

Botswana Meter marks: An introduction

by Gordon Smith, Philatelic Society of Greater Southern Africa, the Royal Philatelic Society of Canada, the Postal History Society of Canada, and the Nova Scotia Stamp Club.



Introduction

The public often pays little attention to the stamps on their mail, and even less to other marks that have helped move the mail, especially since they are less colourful and art-like than stamps. However, most mail in the world now moves by non-stamped means, so if we are to describe and preserve current postal history for future collectors, we need to consider the marks that allow an item to move through the postal system without the use of postage stamps. Postmarks are viewed by the philatelic community as a valid aspect of postal history collecting and it can be argued that marks denoting payment (just like a stamp) are at least as equally important to understand and record as postmarks.

Neglected even in developed countries, the collecting of non-stamp marks denoting payment is even less common in smaller developing countries, such as Botswana. Given the lack of interest in this material, covers are often quickly relegated to the trash, even by philatelists, making them rare in collecting circles and challenging to obtain.



Fig.1: Typical Botswana Meter Mark

The Introduction of Meter Machines to Botswana

Prior to Independence in 1966, Botswana was known as the Bechuanaland Protectorate. While other countries in the region, such as South Africa and the Rhodesias were issuing meter licences as early as the 1920s, Botswana remained largely undeveloped until the 1970s, thus influencing the lack of demand for franking licences.

There is no evidence that postal franking machines were used in the Protectorate, although a drawing of a frank die from Universal Postal Frankers Ltd. in London UK in 1957 indicates that their use was under consideration (Fig.2). An article by John Inglefield-Watson (1991) states that *"It has been reported that in May 1963 the Postmaster of the Protectorate wrote in reply to a query, that were no machines were then in use, but applications for their introduction (makes unknown) were in hand."*

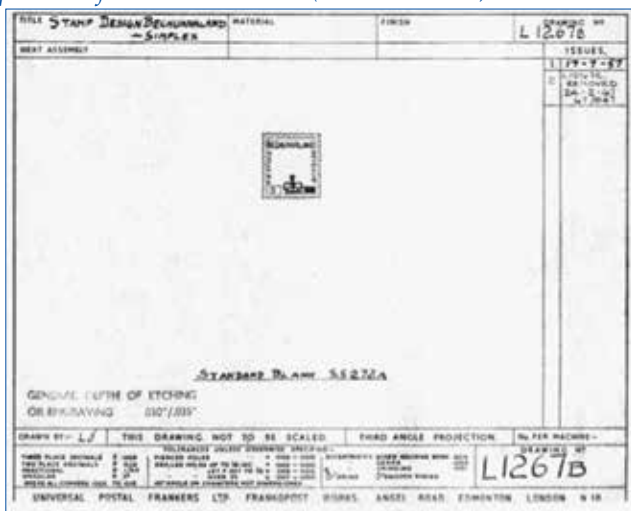


Fig.2: Simplex Stamp Design from Universal Postal Frankers Ltd. in London UK in 1957. (Inglefield-Watson, 1991).

The first meter franking appears to be meter licence no. UA1 issued to Standard Bank of Botswana in Gaborone and dated 13 November 1970 (Fig.3). This mark was created by a Universal MV 'Automax' machine from Universal Postal Frankers Ltd. The production of this model of machine is *"stated to have ceased in 1960"* (Inglefield-Watson, 1991), which in conjunction with the drawing of the frank die noted in Fig.2 would make the earlier use of meter machines in Botswana seem more likely.

Issue dates for the first 30 or so licences in Botswana are unknown. The only file record from the 1970s and 1980s remaining at Botswana Post is the original licence number issue list, which does not contain this information. It is only possible to estimate dates on the basis of earliest seen dates.

From commencement, meter licences were issued nationwide as evidenced through the issuing of the following licences:

- licence number 2 to Central District Council in Serowe,
- licence number 3 to Botswana Business Machines in Francistown,
- licence number 4 to Standard Bank in Maun,
- licence number 6 to Botswana Power Corporation in Francistown, and
- licence number 7 was issued to Botswana Game Industries in Francistown.

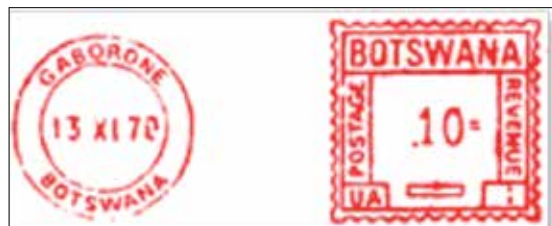


Fig.3: Earliest Known Botswana Meter Mark (Case, 1971)

The Number of Meter Licences Issued

By March 1999, a total of 232 licence numbers had been issued.

In 1992, all licence holders were contacted by Botswana Post in order to confirm whether the issued licences were still in use. While a number responded that either they had never purchased a meter machine or that their machine had ceased functioning, no further action was taken by the Post Office.

In 1999, a similar contacting exercise was undertaken. At that time, licences not being used were designated for re-assignment. This resulted in 75 old licence numbers becoming available for re-use. However, research from Post Office files and secondary sources appears to indicate that a few licence numbers changed hands before the Post Office began re-issuing expired numbers in mid-1999.

Including the re-issued number, a total of 327 licences had been granted by August 2002.

Meter Machines Used

The Post Office did not charge for the use of a meter licence nor did it sell meter machines. It only re-set the machine on request by the licence holder. This may have changed since this information was determined in the early 2000s. So, for at least the first 30 years of postal meter use in Botswana, licence holders had to obtain their machines from a private source.

A variety of makes were used including:

Ascom	Ascom Hasler	Francotyp Postalia	Hasler	Neopost	Pitney Bowes
Postalia	Roneo	Roneo Neopost	Satas		

Meter Licence Prefixes

In countries other than Botswana, the meter licence prefix usually indicates the meter machine make and or model. In Botswana, after an early attempt to assign prefixes, postal authorities seem to have settled on the universal prefix 'R' for all meters fielded in the country (Hawkins, unpubl.).

In addition to the 'R' prefix (Fig.1), the following prefixes have been seen (Fig.4 a - f: 'UA' on licence number 1 and 2 for Standard Bank, 'S' on licences numbered 1, 2 and 797 for Botswana Book Centre in Gaborone, Matemela Master in Serowe and an unknown licensee in Lobatsi, 'P' on licences numbered 91 for First National Bank, 'J' on licence numbers 700, 706 and 713 for unknown licencees in Selibi Phikwe and Gaborone (which are unusual, non-sequential licence numbers), 'TX' on licence 148 for an unknown licensee in Selebi-Phikwe, and 'G' on licence number 148 for the Botswana Medical Aid Society. In addition, the Botswana Medical Aid Society meter mark, dated 10 April 1995 is printed in blue despite all meters in Botswana and elsewhere being typically printed in red. This does not seem to be a provisional issue, as their licence was granted on 11 June 1992.



Fig.4a: Meter with Prefix 'UA'



Fig.4b: Meter with Prefix 'S'



Fig.4c: Meter with Prefix 'P'



Fig.4d: Meter with Prefix 'J'



Fig.4e: Meter with Prefix 'TX'



Fig.4f: Meter with Prefix 'G'



Fig.5: Meter No. R51 with 'H1' in frame

Marks for licence number 51 for Jwaneng Mine contain an 'H1' within the frame in addition to the 'R' within the indicum (Fig.5).

John Inglefield-Watson (1991) provides an undated illustration of a frank die for a Pitney Bowes Model 6300 with an indication of a 'PB' prefix (Fig.6). While there is a mark that has the same layout as this illustration, there does not appear to have been any marks prefixed 'PB' in circulation.



Fig.6: Drawing of Die for Pitney Bowes Meter Machine (at left) compared to an Actual Mark

In April 2004, BotswanaPost suspended issuing licences pending the introduction of meter machines that could be digitally recharged by telephone. The new licences are prefixed 'BP', which is assumed to stand for BotswanaPost. 'R' prefixed licences continued to be used until at least September 2008.

With one known exception, licence numbers in this new 'BP' series are all 5 digits long, and, as of January 2022, the following licence numbers have been seen:

- series starting at 06001 and running into the 06100s (Fig.7a),
- series starting at 06501 and running to the 06570s (Fig.7b),
- a few licence numbers beginning 5118# (Fig.7c), and
- one licence each with numbers 51454 (Fig.7d), 51805 (Fig.7e), and 51981 (Fig.7f).

One meter mark with a 6-digit licence number BP372980 has also been seen (Fig.8).

A complete list of licence numbers known to date can be found at <https://postalhistory.ca/botswana-meter-marks/>.



Fig.7a: Example of series starting at 06001



Fig.7b: Example of series starting at 06501



Fig.7c: Example of licences beginning 5118#



Fig.7d: Meter BP51454



Fig.7e: Meter BP51805



Fig.7f: Meter BP51981



Fig.8: Meter BP372980

Denominations

At independence, Botswana utilised the South African Rand as its currency and meter marks were denominated in cents, the minor currency unit of the Rand. In 1976, Botswana issued its own currency, the Pula which is equal to 100 Thebe, and since that time, meter marks have been denominated in Thebe and Pula.

References

- This article is more or less a reprint of information contained on a portion of my website. For more in-depth information on the topic, please visit <https://postalhistory.ca/botswana-meter-marks/>.
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The South African Philatelist

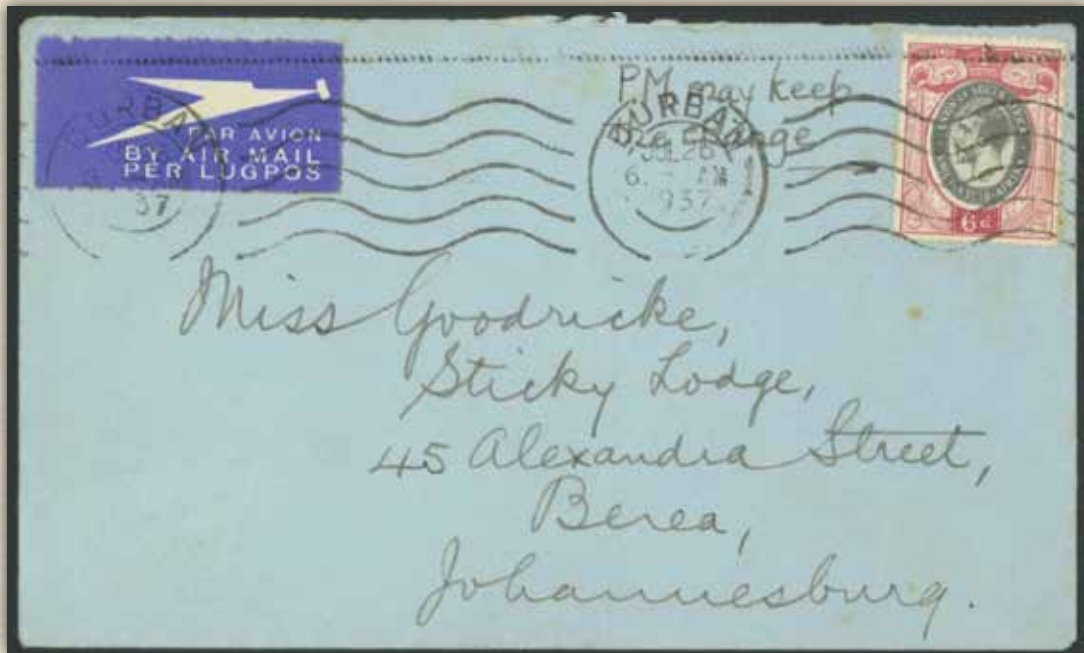
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INCORRECTLY FRANKED INLAND AIRMAIL LETTER WITH A 'GIFT' FOR THE POSTMASTER (this revenue stamp bears the year of issue in small print below the King's head)



THE LISTED VARIETIES OF THE COMMEMORATIVES OF SA shown here, missing hyphen damaged 'K'



EARLIEST KNOWN BOTSWANA METER MARK (Case, 1971)



MALTA 5/-, 1886 PORTRAIT OF QUEEN VICTORIA



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