front cover).

The Scottish postal service developed spasmodically throughout the seventeenth century and was hampered by an inadequate road system, and frequent 'hold-ups' by highwaymen took place.

Even at the end of the eighteenth century the Rev. Robert Liston who was minister of our parish from 1754 to 1796 (and also was a Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1787) wrote that Aberdour in common with the rest of Fife, suffered from poor roads:

*"The roads in this parifh are generally bad, as in other parts of Fife. The gentlemen of the county are now paying attention to the direction and formation of the roads. Toll bars are erecting, and a great change for the better muft take place. The village of Aberdour, like many others, have fuffered by its caufeway being changed into a common road. Such a road in a narrow village continues long moift, and is hurtful to the health of its inhabitants. They, fuffer great inconveniences too, in winter, from the depth of the road, and in fummer, from the duft. Neither does a common road laft in a village, being exhausted by the attempts which are made to keep it clean. A paved caufeway endures, and no inconvenience which travellers can find from it, can balance the daily inconveniences to which the refidenters are fubjected by the other"*

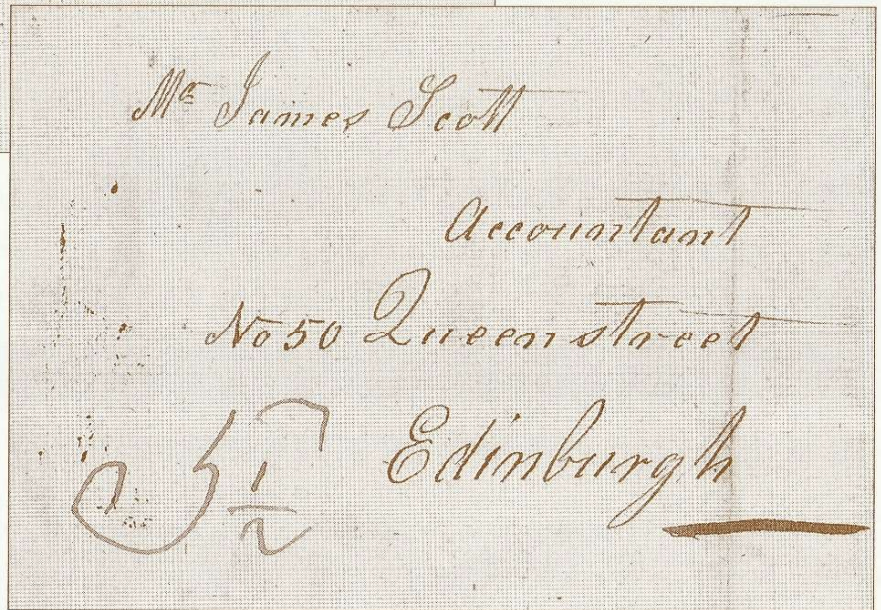
Dissatisfaction with the development of the services in Scotland led to the Scottish Parliament passing legislation in 1695 to establish a General Post Office in Edinburgh. Sir Robert Sinclair of Stevenson was appointed as Postmaster General. Within a few years, however, in 1707, the Act of Settlement was passed and the Post Offices of England and Scotland were united under one Postmaster General in England. Despite this merger, the postmaster in Edinburgh was dignified with the title "Postmaster General".

Up to 1715, in spite of horses being used to convey private messengers in the past, foot runners were the normal means of conveyance by the postal service. In this way direct bags were conveyed long distances i.e. from Edinburgh to Thurso. In 1716, The Duke of Argyll gave orders to place relays of horses from Edinburgh to Inverness, to keep in touch with the army in the Highlands at this time of the first Jacobite rebellion.





1826 handstamp with  
'Aberdour' cancel



These posts worked upon two routes - one going around the east coast through Fife to Aberdeen, whilst a second went by the central road through Perth, Dunkeld and Blair Atholl. It is worth bearing in mind that during these times, military

considerations were of significant importance, and that many of the maps made then were made for a military purpose (and, incidentally, not always reliable for close research!) with the result that the one map available of Aberdour dated 1750 in the National Library of Scotland maps department shows nothing south of our High Street.

Post boys started to be replaced by stagecoaches in the middle of the eighteenth century, as these were faster and less vulnerable to the unwelcome attentions of thieves or highwaymen, which could result in fatalities, and by 1786 regular mail coaches ran between London and Edinburgh (taking sixty hours to complete the journey). There were no mail coaches north of Aberdeen until after the Battle of Waterloo (1815). Postmarks were used in the first instance to indicate that payment had been made, and were introduced by a cavalier colonel called Henry Bishop of Henfield who was appointed to run the posts in England by King Charles the Second. People then used to collect and send their mail at the local post office, or where the post was distant or non-existent, they were obliged to go into the street to meet the visiting letter-carrier who would deliver or receive items for onward conveyance. When receiving mail from the courier it became the custom to 'tip' (just as nowadays we tend to 'tip' a waiter in a restaurant).





*1838 handstamp with straight lined 'Aberdour' handstamp*

The practice of tipping was, from the start, frowned upon by the authorities as it was often abused by the letter carriers and amounted literally to a second charge for delivery, in spite of which it persisted for a considerable time. The sender usually paid the official rate for the transmission in the first place. Rates for the service varied between twopence and eight pence dependent upon the distance for the item to be taken. It is well known that the introduction of stamps in the form of the 'Penny Black' to indicate payment was introduced countrywide in 1840. Up to that time there were varying rates of charge which were never (outside cities) as little as a penny - indeed it took until the 1870s for a profit to be made on this service!!), and a mark which was called - but didn't look much like - a 'Maltese Cross' (illustrated on the back cover) was applied onto the stamp to prevent illegal re-use later - the first postmark on postage stamps. The maltese cross was replaced in 1844 by the serial number system of cancellation in Scotland. Aberdour was allocated the number '3' under this system. However, in 1890 this number was re-allocated to Achnacroish, and Aberdour then became number 589 (illustrated on back cover). I have wondered whether this change of number for Aberdour was due to the introduction of the railway as it was about this time that the Forth Bridge was opened for use, and the construction of the Inverkeithing to Burntisland line was completed. (This completion was not achieved without a tragic incident in October 1888 however, when three 'navvies' employed to lay this seven mile stretch of line were burned to death at night in the wooden hut provided as the workers accommodation



whilst working less than a mile from the centre of Aberdour at Little Couston). These developments marked the end of dependency upon the horse to bring mail to our village. The serial numbers replacing the Maltese cross would first be seen incorporated in what became known as the 'killer' cancellations, so named due to the fact that once applied, it virtually obliterated the design of the stamp it cancelled. In a short time, however, the number was to be included in the circular cancellation date stamp (c.d.s) which succeeded it in England in the middle of the Victorian era.

The location of the post office, (or more exactly, the *sub*-post office) in Aberdour changed from one place in the village to another whilst all these varying changes took place in the official methods of the delivering and cancelling of mail throughout the country. It is hardly surprising to find that in 1855 the post office was just across the road from the blacksmith's in the building which is now at the corner of where Park Lane (formerly 'Coal Wynd') joins the High Street. In those times before railway trains, stage horses required reshoeing and stabling overnight in the yard beside the Aberdour Hotel etc. so this location made good sense. The blacksmith forge was located behind what is now known as 'Anvil House' and operated there as such until the late 'forties'. Sandy Laird was the last blacksmith in our village. By 1896 the post office had moved to the building on the north side of the High Street (nearly opposite our present general store). It may be of interest to mention that when the late Harry Liston ran his grocery business from that shop, evidence of a post office was found. A picture postcard sent in 1907 (illustrated on the front cover) shows us clearly that the post office could be found next to the Woodside Hotel in a house that was called 'Ashlea' (owned later by Wattie Collyer who ran the Woodside Garage and whose eldest son was killed in the second world war, a fact recorded on our war memorial) before being incorporated into the hotel itself as it is now. In 1914, just prior to the Great War, the post office was situated in the shop next to, and on the east of, the church hall. This particular place was a bank amongst other things before becoming the antique shop of to-day. The present location has not been altered at least since the middle 'thirties'. These locations can be noted on the various maps made of the area at various times since 1855.

During the early part of the last century, Aberdour was responsible for the receipt and distribution of parcels from the time that service was initiated by the post office in 1883, and indeed approximately 140 parcels on average were dealt with by the office each year from 1905 until 1909. In 1909 alone however, no fewer than 505 parcels were dealt with, and whatever the reason, (which may have been unrelated to the increased volume of business) this service was passed to Kirkcaldy in February 1910.



Aberdour continued to serve by accepting items going out and sorting and delivering those sent in - the numbers averaging 5700 each year during that period.



First World War – 1916 cancellation date stamp

From 1935 until 1962 the present premises were rented by various postmasters operating the Post Office. David Watson bought the 'shop' in 1962, inadvertently I assume, becoming the first postmaster to own the premises possibly since the innkeeper in the Aberdour Hotel all those years beforehand, and the last postmaster to run the office with letter sorting facilities which were transferred to Burntisland in 1967. Rosie Jeffs, his daughter now lives in Dovecot Estate.

In its heyday the Aberdour Post Office employed three postmen. During the early fifties they were Andrew Wotherspoon, Bert Jamieson and Freddie Macdonald. After leaving the service Fred opened a newsagents business for a short time in 'Caulfield' adjoining the bowling green, Andrew's son now lives in Castle View, and Bert's daughter Catherine Duncan lives in Humble Terrace and is now very active in village affairs. It was the practice then to employ a temporary postman as a replacement to allow the postmen to take their two week annual holiday. As that replacement on two occasions, I was



POST



CARD



CORRESPONDENCE

PUBLISHED BY  
J.B. WHITE LTD DUNDEE.

ADDRESS

Dear Mrs Turnbull

I am having a lovely  
holiday I have never  
been in one day I  
only wish you were  
both here. - Mary

THIS IS A REAL PHOTOGRAPH (COPYRIGHT)

Mrs Turnbull  
4 Abbey Street  
Edinburgh

Second World War – 1944 cancellation date stamp

given the 'country' run for a six week period, which involved doing deliveries on the bicycle to the farms and outlying areas within the parish of Aberdour, extending from the "Chesters" in the west to the 'Murrell' in the east. Balmule farm, Dalachy, and Humbie were, fortunately for me and the regular postmen not included in this 'round'.

The population of our village has not varied too much throughout the years since 1851 as there were nineteen hundred and forty five adults then, whilst in 1999 there were sixteen hundred and seventy two. The surprising thing to me is that the population, with all the developments, has *fallen* albeit the census in 1851 included the whole parish.

Thus for two hundred and ten years Aberdour sorted it's own mail and ran it's postal service. Times are changing and with the development of electronic means of communication the posts may well become part of a romantic past full of discipline, incident, and human endeavour for it was not without good reason that the expression 'The Royal Mail must get though' was well known and understood.



## Comment

My first knowledge of Aberdour was gained in a letter my mother sent to me in 1945 when I was at boarding school in Sherborne, Dorset which said "*We are going to live in a little village which has a High Street from which a road leads down to the sands and the sea*". I think I fell in love with what came to be my 'home' even before I saw it from even that brief and, as I came to later realise, thoroughly inadequate description, and I have spent my life coming back to this lovely village.

Another love of my life has been the collecting of stamps, which later developed into philately, added to which I have an unexplainable fascination for writing and old documents.

These features of my character have had the opportunity to combine into this small production which attempts to give a tiny insight to the reader of how Aberdour's postal service operated over the years. I hope that it may become a 'springboard' for someone in the future who might be in a position to take the story a step further.



The information for the above article was gathered from the following to which my acknowledgement and appreciation is wholeheartedly extended:

The Dunfermline Library – Local History Department  
The Kirkcaldy Library  
The National Library, Edinburgh  
The Central Library, Scottish History Section, Edinburgh  
The Statistical Account of Scotland Vol. X, Fife 1791-99  
'Post Offices in Scotland' by T.B. Lang 1856  
The Dunfermline Journal 1880  
'Aberdour and Inchcolme' by Rev. William Ross LL.D. 1885  
'Scotland on Stamps' by C.W. Hill 1972  
'Scotlands Posts' by James Mackay 2000  
'Scottish Numeral Postmarks' by James A. Mackay

Friends to whom I have spoken in the village have also, perhaps unconsciously, contributed to the above include:

Rosie Jeffs, Catherine Duncan: Andrew Wotherspoon: Douglas Crow: John Cuthill:  
Mike Taddei and Gordon Thomson (the current postmaster).

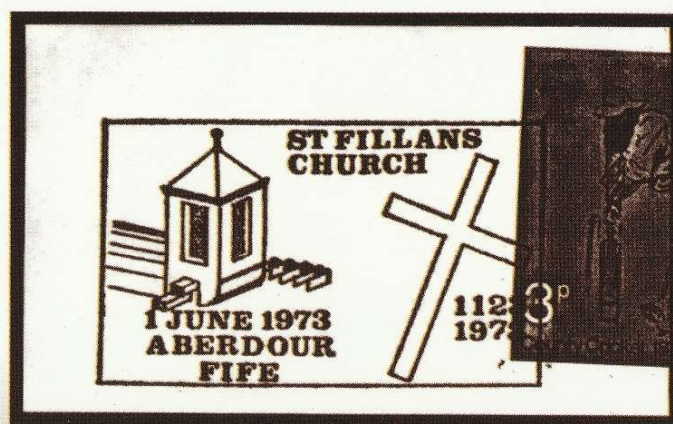
**BILL COCHRANE**

July 2001





*The last Aberdour cancellation date stamp on a block of 'England Winners' commemorative stamps*



*In 1973, six years after Aberdour Post Office lost its autonomy, a number of commemorative covers were produced bearing the above special handstamp.*





*Penny Black cancelled with 'Maltese Cross'*



Mr. Crockett  
Gunmakers  
Stirling

*Cover bearing Aberdeen numeral cancel '589'*