



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
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THE ROYAL MAIL

The first British postage stamp I ever saw was on a letter written to me by my mother in 1952. She had accompanied my father on a business trip to London, and my brother and I were left behind in Montevideo, at the Hawkins boarding house in Pocitos. I was seven years old at the time.



1952

As if it were not punishment enough to be parked at a boarding house while my parents were living it up in the U.K., I was also required to write a letter to them every week, under the unforgiving supervision of Mrs. Hawkins. I have since seen some of those letters, lovingly archived by my mother amongst her precious things. They were all exactly the same. Under the heading “Dear Mummy & Daddy,” there were seven almost identical paragraphs devoted to the seven days of the preceding week: “Monday, got up, had breakfast (cornflakes and fruit and tea), went to school. At school we had English, Arithmetic, Spanish, and Art. For lunch we had *fideo* [noodle] soup, minced meat on rice, and Jello. In the evening did homework had dinner went to bed. For dinner had shepherd’s pie and salad and apple crumble. Tuesday, got up, had breakfast...”

Fortunately love is blind, because my mother thought those letters were wonderful. “Just to receive them meant so much to me, it didn’t matter what they said,” she told me many years later. She, of course, wrote to us every few days while they were gone, telling us about the exciting things they were doing—travelling by train to her father’s birthplace in Yorkshire, standing on runways at country aerodromes watching test pilots put new aeroplanes through their paces,

getting their picture taken in front of the lions in Trafalgar Square—but somehow managing to make it sound as though she would rather be with us.

By the time my parents came home and life returned to normal I had a nice little collection of stamps. Various relatives had no doubt been coerced into writing to my brother and me during our ordeal, and I had stamps from Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Peru, and some from Uruguay. Once I started organizing them by country I saw something I hadn’t noticed before. All my Latin American stamps bore the name of the issuing country, but the British stamps just had the words “Postage Revenue,” the value in British currency, and a picture of Queen Elizabeth II, who had very recently ascended the throne following the death of her father, George VI. There was no mention of England or Great Britain or United Kingdom. I immediately decided that, due to some extraordinary blunder committed by the Royal Mail, I had come into possession of a few priceless stamps.

When I confided in my father, however, he smiled and said that would be nice if it were true but, sadly, it wasn’t. He explained that Great Britain had been the first country to issue an adhesive postage stamp, in May 1840. Until then, letters were delivered on a COD basis, and payment was due on receipt. Postage rates were complicated and expensive, and recipients sometimes refused to pay, leaving the government with an unwelcome expense. Under a new system devised by the teacher, inventor, and social reformer Sir Rowland Hill, postal rates were standardised and based on weight. The sender was obliged to buy stamps that originally cost a penny. The first of these was called the Penny Black and was illustrated with a profile of Queen Victoria against a



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black background, an image that remained on British stamps until her death in 1901. Ever since then they have, by and large, been graced with a portrait of the reigning monarch, or at the very least a silhouette of his or her head in one corner. They are the only ones in the world that do not identify their country of origin; it is universally understood that the monarch's image symbolizes the United Kingdom, a fine example of what we now call branding. Shakespeare was the first non-royal to appear on a British stamp. This momentous event took place in 1964, to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the playwright's death. It is interesting to note that, despite Shakespeare's contribution to British and world culture, initial requests to feature him on stamps were met with resistance. The Post Office at that time only acknowledged Royal or postal anniversaries and important events on the national or international calendar. Old habits die hard, but strings were pulled and Shakespeare finally made his debut, together with a series of stamps that quoted famous lines from some of his plays.

My mother sometimes included photos in her missives from London. In one of them she was smiling broadly as



Penny Black (1840)

she slipped a letter into the slot on the side of a Post Office pillar box. On the back of the photo, which my father had taken, she had written "Posting a letter to you!" I inspected the pillar box very closely, having heard of them but never actually seen one before. They were so distinctive, such iconic symbols of Great Britain. That night Mr. Hawkins lent me one of his encyclopaedias, and I learned that those pillar boxes had dotted the British Isles since 1852—a century ago. They were traditionally decorated with the Latin initials of whoever was on the throne when they were installed; VR for Victoria Regina, for example, or GR for Georgius Rex. I also learned that British pillar boxes were painted bright red, which of course was not apparent from the black & white photo



my father took. Learning about the Royal Mail was somehow comforting, as though becoming more familiar with that aspect of British life brought my parents a little closer. Almost as comforting as the photo my mother slipped into a pillar box one afternoon in London, which lived on my bedside table until they came home.

