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The History of the Postcard



A Victorian Seaside Postcard HPC113.003



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The History of the Postcard

The Origins of the Official Post Card

The first 'postcards were produced in Germany in 1865. On 26th May 1870, the British Postmaster-General recommended the production of "Correspondence Cards" and on 1st October 1870, the first official postcards in Britain were issued by the Post Office. These early postcards were printed by the famous firm of De La Rue and incorporated a printed, stamp. The officially produced Post Card carried a prepaid stamp to the value of 1/2 d, a new postal rate for open correspondence. The postal rate for letters in a sealed envelope remained at one penny. At half the standard postal rate, the Post Card was immediately popular, and 675,000 were sold on the first day.

Illustrated Post Cards

No pictures were allowed on the early official Post Card, but from 1872, private firms were allowed to print postcards which carried advertisements, as long as these commercial cards bore the official prepaid stamp. Around this time, postcards were produced that featured line drawings. An early example carried line illustrations of London landmarks such as St Paul's Cathedral and London Bridge.

The production of pictorial cards was inhibited by the restrictions imposed by the Post Office rule that post cards had to carry a printed prepaid stamp. A major breakthrough occurred when the British Post Office announced that from 1st September 1894, privately printed post cards could be sent through the post with an adhesive halfpenny stamp. These early pictorial view postcards did not carry actual photographs.

The views on the earliest picture postcards were engraved from line drawings and could not cover the whole side of the card as postal regulations stipulated that the front of the postcard, which carried the stamp, was reserved for the address only. The message had to be written on the reverse side and therefore had to share space with any pictorial illustration. These early commercial produced 'local view' cards provided an illustration to go alongside the written message or provided a decorative border around the space that was reserved for the greeting.

Tintype Portraits on the Beach

From the late 1870s, itinerants equipped with tintype cameras descended on seaside towns and with the advent of dry plates and 'instantaneous' photography in the 1880s professional photographers could leave their studios and come down to the beach to find customers. In seaside towns in the south of England, such as Hastings, beach photographers carried portable dark rooms on little handcarts, which they trundled over the beach itself. A number of the photographers who wheeled handcarts along the beach produced tintype portraits on a "while you wait" basis. The tintype process was particularly suitable for producing "instant portraits". Many of the beach photographer's customers were "day trippers" and so it was important that the photographic portrait could be developed on the spot.

The tintype portrait was ideal for beach photography, in that it was cheap, fast to produce and processed on a durable metal base, rather than a fragile glass plate. Tintype portraits were sold for as little as 6d each, being the cheapest format of photographic portrait available.

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