EVOLUTION OF THE POSTCARD

Malcolm Gascoyne

In this age of instant communication the humble postcard, whilst still remaining a familiar feature of many people's holidays, is but a shadow of its former self. Even the image we have of the postcard in its heyday, as a means of mass communication, is a far cry from its inauspicious beginnings over 150 years ago.

In 1865 a Prussian postal official, Heinrich von Stephan (Fig 1), first put forward the idea of an "open post-sheet" made of stiff paper, with one side reserved for the recipient's address, and the other for a brief message. The idea was to simplify postal handling, with the cost being at the standard postal rate. This was rejected by the Prussian Post Office on grounds of being far too radical. Senior officials did not believe that anyone would willingly give up the privacy of their communications.

In January 1869 an article appeared in Austria's leading paper *Neue Freie Presse* entitled "Über eine neue Art des Korrespondenzmittels der Post" [About a novel means of postal correspondence]. In this the author, Dr Emanuel Hermann (Fig 2), proposed that all envelope-size cards, whether written, produced by copying machine or printed, ought to be admitted as mail if they contained not more than twenty words including the address and sender's signature and carried a two Kreuzer postage stamp, a reduction on the regular letter rate of 5 Kreuzers. The idea was to stimulate business.

Austria-Hungary's Postmaster General Vincenz Baron Maly von Vevanovič considered the concept valuable and in September 1869 the "Correspondence Card" was officially introduced in Austria-Hungary by ministerial order. Two forms of card, titled in Hungarian and German, were issued on 1 October 1869. They carried an imprint of a two kreuzer stamp in yellow, and were valid for delivery to any place within the dual monarchy, irrespective of the distance involved. Three million cards were mailed within the first three months (Fig 3).

The success of the card, both for businesses and for the public, raised considerable interest in a number of countries. Articles appeared in British magazines extolling the virtues of the cards: "*A halfpenny post of this kind would certainly be very convenient, especially in large towns, and a man of business carrying a few such cards in his pocket-book would find them very useful. There is an additional advantage attaching to the card, namely, that of having the address and postmark inseparably fixed to the note*" [Manufacturer and Builder vol.1, issue 12, 1869 "A New Thing in Postage"]. Indeed the business community was the main target, such that full sheets of the printed cards were issued to some companies before the official start date so that they could be pre-printed on the backs. October 1st 1870 saw the issue of two sizes of card, 3½ x 4¾ and 2⅞ x 4¾ inches in a similar format to the Austrian cards. These were printed by De La Rue, who, as we shall see later, fought hard to maintain their monopoly on printing cards (Fig 4).

1870 also saw cards introduced by the North German Confederation and Switzerland. In 1871 Luxemburg, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland and Canada follow suit. During 1871-74 Rumania, Russia, the Scandinavian countries, Spain, Japan, Italy, Chile and France followed. From these beginnings the Postal Card spread across the world.

Fig 1: Heinrich Von Stephan 1947 Deusche Post

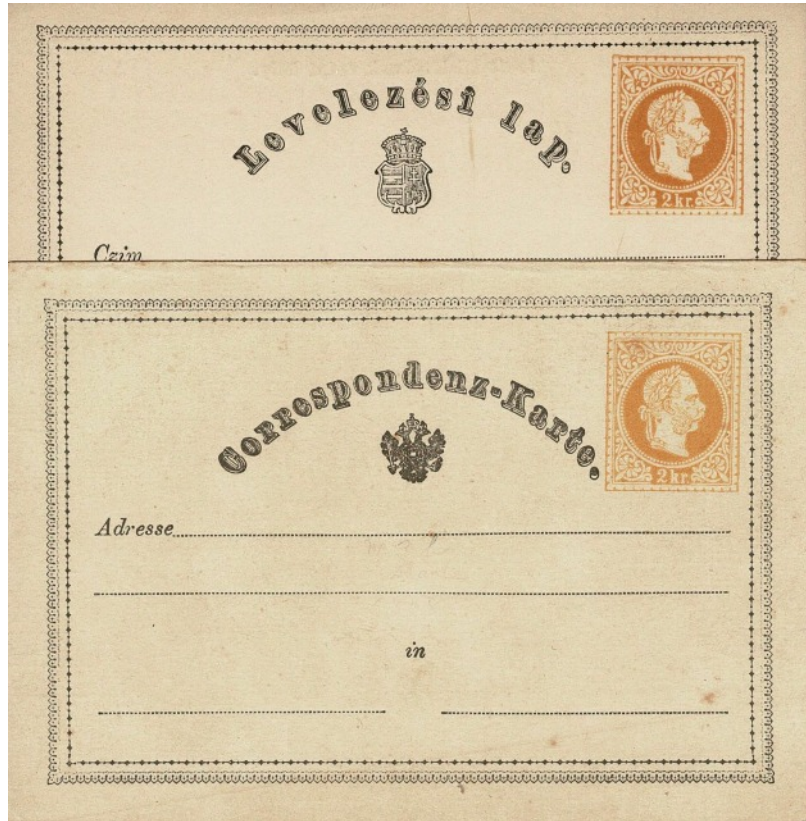*Fig 2: Emanuel Hermann Austria 1977 Stamp Day*
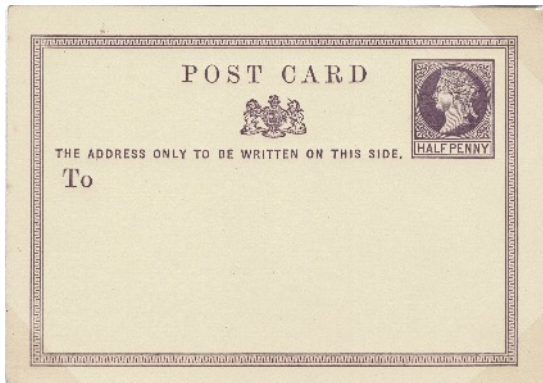

Fig 3: Correspondence cards

Fig 4: GB card, De La Rue 1870

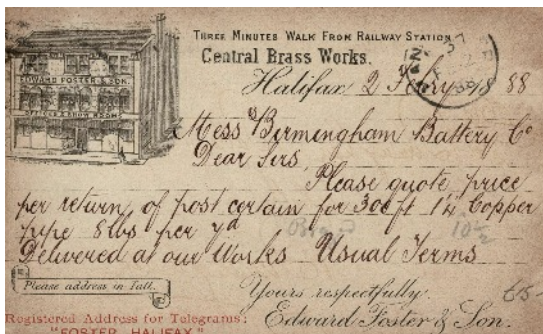*Fig 5: Bavaria Nuremburg Trade Exhibition*

Fig 6: Illustrated trade card back 1883

Fig 7: Vitznau Rigi Bahn, Switzerland

All of these cards had plain backs, designed just for simple communication; but by the 1880's the idea of adding illustrations to the cards began to take hold. Bavaria led the way with a card to celebrate the Nuremberg Exhibition of 1882, with an engraving of the main entrance on the front (Fig 5). In Great Britain some companies began to put small engravings on the backs (Fig 6).

In the Austro-Hungarian Empire the expanding tourist industry, driven by the growth of the railways, was utilising the Correspondence Card as a means of sending messages home, but pressure was beginning to grow to allow landscape views to be put on the cards. It was also realised that congratulatory prints, patriotic sayings, poems or drawings might also have a ready market. The Austrian Post Office did not take long to respond. Under the title "Admissibility of Correspondence Cards produced by Private Industry" the Post Office allowed, from 1st January 1885, all private individuals to produce, and send postcards. The only stipulations were that they had to be in the same format and paper thickness as the official cards, with the imprint "Correspondence Card" and have a two kreuzer stamp stuck to them. The Swiss were not slow to follow suit (Fig 7 shows a rare Swiss postcard of 1886 posted to England).

The Exposition Universelle of 1889 was a World's Fair held in Paris, France, from 5th May to 31st October 1889, with the Eiffel Tower having been built as its centrepiece. Demand from visitors to the Tower, wanting a souvenir to send to friends and family, pressured the Tower's administration into producing a suitable card. The Société de la Tour Eiffel commissioned the engraver Léon Charles Libonis to produce five different designs, showing the Tower. These were printed on standard Postal Cards for sale to the visitors. The first known date of usage was 21st August and it is recorded that 57,000 sold in the first 20 days. This became the first French Illustrated postcard. (Fig 8).

The 1890's were to witness an explosion in both card production and illustrations on the cards. Up to this point the illustrations had typically been engravings printed in a single colour (usually black). However the development of chromo-lithography, particularly in Germany, resulted in the growing use of colour illustrations.(Fig 9).

Great Britain lagged well behind Europe when it came to illustrations on cards. This was to a large extent due to De La Rue fighting to retain its monopoly on the printing of Postal Cards. Indeed it was not until 1st September 1894 that the Post Office finally allowed privately printed postcards, with a halfpenny stamp affixed, to pass through the post. These were however still restricted to the same sizes (Court size) as the official cards at 3½ x 4¾ and 2⅞ x 4¾ inches, unlike the Continental cards.

The very first publisher of a picture postcard in Great Britain is thought to have been George Stewart & Co, of 92 George Street, Edinburgh, but he was quickly followed by a large number of publishers across the country. Many of the cards do not have a publisher's name, but are usually printed in Germany (Fig 10). Due to the efforts of one Adolph Tuck in negotiating with the Post Office, over a period of four years, the Postmaster General was finally persuaded to introduce a regulation UPU size (5½ x 3½ inch) for internal postage. Hence on 1st November 1899 an Internal card was introduced, and private printed postcards of the same size were allowed to be produced. Raphael Tuck & Sons, as prime movers in this shift, were poised to take advantage of the opportunities. They already had 45 sets of cards, covering London and the Thames, printed and ready to distribute (Fig 11).   📖

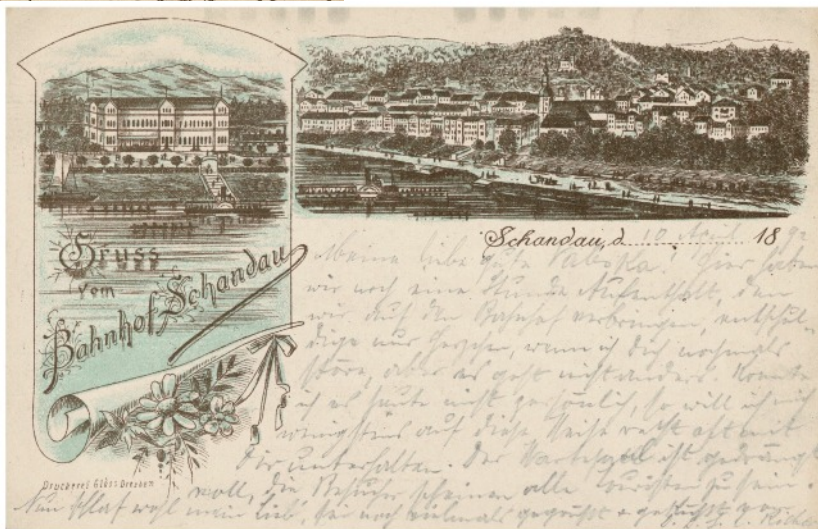*Fig 8: Paris Exposition card
used 14 Oct 1889*

*Fig 9: Chromo-litho printing. Gruss vom Bahnhof
(Train Station) Schandau card posted April 1892*

*Fig 10: Compliments from London. Vignette of
Tower Bridge. Card numbered 456, printed in
Germany. Posted 2 Oct 1896.*

*Fig 11: London St James Palace.
Warwick to Paris 15 May 1900*