

Pitney Bowes and its British PillarPost Machine of c1938

Glenn H Morgan

Back in 2002, an American dealer trading as *World Meter Stamps* was offering a cover advertised as: “**Great Britain "Pillar Post" meter stamp.** This is an extremely rare "Pillar Post" meter stamp cover from Great Britain. Maybe a unique cover. Don't miss out on obtaining this cover.”

As ever, your author kept the information in a folder and thought no more of it. Then a decade later in July 2012 he organised a visit to Pitney Bowes in the UK for the Friends of the British Postal Museum & Archive (FBPMA) and things started to come together. One of over 200 machines archived by the Corporate Liaison Officer for the company, Terry Kirkby, was the device illustrated nearby.



The PillarPost with its red painted top cover in place.

MACHINE DESCRIPTION

Pitney Bowes had a descriptive tent card alongside the machine describing what they knew about it reading: ***PillarPost** A prototype hand M/C manufactured about 1938 for use on Post Office pillar boxes. Coin operated this M/C was able to deal with mail from 1/2d to 1 1/2d only. A coin was placed in M/C and mail was inserted and then with one revolution of handle was ejected into pillar box top. This M/C was hand built from sheet brass and hand engraved. A small electric torch was lit inside when dark enabling the mail to be seen when inserting.*

SOMETHING OF A MYSTERY

Reading the tent card presented a problem in that none of the Friends examining the machine could fathom how it could physically fit onto a pillar box, much less retain the mail unless a large hole was to be cut in the cap of every box to enable the letters to drop inside.

It would also have required a restyling of the outer case to accommodate the roundness of the box cap. Also, there is the question of how power could be provided at the kerb-side for the “small electric torch” mentioned above, but it was just a prototype after all, so solutions may have been forthcoming if it had been progressed further as an idea.

HOW PILLARPOST WORKED

Based solely on the tent card information and the instructions on the face of the PillarPost we know that the mechanism involved the customer in three simple operations (as detailed in the numbered bold text below). However, when testing the machine on your author’s follow-up visit with Terry, we could deduce much more information, which is described below in normal type.

1) Insert one of three combinations of coin depending on the postage required to be paid on the mail item.

Customers had to use a single halfpenny for a 1/2d mail item, a single penny for a 1d mail item, or a penny and a halfpenny coin for 1 1/2d mail. The use of two or three halfpenny coins was unacceptable.

When a coin(s) is inserted, it rolls down a channel and is diverted one of two ways depending on the value (or, rather, weight) of the coin(s) used. This enables the device to understand what postage rate die is to be applied to the mail item. The coins drop into one or both of two temporary holders and when the transaction is underway they drop onto the desk top, as a coin retention box was not built into the prototype. It seems that returning coins to the customer was not an option.

2) Insert the unstamped letter upside down with the address to the left.

Inserting the coin(s) enabled a sliding door on the front of the device to open enabling the customer to insert the mail item. This could only go so far into the PillarPost until it reached a bar that prevented it moving any further forward. This correctly aligned the letter ready for franking.

3) Rotate the handle once in a clockwise direction to prime and release (or ‘free’) the mechanism.

As the handle is slowly rotated, several actions within the machine start to happen. The sliding door closes temporarily preventing access to your mail item, a series of cams aligns the correct postage die, the inked town and value die moves forward pressing itself against the top right hand corner of the mail item franking it, and the sliding door re-opens. The franked mail item is then removed by the customer ready for dropping into the pillar box that the device would have been attached to.

APPLYING THE FRANK

The town and postage dies were applied in a single operation in red ink– the main colour for meter franking to this day, albeit that blue is now also used for some classes of mail. This was done via a pre-inked cloth tape that could be advanced by hand, presumably each time that the machine was opened by staff. There is no built-in automated method of advancing the tape, but there is a small knob that assists with turning the ribbon.



The dried-out red tape.

A locked side-door on the machine gave access to the ribbon and to the town die enabling postal staff to change the date information manually. It also exposes the postage dies...

THE POSTAGE DIES

One of three rotating steel value dies in the aforementioned 1/2d, 1d or 1 1/2d postage rates applied a marking directly onto the envelope. This was much like the Wilkinson experiment of 1912, albeit that the earlier trial could only service mail costing one penny. The Wilkinson also suffered from the need for costly date-stamping of every item of mail, as a date was not part of the impression made by the machine.

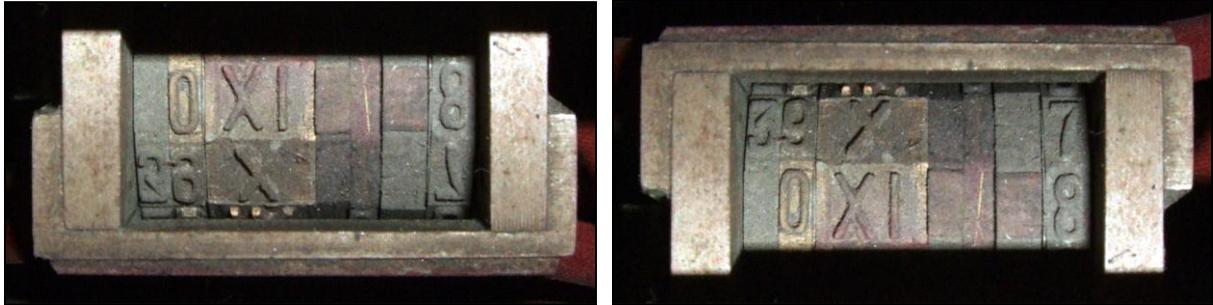


The three postage dies seen from above.
Note the 'perforated' top edges to the steel dies.

TWO POSTAL MARKINGS RECORDED

It became apparent that two models of PillarPost existed based on examination of two different postal markings associated with this device. It had originally been suspected that the envelope showing the circular town die was the original version; otherwise it would have been necessary to change the die every year. If the machine had been a success, then this would have been a costly exercise for the GPO, so logic and tradition to this day means that the year is shown as a part of the overall date, and central to the town die, as in the square die. However, the circular marking is dated 1939, whereas the square die within the machine is clearly dated 1938. We may never know for sure what version came first.

Square Town Die



The date die shown in its correct, reverse, reading (left) and flipped (right).

The date die on this version has different information shown to that of the circular die. On a test impression taken recently it reads **NODLON / _____ [details?] _____ / S.W.3**. The “No 5” is presumed to represent the fifth collection made that day from the pillar box, a feature not included on the circular die.

Circular Town Die

A collector in America owns the only example of the strike seen with the marking depicted below, the envelope of which is annotated in pencil “→ / British Pillar-Post / Mach[ine].”

A circular town die was applied to the left of the Postage Paid indicia, worded **LONDON E.C.1. / 23 V 6AM / 1939**. Note how the impression is on the same cover as an American strike in violet with the Pitney Bowes US HQ location of Stamford in Connecticut depicted in reverse (**DROFMATS / .NNOC**), as with the British square die, above.



Note the unique PP1 machine ID on the indicia (PP presumably meaning PillarPost).



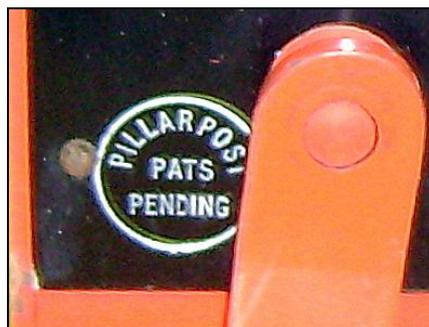
Dummy PillarPost strike on full cover, with unexplained and undated American cancellation.

WAS THE MACHINE EVER FIELD TRIALLED?

It seems unlikely that the PillarPost idea was ever given a public trial in the UK through the General Post Office. An American collector advises: *“I have a letter written by early meter collector-dealer Walt Swan in which he calls the stamp an essay. Assuming he knew what he was talking about, this implies that the PillarPost machine was never placed in public use.”* Your author agrees that this is almost certainly the case, as nothing has yet been traced in the extensive Royal Mail Archive maintained by the BPMA.

PATENT GRANTED?

There is a PILLARPOST / PATS / PENDING marking within a circle that resembles a postmark at bottom left, alongside the handle.



However, extensive searching of the Patent records at the British Library has failed to see an application for, or indeed granting of, a Patent. It is understood that use of the wording ‘Pats. Pending’ was not uncommon even if no application had been submitted to the Patent Office and with the machine being an unadopted prototype it seems unlikely that a costly application was ever made.

ABOUT PITNEY BOWES

Having seen the PillarPost machine sitting alongside Pitney Bowes's latest range of technologically advanced mailing machines at its UK headquarters it is mind-blowing to see just how far the equipment – and the company – has come.

With more than 90 years of innovation under its belt, today Pitney Bowes is a \$5.3 billion global company that employs 29,000 staff worldwide and provides software, hardware and services that integrate physical and digital communications channels.

For an online history of the company visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pitney_Bowes

...AND FINALLY

This is a fascinating prototype machine that appears to have previously gone unrecorded in the annals of philately and is detailed here in-depth for the first time. It again proves that new discoveries can still be made many decades after an idea has long been forgotten. It also begs the question, what else is still waiting to be discovered.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks are offered to Terry Kirkby of Pitney Bowes, Harlow, for allowing closer examination of the machine during a private follow-up visit to the company, for his enthusiasm in getting the story told and for verifying some of the technical aspects of PillarPost.

Thanks also go to the Pitney Bowes Corporate Communications team for granting permission to illustrate the machine and the accompanying text used in this article.

The PP1 1/2d meter franking impression on cover appears courtesy of Richard Stambaugh.

IMAGERY COPYRIGHT

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