

Cinderella Time: **New Book on Cambridge's College Messenger Stamps**

By Christer Brunström, AIJP

When Englishman Simon J. Catling went through the estate of his late mother in 2010 he discovered a manuscript from the 1930s. The author was Simon's grandfather Harry D. Catling (1869-1947) who was born in Cambridge. He studied at the city's famous university and then lived and worked in Cambridge for his entire life.

A stamp collector since childhood, Harry became interested in the private postal services operated by some of the Cambridge colleges from 1882 until 1886 when these messenger services in Cambridge and Oxford were closed down by the British General Post Office (GPO).

Thanks to the Cinderella Stamp Club in the UK, Harry Catling's manuscript was finally published as a book in 2014. It's a 65-page book that not only contains the original manuscript but also a large amount of explanatory footnotes and a number of appendices. Most of the illustrations come from Catling's collection and from the family archives. Some were supplied by Chris Harman who has a very extensive collection of Cambridge and Oxford College Messenger Stamps.

Catling felt that the college messenger stamps had not received the attention they deserved and he also felt that the GPO had no legal rights to close the services. According to his researches, the universities at Oxford and Cambridge had postal privileges going back hundreds of years and even before the English post office was established in 1660.

Harry Catling was a school boy when the local posts were in operation. He later studied at St. John's College in Cambridge from 1889 until 1892. This was a few years after the college's messenger service had been terminated. He tells that at the time the college stamps were still freely available at a low cost. Obviously there were large remainders in the philatelic marketplace and at the colleges.

In the early 1930s, he began his serious study of the Cambridge college posts. He was able to interview people

who had worked or studied at the three colleges at the time in question. The colleges still held small stocks of the old stamps and he was given two complete sheets in appreciation of his work to find out more about this short but interesting postal period.

In his book, the author describes how the services worked. Sending a card or letter to another college or to private persons or shops in the city cost 1/2 penny. This was considerably cheaper than the one penny charged by the GPO for the same service.

The colleges employed messengers who delivered the mail. It was possible to send postcards, letters and small parcels with the college messenger service. Catling suggests that the messengers from the different colleges used to meet at a central location (possibly a pub) where they interchanged the mail for faster distribution. At the time many of the colleges were located on the outskirts of Cambridge.

The inspiration to use adhesive postage stamps came from Keble College in Oxford, which issued its first stamp as early as 1871. In Cambridge, Selwyn College introduced its postage stamp in 1882. Like Keble College they chose to depict the college's coat of arms on its stamp. Immediately after printing, the imperforate stamps were cut apart and delivered in envelopes containing 100 stamps each. One of the stamps was affixed to the envelope to indicate what it contained. Such an envelope is depicted in Catling's book.



In 1883, Queens' College issued its stamp which also depicted the college coat of arms. Interestingly the arms includes the head of a wild boar! This certainly would be a nice addition to a topical collection of wild boars on stamps.



This stamp was printed in sheets of 96.

St. John's College decided to use an eagle on its messenger stamp which was also printed in sheets of 96. The stamp was introduced in 1883. The eagle was supposed to have some kind of religious significance. Catling suggests that

there were two printings of this stamps and that the difference is the thickness of the paper.

The stamps from St. John's were usually cancelled by pencil adding a scribble to the stamp image. Catling further states that the stamps were thus cancelled upon delivery.



It was long believed that the stamps were all printed by W. P. Spalding of Cambridge as it was he who had arranged the printing of the stamps. However, Catling suggests that they were printed by W. S. Cowell, Ltd., in Ipswich.

Today the three Cambridge college stamps are still quite affordable but on cover they are major rarities.

What did Catling want to achieve with his book? First of all he wanted the college stamps to be fully recognized as postage stamps albeit of a local nature. Secondly he tried to prove that the GPO closure of the college messenger services was not in accordance with the law. Some of the correspondence between Catling and GPO headquarters in London is printed in the book.

The local college mail services worked very well for many years, providing the college residents with a fast and inexpensive postal service. It all ended when an Oxford resident wrote to the GPO complaining that the services constituted an infringement of the GPO monopoly of the carriage of mail. Catling writes that British postal laws throughout the centuries have always had special privileges for the universities at Oxford and Cambridge. However, you probably need to hold a degree in law to fully understand this part of his argument.

Harry Catling's book is a valuable contribution to our understanding of how the Cambridge College Messenger Services worked. It can be obtained from The Cinderella Stamp Club, c/o Ian D. Pittway, 91 Hawkwood Road, Sible Hedingham, Halstead, Essex CO9 3JS, England. The post-paid price is £18.