

Auxiliary Markings from Bechuanaland and Botswana

by Gordon Smith

“Auxiliary markings are notations made on an envelope regarding services to be performed and status of the mail piece within the postal network. They may be hand-written comments, hand-stamped, or applied labels.”^[i]

All the auxiliary markings described in the article are written in English as the primary language, while some also contain French and/or Setswana translations. While Setswana is the “national” language of Botswana, English is the official language of the country.^[ii] The official language of the Universal Postal Union (UPU) is French, hence the French translation on some of the earlier markings. However, English was added as a working language in 1994.^[iii] While the UPU regulations state that addressing shall be written in roman letters and Arabic numerals,^[iv] they do not provide regulations on types or language of auxiliary markings.

Reason for Return to Sender

Figure 2 illustrates a registered official free cover from the Central Statistics Office (official free mark type ODot1N) ^[v] in Gaborone dated September 16, 1977, to, based on an analysis of the postmarks on the rear of the envelope, Lobatse, where it arrived the next day. The item remained in Lobatse until October 29, when it received multiple rose-coloured “UNCLAIMED” handstamps and was marked with a manuscript “R.T.S.” in red ink above the official free mark. The postal clerk also handwrote the numeral “2” on either side of the official free mark to indicate the item should be returned “2” (to) the Central Statistics Office. The item arrived back in Gaborone on 31 October.

The address on the registered cover postmarked March 7, 1991, in Figure 3 is covered by a framed mauve

“UNCLAIMED” handstamp, 44.0 mm wide by 9.5 mm tall, stamped upside down over upper part of the address with a manuscript “RTS” (Return to Sender) in red ballpoint pen ink above and to the right of address. A manuscript “TO” in red ballpoint pen ink to upper left of the official free handstamp type RS0N^[vi] is used to redirect item back to the sender, the Department of Wildlife & National Parks in Gaborone.

Figure 4 shows another “UNCLAIMED” handstamp on cover dated September 22, 2000. This handstamp, also in mauve, is stamped on top of the address with an underlined manuscript

“RTS” (Return to Sender) in red ballpoint pen ink written below also covering the address. The handstamp is 44.0 mm wide by 8.5 mm tall and has thinner letters than the handstamp in Figure 3. A squiggly outline and manuscript “TO” in red ballpoint pen ink to upper left of the Central Medical Stores official free handstamp type OS0Y^[vii] are used to redirect item back to the sender.

Figure 5 illustrates a cover from March 2, 2004, to an address in Gaborone with a “Postage Prepaid” handstamp with the originating post office illegible and no return address on the envelope. The address information has a manuscript “unknown” written across it, manuscript lines above and below, and an asterisk to the upper left all written in black. A descriptive handstamp has been applied by a postal clerk, likely in Gaborone, who then ticked a box within the handstamp to

Table 1. Interpretation of Figure 1.

	Route	Marks	Postmarks
1	From unknown location to Carr in Serowe	Original addressing	Faint unreadable mark on stamp
2	Serowe to Francistown	Manuscript in black ink strikes out P.O. box number and puts in topmost “FRANCISTOWN”	Two strikes of Serowe postmark January 10, 1966 upside down (see shape of “O” of Serowe in partial strike)
3	Francistown to Serowe	Manuscript “To” to upper right of address and “SEROWE” at bottom applied in same light blue cartridge pen	Francistown postmark January 13, 1966
4	Serowe to Francistown	Manuscript in black ink denotes “D.C.’s Office, FRANCISTOWN” giving more detail	Serowe, February 2, 1966
5	?	“UNKNOWN GAAITSIWE, INCONNU” handstamp applied “D.C.’s Office” struck out and “Return to SENDER” manuscript applied in same dark blue cartridge pen	?
6	?	“LEFT TERRITORY” in blue ballpoint ink applied on upper left of envelope	Serowe, February 10, 1966 on rear (see Figure 2)

Bechuanaland Unknown Handstamp

Figure 1 shows a cover from January 1966, eight months before the country gained independence and became Botswana. The cover contains many markings including a mauve handstamp, 50.8 mm wide by 23.5 mm tall, containing the words “UNKNOWN GAAITSIWE INCONNU” on three lines. The word “INCONNU,” which means unknown in French, reflects that the official language of the Universal Postal Union (UPU). The word “GAAITSIWE” would appear to be an anglicization of the Setswana phrase “Ga se itsiwe” which means “it is not known”.

The cover presents an interesting mystery related to its routings, which the above Table 1 attempts to unravel.



Figures 1. Cover front with Bechuanaland Unknown handstamp from 1966

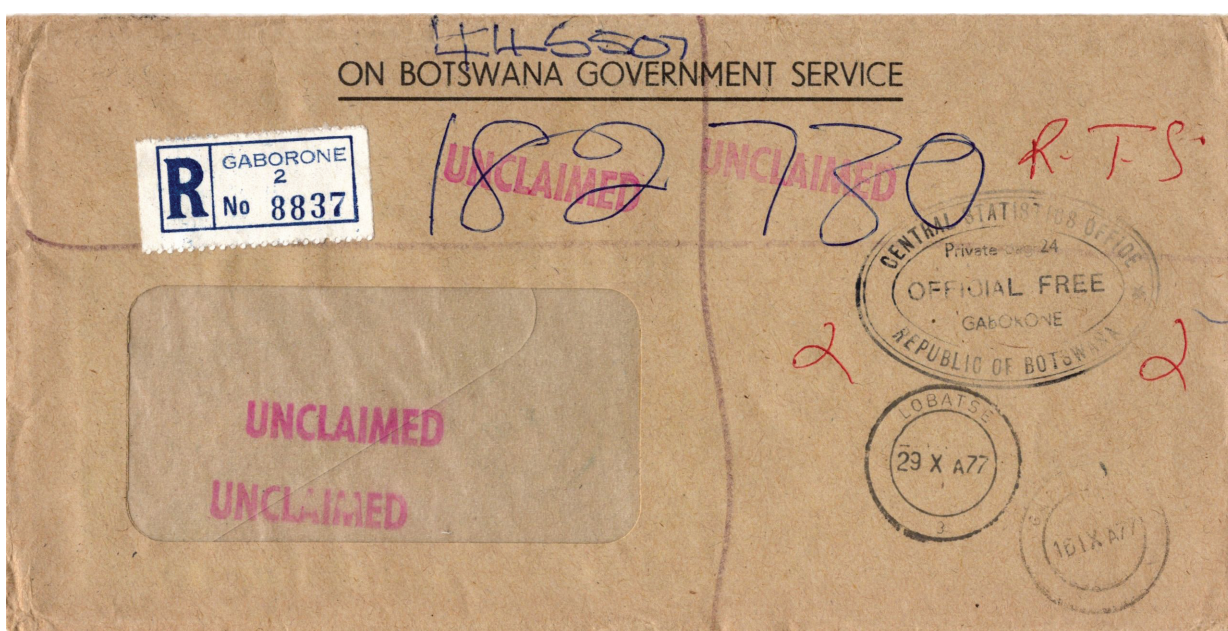


Figure 2. Cover front with Botswana Unclaimed handstamp from 1977

explain why the item was undeliverable. The handstamp is 51 mm wide by 74.5 mm tall, struck in mauve, and contains the following ten lines:

- First line: UNKNOWN
- Second Line: REFUSED
- Third Line: UNCLAIMED
- Fourth Line: RETURN TO SENDER
- Fifth Line: ADDRESS INSUFFICIENT
- Sixth Line: NO SUCH NUMBER
- Seventh Line: GONE AWAY/BOX CLOSED
- Eighth Line: RETURN LETTER OFFICE
- Ninth Line: NO STREET DELIVERY
- Tenth Line: OWNER DECEASED

The fourth line "RETURN TO SENDER" is checked with a red stroke.



Figure 6 shows a similar mark likely applied in Bobonong. The cover is a standard size envelope postmarked in Gaborone, but the date is illegible. The rear of the cover contains a backstamp from the Palapye POTA Sorting Centre. The day and the month in the backstamp are 09/15 and while the year is unclear, it appears to be "04" and the of franking of 0.80 Pula would be correct for this

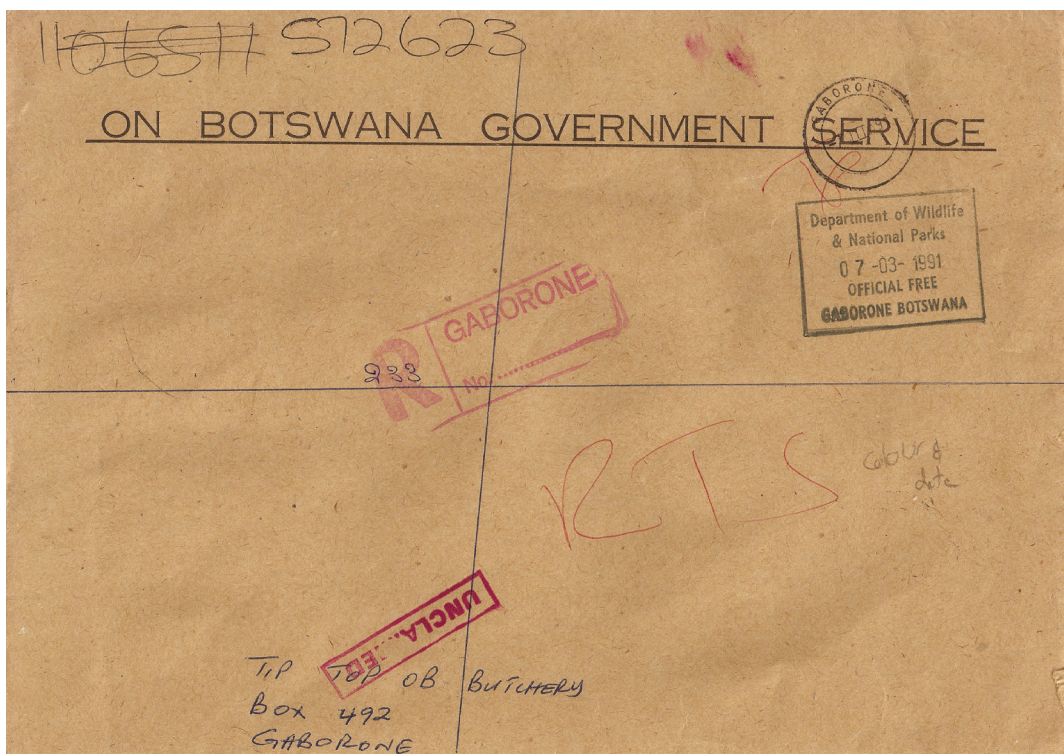


Figure 3. Cover with Unclaimed handstamp from 1991

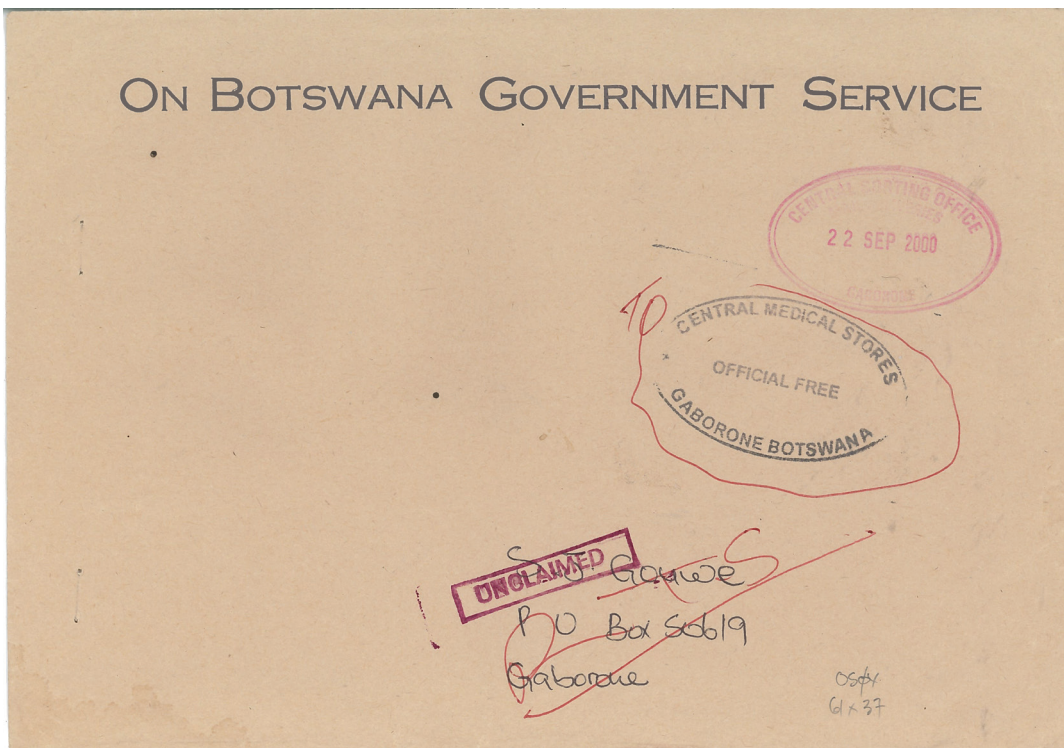


Figure 4. Cover with Unclaimed handstamp from 2000

date. The front of the envelope has “WRONG ADDRESS” handwritten in black ink in the upper right. A nine-line descriptive handstamp, 63.5 mm wide by 101.5 mm tall, struck in red has been applied over the address. While imprint is unclear in parts, it is possible to decipher the text from what is

legible and by comparison to the mark as follows:

First line: **UNKNOWN**
 Second Line: **REFUSED**
 Third Line: **UNCLAIMED**
 Fourth Line: **RETURN TO SENDER**

Fifth Line: **ADDRESS INSUFFICIENT**
Sixth Line: **NO SUCH NUMBER**
Seventh Line: **GONE AWAY/BOX CLOSED**
Eighth Line: **RETURN LETTER OFFICE**
Ninth Line: **NO STREET DELIVERY**

The third line “UNCLAIMED” and the fourth line “RETURN TO SENDER” are each checked with a red stroke.

A scrawl that can be interpreted as “RTS” and a manuscript line, both in red ink, have been applied above and below a return address handstamp on the rear of the envelope. The number 3600700 has also been handwritten in blue ink on the rear of the envelope to the left of the return address. While this appears to be a phone number, it does not correspond to the numbers provided in the return address information. An internet search indicates that the number is for the Botswana Ministry of International Affairs and Cooperation, and not the organization that sent the letter.

Based on the different handwriting styles and the ink colours, it could be inferred that the indication of a wrong address was written on the envelope by the person who received the letter in their post office box, who then re-posted the letter, and that the marks in red ink were later written by a postal clerk when they applied the descriptive handstamp.

Figure 7 shows yet another descriptive handstamp that can be marked by a postal clerk to explain why the item was undeliverable. This mark, struck in red, is 73 mm wide by 60 mm tall and contains nine lines. While the handstamp is unclear, the cover was examined using ImageSleuth 1.3.0^[viii] that enhanced the light marking, allowing additional lettering to be determined. Based on the text that is readable and a comparison to the similar markings illustrated in Figures 5 and 6, the following information can be deciphered. The letters in black are readable and the letters in red are assumed.

First line: **UNKNOWN**
Second Line: **REFUSED**
Third Line: **UNDELIVERABLE** or **UNCLAIMED**
Fourth Line: **RETURN TO SENDER**
Fifth Line: **?**
Sixth Line: **?**
Seventh Line: **GONE AWAY/BOX CLOSED**
Eighth Line: **RETURN LETTER OFFICE**
Ninth Line: **NO STREET DELIVERY**

Interestingly, on this domestic cover that was likely posted between September 4, 2006 and June 1, 2010 (the date stamp of the postmark runs off the envelope and therefore is unavailable, so the dating is based on the rate of P1.10 that was paid), no box indicating a reason for non-delivery was ticked and rather a manuscript “TRY” in black ballpoint was applied pointing to the address on the envelope.

“Pointing hand” marks or manicules are found on mail from many countries around the world. They are typically used to mark mail as returned to the sender with an explanation of why the item could not be delivered.^[ix] Figure 8 shows one such manicule on an envelope from Botswana. The marking, 73 mm wide by 40.5 mm tall, struck in red, is found on a large envelope with a meter franking on tape, paying Domestic Large Letter Surface rate of P4.90.

The mark contains the following text:
“RETURN TO SENDER” printed within hand with further text below the hand stating

RETURN TO SENDER
IMM122.1 REQUIRES
COUNTRY NAME IN
ENGLISH ON LAST LINE

The IMM refers to International Mail Manual. Section 122 discusses Addressing and subsection 122.1 deals with the Destination Address. Sub-subsection 122.1j^[x] states that “The last line of the address must show only the country name, written in full (no abbreviations) and in capital letters.” The International Mail Manual is a publication of the United States Postal Service (USPS), so it appears that this mail was sent by accident to the United States given that a USPS regulation is quoted and the manuscript “RTS” (Return to Sender) mark circles and points to Botswana in the postal franking indicium. It appears that a postal clerk in the United States applied the handstamp indicating that a mistake was made in sending the item to the United States because there was no country name provided in the address. It is interesting if the letter did in fact make it to the United States since the franking underpaid the “Large Letter Airmail to the rest of the World” rate of P9.60 by P4.70 and no postage due was applied.

Botswana Insufficient Postage Handstamp

Figure 9 shows a framed handstamp in mauve, 61 mm wide by 21 mm tall, denoting that the postage on the item was insufficient for airmail. The item, posted from Botswana to England on July 19, 2002, paid P2.50. The correct rate at the time was P2.75. Given that the rate changed from P2.50 on July 1, 2002, just 16 days prior, it is likely that the sender was not aware of the rate change. It appears that the letter was not charged postage due, nor, unlike the following example, was there any indication that it was sent by surface.

Figure 10 shows a framed handstamp from April 2004 in black providing similar information to the previous example. However, from an analysis of the lettering, this is a different mark than the previous one, based on the distance of the letter “P” from the edge of frame and the location of the letter “F” on the second line in relation to the letter “A” on the first line. The cover also contains a handstamp in black indicating that the item should proceed by surface mail. The cover was franked with a P1.95 stamp, while the airmail rate to Europe for standard letter was P2.75. The sender might have been confused because the rate for an aerogram to Europe was P1.95. This cover has been copied from a digital copy of a newsletter,^[xi] so apologies for the poor quality of the image and the inability to offer dimensions.

Botswana Received After Final Despatch Handstamp

Based on the meter license number in indicium of the meter mark, Figure 11 was sent from the University of Botswana on June 22, 1990.

The cover has a “Received after final despatch” handstamp in lower right corner. Despatch is the British spelling of dispatch. This handstamp is also dated June 22.

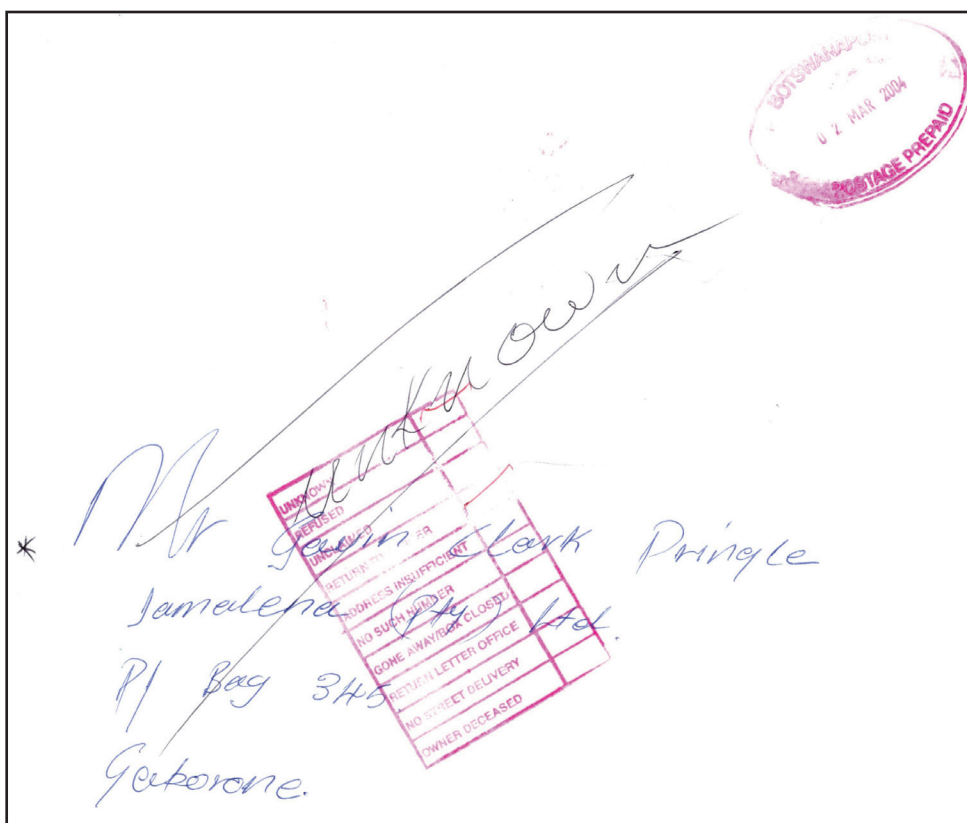
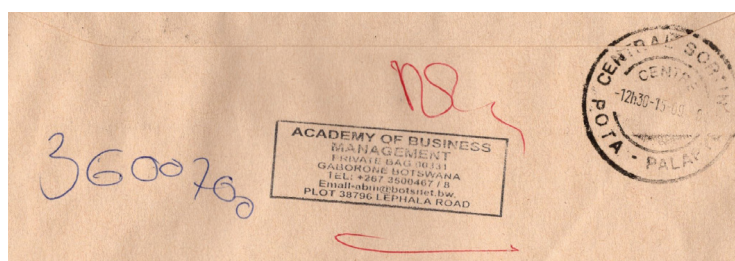


Figure 5. 2004 part cover with handstamp explaining reason for return to sender



Figure 6. Cover front with handstamp from Bobonong explaining reason for return to sender



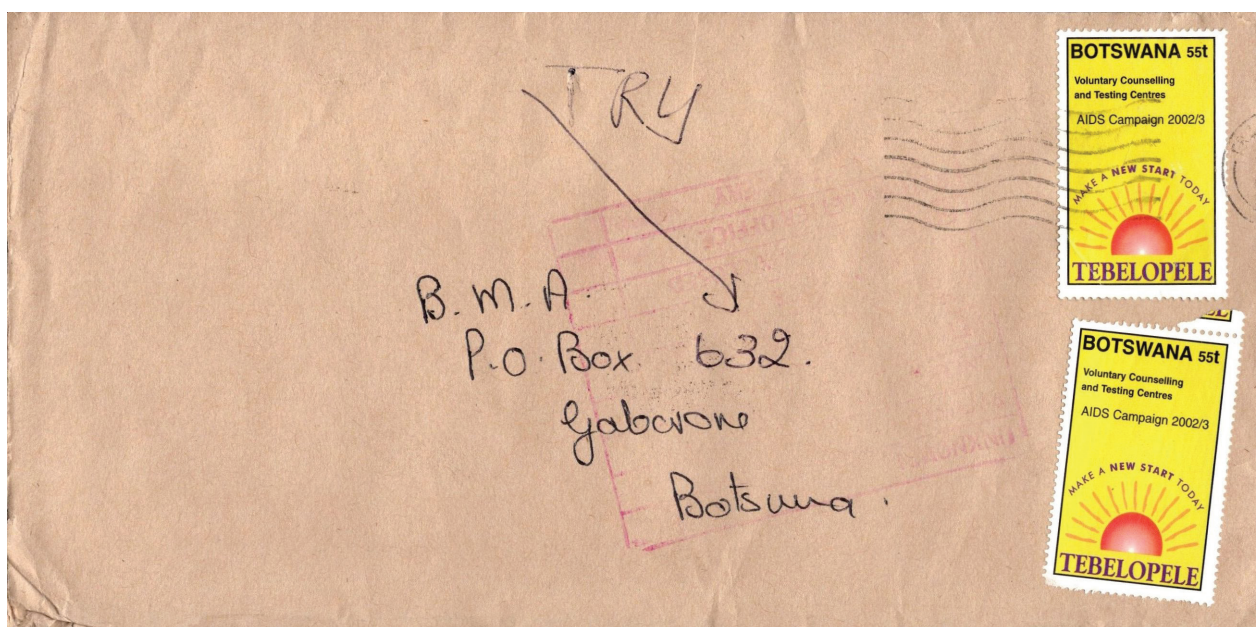


Figure 7. 2006 to 2010 cover with handstamp explaining reason for return to sender



Figure 8. Part cover from 2012 with pointing hand or “manicule” handstamp applied in the United States

The package is marked with “Express Airmail” in manuscript in the upper left corner. Comparing the script to the writing in the address, this denotation indicating the service requested for the item appears to have been added by the sender. The rear of the cover contains a “Received” handstamp marked “July 1, 1990, Spec Del Section, Houston TX” (see insert on Figure 11). The front of the cover has a “Received” handstamp marked “July 2, 1990, Nassau Bay Sta., Houston TX”. Based on these marks, we know that the letter was handled as special delivery in the United States or express delivery using terminology from the Botswana Postal Service, despite there being no official designation that this service was requested.

The envelope was franked with P4.80 in postage comprised of:

- P1.50 which was the “Express Delivery Service” charge for letters to the United States
- P0.50 which was a “special charge” for “acceptance of postal article other than registered articles and parcels after closing of the mail”
- P2.80 which was the postage for a 70-gram letter airmail service to the Americas at 0.40 Pula per 10 grams.^[xii]

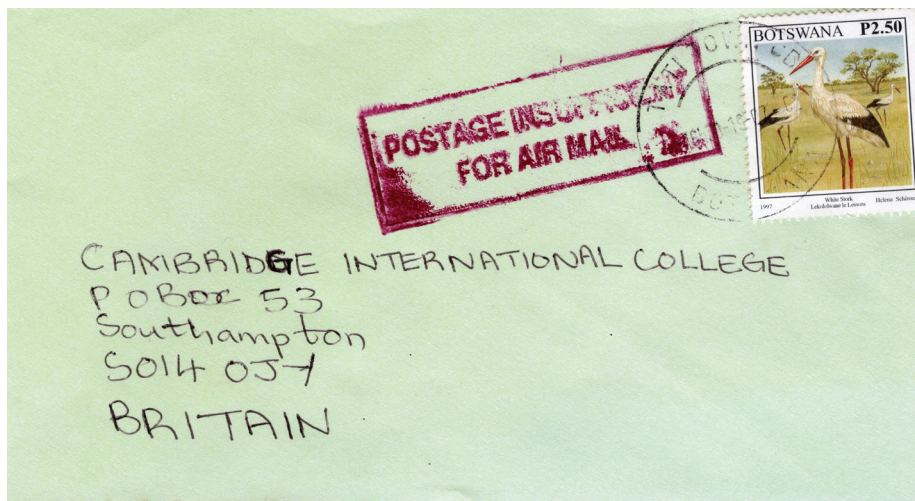


Figure 9. Cover with Postage Insufficient for Air Mail handstamp from 2002



Figure 10. Cover with Postage Insufficient for Air Mail and Surface handstamps from 2004

Botswana Return to Sender and Unclaimed Manuscript

Figure 12 illustrates manuscript markings “RTS” (Return to Sender) and “Unclaimed” that were applied by the post office in red ballpoint ink. The item was mailed from the Cresta Mowana Safari Lodge on 18 September 1996 at a rate of 1.20 Pula,^[xiii] which is comprised of 20 thebe in postage for a domestic letter up to 20 grams and a registration fee of 1.00 Pula. The rear of the envelope with a manuscript “RTS” (Return To Sender) red ballpoint ink and the manuscript “To” with quotation marks (also in red ball point ink) around the handstamp that was applied by the original sender provide the address information to be used for the return. The rear also provides additional manuscript markings in blue and black ballpoint ink that would appear to indicate that notices were provided to the addressee in their post office box that a registered article was awaiting them at the counter. All manuscript markings on the cover are in the same hand.

Botswana Airmail Handstamps

Figure 13 illustrates a cover from Standard Chartered Bank in Gaborone to the United States dated August 5, 1994, containing an “AIRMAIL” handstamp in the upper left corner. The 50 thebe postage pays the rate for sending a letter weighing 10 grams to the Americas by airmail.^[xiv] While the airmail handstamp appears to have been applied by the sender and not by the post office, this can still be considered an auxiliary marking since it indicates the service requested.

Another “AIRMAIL” handstamp is shown in Figure 14. The cover is postmarked on February 25, 2008, and pays the correct rate of 4.90 Pula for a standard sized letter airmailed to Canada.^[xv] This mark also appears to have been applied by the sender and not the post office.

The author is very interested in hearing from other collectors who have postal items from Botswana containing auxiliary markings. Please reach out to Gordon Smith at gs@postalhistory.ca.



Endnotes

- i Marking Devices. Smithsonian National Postal Museum. Retrieved from <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/about-postal-operations-mail-processing/marketing-devices> on September 27, 2025.
- ii About Our Country. (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://gov.bw/about-our-country> on 29 August 2025.
- iii Languages. (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://www.upu.int/en/universal-postal-union/about-upu/history/languages> on August 29, 2025.
- iv Article 17-106, Conditions of acceptance of items. Make-up. Packing. (2021). Regulations to the Convention, Section 3.3, Final Protocol. Retrieved from <https://www.upu.int/UPU/media/upu/files/aboutUpu/acts/05-actsRegulationsConventionAndPostalPayment/actsRegulationsToTheConventionAndFinalProtocol.pdf#page=80>.
- v The type of the official free handstamp is determined from the Botswana Official Free Marks Typology. (2020). Retrieved from <https://postalhistory.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Botswana-Official-Free-Mark-Typology.pdf> on October 19, 2025.
- vi Botswana Official Free Marks Typology (2020).
- vii Botswana Official Free Marks Typology (2020).
- viii ImageSleuth a computer application which can be used to enhance images to better see faint markings. The program can be downloaded from <https://www.thestampweb.com/imagesleuth/download>.
- ix Auxiliary handstamp, REFUSED. (n.d.) Retrieved from https://postalmuseum.si.edu/object/npm_2002.2002.7 on September 8, 2025.
- x USPS.COM Postal Explorer, 122 Addressing, 122.1 Destination Address. (n.d.) Retrieved from https://pe.usps.com/text/imm/immcl_008.htm on September 8, 2025.
- xi Kee, Bas. (January 2019). 'Insufficiently Prepaid for Airmail'. Auxiliary Markings Journal. Vol. XVI, No. 1. Issue No. 61. pp. 5. Retrieved from <https://www.postal-markings.org/amc-newsletter-issue61.pdf#page=5> on October 27, 2025.
- xii Post Office (Postage and Miscellaneous Charges) (Amendment) Regulations, 1986. Retrieved from https://postalhistory.ca/wp-content/uploads/simple-file-list/Botswana-Legislation/1986-Tariff-Regulations-S_I_-31.pdf on September 27, 2025.
- xiii Botswana Postal Services Tariff Book, July 1, 1995. Retrieved from <https://postalhistory.ca/wp-content/uploads/simple-file-list/Botswana-Legislation/1995-Tariff-Guide.pdf> on September 27, 2025.
- xiv Botswana Postal Services Tariff Book (1995).
- xv Tariffs > Surface & Airmail. (2006). Retrieved from <https://postalhistory.ca/wp-content/uploads/simple-file-list/Botswana-Legislation/2006-Tariff-Guide.pdf> on October 18, 2025.

Illustrations are not to scale.

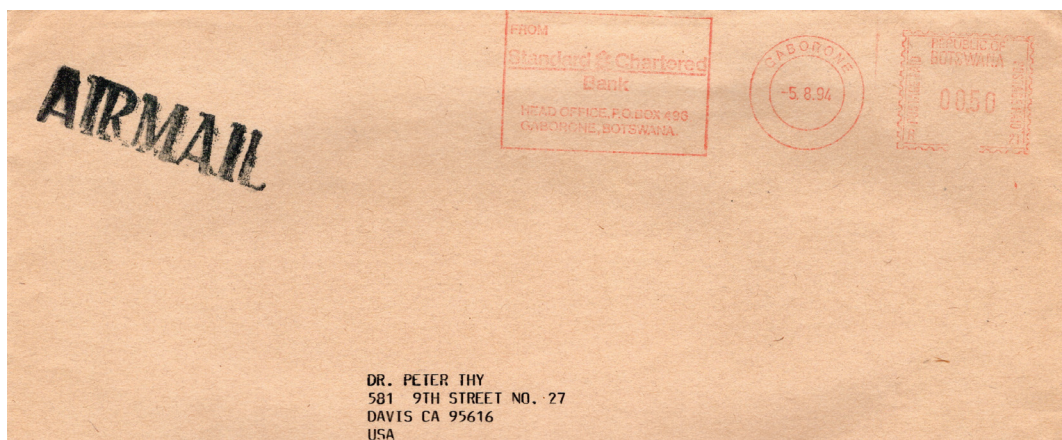


Figure 13. Part cover with Airmail handstamp from 1994

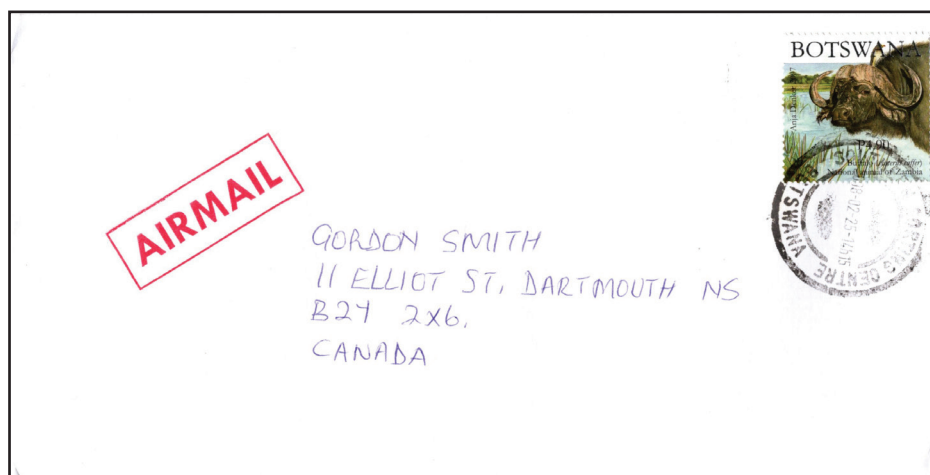


Figure 14. Cover with Airmail handstamp from 2008



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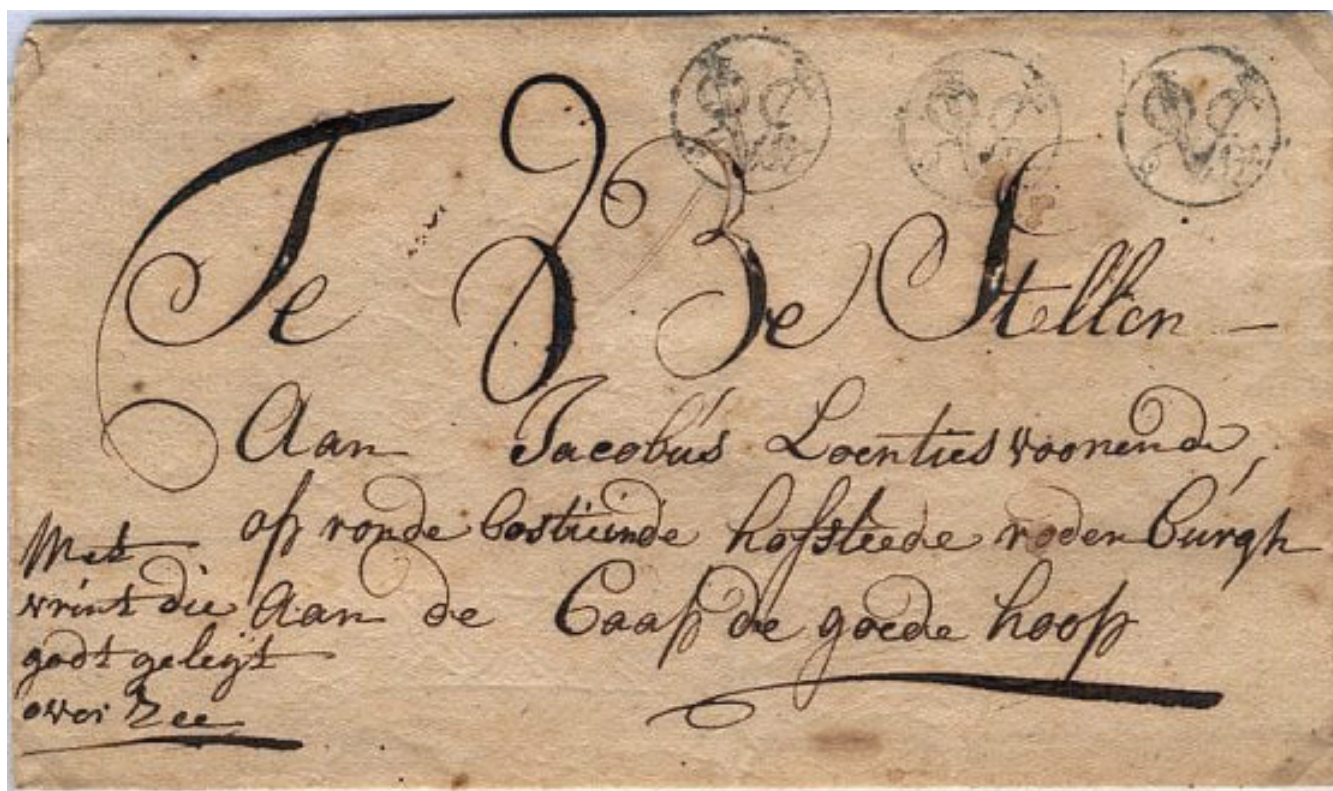
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Dutch folded letter addressed to the Cape of Good Hope bearing three strikes of the VOC handstamp.
From the Johnny Barth collection.

Highlights

Sophiatown

André Bezuidenhout

Botswana Auxiliary Markings

Railway Parcel Stamps

Botswana Permit Mail