

# Royal train yields numerous cancels

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In May and June 1939, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth traveled by special train from Quebec City to Victoria, British Columbia. The return rail trip to Halifax, Nova Scotia, was made via Niagara Falls, Ontario; Washington, D.C.; New York City; and Hyde Park, New York, where the royal couple visited the falls, the New York World's Fair and met with President and Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Known as the royal visit, this tour resulted in numerous handstamps and special cancellations and spectacular

covers. Most royal train covers are franked with the three stamps issued for the royal visit. The stamps were discussed in the O Canada column in the December 2008 issue of *Scott Stamp Monthly*.

The royal visit was the greatest tour ever organized in Canada and was conducted virtually all by rail. The royal couple traveled on the royal train, while the press, staff and the post office were on board the pilot train that preceded it (Figure 1).

The king and queen departed Portsmouth, England, May 6 on the *Empress of Australia*. The departure was two days earlier than planned, but the royal couple arrived in Quebec City two days later than the scheduled beginning of the tour. Fog and ice conditions in the Atlantic Ocean contributed to the delay.

The tour was to begin in Quebec City May 15, but was delayed until May 17, when the royal couple arrived

in Canada. Because of the delay, the May 15-21 activities were condensed, and the tour was back on schedule May 22. This delay did not interfere with the operations of the royal train post office that began operations as scheduled.

The Canada Post Office Department announced in April 1939 that a "special Post Office will be operated for the convenience of the Royal Party and officials and other personnel accredited to the Royal Tour. It will be known as the 'Royal Train Post Office,' and will be provided with special postmarks." The post office also reported that no unauthorized persons would have access to the trains during the tour, but that interested persons could "secure the special postmark of the Royal Train Post Office on philatelic covers." The announcement went on to explain how such postmarks could be obtained.

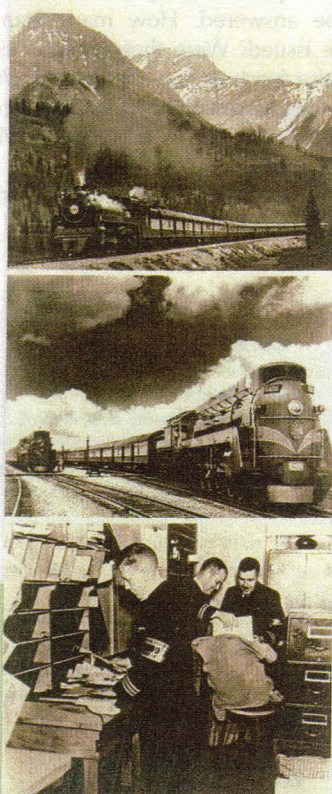


Figure 1. Canadian Pacific Railway's Royal Hudson steam train (top) hauled the royal train for most of the westbound trip, while on the eastern journey, the train was pulled by Canadian National Railway's 6400 series locomotive (middle). The bottom photo shows the inside of the royal train post office aboard the pilot train with Postmaster Bill Ross and his assistants Pallie Pascoe and Lou Gignac.

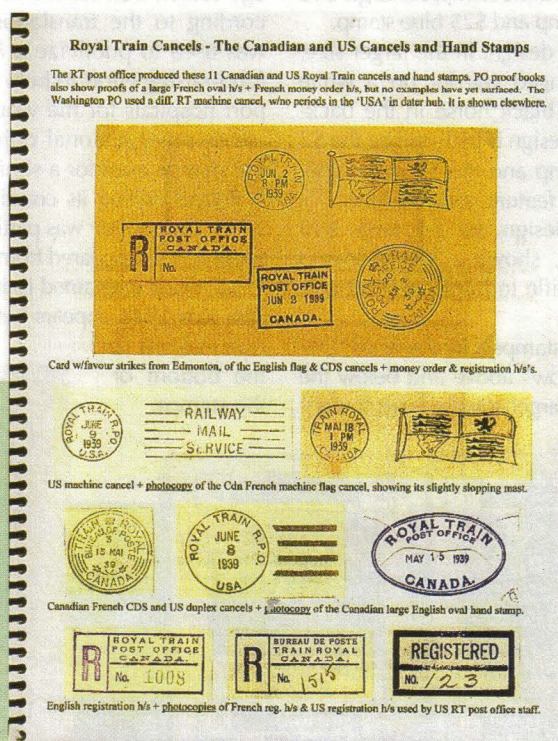


Figure 2. A page from Doug Lingard's collection, showing the many Canadian and United States machine cancels and hand cancels used aboard the royal train post office.





Figure 3. A proof strike of the cancel that was used on the Perfect machine when the royal train was in the United States. The canceling die and hub were supplied by the Canada Post Office.

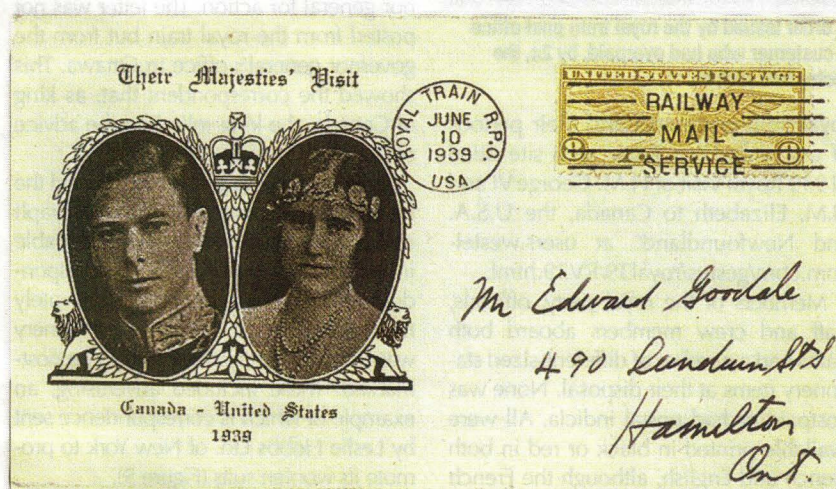


Figure 4. An example of the Universal machine used at the Washington, D.C., post office to deal with the excess mail from the royal train. No periods appear between the letters "USA."

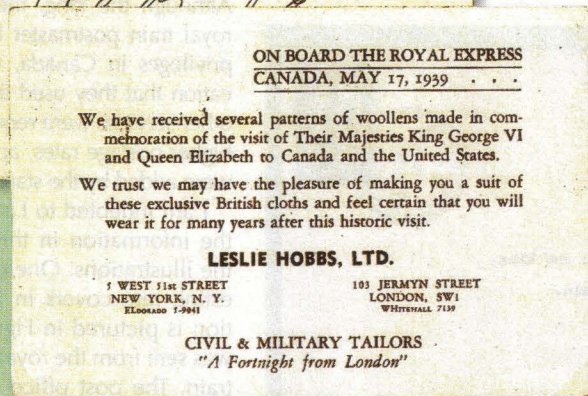


Figure 5. This advertising card from tailor Leslie Hobbs Ltd. shows commercial use of the royal train post office markings.

In the early days of the royal train's operation, many covers are known backdated by post office personnel. These were done during the catch-up period and are known from Quebec City, Montreal and Ottawa. Covers carried on the royal train can be distinguished by appropriate markings on the front or by the backstamps that are dated later than May 15, or those canceled with a correct datestamp or machine cancel but with a May 15 backstamp.

The Canada Post Office Department considered the royal train post office as a full-service post office and provided it with the necessary handstamps (Figure 2) and equipment to perform the tasks required. The most important of these was a Perfect canceling machine, which was installed because the post office expected a large amount of philatelic mail to be processed aboard the royal train.

A number of trial slogan dies and dater hubs were made with the machine, which was manufactured by Machine Works Ltd. in Montreal. The Royal Standard slogan box was chosen after many trials. Slogan cancellations were prepared in both French and English, as were all other canceling devices used on the train.

Because the United States Post Office Department did not use the Perfect machine, the Canadian Post Office Department supplied a canceling die and dater hub for use when the royal train was in the United States (Figure 3). Originally, purple ink was to be used to cancel most of the mail. The trial runs of the machine-slogan dies frequently were smudged, except for those created for the U.S. slogan die. Black ink was used to cancel the bulk of the mail.

All purple Perfect machine cancellations applied in Canada that are in private hands were applied using the French TRAIN ROYAL slogan and circular datestamp. Doug Lingard, a longtime royal train postal historian, believes that only about 10 purple machine cancels and 19 to 25 circular datestamps exist. Each bears the May 15 date and a 3 a.m.

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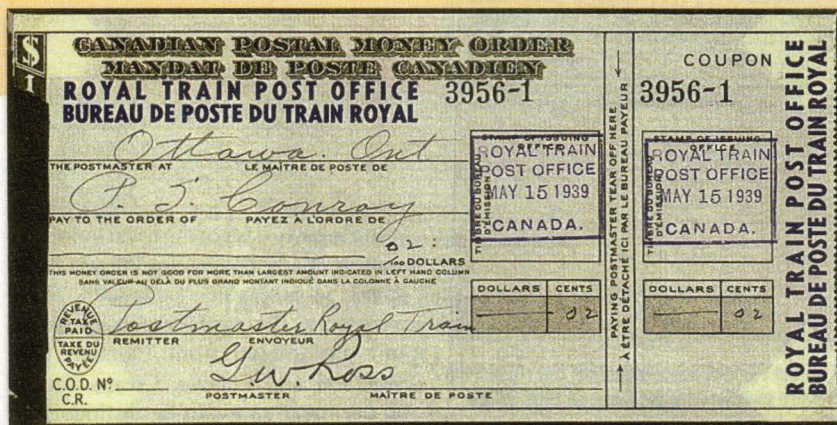


Figure 6. The only recorded Canadian postal money order issued by the royal train post office May 15, 1939. The money order likely was sent to a customer who had overpaid, by 2¢, the postage required to process the envelopes the collector had sent in.

time mark. After that date, purple ink rarely was used. Typically, these were courtesy cancellations.

The U.S. Post Office staff occasionally used purple ink with its royal train duplex cancellation, as well as for favor cancels. As with any post office, the royal train's postal markings (both Canadian and U.S.) also were used as datestamps on incoming mail.

Although most of the U.S. mail was canceled using the pilot train's onboard Perfect machine, the U.S. Post Office used a Universal machine with a similar slogan on June 10, after the royal train left for New York, to service the remaining royal train cover requests. Several differences distinguish the two machine cancels, the most prominent being the lack of periods between the letters "USA" on the Universal machine's dater hub (Figure 4). Lingard records only 12 Universal cancels.

For additional information on the

royal train postmarks and their periods of use, visit Glen Estus' web site titled "1939 Royal Visit of H.M. George VI and H.M. Elizabeth to Canada, the U.S.A. and Newfoundland" at [users.westel.com/gestus/royal39/RV39.html](http://users.westel.com/gestus/royal39/RV39.html).

Members of the royal party, officials, staff and crew members aboard both trains had a number of different-sized stationery items at their disposal. None was postpaid or had postal indicia. All were available printed in black or red in both French and English, although the French versions are scarcer. Some have no text and bear only a maple leaf on the flap.

Because few passengers and crew were on the royal train or the pilot train before May 17, royal train stationery items used or posted on May 15 or May 16 are scarce. The king and queen used stationery showing the royal coat of arms in red on the flap. The king's private secretary used most of the smaller royal arms envelopes (5½ inches by 4½

inches) for thank-you notes. Letters of a more personal nature signed by the king were mailed in the larger (8¾ inches by 3¾ inches) royal arms envelopes.

When complaints or suggestions were sent to the king or queen, a letter was sent in reply, indicating that the correspondent's letter was forwarded to the governor general for action. The letter was not posted from the royal train but from the governor general's office in Ottawa. This showed the correspondent that, as king of Canada, the king relied on the advice of the Canadian government.

Infrequently, the postmaster aboard the royal train used a handstamp to autograph covers. The handstamp was available in either French or English. Correspondence from other personnel and privately monogrammed or advertising stationery was used on the trains or sent to be postmarked. These included advertising, an example of which is correspondence sent by Leslie Hobbs Ltd. of New York to promote its woolen suits (Figure 5).

As mentioned above, the royal train post office was able to provide many of the postal services available in other Canadian post offices. In addition to registration services, these services included postal money orders (Figure 6), waybills and railway mail.

When the trains were in Canada, the current postal rates applied for mail posted on either train, and when they were in the United States, the U.S. rates applied. Although the king, the queen and the royal train postmaster had free-franking privileges in Canada, there is no indication that they used this prerogative. If other services were required that needed higher postage rates, appropriate stamps were added by the staff on the train.

I am indebted to Lingard for most of the information in this article and for the illustrations. One of the most interesting rate covers in Lingard's collection is pictured in Figure 7. The cover was sent from the royal train to the pilot train. The post office considered mail from one train to another train to be a drop or local letter, and the 2¢ stamp on the cover covered this rate.

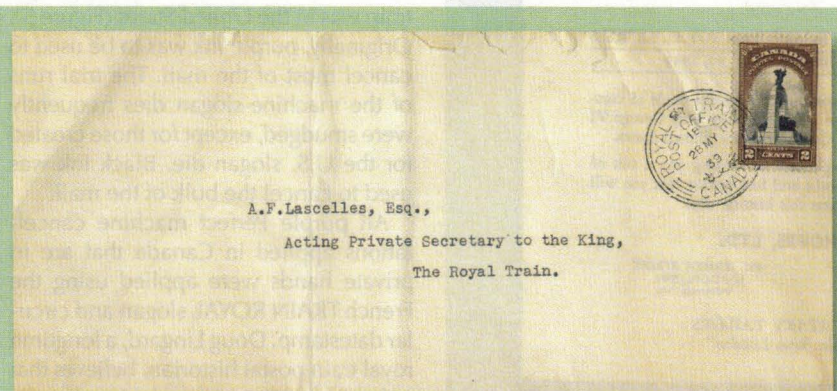


Figure 7. This cover addressed to Alan F. Lascelles, the king's acting private secretary, represents the 2¢ drop-letter, or local-letter, rate for a letter from the royal train to the pilot train.