THE 1836 ANGLO-FRENCH POSTAL CONVENTION

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ABSTRACT

Most mail destined for France from overseas countries was carried by British ships.

Britain wanted to collect postage fees for providing the shipping, so before the 1836 Anglo-French Postal Convention (AF1836) insisted that the letters were addressed to a British agent who would pay the incoming postage, and then the postal fees onward to France.

Under AF1836 Britain and France agreed to collect postage fees on behalf of each other. It became much easier to send a letter addressed directly to France, as a British forwarding agent was no longer needed. A postal clerk at an exchange office wrote the accountancy amount due in the top right corner. The colour of ink, red or black, was important as it indicated which country owed the money. There were different accountancy rates if the letter was carried by private ship or by packet, and there were different rates for the different packet services.

At the end of a month there was a reckoning, where clerks would determine the net amount owed by one country to the other.

For any given letter the number of French postal units was based on weight, while the number of British postal units usually depended on the number of pieces of paper. This meant that the accountancy amount due for each letter had to be individually assessed.

This convention was in effect until 1843. It governed all types of mail exchanged between France and Britain, not only mail from overseas via Britain to France. In later conventions both countries were using weight-based postal units, so the accountancy due for a group of letters was determined by the bulk weight.
THE 1836 ANGLO-FRENCH POSTAL CONVENTION

The 1836 Anglo-French Postal Convention (AF1836) had many influences on Postal Reforms. This was particularly the case for the major postal reforms in Britain, which were introduced only a few years later in 1839 and 1840. I believe that this postal convention had more effect on postal reforms than any other.

Influences on Postal Reform

- Position of the placement of adhesive stamps. This is quite amazing since the Convention preceded the issue of stamps by four years.
- Internal rates became independent of distance.
- Britain adopted a weight-based system of postal units.
- Later international postal conventions were based on bulk-weight.

Also

- For some international letters, the full postage could be paid by sender or by receiver.
- Accountancy amounts were written on each postal item. Under the Convention, they had to be written legibly.

Some housekeeping matters

- The abbreviation AF1836 is used for this Convention. Similarly AF1833, AF1843, etc are used for those of the years 1833, 1843, etc.
I use the term **Postal Convention** rather than **Postal Treaty**. When writing my book on AF1836, I originally used the title of the 1836 Anglo-French Postal Treaty. However I found that for agreements between countries, the word Treaty was used for more important agreements typically concerning peace and trade. The word Convention was used for agreements of lesser importance. We postal historians believe that postal matters were of the highest importance, but that opinion is probably not shared by most historians.

**Background**

In the first half of the 19th century Britain and France were the two most powerful nations in the world. They had tremendous influence over many parts of the world both politically and commercially. France and Britain had been at war on and off for many decades until Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. This outbreak of sustained peace was conducive to a rapid increase in worldwide commerce and a consequent increased need for communication.

A major reason for the Convention, was to find a more efficient way for Britain to receive postage fees for mail transiting Britain. This was particularly the case for mail from overseas addressed to France, carried by British ships to Britain. It cost Britain a lot to provide the regular shipping services to many parts of the world, so it was not unreasonable for Britain to collect some postal revenue for these services.

There were some fundamental problems in getting an agreement:

- Different currencies.
• Different weight units.

• The major difference was the definition of a postal unit. France used a weight-based system. The British system depended on the number of pieces of paper for letters weighing up to one ounce, and a weight-based formula for letters whose weight exceeded one ounce. There are many instances of letters double in one system and single in the other.

**Sending letters to France from Overseas Places via Britain**

The letter had to be sent to someone (an agent) in Britain. In practice the agent was always in England, and usually London. Very occasionally letters were sent to agents at the ports of arrival: Liverpool and Falmouth.

The cover in Figure 1 is an example. The address panel is very busy. It contains two addresses: the ultimate recipient in France; and the agent in Britain. The typical letter has three postal charges: inwards to London; from London to the border with France; and the French rate from the border to the destination. The same cover is shown in Figure 1a, where the rate marks are circled and explained.

There are lots of scribbles and scrawls. The British agent had to cross out his address. The agent had to pay the postage of the letter into Britain, and then another fee for the postage to France. The agent had to get reimbursed eventually by either the sender or the receiver.
The letter was mailed to an agent in London.
The agent paid the incoming postage, 4s9d.
The agent crossed out his name in the address panel, and mailed it paying postage of 3s6d.

3s6d postage from Britain to France triple letter. Prepaid by agent so red ink.

4s9d incoming British postage. Triple rate ship letter via Plymouth.

Figure 1. New York, November 1834, to Bordeaux.

Figure 1a (at bottom) highlights and explains the rates.
The postage charge included two payments for British internal postage: one from the arrival port to London; and the other from London to Dover. The total of these two payments was much greater than the British internal postage from the arrival port to Dover.

For most merchants in overseas countries this system was workable although expensive. The merchants were likely to have some business contact in England, who could act as the agent. However it was very difficult for an individual writing to France, who quite likely did not know anyone in Britain.

The AF1833 option

The 1833 Convention offered an alternative. Effectively the British Post Office acted as the agent. The sender could simply address the letter to France. This option was seldom used – I have only seen four covers from overseas places. The vast majority of letters continued to be sent to a British agent.

The British postage fees were reimbursed by the French Post Office to the British Post Office. France collected postage from the addressee. However one penny was worth slightly more than one décime, approximately 1.06 décimes. France converted the amount due to Britain as 13 décimes for each shilling, and one décime for each penny.

The cover in Figure 2 is an example. It is an 1835 cover from Penang. It landed at the port of Gravesend, and qualified for the India Letter Concession. It was a double letter in both the British and French systems. It was simply addressed to Nantes, without the use of any British intermediary.
The British Post Office wrote the rates due to it where space could be found, in this case in the top right corner. On the first line is 1s4d (one shilling four pence), the incoming rate comprising 4d for the India Letter fee plus one shilling for double the 6d distance charge from Gravesend to London. The second line has the rate from London to France, 2s4d, which was double the single rate of 1s2d. The total amount of 3s8d was written underneath.

Figure 2. Penang, 29 October 1835, to Nantes. Figure 2a shows the working on the reverse.
It is fortunate that the Paris postal clerk wrote his working for the conversion of the 3s8d due to Britain on the reverse of the cover, as illustrated in Figure 2a. The top line has 80 centimes (equal to 8 décimes) for 8 pence at one décime for each penny. The second line is “3 9” or 3 francs 9 décimes (equal to 39 décimes) for 3 shillings converted at the rate of 13 décimes per shilling. The total French amount due of 8 francs 1 décime (or 81 décimes) was written on the front of the cover. This was the sum of 47 décimes due to Britain plus 34 décimes for double the 17 décimes fee for a single letter to Nantes.

AF1836

The AF1836 Convention came into effect in July 1836. In France it started on 15 July, and in Britain on 20 July. The reason for the different commencement dates is given on pages 11 to 14 of Lewis (2015). The Convention continued until 31 May 1843.

An example is shown in Figure 3. Look at the top right corner of the address panel, where the amount of 3/7 has been written for 3s7d. This is the accountancy amount due to Britain from France under AF1836. Under the AF1836 agreement this position, the top right corner, was reserved for the accountancy amount. Both Britain and France applied lots of manuscript marks on covers to assist with calculation and collection of postage charges, for both internal covers and covers or from other countries. Each country had independently developed its own set of rules for the position of most of these manuscript marks. As it turned out, the top right corner was not used by either country for any other purpose. It was thus logical that the two countries selected this position for the writing of the accountancy amounts in the 1836 Convention. The
same logic drove the British Post Office in 1840 to choose the top right corner to be the place where the new adhesive postage stamps would be affixed.

Figure 3. Rio de Janeiro, 11 November 1836 to Nantes.

Under the AF1836 Convention the colour of the ink for the accountancy amount was important. In Figure 3 the 3s7d was written in black ink, which meant that France owed Britain this amount. If it had been written in red, then the amount would be owed by Britain to France.

The AF1836 Convention also required the accountancy amount to be written legibly. The rate amounts on a typical cover, such as Figure 1, are quite difficult to decipher by anybody who has not had a lot of experience studying these rate marks. Each of Britain and France had developed its own way of writing numbers and amounts, and every postal clerk was trained to write them in that fashion. Often the rule was so that each number could be written with a single pen-stroke.
The framers of the Convention realised that clerks in each country would not be familiar with the way that clerks in the other country wrote numbers. The Convention specified that the accountancy amounts had to be written very clearly.

Another great feature of the AF1836 Convention was to convert amounts between the two currencies using the simple rule that one penny and one décime were equivalent. This was not the real exchange rate, because one penny was worth slightly more than one décime, being approximately 1.06 décimes. We saw that a slightly more accurate conversion method was used with the AF1833 Convention. It is fortunate the two nations agreed on the much simpler conversion rate.

The French Post Office calculated the rate due from the addressee by adding the amount due to Britain (43 décimes for 3s7d) and the French internal postage from Calais (here 12 décimes to Nantes) to get a total of 55 décimes. It was written as 5fr5 for 5 francs 5 décimes.

The framed mark inscribed *Packet Letter* in italics was applied in London, so that France would know that this letter had been carried to Britain by a packet, so it was subject to a higher accountancy amount. This mark was applied in black in Figure 3, and in red from mid-1840 as can be seen in Figure 4.
A packet service was a regular shipping service which was contracted by the British Post Office often using Admiralty (Navy) ships. There were different accountancy rates for different packet services. The accountancy amount of 3s7d was the single rate for a letter carried by the packet from Brazil in Figure 3. The accountancy amount of one shilling in Figure 4 was the single rate for a letter carried by the Cunard packet from Boston. Many other accountancy amounts were used for different packet services as discussed in Chapter 4 of Lewis (2015).

Postage prepaid by sender

Under the AF1836 Convention it was possible for the sender to pay the full postage to France, but only if the letter was posted at a British Post Office in either British North America or the British West Indies.
This was the case for the cover in Figure 5, which was posted at Kingston, Jamaica. The postmaster used red ink to write the amount of postage, split into a component for the accountancy amount and a component for the French postage. The top amount of 2s3d was the accountancy amount for a single letter carried by the West Indies packet. The next amount of 2s4d was the French postage from Calais to Lyons. The postmaster at every British Post Office (both in Britain and overseas) had a list showing every French town with a Post Office, together with the French rate for a single letter entering France from Britain addressed to that town. The rate for the city of Lyons was 14 décimes or 1s2d. Each quarter-ounce or part thereof was one French postal unit, so this letter must have weighed between one-quarter and one-half ounce to be rated as double.
When the letter arrived in London, it was stamped in red with an oval mark inscribed **P-D**, which conveniently stood for both *Paid to Destination* in English and *Payé à Destination* in French. Because the full postage had been paid, the accountancy amount was written in red to indicate that 28 décimes was owed to France by Britain. The 28 does not look very red now. Note that many red inks have changed colour over the years, so some may appear brownish while others have a faded appearance.

**Ship Letters**

Under the British definition, a *ship letter* was a letter carried by a private ship not under a postal contract. Under the AF1836 Convention the accountancy amount on a ship letter arriving in Britain destined for France was 1s6d per unit. It is very significant that this rate did not depend on which British port the ship landed. This was in marked contrast to ship letters addressed to Britain where the rate depended on the British inland distance carried, which was a function of the port and the destination.

This is the first instance known to the author where a British postal rate was the same regardless of the British distance travelled. This is another example of where the 1836 Convention preceded the British postal reforms introduced on 5 December 1839, when the British inland postage rates were changed to a uniform rate of four pence.

The covers in Figures 6 and 7 were carried to Britain by private ship. The accountancy amounts were 4s6d and 3s0d for a triple letter and a double letter respectively. A minority of ship letters to France were stamped by London with the framed italic *Ship Letter* mark as in Figure 6. The cover in Figure 7 arrived at Liverpool and has a **Liverpool / Ship Letter** mark on the reverse.
Figure 6. Valparaiso, 7 January 1839 to Bordeaux.

Figure 7. St Louis, Senegal, 25 June 1839 to Bordeaux.

An **India Letter** was a ship letter subject to a concessional ship letter rate. Originally the concession only applied to letters originating in India, but over the years the definition was extended to include letters originating in many places such as the Cape of Good Hope, the
Australian colonies, the Malay Peninsula, and in 1839 to several places in South America. The concession was quite substantial for a letter addressed to Britain. The ship letter fee (without the British internal component) was eight pence per unit, whereas the India Letter fee was a flat rate of four pence, unless the letter weighed over three ounces.

The cover in Figure 8 was carried from Penang and landed at the port of Gravesend. The India Letter / Gravesend mark was struck on the reverse and can be seen in the illustration. However the Anglo-French accountancy amount was 1s6d, so that the India Letter concessional rate was not passed onto France or the French addressee.

Figure 8. Penang, 6 July 1838, to St Peray.
Mail from overseas via France to Britain

The cover in Figure 9 was written at Rio de Janeiro and was addressed to London. It was carried by a French naval ship, the corvette *La Bonite*. The ship arrived at the French naval base of Brest, and the cover was stamped with the French arrival cds *Outre-Mer / Brest* (overseas).

![Image of cover](image)

*Figure 9. Rio de Janeiro, 19 August 1839 to London.*

Note the 27 written in black ink at the top right corner. This is an AF1836 accountancy amount indicating that Britain owed France 27 décimes for this letter. This was the French postal rate to Calais (on the French channel). It was a double letter under the French system, so the French inland rate was 26 décimes for double of 13 décimes for a letter between Brest and Calais en route to England. The remaining décime was the ship letter fee of one décime.
This letter was also double in the British system. The single rate from France to London was 10d. The total British fee was 27 pence due to France, plus 20 pence for the double rate to London, and this amount of 47 pence or 3s11d was collected from the addressee.

**Mail from France via Britain to elsewhere**

The AF1836 accountancy system was also useful for mail going from France via Britain to other countries. The cover in Figure 10 went from Paris to the United States using a British ship. The postage was prepaid to the United States by the sender. The accountancy amount of one shilling was written in red ink at the top right corner by a postal clerk in Paris.

The letter was clearly endorsed to be carried by the steamship *Great Western* from Bristol to New York. Under the AF1836 Convention this was a ship letter and not a packet letter, because the *Great Western* was not operating under a postal contract. The AF1836 Convention specified an accountancy rate of one shilling per unit for a ship letter carried from France via Britain to any overseas destination. This differed from the accountancy rate of 1s6d for a ship letter travelling in the opposite direction to Britain and France, as can be seen in Figures 6 and 7. The accountancy rate for packet letters was the same for both directions of travel. For this cover this is somewhat academic as the accountancy rate for a packet letter travelling to the United States was also one shilling.

The letter was stamped with **PD** in red in Paris which suggests that postage was paid to destination. However this really meant that postage was paid until it had travelled as far as possible under the British system, which was for its journey to the US port of entry, New York.
The addressee paid a US postage charge of 27 cents consisting of the US internal rate of 25 cents from New York to New Orleans plus 2 cents ship letter fee.

Figure 10. Paris, 25 August 1841 to New Orleans.

**Pressure on Britain to use weight-based postal units**

Britain and France had different definitions for the number of postal units. The French system was based on the weight of the item, whereas the British system was based on the number of sheets of paper for letters up to one ounce.

Many letters had the same number of rates under both systems. However for some letters, the French rules resulted in the assessment of more French units than British, and for other letters there were more British units than French. For letters exchanged under AF1836, the first of the two countries to process the item, used its definition of the number of units to calculate the
accountancy amount. The letters via Britain to France, were first handled by Britain so the accountancy rate depended on the number of British units.

Consequently in AF1836, every letter had to be individually rated for its accountancy amount. The processing of each letter was time-consuming. It was inefficient. It added momentum to the need for postal reform in Britain to adopt a weight-based postal unit. This happened on 5 December 1839 when the definition of a single letter became one weighing up to half an ounce, regardless of the number of sheets of paper.

For later postal conventions, both countries used weight-based units. A pile of letters to be exchanged could be weighed, and the amount of accountancy could be calculated as a function of the total weight.

Settlement of accounts

Both countries kept records of the amount due on each mail-bag exchanged. At monthly intervals, the two countries calculated the net difference, which was paid by one nation to the other.

AF1843 Convention

The next postal convention between Britain and France came into effect on 1 June 1843. By that time both nations were using weight-based systems. The AF1843 Convention had the same accountancy rates for most packet letters, with some exceptions for letters from Canada and Jamaica and letters traveling via Panama. Ship letters were treated the same as packet letters.
The cover in Figure 11 is a typical letter arriving in Britain with destination in France. It was grouped with other letters to France which had come from different origins. The GPO in London simply stamped each letter with the red-orange rectangular mark inscribed Colonies / &c Art 12. The total group was weighed and France paid Britain at the rate of 3s4d per ounce. There was no need for the London GPO to write the accountancy amount on each letter or even to weigh any specific letter.

![Image of a letter with the stamp Colonies Art 12]

Figure 11. St Pierre, Martinique, 11 January 1845 to Montfort, France.

The processing was easier for France too. Because of the Colonies / &c Art 12 handstamp, the component of the French rate to cover the accountancy due to Britain was 10 décimes or 10 pence for one-quarter of 3s4d (or multiples of 10 décimes for higher weight letters). This was added to the standard French internal rate from Boulogne to the destination. Even though the mail arrived at Calais, there were some technical and political reasons why France used
Boulogne as the exchange office for calculation of rates (discussed on pages 167-171 of Lewis 2015).

References