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# Postal Usage of the Egypt Seal

*By Nick Levinge*

When I plagiarised, with his consent, John Hobbs book for the seventh edition of the Flagstaff, I recorded that the book indicated there is little that can be added. The only issues outstanding were which of the many possible usages actually exist for the Silver Jubilee seal. I asked for photocopies of covers and got a good response and have seen a few items of interest since. This article is a record of what I know exists, and I hope that those who read it may be inclined to send me scans of any covers which either confirm my theories or add new items, so that we can eventually get a complete picture.

A brief summary is appropriate for those who did not see the original article. A subsidised mail service was available for the large number of British military personnel stationed in Egypt. For mail to the UK and Ireland special seals could be bought at NAAFI canteens to denote that the sender had made his contribution to the large sum that the British Government paid to the Egyptian Government for the service. That postage had been paid was indicated by a red cancellation with the words "EGYPT POSTAGE PREPAID" within concentric circles, a numeral in the centre and the Egyptian crown at the top. These are referred to as "Crown Circles", and were placed at the top right of an envelope, where a stamp is conventionally placed. There were 24 crown circles in use in 1935, number 7 having been lost down a well in 1933. These were allocated to the various stations in Egypt. The situation is complicated by the fact that several of the crown circles were moved, three to Moascar in June 1935 and one the other way, and eight to Alexandria in November 1935 when there was an influx of troops there at the time of the Abyssinian campaign. The seal was supposed to be obliterated with a framed diamond shaped canceller containing a pattern of dots, normally 9x9. These are known as "retta" cancellations and can be found in black, red, blue and mauve. They were normally applied without much care and often appear as a smudge. Generally, it is only on FDCs that the dots can be clearly made out. The military postal officials did not always keep to the rules. In Moascar, it was the custom to use the military circular date stamp to cancel the seal, and a few are known cancelled with a crown circle. Once the seal had been obliterated and the crown circle applied, the letter took one of two courses. At some stations the letter received a circular date stamp of a military Post office. In such a case the mail was placed in sealed bags and the Egyptian authorities had only to take the bags to Alexandria for them to catch a ship to Britain. In other, presumably smaller stations, the mail was passed to the local Egyptian civilian Post Office where it received a civil datestamp, and sometimes two of them, and was passed on to catch a ship. In the original piece I showed illustrations of some of these cancellations from Mr. Hobbs' book, and I have used the same reference numbers in this article. It follows that there is a range of covers to seek out with different crown circles, different rettas and other obliterators and different civil and military datestamps.

## FIRST DAY COVERS

These are the first point to be considered. Mr Hobbs recorded that the post boxes were cleared only once, in the morning, at most Stations on 6<sup>th</sup> May 1935 as it was a forces holiday. As a result, FDCs are relatively scarce. I am not convinced that the statistics bear this out. My sample of covers seen after my original article was 37. Of those 12 were FDCs. Of course, my correspondents perhaps were all keen to include an FDC in their collections. Another small piece of evidence is that in the Sahgal collection sold by Grosvenor in November 2007 there were 8 covers including 2 FDCs. Sometime someone may trawl auctions for Egypt SJ covers for better statistics, but my feeling is that a reasonable proportion will be FDCs. Of course, the print run was small at 27,000, many seals would have been retained as mint and many covers would have been destroyed on receipt, so all covers bearing the Egypt seal are uncommon. It is also the case that if large numbers of forces personnel attempted FDCs and were frustrated by the early clearing of the boxes, then one would expect 7 May covers to be plentiful. There was one in the Sahgal sale, but that is the only one I have ever noted. It does, however, bear a clear retta, which indicates that the unusual care applied in the case of FDCs was applied here, so it may well have been an attempted FDC, or maybe the postal official had simply not reverted to speed above careful cancelling.

Of the 24 crown circles current in 1935 I had seen 7 and Mr Hobbs had seen 8 when I wrote my piece for the Flagstaff. I have now increased that number to 10. Those seen on FDCs are:

Number 13 – Abu Qir, an RAF station on the coast about 20 miles East of Alexandria – where the mail was passed to the Egyptian postal authorities for onward processing and all FDCs known are cancelled by the civil datestamp “ALEXANDRIA DEPART”. A black retta was used to obliterate the seal, and neatly applied to FDCs. 4 such covers were in my selection of 37.



*Crown Circle 13 on FDC used at Abu Qir. Note the Abu Qir civil datestamp and the Alexandria Depart transit mark and the clear black retta.*



Number 14 – Abu Qir – the same arrangements and cancellations apply as for number 13, except that the transit cds is “ALEXANDRIA”, rather than “ALEXANDRIA DEPART”. This indicates a likelihood that the covers with the 2 different crown circles were handled in different ways. I can only speculate about how this was: for example there were two different post offices, or 2 batches of mail, morning and afternoon, and there must be other possibilities. 5 such covers have been noted.



*Crown Circle 14 on FDC, also from Abu Qir but with Alexandria B transit. The cover is also notable for having the Crown Circle applied to both front and rear.*



Number 19 – Cairo – where the mail was handled by the military authorities and handed over to the Egyptians in sealed bags for onward transmission to the UK. Such covers therefore have the “MPO Cairo” cancellation. A red retta was neatly applied to obliterate the seal. 1 FDC was noted.



*Crown Circle 19 on a first day cover showing the clear red retta and the MPO datestamp.*



Number 21 – Cairo – the same applies as number 19. I cannot confirm the colour of the retta. 2 FDCs were noted.

Number 23 – Cairo – the same applies as number 19. The retta used was black. One cover has been noted and this is subsequent to the original sample.



*Crown Circle 23 on FDC with seal cancelled with a black retta. (Cover borrowed from this site's List of Offers).*



This sample indicates that only 5 stations produced FDCs at all, and that the RAF personnel at Abu Qir were particularly enthusiastic for producing them. One can only speculate about how this came about – perhaps the boxes were cleared more than once on 6 May or perhaps the personnel were more informed or there were simply more with a philatelic interest, although that is unlikely as the whole issue of 27,000 seals was sold out in three days although there was a limit of ten for each purchaser. In theory, therefore, at least 2,700 individuals bought them, and probably more as not all would have wanted ten. Why were they not used on the day of issue at the other stations

where Crown Circles have been noted on SJ seals? If any reader owns or has seen an FDC with a Crown Circle other than the above 4, I should be very pleased to hear from him or her.

#### COMMERCIAL AND PHILATELIC MAIL AFTER 6 MAY 1935

Nine crown circles have been observed. Curiously number 14 has not been seen except on FDCs. 13 and 14 were both used at ABU QIR. It would be interesting to know if both were in use at the same counter and they were used simultaneously only if there was a large volume of mail; or if they were used at different counters or even different locations. The nine are as follows:

Number 1 – this was used at the army base at MOASCAR throughout 1935 and was not moved. Moascar is situated near to the West Bank of the Suez Canal approximately half way along it. Mail was dealt with entirely by military personnel until the sealed bags were handed to the civil authorities. Covers therefore have a crown circle, a cancelled seal and a circular date stamp reading “MILITARY POST OFFICE MOASCAR” with a date. All the covers I have seen have the seal cancelled with the cds rather than a retta, and some used seals off cover have been seen with the same obliteration. 2 appeared in the sample of 37, and at least two have been seen since.



*Crown Circle 1 on a May 1935 cover showing use of the MPO datestamp to obliterate the seal in Moascar. Unusually there is a London receipt mark despite it not being a registered or forwarded letter.*



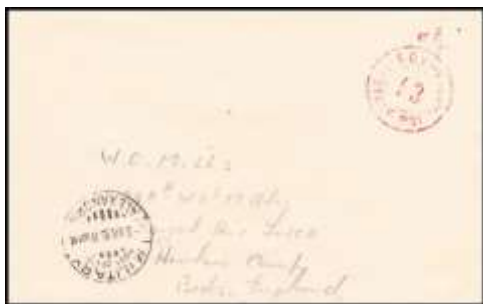
Number 4 – started in the Military Post Office Cairo and was transferred to Moascar in June 1935. No usage of number 4 has been observed from Cairo, but one Moascar cover has been seen. This was used in November 1935, and the seal was cancelled by the Moascar Military post Office canceller. Perhaps they were not issued with a retta in Moascar, or maybe the military postal official there simply wanted to do his own thing. This no doubt is the scarcest crown circle on silver jubilee seals.

Number 12 – used at the RAF station at Abu Suwer, a little to West of Moascar and not moved during 1935. Here the seal was obliterated by a red retta on the only coloured copy available. After the crown circle was applied, the covers were processed by the civil authorities and bear an ABU SUWER civil date stamp. The covers seen also have an Alexandria transit mark in the form of a machine cancel across the reverse of the cover, the slogan of which includes the words “EGYPTIAN INDUSTRIES”, but the rest is illegible. An Egypt expert is required for the rest. 3 such covers have been noted.

*Crown Circle 12 used at Abu Suwer. Note the Abu Qir civil datestamp and the Alexandria slogan roller cancel.*



Number 13 – used at the RAF station at Abu Qir, as written on postmarks, and also written Aboukir, which is on the coast approximately 30 miles East of Alexandria. The few coloured copies available to me indicate that a black retta was used to obliterate the seals. If anyone has seen any other colours used, please contact me, and the same applies to any sightings which contradict or add to anything in this piece. I have not seen two covers with the same civil datestamps, so number 13 is a fertile collecting field for the specialist. Most, but not all have an ABU QIR cds on the obverse of the cover. All the civil marks have the place name in Arabic script at the top and in latin script at the bottom, with the date across the middle, sometimes between two bars. One cover has an ALEXANDRIA civil mark on the obverse with no other civil marks: the date is 8 November 1935 and the number 5 in brackets appears above the place name (Hobbs type 20). A cover with the ALEXANDRIA mark dated 15 May has the ABU QIR mark on the obverse and the Alexandria mark has the letter A below the place name (Hobbs type 19). Another has the civil marks dated 9 July and has ABU QIR on the obverse, and type 19 with ALEXANDRIA – ABU QIR (type 21) on the reverse. Finally another late dated cover has MILITARY POST OFFICE ALEXANDRIA (type 5) on the obverse and reverse. Mr. Hobbs' book does not include number 13 amongst those moved to Alexandria in November 1935, but the two covers dated after 1<sup>st</sup> November 1935 raise the question as to whether in fact it was moved. Originally mail was passed from the RAF station to the Post Office at Mamura, before one was opened at Abu Qir. It is likely that all mail went to Abu Qir by 1935, but a Mamura postmark may be something to look out for. None have been seen yet.



*Block of four on cover. Note the Alexandria Military Post Office datestamp which suggests that Crown Circle 13 was transferred from Abu Qir to Alexandria on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1935, although not recorded by Mr Hobbs*



Number 14 – not so far recorded after 6<sup>th</sup> May 1935.

Number 17 – was used at the military barracks Sidi Gaber very close to Alexandria. The crown circle canceller was moved to Alexandria on 1 November 1935. Mail here was handed to the civil authorities at the Alexandria Post Office for individual processing. The three covers of which I have copies or have seen have an ALEXANDRIA date stamp, one is type 19 and another other type 20. They have May and June dates, prior to the transfer. The one coloured copy shows a back retta used.

Number 19 – was used in Cairo and transferred to Moascar in June 1935. In both places processing was entirely by the military authorities, so no civil marks should be found. The sample available is very small. The FDC has already been described. The other 2 covers of which I have copies have a MPO CAIRO datestamp of 31 December 1935 on the obverse. This raises the issue as to whether Mr. Hobbs was right to say that number 19 was moved to Moascar, or perhaps it was, and subsequently returned to Cairo.



*Crown Circle 19  
(back in Cairo?)  
with a MPO  
datestamp of 31  
De 35 (attempt at  
last day cover?).*



Number 21 – was used in Cairo and not transferred at all. Only military marks should be found. Again the sample is very small. The FDC has already been described. One other was lot 2557 in the “Sahgal” sale and has a very smudged retta which cannot be properly identified as such and is believed to be in purple. The MPO CAIRO cds is on the obverse and dated 11 May 1935. A similar cover with a smudge of a purple retta has also been seen.



*Crown Circle 21  
and showing the  
MPO Cairo  
datestamp and  
nothing but the  
seal, retta and love  
note on the  
reverse.*



Number 22 – was used in Cairo and moved to Alexandria on 1 November 1935. There were seven covers in the original sample of 37, all used in May 1935 with an MPO CAIRO datestamp, and where coloured copies or descriptions are available the retta appears to be in black. Four more have recently been seen, all with a black retta and used in May, except for one used in June 1935.

Number 23 – was used in Cairo and moved to Moascar in June 1935. There were six covers in the original sample, all used in May 1935, and there were three in the Sahgal sale. They have the MPO CAIRO mark on the obverse and where coloured copies or descriptions are available the retta was in black. One cover with a date of 28 May shows a clear retta, which is very unusual other than on FDCs. Lot 2559 in the Sahgal sale was a seal placed on the obverse at the top left corner, where a conventional stamp is placed. The seal was obliterated by the crown circle cancel. Two examples of number 23 cancelling a seal are known on piece. One person may have mailed several covers in this fashion as a stunt or several people had the same idea at the same station.

### IRREGULAR USE AND CURIOSITIES

The seals can be found cancelled by the Military post Office datestamp in Moascar, and by the crown circle number 23 in Cairo as has been discussed under the descriptions of numbers 1 and 23. The former was an eccentricity of the postal official. The latter was the result of irregular placing of the seal. The appropriate payment would have been made, so there probably seemed no reason to penalise the item although the use of the seal was irregular.

It is worth remembering that payment of postal charges was denoted by the crown circle rather than the seal, so a cover which missed its crown circle through being placed in a civilian box or through postal negligence might be charged postage due on arrival. I have seen such a cover and the seal appears to be obliterated by a retta, which suggests that the military postal clerk who applied to retta simply forgot to apply the crown circle. Postage due was assessed at 4d.

Multiples – When the scheme of using seals came into operation in 1932 the weight allowed for a single seal of one piastre was 20 grammes, with a further piastre for each subsequent 20 grammes in weight. I do not have any information that this arrangement had altered by 1935, so in theory multiples of the Silver Jubilee seal could be genuinely used. In practice multiples are very scarce either genuine commercial use or philatelic. Mr. Hobbs recorded in his book that his block of four on cover is the only one known. This was used in Moascar using crown circle 1 on 5 June 1935 and the seals were cancelled by the Moascar MPO datestamp as was the custom there. Another block of four on cover has subsequently come to light. This has the seals cancelled by a black retta and the crown circle used was number 13 and the cover also bears the ALEXANDRIA MPO datestamp of 3 December 1935. The issue of the whereabouts of number 13 has been mentioned in the section concerning number 13. I am not aware of any other multiples on cover, though I would not be surprised if a pair exists somewhere.

## CONCLUSIONS

More research is needed to verify my findings so far. As mentioned in the section on FDCs, all covers are uncommon. FDCs are said to be relatively scarce, but seem to come onto the market with a reasonable frequency, so whilst the emptying of the boxes theory may be correct, plenty of people in Cairo and Abu Qir who wanted FDCs succeeded in making them. Figures to date indicate that Abu Qir FDCs showing crown circles 13 and 14 are most likely to be encountered, with those from Cairo showing crown circles 19, 21 and 23 scarcer. Of commercial use, crown circle 4 is the most scarce and the example seen may be unique. Numbers 1, 12, 13, 17, 19 and 21 are relatively hard to find, with 22 and 23 the most plentiful. Those used at stations where the covers were passed to local civil post offices have more and various cancels. The crown circles used in combination with civil datestamps are 12, 13, 14, and 17.

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