

1861 British Guiana to Hong Kong cover

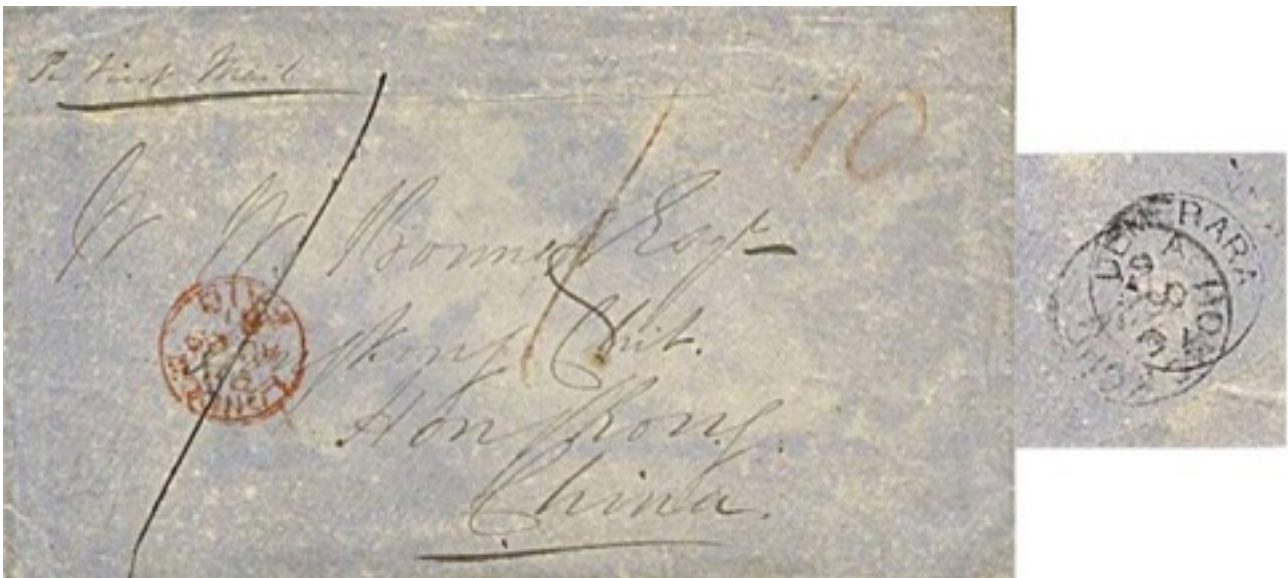
By Dr. Andrew Cheung FRPSL

Not quite a "new find", since I acquired this cover sometime ago from a friend and fellow member of the SPH and RPSL, the late Mr. Derek Nathan FRPSL who specialized in postal history of British Guiana.

My interest in the Central and South American mail to and from China began when I acquired my first item, the famous 1864 Hong Kong to Lima, Peru from Fred Stubens David Feldman Swiss sale in 1997 (1).

The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company (RMSPC) held the mail contract for West Indies, Central and South American packet mail to Great Britain and with the "lucky" acquisition of two important books at Vera Trinder during a vacation in London - *Kenton and Parsons: "Early Routings of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company 1842 - 1879"* and *Rev. J.N.T. Howat: "South American Packets 1808 - 1880"*, itineraries of such letters can be worked out.

The subject is a 7 August 1861 letter from Demerara, British Guiana, now known as Guyana (2) addressed to Hong Kong Club sent via England. From Kenton/Parsons and Kirk, the itinerary of the letter can be worked out:-



Demerara to G.B.

RMSPC *Teviot* Demerara 7 August to Barbados 9 August, RMSPC *Thames* Barbados 10 August to St. Thomas 13 August. RMSPC *Shannon* St. Thomas 14 August to Southampton 29 August

G.B. to Hong Kong

P&O *Ceylon* Southampton 4 September to Alexandria 17 September, P&O *Nemesis* Suez to Galle 4 October
P&O *Emeu* Galle 6 October to Hong Kong 24 October 1861

Postage rate

This is more puzzling as Mr. Nathan and I exchanged several emails regarding the interpretation but still unable to reach a satisfactory answer since the actual postal archive was unavailable for inspection and even Colin Tabear's "British Internal and Overseas postal rates" is unsure of the time when the rate change from 6d to 1 shilling for a letter weighing $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. between British Guiana and G.B. From the face of it, the rate markings can be interpreted in two ways:-

(i) Prepaid 10d at Demerara (red hand written **10** top left corner) to G.B. only. According to Tabear, this would represent 4d Demerara to St. Thomas + 6d St. Thomas to G.B. for a letter under $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. around 1860s. The second red **/** to the left of the **10** would be the 1d credit to British Guiana. This was crossed out upon arrival in G.B. It then follows that the long black stroke **/** on the left would be the 1 shilling postage due in Hong Kong since the Packet rate via Southampton had increased to 1 shilling per $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. on 3 August 1861 (Proud II p. 186). The London paid c.d.s. dated AU 29 61 on the front of the letter was struck upon arrival indicating that the letter was prepaid at office of dispatch. Argument against the long black **/** being one shilling due is that by convention, m/s **/** usually indicates 1d and **1/-** in various fancy script represents 1 shilling.

(ii) Prepaid 1 shilling (12d) at Demerara to Hong Kong, the red **/** in the centre being 1 shilling rate prepaid and 10d was credit to G.B. The long black **/** on the left represents 1d credit to Hong Kong for handling since Hong Kong Post Office had been under Colonial Government control since May 1860. Upon close examination with a powerful magnifying lens, the black **/** is *above* the London paid c.d.s. Argument against this is that why was the red **/** supposedly indicating the 1 shilling postage paid at Demerara crossed out by G.B.?

Luckily, Hong Kong Postal History guru Lee Scamp came to my rescue, he wrote:-

"10"d prepaid for British Guiana (BG) to GB, and credited to GB

1/11d prepaid and retained by BG (Colonial rate)

Possibly a total of 1/11 prepaid, vs. 1d as part of 10d prepaid: Proud pg. 185 shows 1/11 rate to many place in Caribbean (although BG not included). These HK rates were effective 1.5.60 to 23.9.61 (Webb pg. 178).

The absence of BG in the page 185 (160) and 188 (1863) rate tables in Proud indicates that no through rates had been established between HK and BG, so mail could not be sent prepaid for the entire route, and therefore had to be constructed of the rates for the BG to GB and GB to HK segments of that route.

GB kept accounts with HK from 1.5.60, when HK took over administration of its PO.

New 1/- per ½ ounce rate effective 3.8.61 in GB (notified in HK 23.9), so applied to subject letter from BG.

GB debited the HK account 1/- (nominally; not shown on cover) for P&O GB via Southampton to HK.

GB "credited" the 10d (the large 1/11 at the left) colonial rate to HK out of the 1/- rate.

GB struck out the red "10" to try to avoid confusion between the prepaid amount and the unpaid amount.

Besides the above rates interpretation, it should be pointed out that this was a very early usage of the 1/- per ½ ounce rate, less than 1 month after the 3.8.61 rate notice in GB.

And, a very early usage (1 month) after the return to twice per month P&O service. The Galle to HK leg was eliminated for only one voyage for the itinerary that began on 20.7.61 at Southampton (Kirk page 54).

Further Comments are most welcome; kindly contact me by mail or email.

Footnote

1. The second letter on the same itinerary to Lima as the Hong Kong letter is from Le Havre, France to Lima illustrated on p.221 RMSPC 1842-1879 by Kenton & Parsons

2. Demerara is a region in [South America](#) that began as a Dutch colony, then was captured by the [British](#) in 1796 and was ceded to the UK in 1814. It became one of the three colonies that were joined into the colony of [British Guiana](#), now [Guyana](#). It was located about the lower courses of the [Demerara River](#), and its main town was [Georgetown](#). Demerara is now one of three counties of Guyana. The other two counties are [Berbice](#) and [Essequibo](#). The name "Demerara" comes from a variant of the [Arawak](#) word "Immenary" or "Dumaruni" which means "river of the letter wood".