

Stamp Boxes and Cases made of Paper, Board or with Embroidery

Although stamp boxes and cases made of paper or card may well appear to be potentially less durable than some other materials, there are many examples from Victorian times.

The most well-known *paper* example just has to be The Wonderland postage stamp case. This is, in effect, a four-piece set – the stamp case itself, the folder in which it is housed, an enclosing envelope and an accompanying booklet. There were different editions / issues / versions of each of these constituent parts (three editions of the stamp case itself, five editions of its outer folder, eight of the booklet and three of the envelope), and ways of distinguishing which version is which have been established in a comprehensive article published in 1980 in *Stamp Collecting* magazine. The Kelvin Smith Library, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio was happy to supply a scan of a letter from one of his nieces relating to the stamp case which also helped in the research on this item. Guildford Museum also holds much Lewis Carroll material. The earliest publication date is 1890 but the most frequently seen version is a lithographed reprint (which confusingly carries the wording “FIRST PUBLISHED 1890”) which was made in about 1910/1915 by the original printers/publishers – Emberlin and Son, 4 Magdalen Street, Oxford. Emberlins were still selling the reprints in 1944 at the original price of 1/- (5p in today’s decimal currency).



The booklet itself is a little gem, redolent with the author’s wit and humour. It is entitled “*Eight or Nine Wise Words about Letter-Writing*”, and is of course by Lewis Carroll. He introduces the reader to the concept of a postage stamp case and thus to the Wonderland postage stamp case and specifically to the two visual surprises he has included. The illustration on the front of the outer folder is of Alice holding the Duchess’s baby (a picture which does not appear in the book of Alice in Wonderland); the illustration on the other side of the outer folder is of the Cheshire Cat. When the postage stamp case is withdrawn from the outer folder, the illustrations then visible are of Alice holding the pig on the front and of the Cheshire Cat with only its grin shown clearly on the back.

Paper examples of stamp cases also include those which have used some of the fancy papers more well-known from Victorian Valentine cards – with cut-outs similar to broderie anglaise. One such is a small oval case, with a pencilled sketch of sailing ships on one side and with what we refer to as “the usual rhyme”, in this case slightly adapted, in manuscript on the reverse. The case is decorated with a pink bow on each side and also on the slip-in envelope, which would have contained the stamps.

Many examples have survived of cases made of *perforated card, with embroidery*. The basic material is in fact perforated Bristol board, which was introduced in the 1840s and which was a useful tool in helping children to practise and develop their stitching skills. It is a type of stiffened paper, punched with regularly spaced holes, available in large sheets with different hole sizes, to suit the proficiency of the maker, the thickness of the thread used (wool or fine silk) and the

delicacy of the finished article. The card could be cut to the required shape but there were also items pre-shaped with a ready-made fancy border. Bookmarks seem to have been very popular as well as pictures and samplers, notebooks, needle cases, greeting cards and trinket boxes, in addition to stamp cases. Some of these embroidered stamp cases carry dates – the earliest seen so far is 1854 (when postage stamps in the UK were first perforated, prior to which the counter clerks cut them from the printed sheet), but there were also others from the 1850s and one from 1871.



This type of stamp case uses a standard format – a double sided case, with a slip-in opening at one end / one side. The shape is usually rectangular, although some are almost square. Many are so similar that they may well have been supplied as kits or certainly the materials could

have come with a pattern or other instructions. It may be that the design was supplied on graph paper, although there is also evidence that it may have been printed on the card. This has a modern equivalent in the tapestry kits that are currently available, albeit the basic material nowadays in Aida canvas, but the range includes bookmarks, sewing cases, spectacle cases as well as cushion covers and pictures.

Many stamp cases have survived with the inner sleeve intact. This is where the stamps were housed – and there are many different styles, some quite ingenious, and some more practical than others. This inner carrier could be a simple slip-in with a folded-over edge, an envelope, a small pouch, two layers of Berlin card hinged with ribbon. Most in fact have a ribbon by which to extract the carrier from the case and in most instances, the inner sleeve is noticeably shorter than the case.

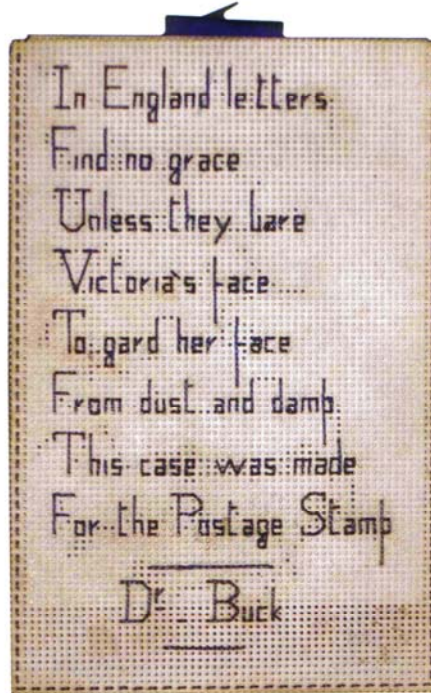
The embroidery on this type of case is often in cross-stitch. Some are very simple while others are more ornate and have been executed with greater skill. At their simplest, there will be frame of probably cross stitch which can also act to hold the case together. The decoration could at its simplest say “Stamps”, and a slightly more detailed variation could well say “Postage stamps” on one side, and “A gift from a friend” or “God is Love” on the reverse. Another simple one has “Postage” on one side and “Stamps” on the other. Some have been executed in bead work. One has a list of postage rates.

A very popular design was the previously-mentioned verse, although the wording is not precisely identical in each case, so the person making the case obviously took some leeway in diverting from what must have been a published format. The rhyme can be entirely on one side of the case or with two lines on one side and the other two on the reverse. A “standard” version is:

“In England letters find no grace
Unless they bear Victoria’s face
To guard her head from dust and damp
This case provides for postage stamps”

A version which reads better varies the last two lines to:

“To guard her head from dust and damp
This case provides for the Postage Stamp.”



This example also carried a name – “Dr Buck” – but research so far has not been able to identify him as the author and it may be that this particular case had simply been made for him. However, the rhyme is on one side of this case, with the front carrying a Victorian “scrap” of an exceptionally floral nature, with the words “Postage Stamps” as a heading, which lends weight to the thought that he may well be the author.

This general style of embroidered case survived into Edwardian times. One example carries the name Edward, and the adjective “her” changed to “his” in this rhyme, and Brian Beet’s book for the Musée de la Poste (pp 66/67) illustrates a case with an Edward VII 1^d red stamp on one side and this variant of the verse on the other:

“England’s letters find no grace
 Unless they bear her Ruler’s face
 To guard the head from dust and damp
 This case provides for postage stamps”

A more unusual rhyme, and one that can seem a little disrespectful to the sovereign at first reading, starts on one side of the case:

“This little case A Wonder contains
 A lot of Queen’s Heads
 Without any Brains.”

The rhyme continues on the other side of the case:

“Though Brainless they Be
 There are none of their Better.
 Reign Supreme as they do
 O’er the Empire of letters.”

This case has been executed in rust and blue threads, and its inner carrier has ribbons in the same colours to enable it to be extracted.

Some of the Bristol board cases have a geometric pattern which gives the appearance of lace. These are very attractive but have not been embroidered. It seems they have been made by punch-work,



Perforated card stamp case with postage rates in cross-stitch embroidery.

with the removal of bits of the card with a stiletto or penknife – painstaking work, shown to great advantage by a lining of a contrasting colour.

There are clear links between the Bristol board items and Berlin woolwork, where the design was made on graph paper, and Tunbridge Ware items, where again the design would have been drawn on graph paper and interpreted by the mosaic makers. Some of the designs used on Tunbridge Ware items are almost identical to those use in Berlin woolwork.

One very attractive small case has been made of padded silk – bright blue on one side, with white beadwork in a geometric pattern and ivory silk, with pockets for stamps, on the other, within a white beadwork outer frame.

There are examples of boxes made of *board* with an overlay of another material, such as leather. An upright stationery-type box is one style of this – it is difficult to date such items with any precision, but they have to be twentieth-century. Known to have been made in 1991, is a box, square in shape, printed inside and out with 19th century postal motifs. This has a hinged lid and was designed by Catriona Stewart – one of these was also in the collection that was on loan to the Paris Postal Museum. Another maker of modern boxes of this type is Matthew Rice, who has been selling them in different sizes and with different, but also postally-related, decoration (however, they do not appear to feature currently on his website).

References:

“The Wonderful Case of Alice” by Gerald Davis, from *Stamp Collecting*, 12th June 1980.

“Les Boîtes à Timbres” / “Stamp boxes” by Brian Beet, Edition du Musée de la Poste, Paris, 1994

“Love the Giver” – bookmarks stitched on perforated Bristol board by Diane Pelham Burn, *Antique Collecting*, February 1988, and a subsequent article by the same author, “Art and Stitchery on punched card”.

Acknowledgement:

We are grateful to the Special Collections, Kelvin Smith Library, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA for permission to use the letter from Charles Dodgson’s (Lewis Carroll’s real name) niece clarifying aspects of the Wonderland Stamp case.

POSTSCRIPTS

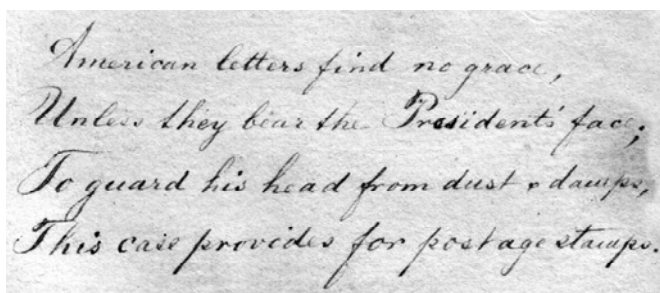
Since the above article was written, more verses have come to light.

1. The following has been reported on one side of an embroidered punched card stamp case:

“The Head of our Queen
Inside you will see.
If placed on your letter
T’will make it go free.”

and the other has the usual “In England letters ...”. Does anyone have a photograph or any other information?

2. A perforated card case with “U.S. Postage” embroidered on one side and “Stamps” on the other has this verse handwritten on the inner sleeve:



American letters find no grace,
Unless they bear the President's face;
To guard his head from dust & damps,
This case provides for postage stamps.

Has anyone seen an embroidered version of this verse or have any other information?

3. A Bristol board (perforated card) case has come to light with a verse in German. The embroidery has faded with time, but seems to say:

“Tauscht man die Gedanke aus.” on one side, and

“Ihre durch mich von haus zu haus.” on the other.

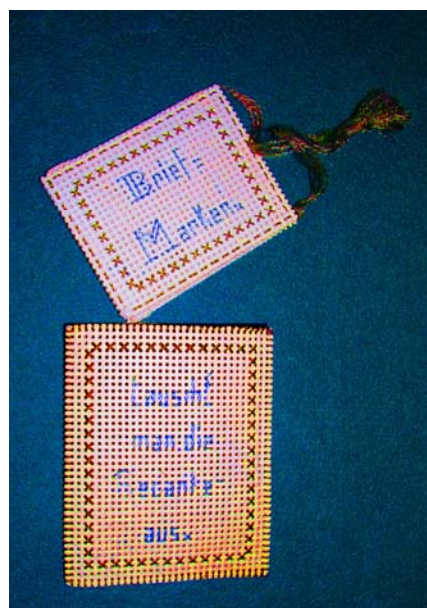
The inner case, shielded from the light, is much clearer, and has the word “Briefmarken” (stamps) on one side, with a pattern on the other.

The German verse can be loosely translated as:

"One exchanges thoughts through me from house
to house",

building on the stamp's part in aiding communication..

It also appears that there may well be stamp cases with other languages, such as French. If anyone reading this has knowledge of any of these, please contact the webmaster.



Colours in the above photo have been altered to show the faded embroidery better.

Comments welcome at webmaster@stampbox.info.