

ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF EARLY UK POSTCARDS

Definition

A postcard is a piece of thick paper or thin cardboard, typically rectangular, intended for writing and mailing without an envelope. Non-rectangular shapes may also be used but are rare. There are novelty exceptions, such as wooden postcards, copper postcards sold in the Copper Country of the U.S. state of Michigan, and coconut "postcards" from tropical islands.

In some places, one can send a postcard for a lower fee than a letter. Stamp collectors distinguish between postcards (which require a postage stamp) and postal cards (which have the postage pre-printed on them). While a postcard is usually printed and sold by a private company, individual or organization, a postal card is issued by the relevant postal authority (often with pre-printed postage).

First Cards

Whilst cards with messages had been sporadically created and posted by individuals since the beginning of postal services, a Prussian postal official, Dr Heinrich von Stephan, first proposed an "open post-sheet" made of stiff paper in 1865. He proposed that one side would be reserved for a recipient address, and the other for a brief message. His proposal was denied on grounds of being too radical and officials did not believe anyone would willingly give up their privacy.

In October 1869, the post office of Austria-Hungary accepted a similar proposal, and 3 million cards were mailed within the first 3 months. With the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in July 1870, the government of the North German Confederation decided to take the advice of Austrian Dr Emanuel Herrmann and issued postals for soldiers to inexpensively send home from the field.

The period from 1870 to 1874 saw a great number of countries begin the issuing of postals. In 1870, the North German Confederation was joined by Baden, Bavaria, Great Britain, Luxembourg, and Switzerland. The year 1871 saw Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden introduce their own postals.

The first postcards issued in the UK were plain cards, front and back with a pre-printed stamp (included in the price of purchase) and were published by the Post Office. No other companies were permitted at this time to print postcards. These cards came in two sizes; the larger size was found to be slightly too large for ease of handling, and was soon withdrawn in favour of cards $\frac{1}{2}$ inch shorter. 75 million of these cards were sent within Britain during 1870.

Initially postcards were used just for internal communication. Postcards started to be sent internationally in 1875, after the first meeting of the General Postal Union in Berne, Switzerland.¹

Picture Cards

In 1894, British publishers were given permission by the Royal Mail to manufacture and distribute picture postcards, which could be sent through the post. It was originally thought that the first UK postcards were produced by printing firm Stewarts of Edinburgh; later research² has shown that the first UK picture card was published by ETW Dennis of Scarborough. Two postmarked examples of the September 1894 ETW Dennis card have survived. Early postcards were pictures of landmarks, scenic views, photographs or drawings of celebrities and so on. With steam locomotives providing fast and affordable travel, the seaside became a popular tourist destination, and generated its own souvenir-industry.

Between 1895 and 1899 Court Cards were issued - these were smaller and squarer than the old size postcards we're used to, being 4.75 inches by 3.5 inches. They had a small picture on one side, with the address to be written on the other.

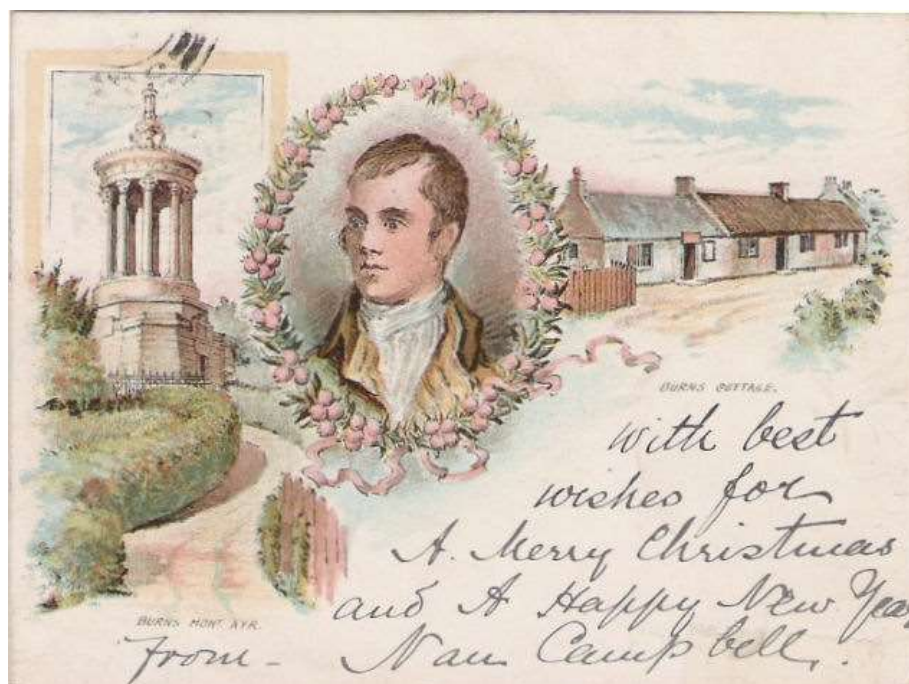


Figure 1: Example of a court card, postmarked 1899, showing Robert Burns

¹ The Universal Postal Union (UPU, French: Union postale universelle), established by the Treaty of Bern of 1874, is a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN) that coordinates postal policies among member nations, in addition to the worldwide postal system. The UPU contains four bodies consisting of the Congress, the Council of Administration (CA), the Postal Operations Council (POC) and the International Bureau (IB). It also oversees the Telematics and Express Mail Service (EMS) cooperatives. Each member agrees to the same terms for conducting international postal duties. The UPU's headquarters are located in Bern, Switzerland.

² *Picture Postcard Monthly* 1991

Picture Cards

In 1899, standard size postcards were introduced - 5.5 inches x 3.5 inches. This brought the UK into line with other countries and is the most common size of vintage postcard seen today. There was a picture on one side of these cards, usually not leaving much room for any message to be written as it was at that time considered unseemly to allow personal messages on something that was open for all to see! Nowadays, these cards are called Undivided Backs. They should, rightly, be called 'undivided fronts' as, like with a letter, the address and stamp went on the front.



Figure 2: Undivided back postcard



Figure 3: Formats with smaller pictures

Some manufacturers produced cards with smaller pictures to allow more space for a message.



Divided Back Cards

Great Britain was the first country to issue 'Divided back' postcards, in 1902. These allowed people to write messages on one half of the front of the card and an address on the other half. On the reverse, would be the picture. This quickly led to a sharp increase in card sales.

Over the next five years, most countries in the world followed suit and released new postal regulations that permitted the divided back cards.

UK	1902
Canada	1904
France	1904
Australia	01/01/1905
Austria	1905
Belgium	1905
Germany	1905
Italy	1905
Netherlands	1905
Spain	1906
USA	01/03/1907
Japan	28/03/1907
International	01/10/1907

On some of the earliest cards of this period the dividing line is left of centre, allowing about a third of the space to be used for the message. Printed instructions of what could be written and where, appeared.



Figure 4: 1/3:2/3 split



Figure 5: 50:50 split

The exact wording of the printed instructions seems to have been left up to the manufacturer. A number of different examples appear, some more comprehensive than others.



Figure 6: This card seems to have been produced in anticipation of the new regulations – it is divided but it still bears the instruction that only the address is to appear on this side



Figure 7: Inland postage only – note reference to the picture side being the back

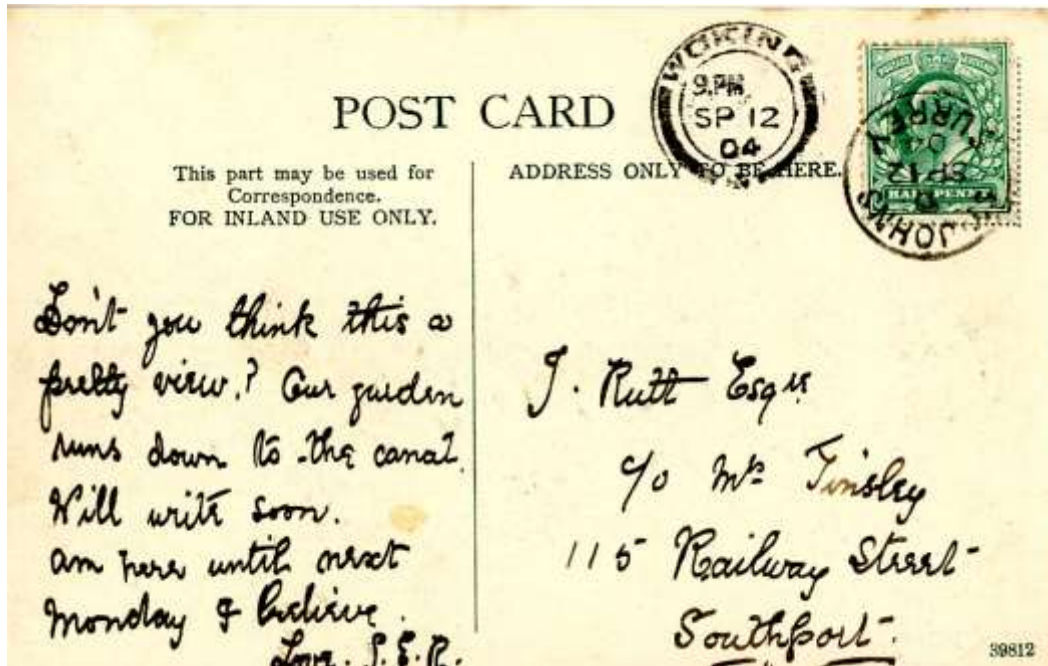


Figure 8: Inland use only

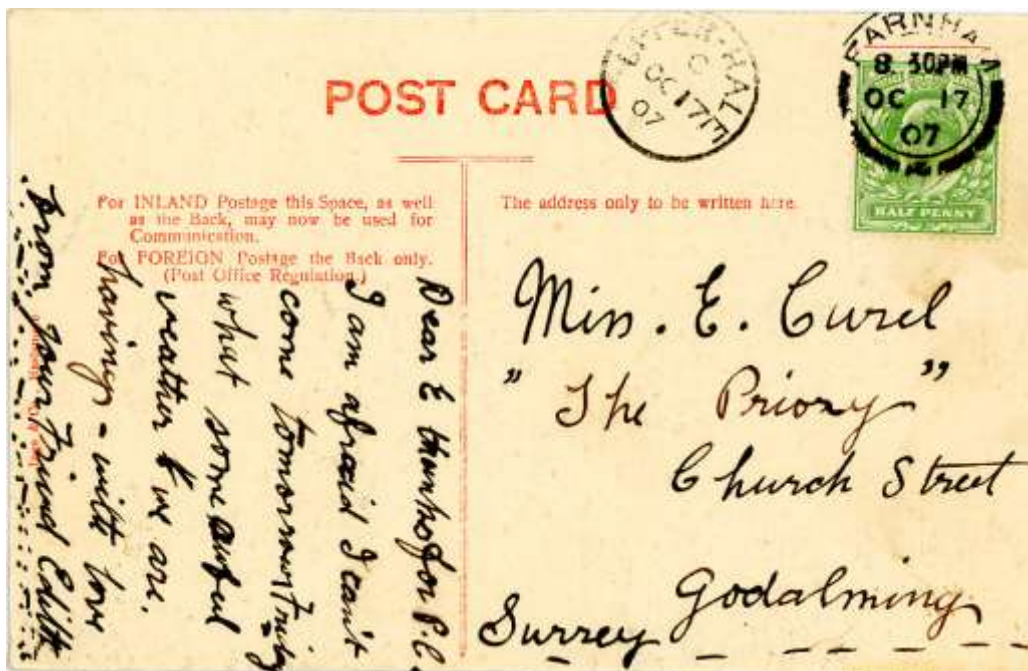


Figure 9: Explicit instructions for 'Inland' and 'Foreign'

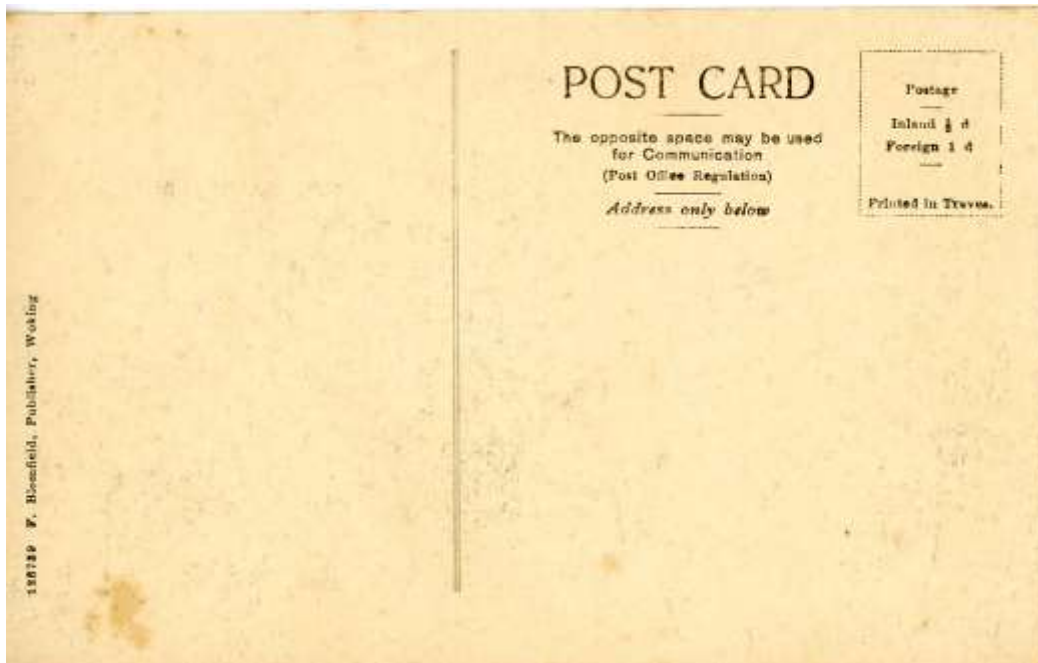


Figure 10: Opposite space



Figure 11: Printed or written matter

As well as inland communication, there are references to the British Isles and the UK. Politically and legally, there are differences between the terms. The UK at this time would have included the whole of Ireland. The British Isles includes places like the Isle of Man and the Channel Isles, which are not part of the UK.

It is unclear whether these terms were used interchangeably (or indiscriminately at the whim of the manufacturer) or whether the regulations actually discriminated between these places.

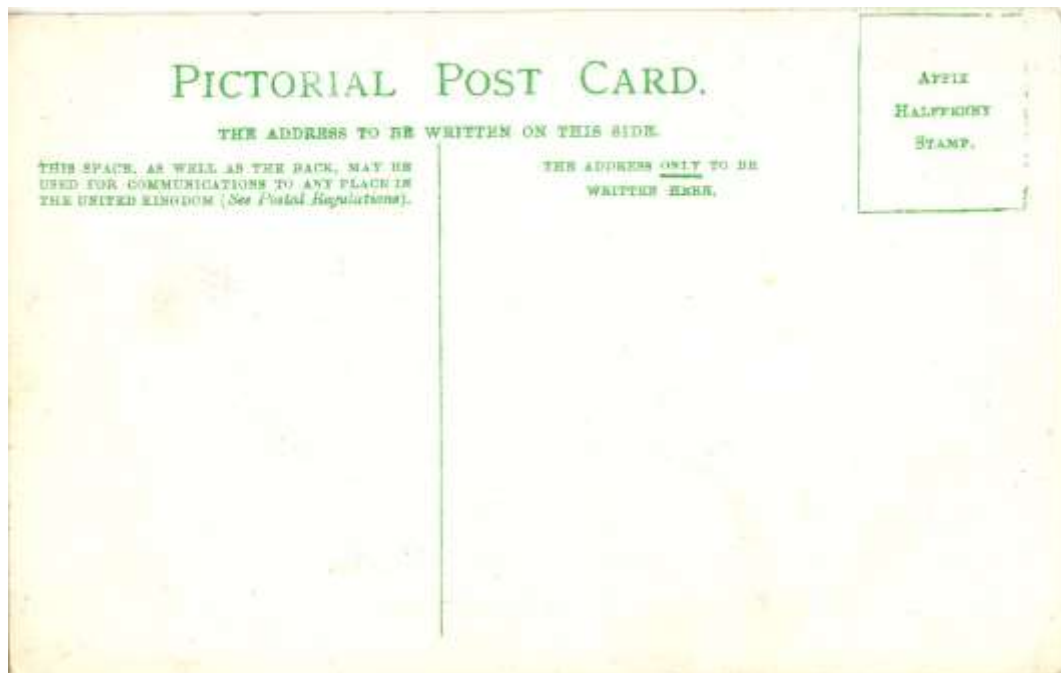


Figure 12: United Kingdom



Figure 13: British Isles only

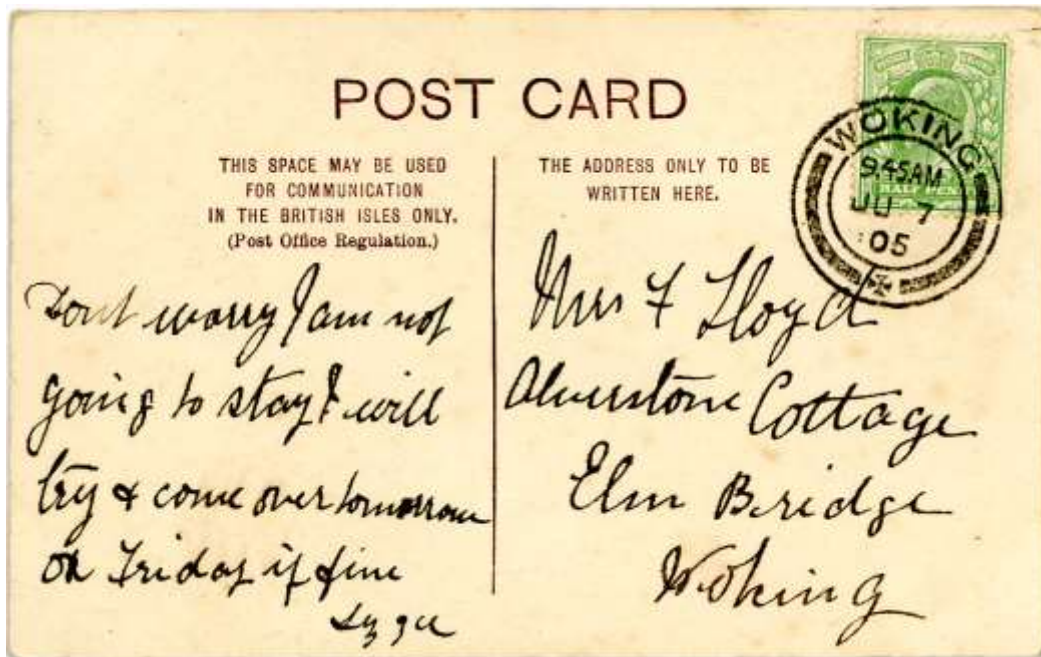


Figure 14: British Isles only – this instruction refers to the Post Office regulation

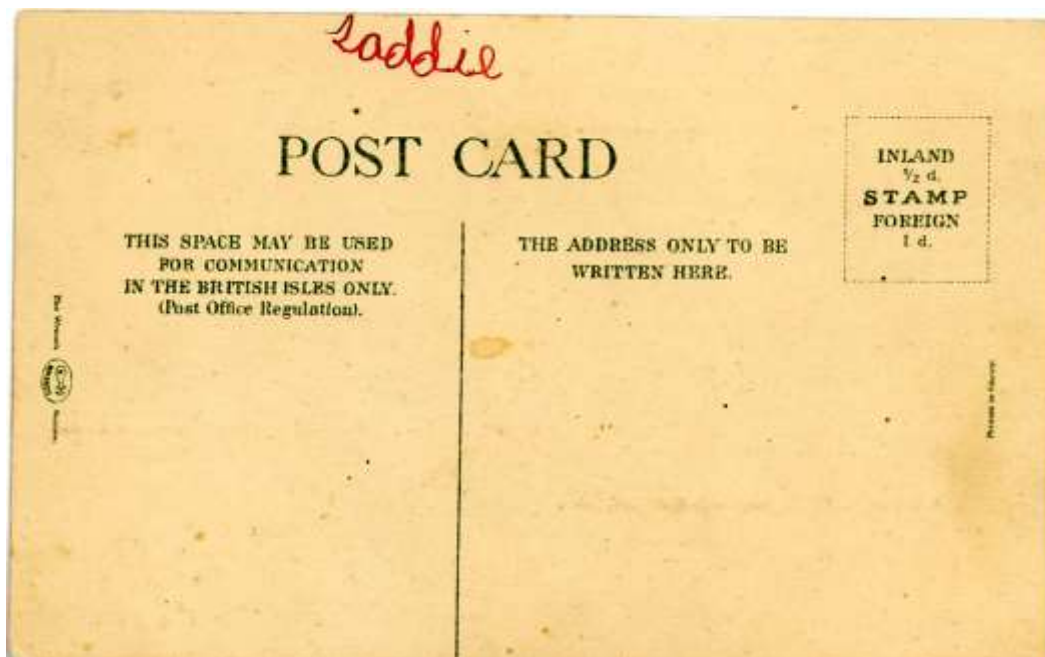


Figure 15: British Isles only

Other terms which appeared were 'except for posting Abroad' and 'not Foreign'. Were these equivalent to UK or British Isles?



Figure 16: Except for posting abroad

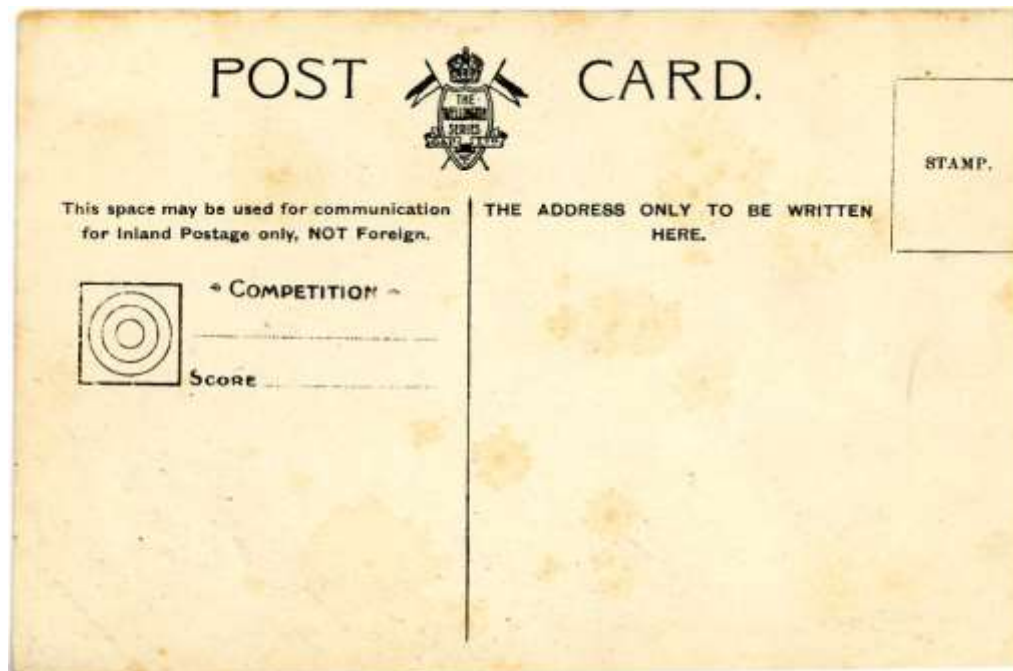


Figure 17: Not Foreign

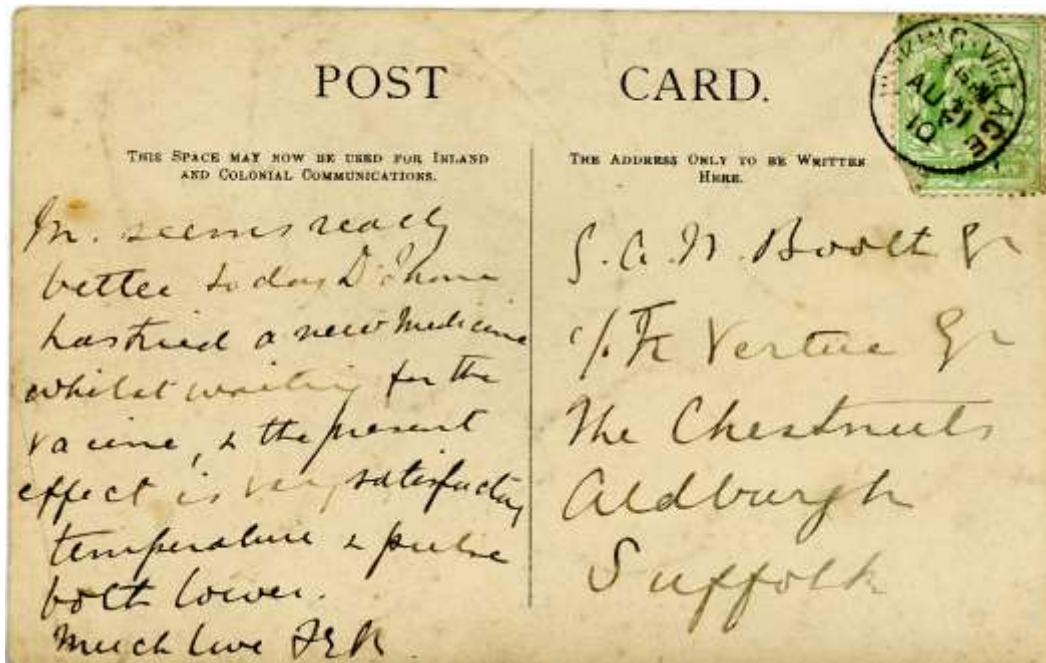


Figure 18: Inland and Colonial

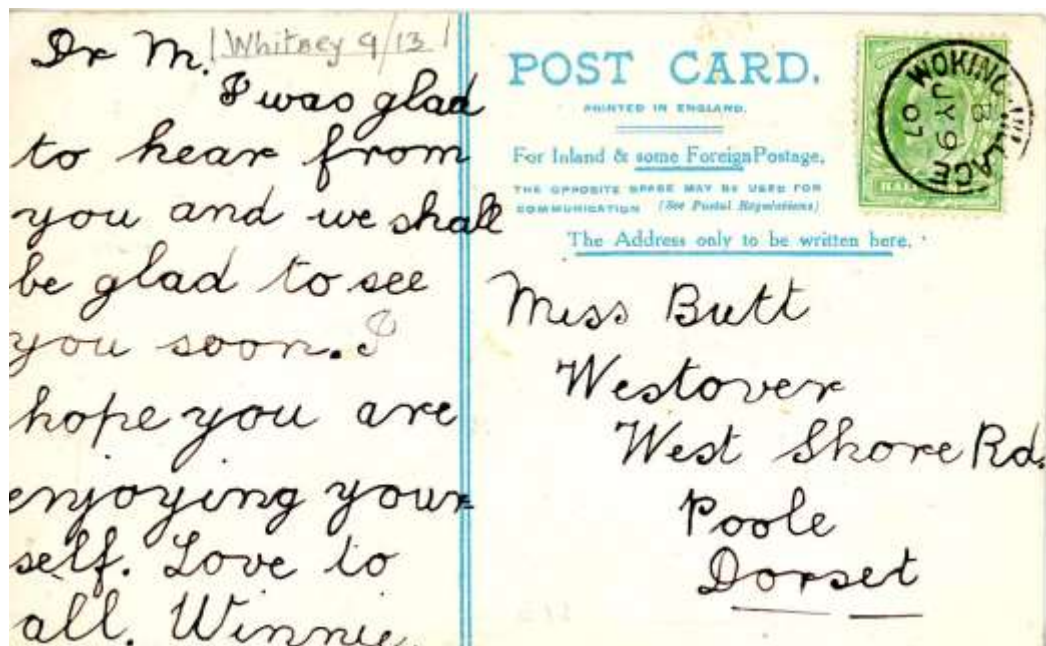


Figure 19: Inland & some Foreign Countries



Figure 20: Foreign Countries in the Postal Union

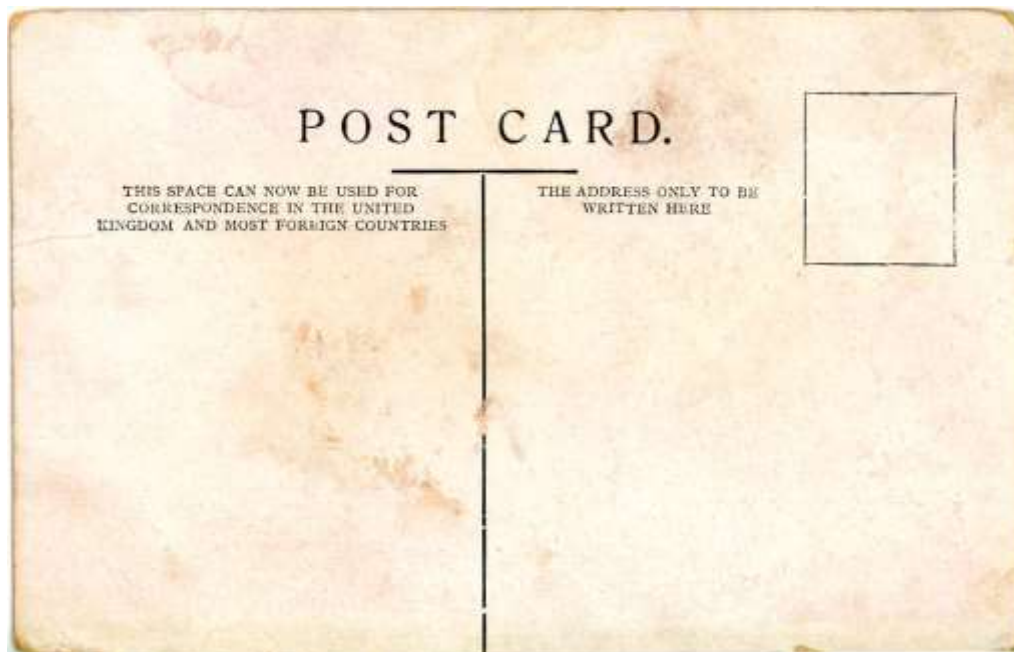


Figure 21: UK & most Foreign Countries



Figure 22: The chief Foreign Countries except Greece, Japan, Servia, Turkey

Spain, in 1906, Japan and the United States, in 1907, were among the last nations to sanction divided back postcards. From 1st October 1907, it was permissible to send divided back cards to all countries.



Figure 23: Except Japan, Spain and United States

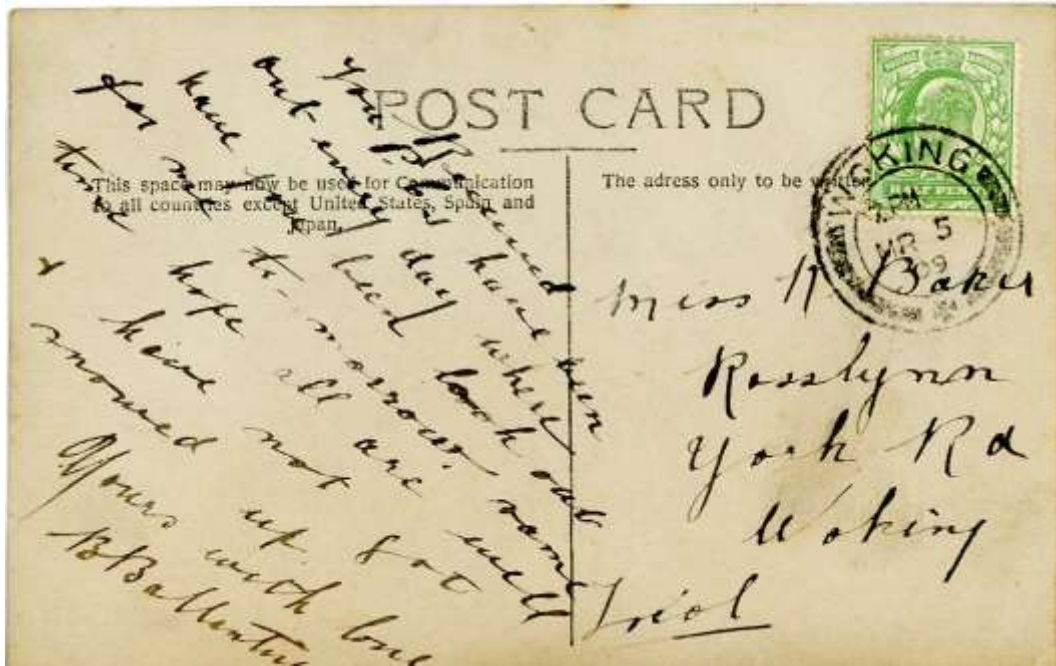


Figure 24: Except United States, Spain and Japan

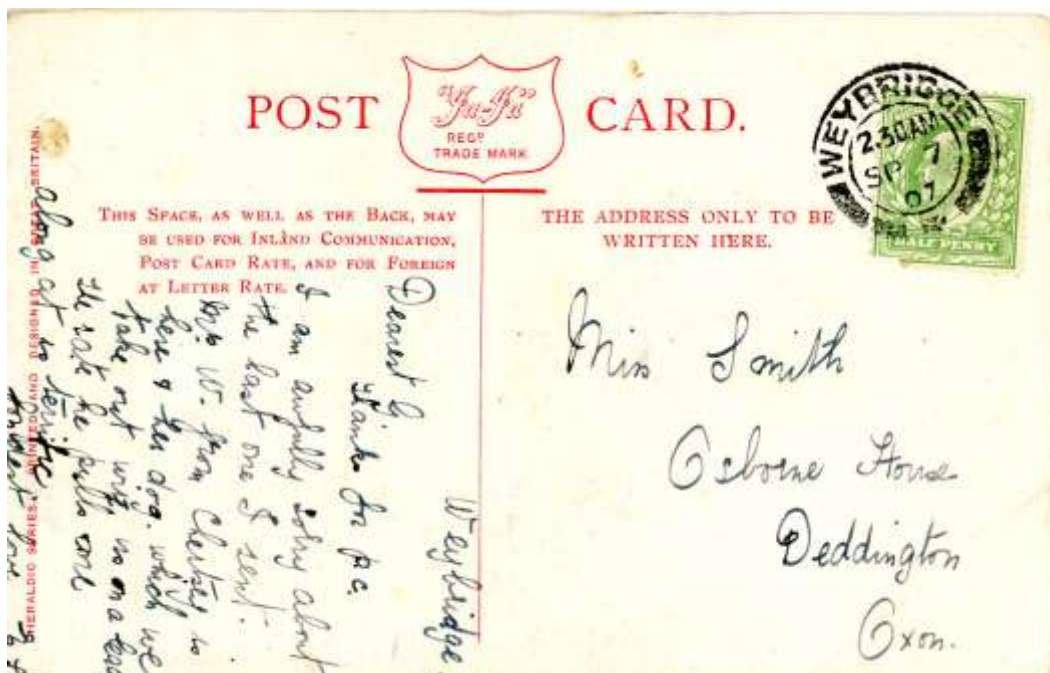


Figure 25: Inland & Foreign

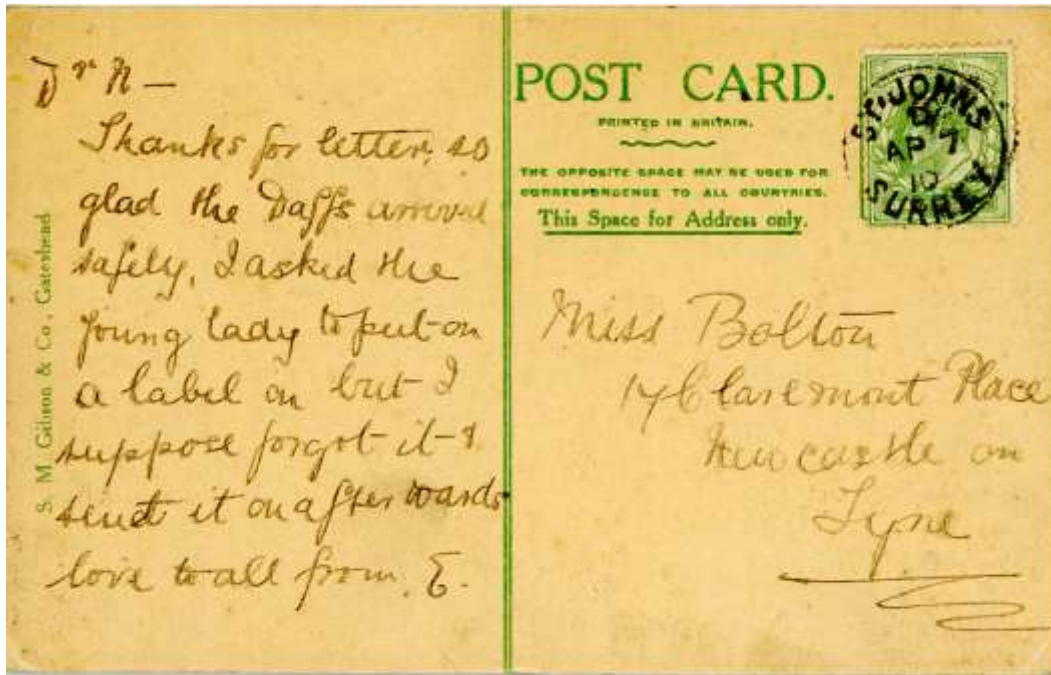


Figure 26: All Countries

After 1907, the usage instructions generally disappeared. An occasional gentle reminder about the RH side being reserved for the address only sometimes appeared.

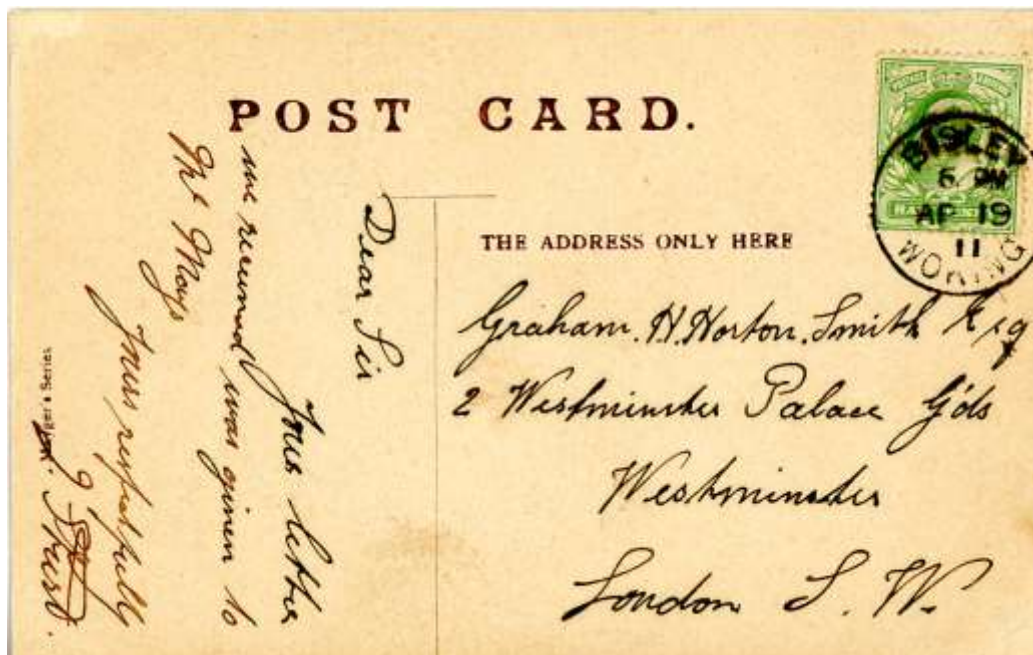


Figure 27: Simple reminder

Even in the 1950s, there was a printed paper rate. Postcards sent at this cheaper rate still could have only the address on the front.



Figure 28: Printed paper rate 1954

Golden Age

The golden age of postcards is considered to be from about 1890 until the First World War broke out in 1914 (some would say up to about 1925). People would use postcards much as we today use email or texts. A reliable postal service with up to four deliveries a day (yes!) meant that you could post a card early in the morning and it would be received, locally, before lunch.

After the war ended, demand for postcards reduced as telephone usage increased. Postcards were colloquially known as the ‘poor man’s telephone’.



Figure 29: Xmas greeting

