

# Malta Pre-Stamp Markings 1806-1857

## Part 1 – Curved Box Handstamps

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### Introduction

This study was originally intended to be a simple update to my articles in *Melita*<sup>i</sup> on the various fakes of Malta pre-stamp markings on cover or entire that are now in circulation. During the research, it was realised that published works<sup>ii</sup> on Malta pre-stamp handstamps are incomplete and contain some inaccuracies. With advances in image technology which were not readily available to earlier authors and the increased resolution of on-line illustrations, it has been possible to create improved artwork for the various handstamps used by the Malta Post Office between 1806 and 1857 on mail from, or in transit through, Malta. The artwork images are full size in A4 format (except the fakes which are 2x).

These improved images are now presented in conjunction with an updated assessment of periods of use to provide collectors with information on these desirable early Malta items. This information<sup>iii</sup> should also be useful for identifying the fakes that exist. Throughout this article, dates of use have been summarised from items with scanned images. Earlier works<sup>iv</sup> quote a wider range of dates, some of which are clearly incorrect (e.g. MSF-1a used up to 1837), but for others, it may just be that no scan or image is available to the current author. Accordingly, additional items may surface in the future and extend the various periods of use quoted in this article.

### 1806 – 1817 Curved Box Handstamps

Introduced in late-1806 for the new British Packet service between Malta, Gibraltar and Falmouth, three distinct handstamps were used during the period up to 1817. Two handstamps for unpaid mail featured the name **MALTA** in cursive script inside a curved box (MSC types MSF-1a & MSF-1b; Proud types PS1 & PS2), whilst the third handstamp also had the word **PAID** above the curved box (MSC type MSP-1a; Proud type PD1). These handstamps were probably manufactured locally in Malta and made of brass. GPO London did not commence central manufacture and supply of handstamps until 1825<sup>v</sup>. This would explain why no record strikes of MSF-1 appear in the GPO Proof Books.

When introduced, black ink was the standard for these handstamps, but from mid-1809 until early-1817, red ink was used. The reason for the change of colour is not known, although a similar changeover occurred at Gibraltar in 1807 and maybe was an instruction from GPO London.



MSF-1a / PS1



MSF-1b / PS2



MSP-1a / PD1

Ink	Earliest	Latest
Black	xx JAN 1807	05 MAY 1809
Red	23 FEB 1810	11 APR 1815

Ink	Earliest	Latest
Black	xx OCT 1808	31 JUL 1809
Red	01AUG 1809	23 FEB 1817

Ink	Earliest	Latest
Black	06 APR 1808	31 JUL 1809
Red	xx AUG 1809	27 FEB 1817

Note that the quoted dates relate to Malta; many early covers & entires originate outside Malta and were hand-stamped in transit. It could take several weeks to reach Malta with the vagaries of sailing ship availability and journey times. For example, the earliest recorded entire with MSF-1a is dated 27 DEC 1806, but was written in Syracuse, Sicily – it probably arrived at Malta in January 1807. For details of Sailing Packet dates, please see the excellent article by David Ball in *Melita*<sup>v</sup>.

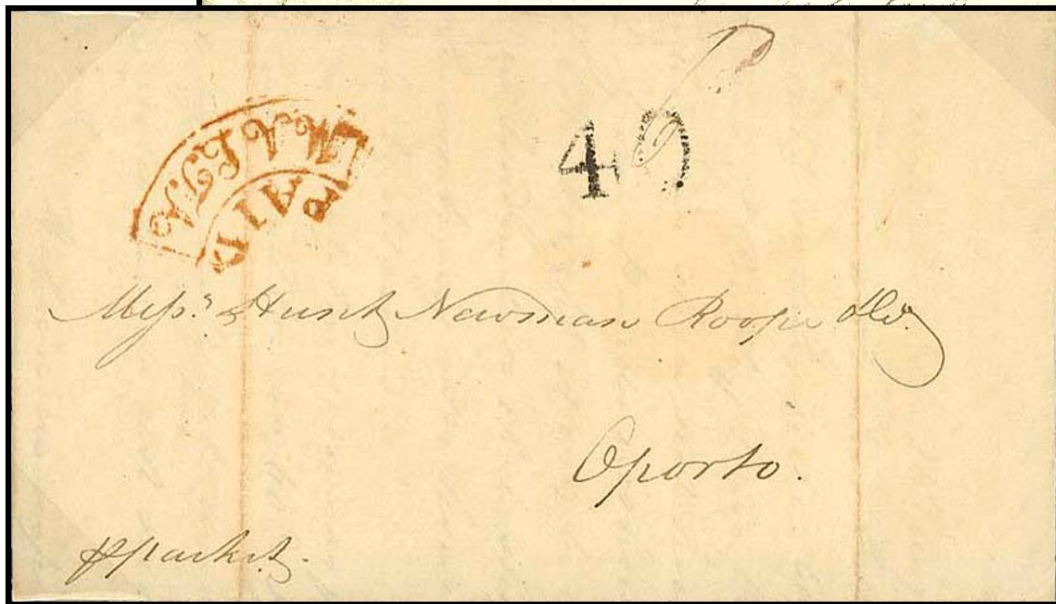
None of these handstamps have been recorded after 1817, although MSF-1a & MSF-1b appear very briefly in late-1817 struck in black.

Examples of MSF-1a, MSF-1b and MSP-1a handstamps, in use between 1806 and 1817.



1812(Sep12) MSF-1aR on 'Hoste' entire from Lissa to Norfolk. Rated 3s3d - packet rate 2s3d plus 1s0d inland

1809(Apr14) MSF-1b Sicily to Scotland. Rated 3s3d - packet rate 2s1d plus 1s2d inland.



1811(Aug26) MSP-1aR prepaid from Malta to Oporto. Manuscript 6d officer's rate plus 40 (reis) Oporto delivery handstamp

In the 1810's decade, the quantity of postal items through Malta was declining, caused initially by an outbreak of plague in 1813 and consequent quarantine restrictions. With the defeats of Napoleon in 1814 & 1815, cessation of war allowed British garrisons in the Mediterranean to be reduced in size and in 1816, the British Army Sicilian Regiment was disbanded. Consequent reductions in military correspondence contributed to a smaller volume of mail using the British packet service via Malta.

## 1817 A Year of Changes

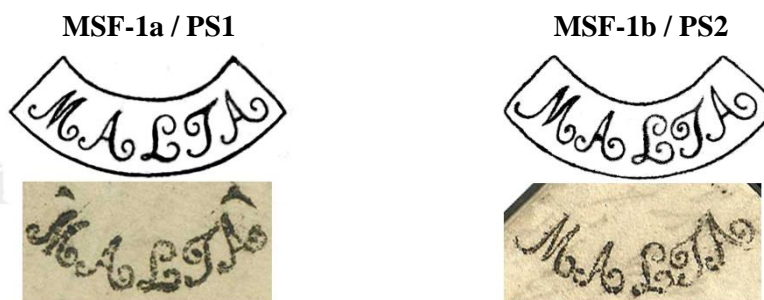
Use of red ink ceased in early-1817, with the latest recorded use on an entire dated 27 February. It is believed when the curved box handstamps were sent for cleaning, an unacceptable amount of damage was discovered. In the interim, a straight-line MALTA marking (MLL) was introduced, struck in black ink and used until the reconditioned MSF-1a & MSF-1b became available.



MLL 1817(May14) Malta to London (BS 28JUN1817) rated 6s/4d

This straight-line MLL handstamp was used for a limited period for all types of mail, although most recorded examples are on naval correspondence. The curved box MSF-1 handstamps re-appeared later in 1817, struck in black ink and seem to have replaced MLL, which is not recorded after 14 July 1817.

The re-appearance of MSF-1a and MSF-1b later in 1817 is of interest as both handstamps appear to have lost their curved boxes and the strikes of **MALTA** are more uniform, but with broader lettering. This would be consistent with reconditioning a metal handstamp, where the worn parts of the design would have been ground down to good material, probably causing the loss of the curved boxes and broadening the lettering in the process.



Comparison of 1817 strikes with framed curved box handstamps

Evidence of continued use during 1817 refutes the suggestion in Proud (1999) that the PS1 and PS2 handstamps had been removed from the Malta Post Office by the Packet Agent James Chabot following his replacement by Robert McNabin January 1817. Interestingly however, MSF-1a is not recorded after April 1815 until this re-appearance in modified form.

A replacement curved box handstamp (MSF-1c) was received in late-1817 and is first recorded used on 1 January 1818, by which time MLL, MSF-1a & MSF-1b all appear to have been withdrawn.

Examples of MSF-1a & MSF-1b handstamps used in 1817, struck in black.



(upper image) MSF-1a 1817(Sep29) to Guernsey, rated 3s3d  
 (lower image) MSF-1b 1817(Oct22) to Guernsey, rated 3s3d

In summary, the following handstamps have been recorded during 1817:

Earliest	Latest	Type	Ink	Comments
(since 1809)	23 FEB 1817	MSF-1bR	Red	
(since 1809)	27 FEB 1817	MSP-1aR	Red	
xx APR 1817	14 JUL 1817	MLL	Black	Straight-line MALTA
29 SEP 1817	xx NOV 1817	MSF-1a	Black	Two examples recorded
xx AUG 1817	22 OCT 1817	MSF-1b	Black	Two examples recorded
01 JAN 1818	(up to 1837)	MSF-1c	Black	Probably received in 1817

Note: The earliest recorded example of MLL was written in Corfu on 23 MAR 1817 and taken to Malta on HMS *Glasgow*. It is assumed that it arrived at Malta in time to catch packet *Princess Elizabeth* which departed on 28 APR 1817 for Falmouth.

Of interest, only one example of a MALTA PAID handstamp of any type has been recorded between Jan. 1812 & Feb. 1819 (MSP-1aR on 27 FEB 1817). This is probably due to declining mail volumes but is an area for further research.

## 1818-1841 Curved Box Handstamps

A new sub-type of curved box handstamp (MSF-1c / PS4) is recorded from 1 January 1818 and an additional handstamp (MSF-1d / PS5) appeared in 1827. Both remained in use until late-1837, when they were replaced by straight-line handstamps (MPO-1) and circular date-stamps (MLC-1a & MLC-2). Black ink was the standard for the duration of these handstamps.



MSF-1c / PS4

Earliest	Latest
01 JAN 1818	xx NOV 1837



MSF-1d / PS5

Earliest	Latest
13FEB 1827	17 OCT 1837

PAID versions of these sub-types were also introduced, in similar timescales. Between 1819-31, straight-line handstamps MPP-1 & MPP-3 appear to have operated in parallel with MSP-1b/c.



MSP-1b / PD2

Earliest	Latest
04 MAR 1819	xx AUG 1841



MSP-1c / PD3

Earliest	Latest
xx MAY 1830	18 MAR 1840

Note: MSP-1c in red ink, dated 14 DEC 1838, is reported<sup>vi</sup>, but not confirmed by colour image.



1836(May4) Malta to Scotland, unusually with strikes of MSF-1c and MSF-1d  
Initially rated at 3s/5d, then changed to 6s/10d accompanied by MSF-1d (lower left)  
Manuscript *only single allowed* at top right with 3s/5d rate accompanied by MSF-1c  
Boxed ½(d) in green added at Falmouth for Scottish wheel tax.



Examples of (upper) MSP-1b 1826 (Sep22) to USA and (lower) MSP-1c 1830 (Mar14) soldiers letter from Paros to Dumfries, probably leaving Malta on HM Steam Packet *Echo* on 8 May.

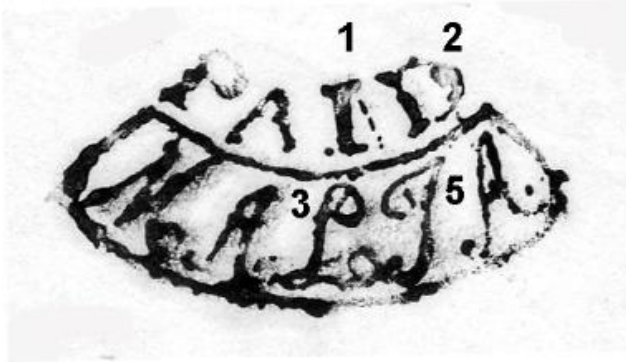
### Faked Curved Box Handstamps

There are numerous faked examples of the MALTA PAID curved box handstamp currently in circulation, although evidence indicates that only one type (MSP-1b) has received attention from forgers. All known examples are on genuine Sonnino correspondence addressed to Alexandria. To assist with understanding when the fakes were produced, it is worth considering where the source material may have originated. In the late 1980's, an extensive Sonnino correspondence was discovered and a significant portion was auctioned by Harmers of London on 9 March 1989 (Sale 4541 – Great Britain Used Abroad). Organised mainly in bulk lots, the Sonnino correspondence consisted of some 1250 pre-stamp covers & entires from the period 1836-1852. It is believed that material from this correspondence forms the basis for the faked markings covered in this article.

The faked examples have been 'improved' with the addition of a forged MSP-1b marking and those seen to date do not exhibit any other postal or manuscript rate markings. This suggests that genuine privately-carried mail was used by the forgers as the basis for the fakes. To complicate matters however, genuine examples of MSP-1b on Sonnino correspondence to Alexandria also exist, but all of these, which are dated between 1837 & 1841, additionally show manuscript charge/rate markings.

Analysis of suspicious covers/entires has revealed two versions of the forged MSP-1b handstamp. Both are reasonably accurate, but there are a few features that can assist with identification. The forged handstamps have poorly formed letters and are generally heavily-inked. In contrast, genuine items are often lightly-inked, particularly the name MALTA. The artwork is shown twice full size to illustrate features of the forged versions.

MSP-F1



MSP-F2



- 1 MSP-F1 exhibits a weak diagonal line from the top of I down through T
- 2 MSP-F1 exhibits another shorter diagonal line from D to top edge of curved box
- 3 MSP-F1 & F2 the top loop of L is distorted
- 4 MSP-F2 has a diagonal mark inside D
- 5 MSP-F1 is missing part of the top of T – MSP-F2 is corrected, but has distorted loops

Genuine MSP-1b (PD2)



Undated wrapper to Isaac Sonnino in Alexandria with no postal markings  
 Wrapper has been 'improved' with the addition of a fake MSP-F1 handstamp

As noted, unfortunately the fake markings are reasonably accurate and at first glance, may appear to be genuine until a wider range of considerations is made. A set of criteria with comments is offered for use when examining such items:

- Knowledge of UK & Mediterranean Postal History and Postal Regulations

- Useful references are *United Kingdom Inland & Overseas Letter Rates* by Colin Tabcart (1989, revised in 2002). This was updated in 2006 by Allan Oliver & Stuart Tanner.
- Reference data for the markings involved and their periods of use
  - Any items dated after 1841 are almost certainly fakes
  - Dated Sonnino correspondence to Alexandria between 1837-45 has been recorded with forged handstamps. Curved box handstamps were used exclusively on mail carried by the Packet services and as such, dated items can be checked against the packet sailing dates in *Admiralty Steam Packets 1830-1857* by Colin Tabcart
  - Undated items should be treated as suspicious and other markings investigated
- Postal Rates & Routes used for transmission of the mail
  - The British Packet service from UK to Malta was extended to Alexandria in 1835
  - Rates are usually applied in manuscript – British packet rate from Malta to Alexandria was 8d (single) up to August 1838, 6d thereafter, or multiples thereof.
  - Details can be obtained from *Admiralty Steam Packets 1830-1857* by Colin Tabcart
- Procedures and markings used in transit and on arrival at destination
  - French *Ligne du Levant* paquebot routes were introduced in 1837, providing a service from Malta to Alexandria via Syra. Most French paquebot mail from Malta to Alexandria received a French P.O. date-stamp on arrival. Mail hand-stamped in Malta and destined for the French paquebot service should only carry a straight-line handstamp.
- A critical approach – analyse the markings (or lack of) and be suspicious until there is enough proof
  - A genuine cover/entire usually shows a number of markings and handstamps which reflect Post Office operations in the days before the Universal Postal Union. Analysis of a cover and its markings will reveal a microcosm of these arrangements and a window into contemporary postal history.
  - A fake cover will usually not have these additional markings/handstamps and their absence is an important part of the analysis. Unfortunately, a number of these fakes have unwittingly passed through the hands of auction houses in recent years without detection. Provenance should therefore be treated with caution, particularly items that have ‘appeared’ since 1989.

#### Areas for Further Research

With a work of this nature, where the results are mainly compiled by analysis of individual covers and entires, new discoveries are always possible, particularly where they extend the known range of dates. Hopefully, this article will prompt the reader to check their own material and advise the editor/author of any items of interest.

#### Acknowledgements

Many thanks to David Ball and John Birkett Allan for their encouragement and support, together with their most welcome information and examples of Malta pre-stamp markings.

Welcome support from Roger Bower in Australia, who has checked his Malta database for items of relevance. Thanks also to MSC members Alan Bannister, Tony Camilleri and Graham Pound for their comments and information.

The many auction houses that freely advertise their sales with illustrations that are increasingly useful to potential purchasers and researchers alike.

#### Bibliography:

- Malta Study Circle Malta – The Stamps and Postal History 1576-1960 (published by Robson Lowe, London 1980) ISBN 0 85397 123 4
- Malta Study Circle Study Paper 2 – Malta Post Office 1806 – 1885 (published 1989)
- Proud, Edward B. The Postal History of Malta (1999) ISBN 1 872465 31 5
- Tabcart, Colin Admiralty Mediterranean Steam Packets 1830-1857 (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, published on CD 2014)



Tabcart, Colin      United Kingdom Inland & Overseas Letter Rates (updated 2006 version by Allan Oliver & Stuart Tanner. At the time of writing, the latter could be downloaded from the internet with URL [www.philatelicsannex.org/reference/letter\\_rates\\_v1-1.PDF](http://www.philatelicsannex.org/reference/letter_rates_v1-1.PDF))

<sup>i</sup> *Melita* Vol.16-8 (Summer 2006) and Vol.17-3 (Spring 2010)

<sup>ii</sup> MSC Handbook (1980), MSC Study Paper 2 *Malta Post Office 1806-1885* (1989 edition) and *Postal History of Malta* (Proud 1999)

<sup>iii</sup> The improved accuracy of handstamp illustrations should enable identification of the handstamp type in most cases. Additional identification notes may also be useful:

- Dated items are most useful to separate MSF-1a, MSF-1b and MSP-1a from the later types, with 1817 being the changeover year.
- Any item struck in red will be MSF-1aR or MSF-1bR (or MSP-1aR if PAID).
- To distinguish between MSF-1a & -1b (or MSF-1aR & -1bR), noticeable differences are:
  - MSF-1a has a short loop on the left foot of M; MSF-1b has an extended loop
  - In MSF-1a, the top loop of T has one turn; MSF-1b has one and a half turns
  - In MSF-1a, the top loops of L and T are further apart than in MSF-1b
  - In MSF-1a, a straight line drawn through the lower corners of the curved box will touch or almost touch the top of L. In MSF-1b, the line is much closer to the curved box.
  - Generally, the loops in MSF-1a are shorter than MSF-1b.
- MSF-1d and MSP-1c are the only curved box handstamps where the top loop of L crosses the upright.
- To distinguish between MSF-1c & -1d (or MSP-1b & -1c):
  - MSF-1c has 7.5mm letters; MSF-1d has 7mm
  - The distance between upper and lower box curves is 9.5mm in MSF-1c and 9mm in MSF-1d
  - If two straight lines are extrapolated from the ends of the curved box until they intersect, in MSF-1c the angle between the lines is 90°; in MSF-1d, this angle is 100°.

<sup>iv</sup> British Postal Museum Archive *POST 55 Series*

<sup>v</sup> *Melita* Vol.17-16 (Autumn 2014)

<sup>vi</sup> Christies Robson Lowe Auction 10 October 1989 lot 75

This cancellation is not listed in Clive Smith reference volumes on the Half Penny Yellow. Is it a fiscal cancellation? If so which company?