

# STAMP BOXES AS BRITISH SEASIDE SOUVENIRS

The rise of the British seaside resort coincided with the introduction of postage stamps and the subsequent manufacture of boxes and cases in which to hold them. This article will describe both the development of the seaside resort and the development of the stamp box industry that provided many of the souvenirs that were sold there.

## *The rise of the British seaside holiday*

The British seaside holiday was created by the Industrial Revolution. Essentially it was an annual exodus by town dwellers. Indeed industrialisation concentrated large numbers of people in surroundings that were not really conducive to holidaying at home (Garrad 1976).

The advent of industrialisation meant that an increasing number of people had both the financial means to have a holiday away from home and the transport infra-structure to get them there. Initially it was the families of the newly-rich factory owners and senior supervisors that visited seaside resorts, particularly in the North of England. However, few northern resorts stayed “select” for long, as the custom of “Wakes weeks” (when all factories in a town closed down for the week) meant that large numbers of people each year were enjoying a mass exodus to seaside resorts. This was the ideal market for mass travel and the growth of the railways facilitated it. “It is hard to imagine that seaside resorts would have developed ... had it not been for the railways” (Trachtenberg and Keith 2002 page 116).

While “Wakes week” and its mass migration to coastal resorts was a northern phenomenon, Londoners had long enjoyed trips to places like Margate and Southend. However many southern seaside resorts tended to cater for the more middle-class market, and some resorts – Bournemouth and Eastbourne, for example – stayed “superior” right into the twentieth century. Coastal resorts were becoming popular before the start of the nineteenth century – previously the old inland spas had been more popular – and the seaside resort was fully established by 1850 (Garrad 1976).

## *The first stamp boxes*

Coincidentally stamps boxes were also starting to appear during the 1850s. The introduction of the Penny Black postage stamp in 1840 had made it much cheaper for people to send letters, before then letters were charged by the distance travelled and the number of pages, and sending a letter could be very expensive. Now that letters could be sent for just one penny, there was a big increase in the number of letters sent, and a need for containers to hold the postage stamps until they were needed. Stamps were issued in sheets much as they are today but without the perforations - instead they had to be cut out and then stored somewhere.

## *The rise of the souvenir industry*

It was inevitable that a souvenir industry would develop, and that stamp holders would be part of it. The production of stamp holders has continued until recent times and not surprisingly a wide range of stamp-related souvenir products exists - after all, the period involves 150 years of both consumerism and mass travel to seaside resorts.

There was a market for inexpensive items that would appeal to the seaside visitor and remind them of their trip. Workshops and factories soon began to turn out suitable items. Many existing products could be readily adapted by adding words, such as “A present from ...”. Boxes that had originally been made to hold other items could be adapted or re-named, and it is often debateable whether some of the stamp boxes that collectors treasure today were actually meant to be stamp boxes in the first place.

The range of items produced was a wide one and involved not just items immediately recognisable as stamp boxes – there were wallets and booklet holders, as well as combination items, for example. The use of materials was also wide ranging and the focus in this article will be on wood, china, metal and leather.

### ***Wooden stamp boxes***

The Scottish made souvenir boxes, known as Mauchline ware, were an example of items originally intended for another purpose. The decline in snuff taking had resulted in the decline in the demand for snuff boxes and the need for the makers to seek new markets (Baker 2004). Snuff boxes adapted readily into stamp boxes – they were the right shape and the right size.

The production of transfer printed woodware was initiated by Smith's of Mauchline in Scotland (Trachtenberg and Keith 2002) and many views of British seaside resorts have been featured using various techniques that included photographic ware too (Fig. 1). Often sentimental messages or flowers decorated the box as well as views of various resorts (Fig. 2).



***Figure 2***



***Figure 1***

“It would be safe to say that the extended Victorian holiday for either the middle or the leisure class, or a day’s seaside outing for those of the working class, provided by far the greatest market for the Mauchline Ware transfer, or site specific souvenir.” (Trachtenberg and Keith p. 122)

Tunbridge ware was also produced for the seaside souvenir trade and there was a maker in nearby Brighton whose name and address remains attached to stamp boxes. According to Garrad (1976) there was even a trade in items made locally by amateur craftsmen, often to raise funds for a particular charitable cause.

### ***Ceramics***

Ceramic souvenirs have been available over a long period. Some of the most popular have probably been the crested china made by Goss which bore the coats of arms of towns around Britain. They produced a small lidded box with sloping sides (Fig. 3) which is now listed as a stamp box (Pine 1984), though it is debateable whether it was originally listed as such. Goss produced souvenirs for every town that had a coat of arms, and naturally seaside resorts featured among them. It can be assumed that these were among some of the most popular souvenirs sold there. Garrard (1976) describes Goss items as “a range of china

which was destined to become one of the most successful types of souvenir ever to be marketed” (page 86).

The boxes were inexpensive, too, which must have contributed to their popularity for the day tripper or holiday maker on a small budget. Supply was plentiful and, although each town would only have one supplier, there were over 500 hundred stockists, many of them in seaside resorts.



*Figure 3*



*Figure 4*

## *Metal*

Crested and emblem brassware has been produced by the Pearson, Page Jewsbury Company for over 100 years. Their Peerage range includes items with a wide range of purpose. Some of these are often described as stamp boxes at antiques fairs or on eBay, but it is doubtful whether they are all intended for the purpose. Many of the items are localised by the addition of an enamel crest or a place name. Dating such items is difficult as their manufacture has continued up to recent times.

Another popular metal souvenir was made combining a match holder and striker with a stamp holder. These items, shaped like a book, are among the most commonly available today. Most of them have no place name indicated on them, but the Isle of Man and Blackpool do feature, the latter bearing an image of the famous tower – the souvenir could well have been produced to celebrate its opening. (Fig. 4)

The 1930s saw the chrome metal stamp booklet holder arrive in seaside souvenir shops. Again enamel crests were applied for all the principal resorts (Fig 5). Images of local landmarks can be found too, either in enamel or set into the chrome.



*Figure 5*

Again the attraction of these metal items must have been the low prices at the time, and today these items continue to be at the lower end of the price range.

## ***Leather***

Other souvenir stamp holders that can still be bought at a reasonable price are the leatherware ones. At least since the 1930s there has been a wide range of quality leather stamp holders and wallets with compartments for stamps (stamp box collectors often extend their collections to include these utilitarian items).

Often the items are localised by the use of gold blocked town crests and wording to indicate which town or seaside resort it was bought in. Squirrels with acorns and art nouveau flowers were also embossed on stamp holders. Sometimes such items bore a witty play on words to amuse and engage the holiday maker as he or she licked their ice cream or munched on their candy floss whilst perusing the rows of souvenirs on display - "If it's a stamp you need, I'm your friend indeed"; "A stamp costs little, a letter is worth much".

## ***In conclusion***

This article isn't intended to be a comprehensive analysis of the stamp holder seaside souvenir. It is just a peek into an industry that emerged alongside the advent of the postage stamp and the emergence of the British seaside resort. There are undoubtedly materials left unexplored – another article waiting to be written perhaps.

The inspiration for the article was the discovery of a book about holiday souvenirs of the British Isles. Strangely, however, there appears to be no mention in it of the souvenir stamp box.

## ***References***

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