

Mail and the 1935 Quetta Earthquake

Purpose and Scope

This exhibit **focuses** on postal activities related to the city of Quetta, Baluchistan (modern day Pakistan) following the 31st May 1935 earthquake. It **documents** responses by the various postal authorities to the posting and receipt of mail following the earthquake.

The exhibit **scope** extends from the period preceding the earthquake to the re-introduction of Quetta cancellers. Its major focus is the first three weeks post earthquake. Specifically **excluded** are postal-related fund-raising activities such as the Silver Jubilee Fund labels and Rocket Mail.

Background and context

The Magnitude Moment (Richter scale equivalent) M_w 7.7 earthquake killed 30,000 to 45,000 people, mainly civilians.

The 12,000 Empire troops stationed in Quetta undertook rapid search, rescue and relief work in the city and surrounding areas.

Most mail seen was written from/to military personnel or families.

Fifty-six of the 60 regular post office staff were killed. Railway Mail Services (RMS) personnel initially handled mail post-earthquake.

A **post-free concession period** was introduced from 4th to 14th June 1935.

Challenges

Acquisition: Only 219 (including 15 incoming) Quetta covers are recorded with very few items in some subgroups.

Quality: Variable quality of postally-related material.

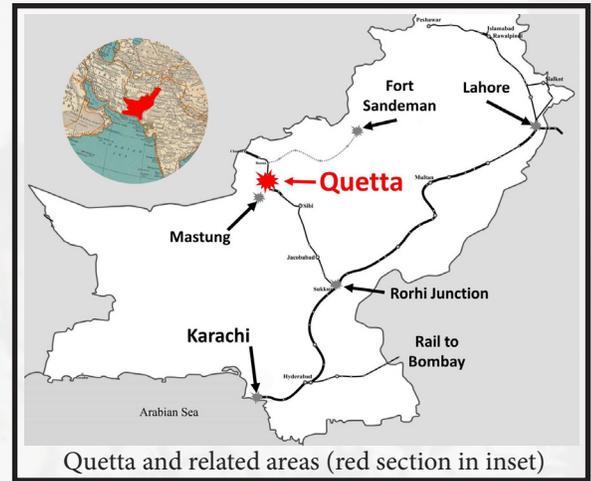


Exhibit Plan

Setting the scene

Pre-earthquake cancellers, the earthquake

RMS Cancellers & Handstamps

Mail sent from Quetta

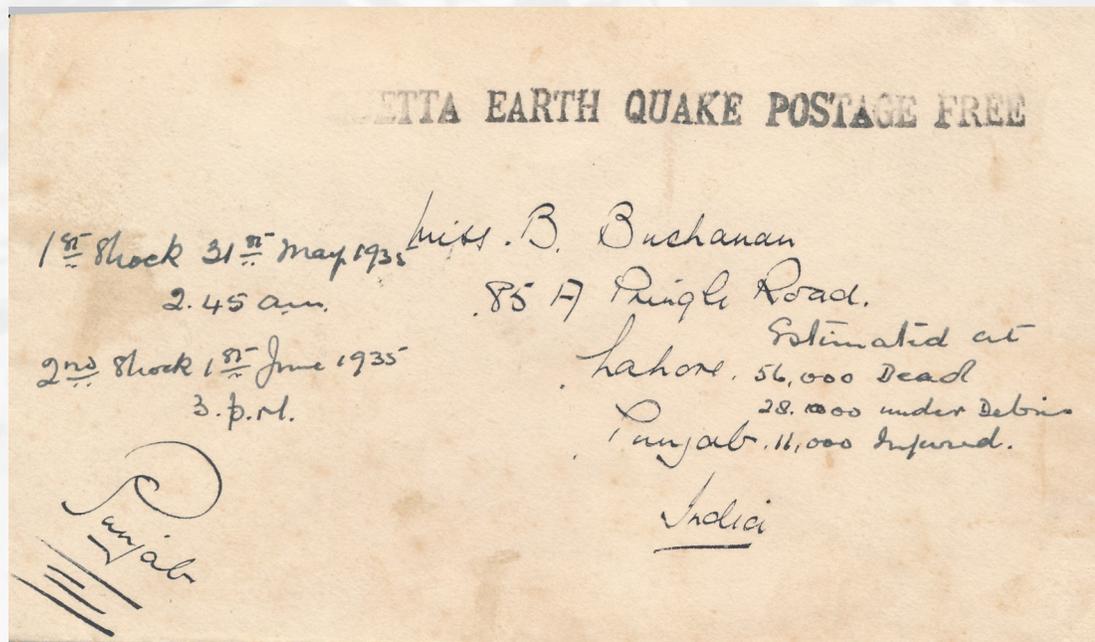
Early mail, transportation & destinations, administrative issues

Incoming and local mail

Delivered, undeliverable & redirected

Returning to "normal"

After the end of post-free concession period, Experimental Post Office, Quetta cancellers



Single line handstamp.
Mailed from Quetta
11th June 1935.

Handwritten notations with initial details of earthquake occurrences and resulting casualties

Notations

Text contains background/contextual philatelic information

+ Personal research

Highlighted item

Historical notes smaller text

Rare items (less than five recorded) highlighted thus

Philatelic Importance

This was the **first** Empire-wide post-free mailing concession following a civil disaster.

Postmarks in regular use pre-earthquake

Seven post offices were operational in Quetta before the earthquake. Each post office used a single type canceller except the General Post Office, which also used a rectangular box canceller. Examples are shown below. The numbers in brackets are the number of post offices using that type of canceller.

- 1. Rectangular Box Slogan with date (1)
- 2. Combined Date/ Hour stamp with obliterator arc (5)



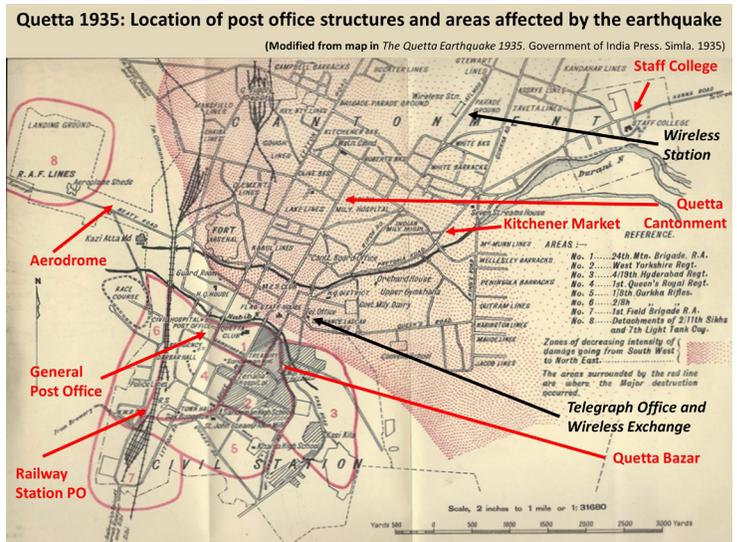
- 4. Double-circle Date/Hour stamp without obliterator arc (1)

- 3. Double-circle Date stamp without obliterator arc (2)

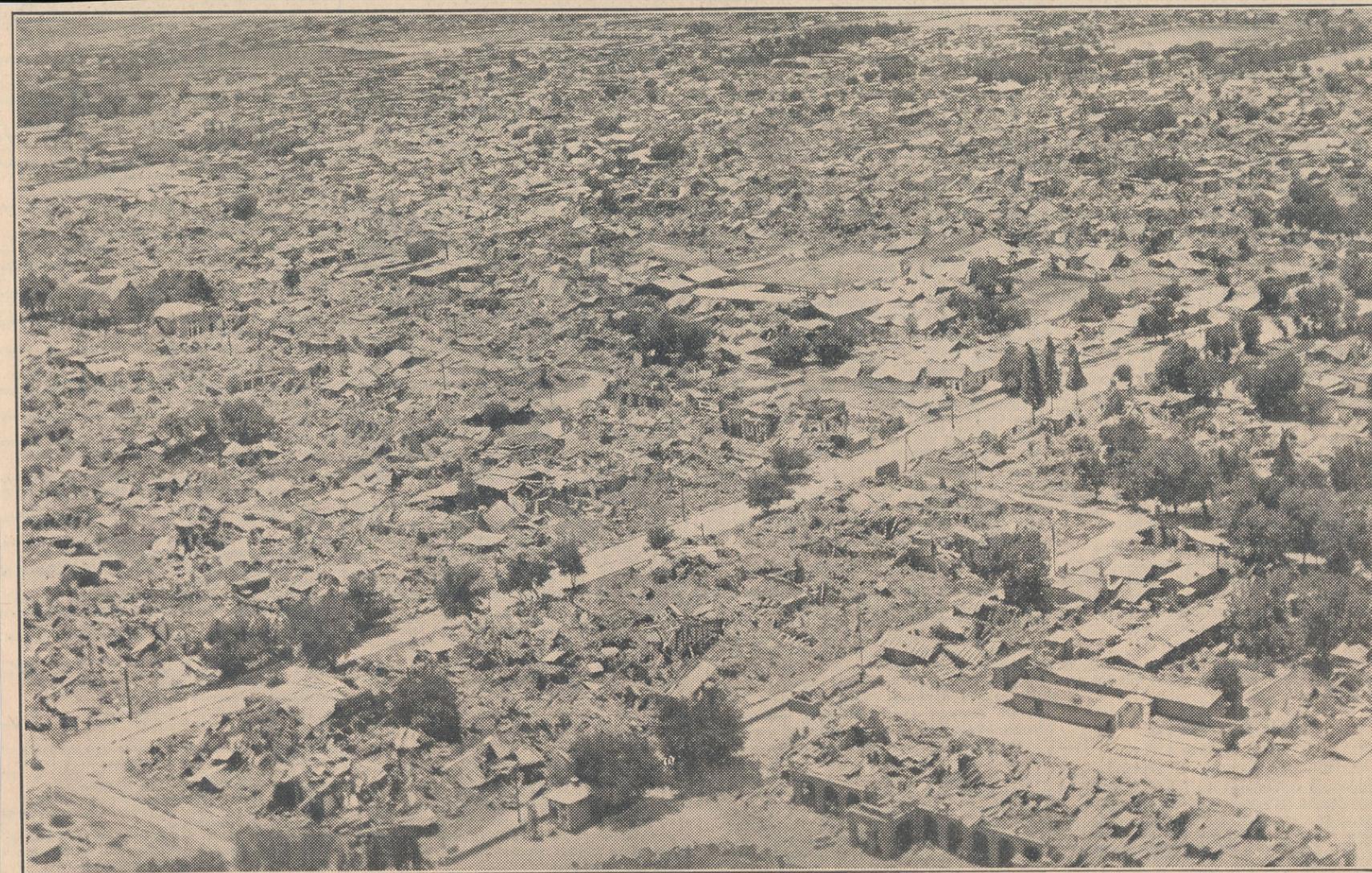


Quetta town plan showing
 a) Degree of destruction especially in the Civil Area (lower left part of plan) and
 b) Post office locations pre-earthquake. All suffered extensive damage except Staff College.

Historical note: Quetta, capital of the Baluchistan Agency, is located in an earthquake prone zone along the Chaman Fault near the Afghan border. In 1935 the population was estimated at 70,000 persons including 12,000 troops responsible for defending the North-West Frontier.



Facsimile. Modified from *The Quetta Earthquake 1935*. Government of India. Simla 1935.

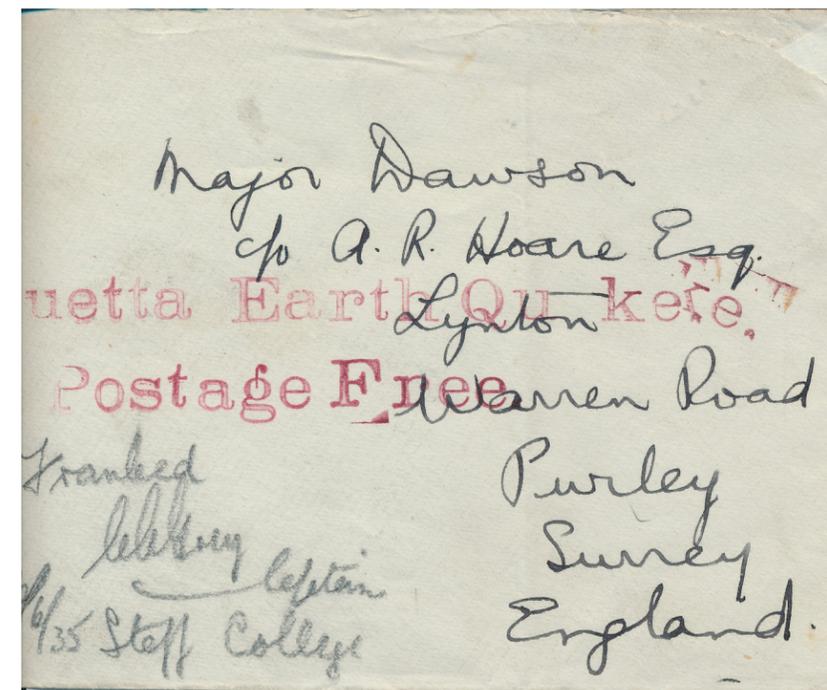
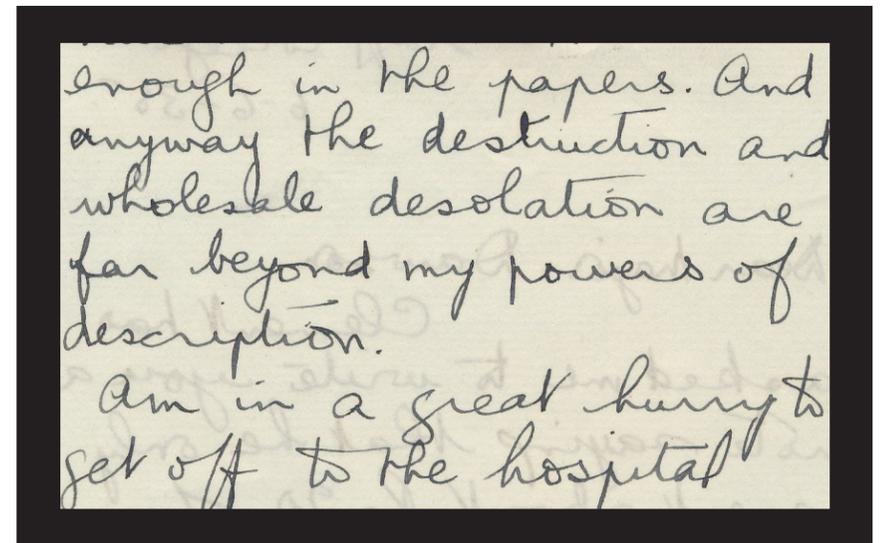


THE RUINS OF QUETTA.—A general view from the air of the ruins of Quetta after the earthquake. In a dispatch to *The Times* a Special Correspondent wrote: "Landmarks have gone as everything has gone. . . . There is nothing but a widespread mass of grey and tawny débris, tapering off into the dun landscape, beyond which in turn is a rim of forlorn and sad hills where no trees grow. It is to-day a place of utter desolation, made poignant with the misery of a suffering people."

The Times of London (12 June 1935 page 16).

31st May 1935

Part of a letter from Phyllis Grey, wife of Capt. Clement Grey to Major Dawson in Surrey, England. Dated 5th June 1935. Describes damage in Quetta.



Accompanying cover with red two-line postage-free handstamp (Group 2 cover). Sent by surface mail to England. Canceled Quetta 6th June.

Handstamp appears to have been applied by Capt. Grey at the Staff College military training facility post office.

Historical notes: The initial earthquake occurred at 3:03 am (not 2:45am as noted on the Title Page cover).

The majority of deaths occurred in the Civil Area of the city. This included local resident population housing. The General Post Office, main Telegraph Office and railway station were also located in this part of Quetta.

The Cantonment housed most of the military personnel and their families. It was less severely damaged.



Before and after original photos of Quetta City Hall, showing the destructive effects of the earthquake.

(Unknown photographer)

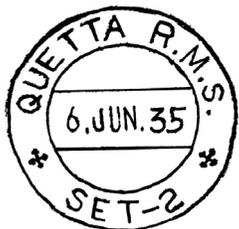


Fifty-six of the 60 regular post office personnel died in the earthquake. There was also severe damage to six of the post offices (The post office at Staff College was undamaged).

Postal services were taken over by Railway Mail Service (RMS) employees living in Quetta who had suffered minimal staff losses. They used their own "Quetta RMS" cancellers. Their original intended use was at the Railway Station Post Office.

‡ Two types of RMS cancellers were used in the post-earthquake period. *Most of the postmark cancels are of poor quality.*

RMS postmarks are a key marker for sequencing outgoing mail and handstamp usage.



Quetta RMS Double-circle Date Stamp canceller (Type Crd postmark/cancel): These have a movable date slug for dispatch dates. They are only seen on Group 1 and Group 2 covers.

Issued in 1914 to all Railway Mail Offices without any volume restrictions on daily posted items.

‡ Crd postmark/cancel usage is only noted between 4th and 7th June 1935.



‡ All Dispatch Times and Set (Shift) Numbers seen were 11:15pm and Set-2 respectively.

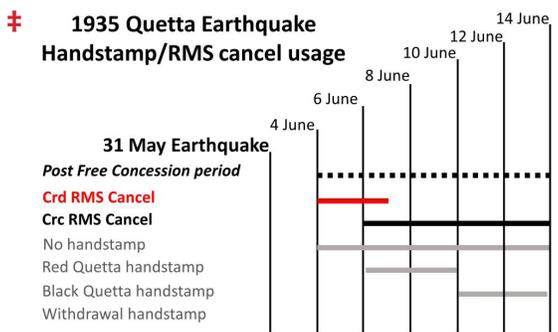
Quetta RMS Combined Date/Hour Stamp and Obliterator canceller (Type Crc postmark/cancel):

These have movable date and hour slugs for dispatch dates and time.

Introduced in 1910 for Railway Mail Offices handling more than 150 posted items daily.

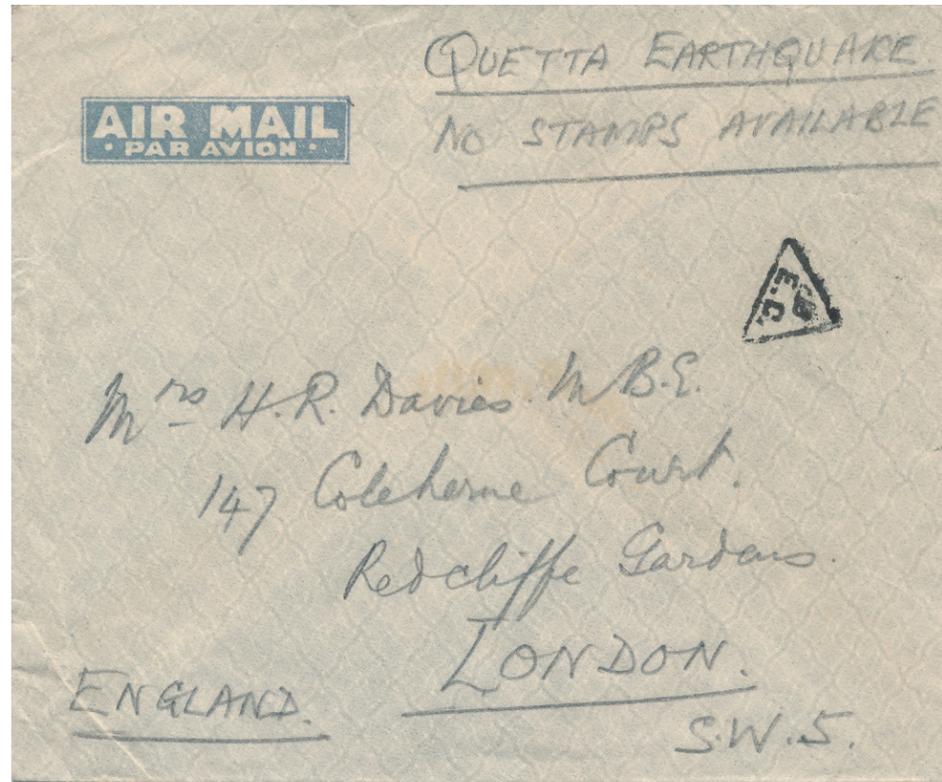
‡ Crc postmarks/cancels only seen used from 6th June 1935.

Graphic representation showing dates of usage of the two types of RMS cancellers in the immediate post-earthquake period. →



No Handstamp - Group 1 covers

(Used between 4th and 14th June)



Quetta earthquake covers are classified into four groups, based on handstamps applied to the cover. They were only applied to unregistered items.
 † The RMS postmarks are key to identifying the date of introduction and sequencing of the various handstamps.

Group 1 covers (31 % of all recorded surviving covers) do not have any frankings. Key indicators highly suggestive of these covers are:

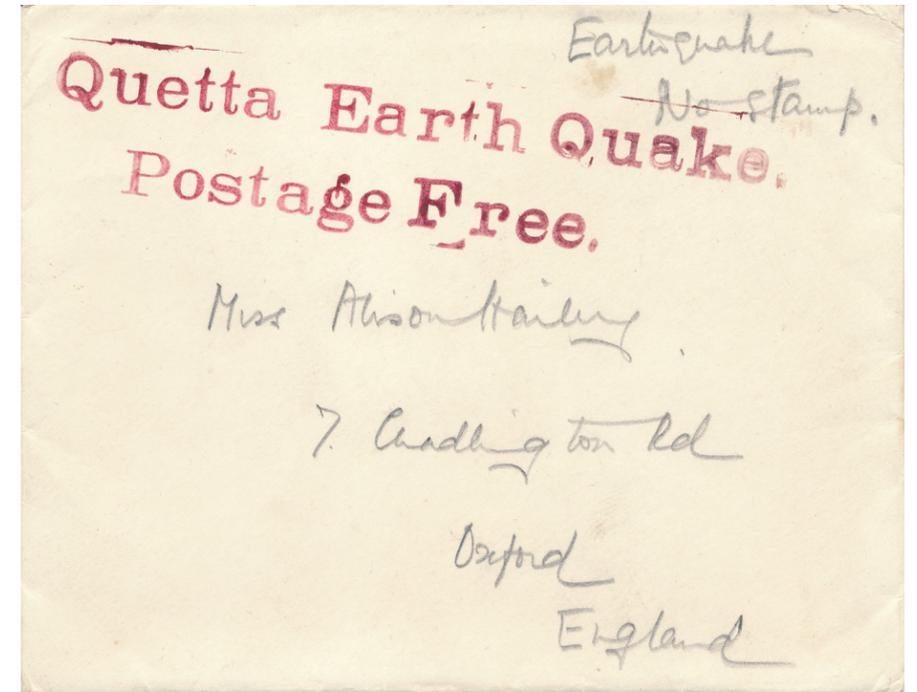
- Manuscript writing: "Quetta Earthquake / no stamps available".
- The presence of small triangular "Inspector's Marks" on covers sent to Great Britain.

Two-line Red handstamp "Quetta Earth Quake. / Postage Free." (98 x 64 mm). To date, 12 Group 2 covers (6% of total covers) have been recorded.

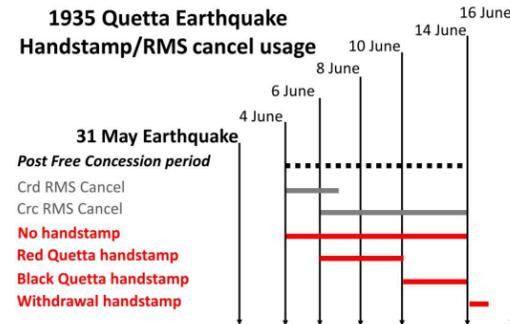
Historical Note: Limited evidence suggests this handstamp may have only been used at State College. In 1935 this was the second largest military training college in the British Empire.

Red Handstamp - Group 2 covers

(Used between 6th and 10th June)



† Dates of usage of the four cover groups.



Black Handstamp - Group 3 covers

(Used between 10th and 14th June)



Single line Black handstamp with words "Quetta Earth Quake Postage Free" (93 x 4 mm).
Commonest group. (61% of recorded covers).

Historical notes:

The handstamps are thought to have been made from rubber lettered John Bull Printing Stamp Kits. Newspaper reports ("Madras Mail" 9th June) suggest the reason for introducing the post free concession was the lack of access to readily available money. The only documentation of the end of the post-free concession period is the three-line Red handstamps on Group 4 covers.



Three-line Red handstamp "Quetta Earth Quake / Free Postage Concession / Withdrawn" (120 x 30 mm). All of the covers were taxed and sent by sea from India to Britain.

One of four covers recorded

Three-line Red Handstamp Group 4 covers

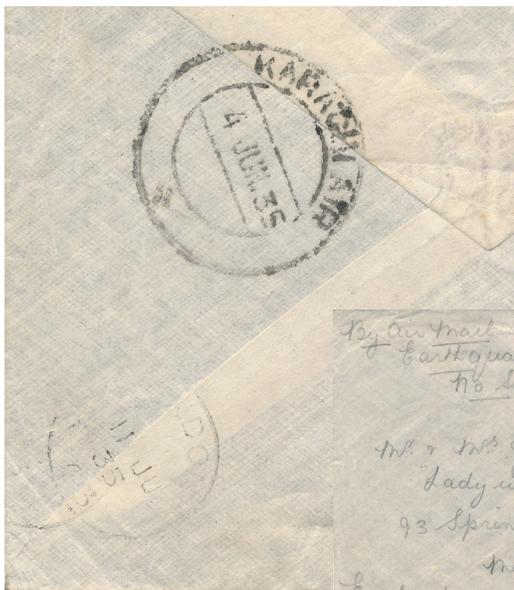
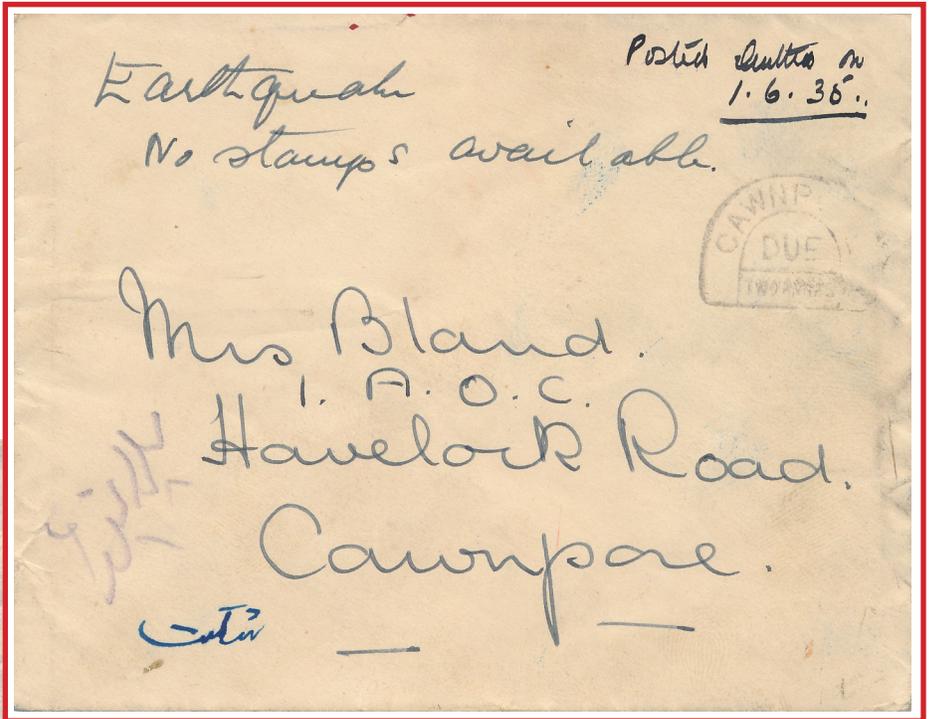
(Only seen on covers dated 15th June)



The India Post Office Department declared an Empire-wide **post-free concession period** on all unregistered mail sent from Quetta and surroundings **beginning 4th June 1935**. On the same day, formal mail services were restored in the city. Some mail has been identified as being posted prior to 4th June.

A: "Unofficial" Early Mail (Pre 4th June)

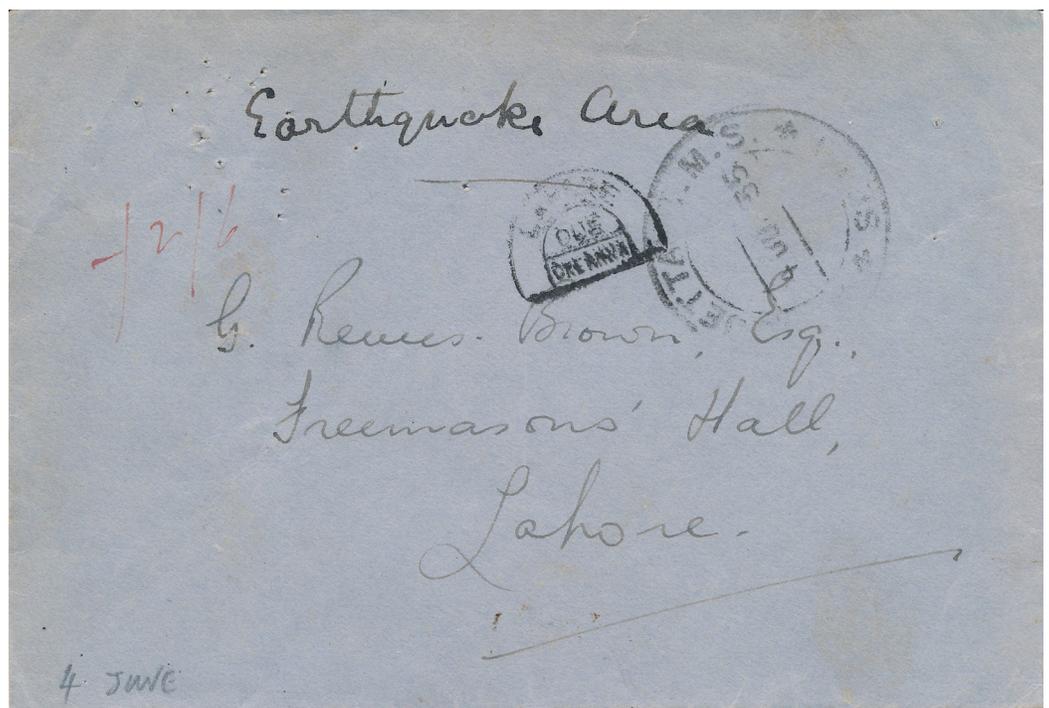
Cover with a Cawnpore receiving cancel of 4th June. Mailed from Quetta on 1st June (Train travel time to Cawnpore 72 hours). Two anna Postage Due handstamp on front cover and unpaid handstamp on back. It is presumed the fee was waived because of notification of the post-free concession. This item was probably handed directly to someone on a departing train from Quetta.



← A small number of covers were **flown out of Quetta on relief air flights**. Karachi airmail receiving cancel of 4th June on back cover. Departed Karachi 5th June on flight IW344. Arrived Croydon 10th June. London receiving cancel 11th June.

**B: 4th June 1935
First Day of Official
Outgoing Mail**

→ First day of concession free post.
Mailed Quetta 4th June.
Lahore one anna Postage Due handstamp on front cover. Back cover has Lahore Unpaid cancel of 6th June indicating postage due fee waived.
Historical note: Train travel time Quetta to Lahore 25 hours.



Mail Destinations and Routings from Quetta

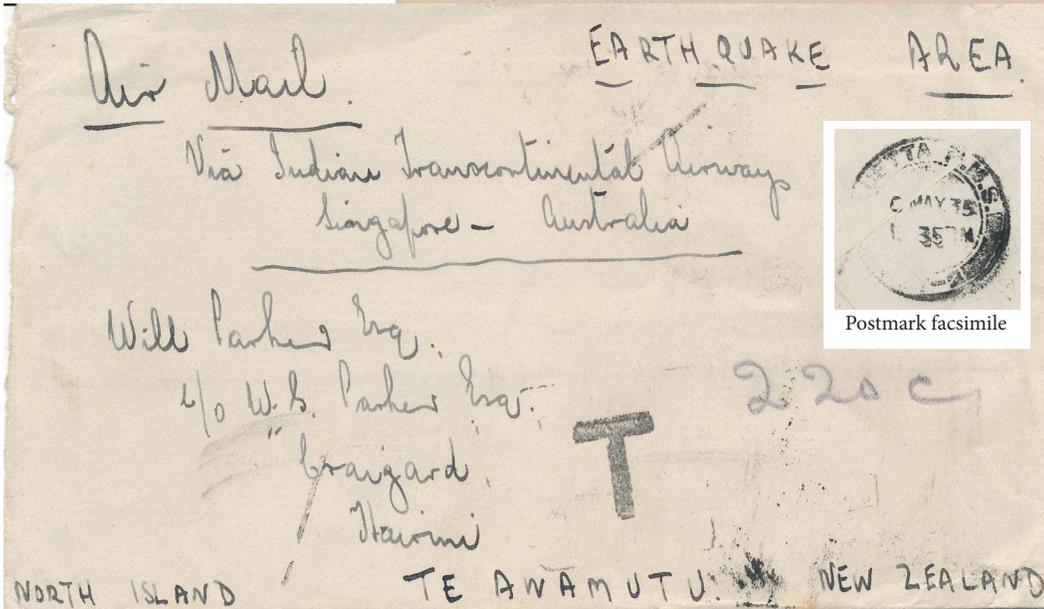
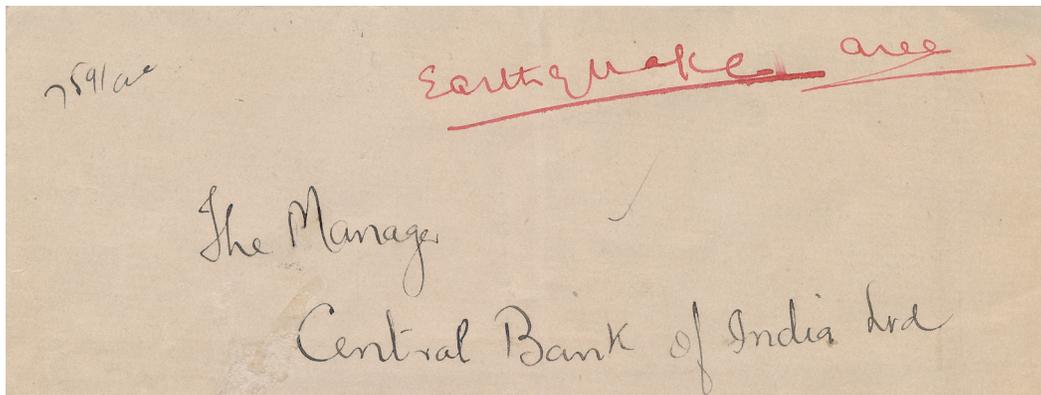
	India	Great Britain	Elsewhere
- Rail	73		1 (China)
- Air	1	81	8
- Sea		36	4
Total	74	117	13

Mail leaving Quetta after 4th June was sent by rail to all parts of India, including Karachi and Bombay. Airmail items were despatched from Karachi on *Imperial Airways* flights. Mail by sea was carried on *Peninsula & Orient* (P&O) vessels departing from Bombay.

Mail to India: →

Mailed to Bombay (train travel time from Quetta 36 hours).

Back of cover has Bombay receiving cancel of 8th June.



← Airmail overseas:

Postmarked Quetta 30th May 1935 - Clerical date error (see facsimile) suggesting early posting to New Zealand. Undated Sydney transit postmark.

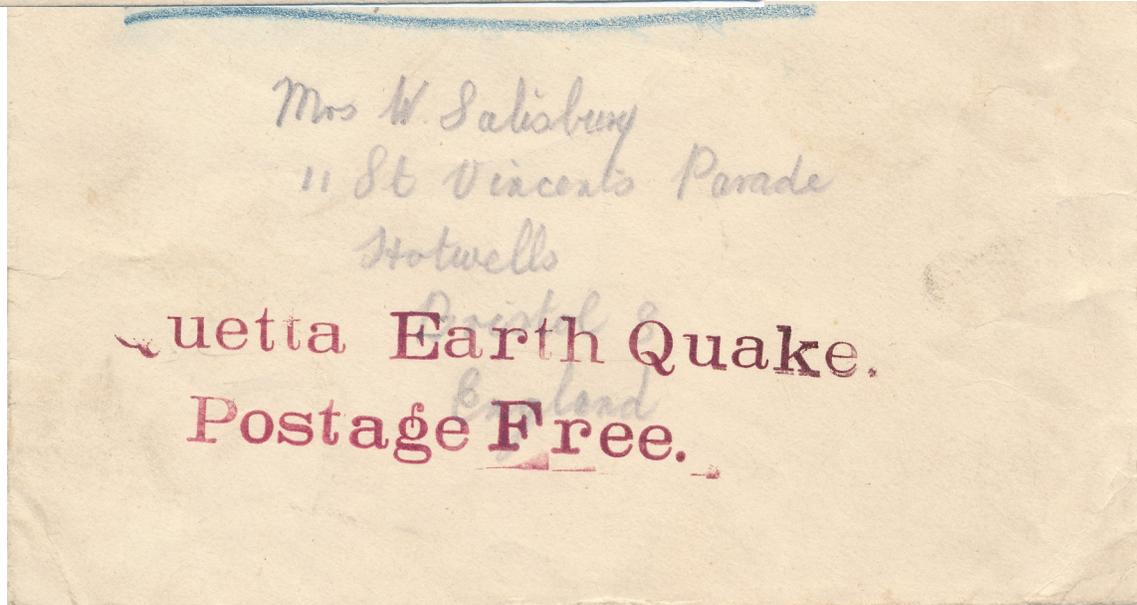
Only recorded cover to New Zealand

↑ Historical note:

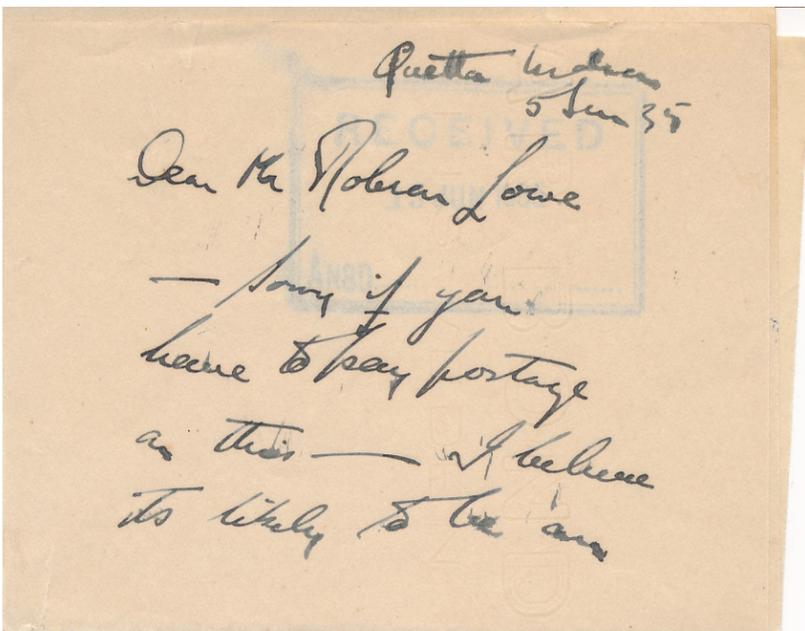
The Indian postal authorities complied with all requests for airmail services during the concession period.

→ Overseas mail by sea:

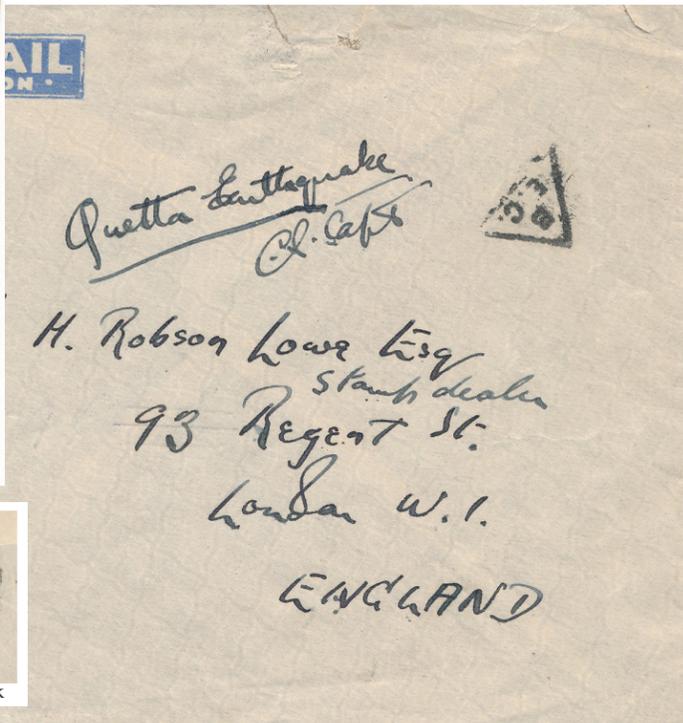
Red handstamp (two line Group 2 cover). Mailed Quetta 7th June. Left Bombay on 15th June via SS *Ranpura* for Great Britain. No receiving cancel.



In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, the RMS staff became responsible for the daily activities of the Quetta postal services. Despite successfully handling the majority of the items (see examples in the exhibit), a number of clerical errors did occur. Examples are provided below.



Clerical date error: Cover mailed to a well known philatelist. Quetta postmark on back (see facsimile below left) dated 6th May 1935. However, enclosed handwritten note (left) dated 5th June and Company receiving mark dated 15th June.

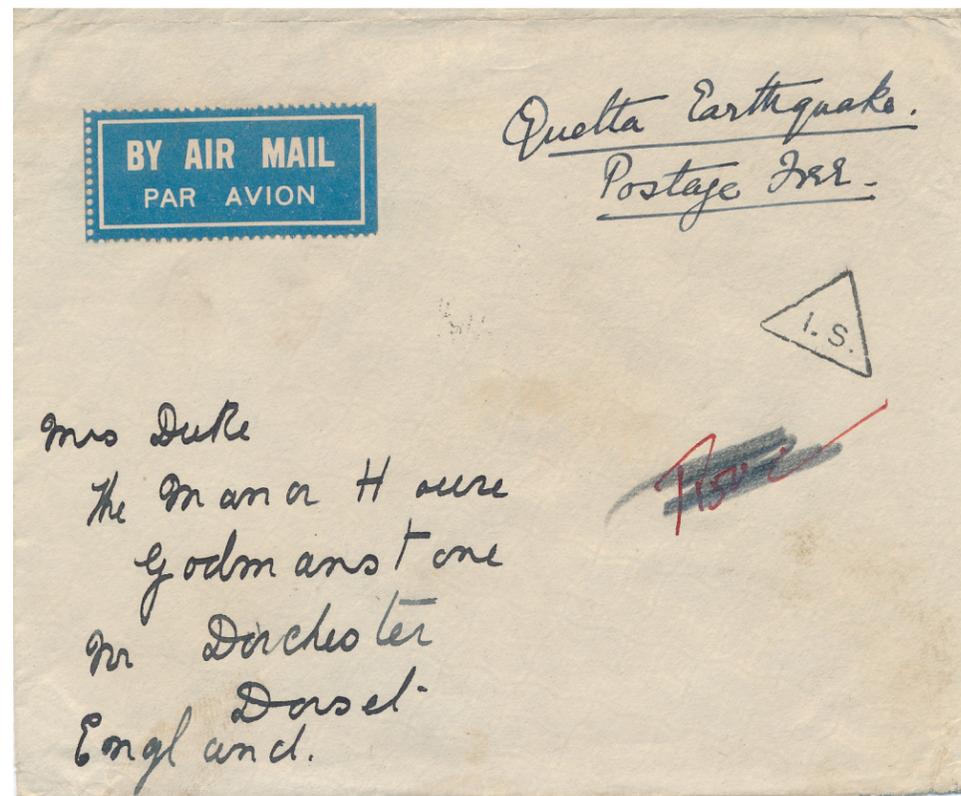


Thought to be one of earliest covers to receive the Quetta Type Crc (combined date-hour) postmark.

← Company receiving mark



Postage Due: Many envelopes mailed to Great Britain have a triangular handstamp present on the front cover with the letters "I.S." (Inland Section Chief Office – London) within the triangle (see top cover). These so-called **Inspectors' Marks** were used by postal supervisors to indicate that the item had been examined to ascertain whether it conformed to the regulations governing mail carried at less than the normal rate.



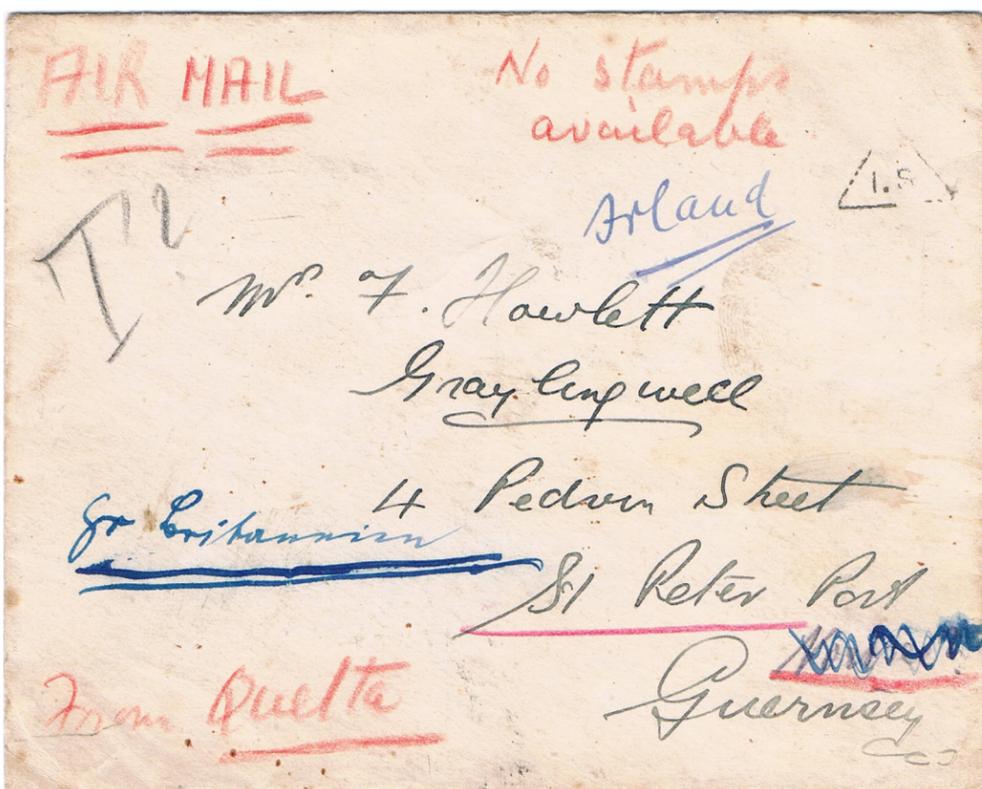
Triangular "Inspectors' Marks" handstamp below manuscript writing.

←
Red manuscript T150 tax notation cancelled.



Mailed Quetta 8th June. Left Karachi 12th June on IW345 arriving London 17th June. Delivery to Godmanstone 18th June.

Historical Note: From mid-1930, the Inland Section in London was instructed to charge postage due **only** on those items identified for taxation in India.

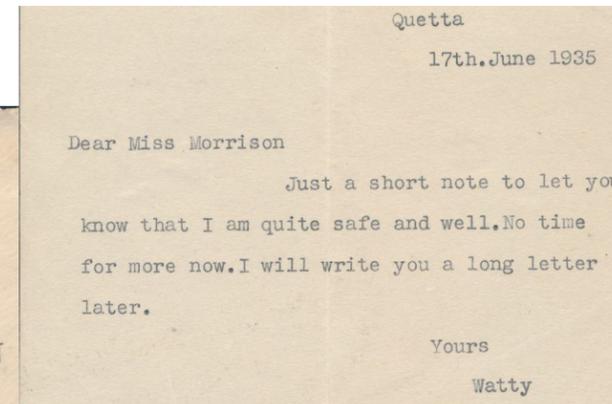
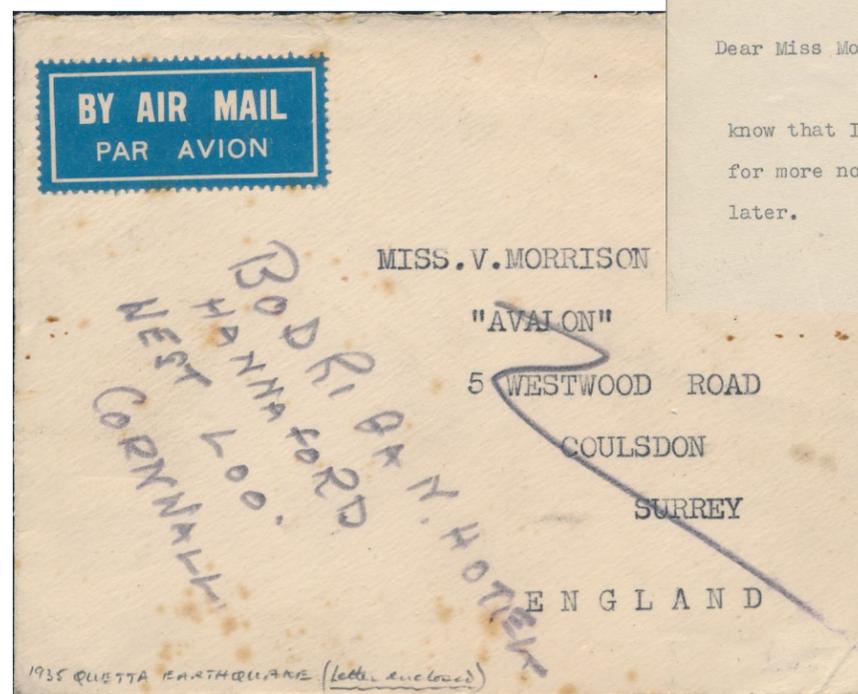


Misdirected mail: Addressed to Saint Peter Port, Guernsey. Mailed on 5th June. Sent in error to St Peter-Ording, North Friesland, Schleswig-Holstein (see facsimile below). Redirected to correct address on 21st June.

The RMS clerk was probably not familiar with handling overseas mail and may have placed the item into the wrong mail bag.



Facsimile, part back cover. Note a) Quetta datestamp, b) North Friesland handstamp and c) handwritten dates.



Letter written 17th June, mailed 18th June, three days after postage-free concession withdrawn (15th June). No "Inspector's Marks" seen as the cover was **not taxed** in India.

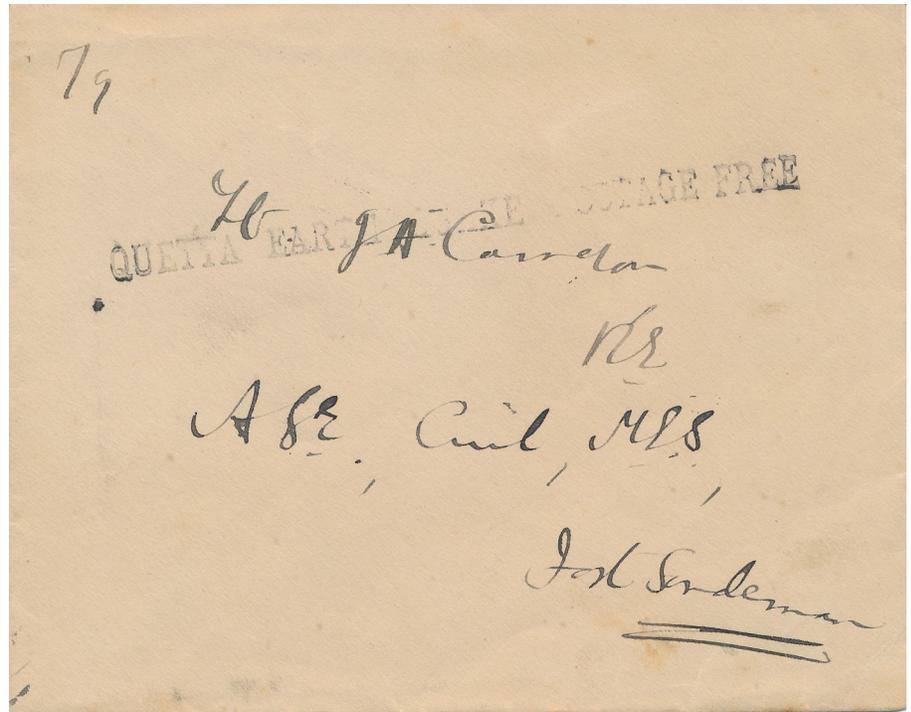
Departed Bombay 22nd June on SS Comorin. Coulsdon arrival cancel of 8th July. Redirected to Cornwall.

Mail to Fort Sandeman

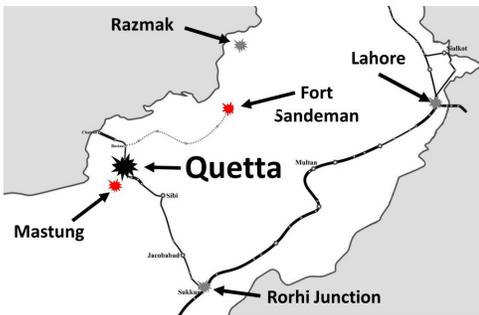
One of three covers recorded mailed to Fort Sandeman



Mailed Quetta 13th June. Fort Sandeman receiving postmark of 16th June. Addressed to Lt. JA Cameron, Assistant Garrison Engineer.



Historical Note: Fort Sandeman (named after Sir Robert Sandeman, a colonial officer) is some 200 miles from Quetta via a narrow guage railway line. The journey took just under 28 hours. The **documentation of mail being received** in Fort Sandeman from Quetta indicates the railway line was still intact following the earthquake.



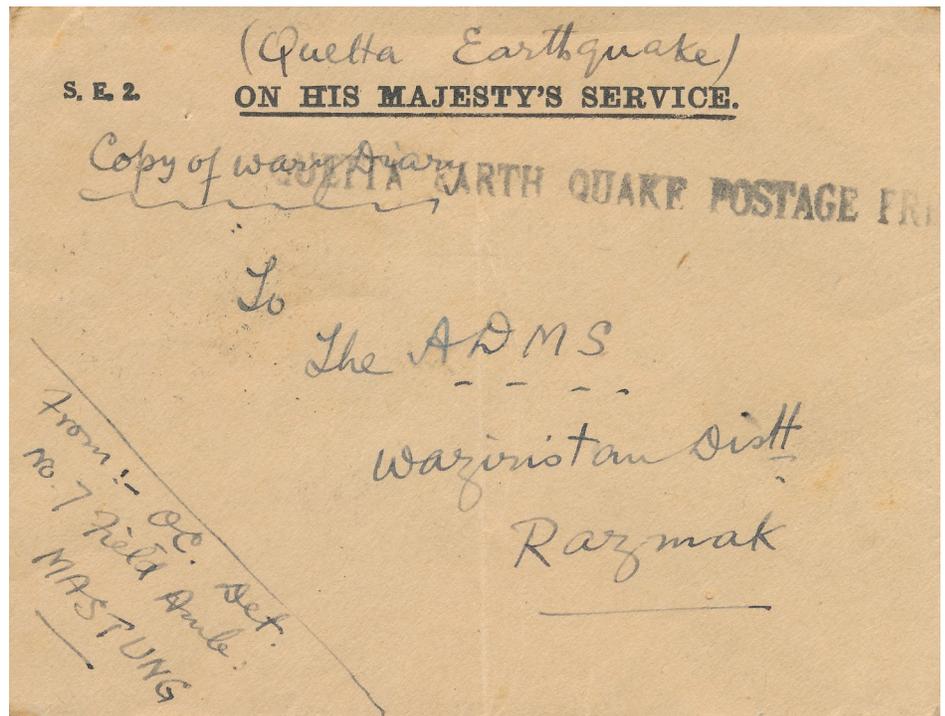
Mail from Mastung



Group 3 type cover sent from Officer Commanding 7th Field Ambulance at Mastung to the unit's headquarters in Razmak, North Waziristan.

Mailed Mastung 10th June. Razmak receiving postmark of 13th June. Probable routing via train to Bannu, then by lorry to Razmak.

Only recorded cover mailed from Mastung



Historical Note: The town of Mastung, 30 miles from Quetta, also suffered heavy casualties. A relief hospital was established at Mastung for injured patients from Quetta and surroundings who wished to remain in the Quetta area. This area was **part of the post-free concession zone.**

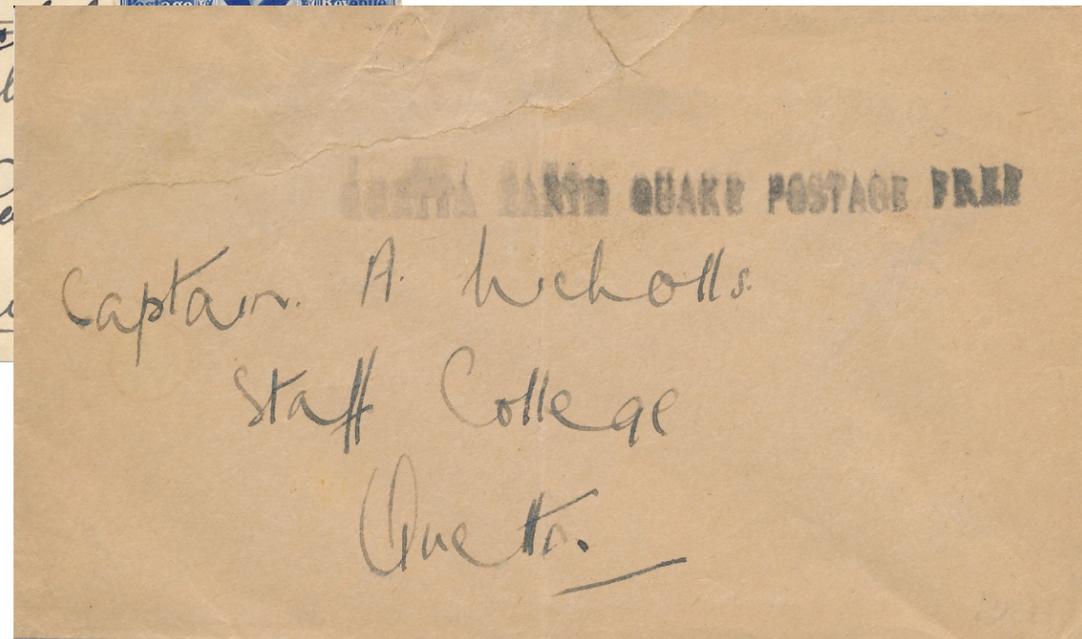
Although mail was brought into Quetta daily, no attempt was made to sort or deliver postal items until 5th June. Initially only registered mail was delivered. Regular mail deliveries began soon thereafter. Mail was either delivered, found to be undeliverable or redirected.



Delivered mail

← **Mailed Dover 3rd June.** Departed London Flight IE346 4th June. Arrived Karachi 9th June. Airmail postage 6d. Quetta arrival date probably 10th or 11th June.

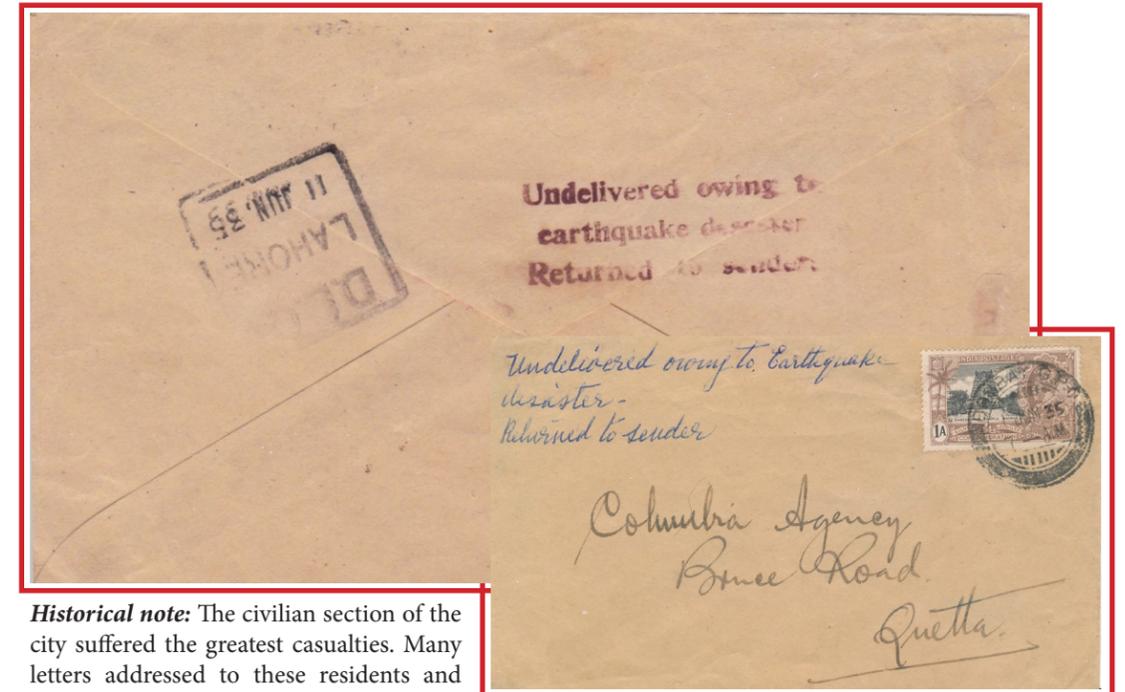
↓ **Mailed locally in Quetta 13th June to Staff College.**



↑ **Historical note:** The 1st Battalion was stationed at Quetta between 1934 and 1936. At the time of the earthquake the battalion was on a night march. Two members of the regiment received the Empire Gallantry Medal (George Cross) for their rescue efforts following the earthquake.

Undeliverable mail

One of four covers recorded with handstamp



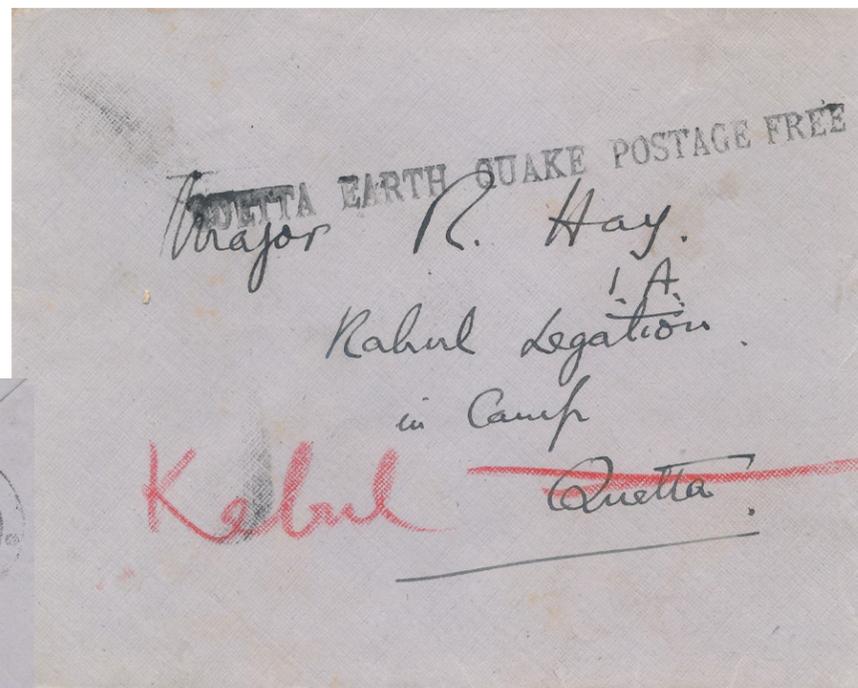
Historical note: The civilian section of the city suffered the greatest casualties. Many letters addressed to these residents and businesses were undeliverable.

Mailed Bombay 1 June. **Undeliverable** and forwarded to the Dead Letter Office in Lahore (closest of 12 Dead Letter Offices in India). Note three-line purplish handstamp on back cover and misspelt word "desaster".

Undelivered owing to earthquake disaster Returned to sender
"Undeliverable owing to / earthquake desaster / Returned to sender"

Re-directed mail

Mailed Bannu, Wazirisstan, 3rd June. **Initial "receiving" Quetta RMS cancel** (Crc type) dated 8th June. Redirected to Kabul (Quetta RMS cancel of 10th June). Peshawar G.P.O. transit cancel of 12th June. Single line Black Handstamp probably applied when redirected.



→ Mailed locally in Quetta 14th June. Redirected 18th June to Ahmednagar (receiving cancel 22nd June with delivery cancel of 23rd June). Group 3 single line black handstamp presumed to have been applied on 14th June.

Front cover: Horseshoe shaped Ahmednagar Tax Handstamp. Cancelled with blue "X" and red manuscript note "cancelled" dated 22nd June.
Back cover: Octagonal unpaid Ahmednagar handstamp 22nd June crossed through with red "X" and signed.

As the item was initially mailed during the *Post-Free Concession Period*, it was permitted to be forwarded postage free.



Postage paid first day post concession

Postage free concession withdrawn on 15th June. Regular postal rates resumed.



Only recorded cover with stamps mailed on 15th June

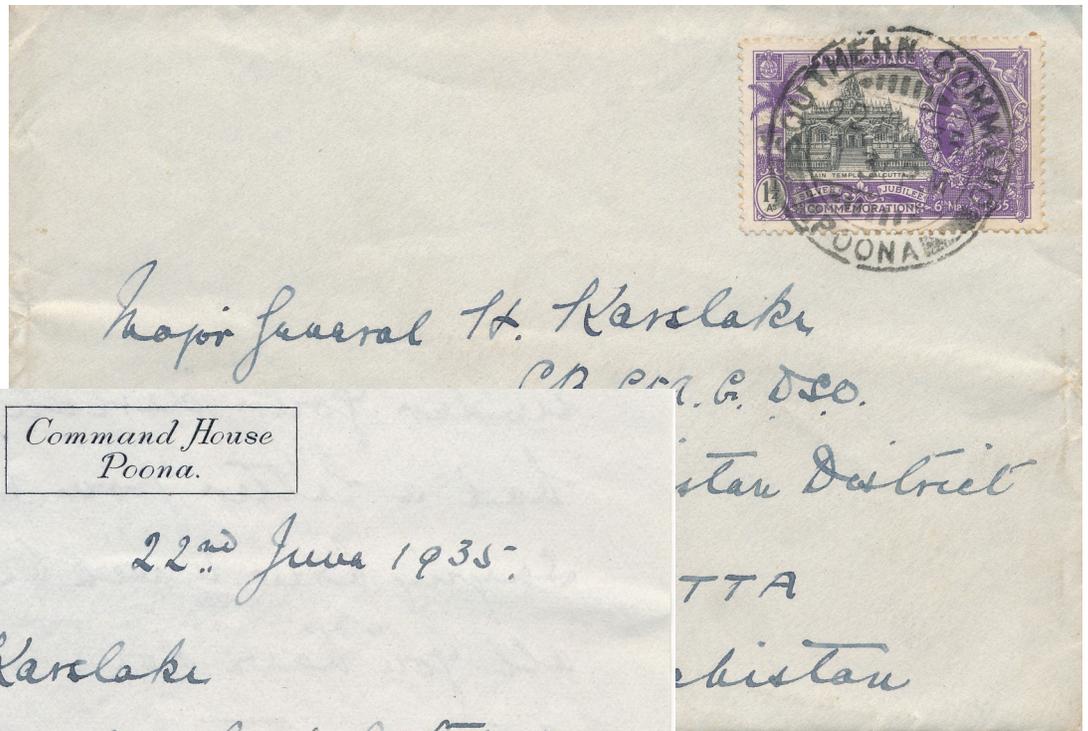


Mailed from Quetta (Crc cancel) 15th June 1935 (see date on front cover facsimile above) paying the correct 7½ anna airmail rate from **India to Great Britain**. Flight IW348 - departed Karachi 17th June, arrived Croydon, 21st June.

Recognition of search and rescue activities

Historical Note:

Congratulatory letter from Sir Ivo Vesey, incoming Commander-in-Chief, Western Command, to General Karlake on his leadership and organisational skills. These had resulted in the rapid deployment of troops in search and rescue activities, and an efficient evacuation process.



Command House
Poona.

Mailed from Southern Command Headquarters, Poona 22nd June 1935 paying inland rate of 1¼ anna. No Quetta receiving cancel.

Experimental Post Office



Experimental Post Offices (EPO) were used to either trial the viability of a new post office or as a replacement cancellation. All EPOs were allocated an alphanumeric character beginning with the Postal Circle initial followed by a number. Quetta was allocated EPO replacement canceller **K-36** (the 'K' signifies the Sind/Karachi Circle). It was instituted sometime after 15th June 1935. Recorded usage between 23rd July to 29th October 1935. Actual duration unknown.

←
Early use of EPO K-36: Mailed from Quetta 30th July 1935, to Leeds. Departed Karachi 4th August (Flight IW362). Arrived Croydon 9th August. No receiving cancel. The correct airmail rate of 7½ annas applied.

Resumption of pre-earthquake postmarks

Mailed Quetta 17th March 1936. Flown IE427 19th March from Karachi. Arrival cancel 27th March 1936 (Melbourne).

Postage: Probable weight between ½-1 ounce (17 annas) air rate plus surface rate (2½a) = 19a 6p. Underpaid 1 anna.

One of earliest recorded covers post-earthquake with a Quetta box slogan cancel.



Historical Notes:

Between late March and May 1936, local inhabitants were permitted to move from the Race Course tents into temporary housing. Resumption of usage of regular pre-earthquake postmarks and cancellers is thought to have occurred at this time.

In September 1935, only the Main General Post Office was listed as being operational. By June 1936, six of the seven pre-earthquake post offices were back in operation.