Admiralty Mediterranean Steam Packets, 1830 to 1857, 2nd Edition, by Colin Tabeart, FSPH, APR.
Electronic version on CD only at £16 including postage worldwide by PayPal to colintabeart@btinternet.com

HMS *Firefly* at Malta c 1860

Some of you will be familiar with the first edition, and will doubtless expect something similar – well, yes and no: the original work is still there, largely unchanged. The original hard-bound edition being long out of print Colin has reformatted it into A4 page size so that it can be printed out easily if required, as it is now available in WORD and Adobe PDF format (both on the same CD). A few minor corrections have been made to the original text. To the original unpublished research by James Smart, consisting mainly of detailed sailings data, Colin has added his own research at the Post Office Archives, a trawl through contemporary newspapers, notably the *Hampshire Telegraph & Sussex Chronicle*, which has a great deal of local information from Portsmouth and Southampton, and a number of visits to the Public Record Office to confirm details gleaned from other sources. The author has also incorporated some of the work of previous researchers, and he mentions Reg Kirk in particular.

So, in detail, what will you be receiving in exchange for your hard-earned cash? The book consists of seven chapters, 206 pages, a Bibliography, and two Indexes, one general, and one by ship name. It also contains a reasonable number of illustrations of items of relevant postal history, all described and explained in detail. Each chapter describes a geographical part of the service, and contains tabulations of all the known voyages (two for each year and each route – outbound, and homeward-bound), naming the vessel, dates, and ports. These tabulations are all annotated with commentary about notable events of each voyage, particularly where they relate to the mails, and there is no shortage of those: most voyages seem to attract at least one such note. Colin has included several verbatim extracts from ships' logs which mention the mails.

Chapter 1 describes the initiation and development of the service: England-Malta-Corfu, 1830-1834. Chapter 2 covers the extension of the service to Alexandria, 1835-1856. This, you might think, would be simple enough. That was not the case, and the service evolved over time. Colin has written a summary at the beginning of the chapter, demonstrating the development of the service, and this greatly assists readers in following the subsequent yearly sailings tables. The author also incorporates the partial 'privatisation' of the route when PSNC (the pre-curser to P&O) were contracted to run the England-Gibraltar leg of the service from September 1837, and their subsequent taking over of the route all the way to Alexandria in 1840. This wasn't quite as simple as that sounds, but the complexity is quite clearly dealt with in the tables, and there is no excuse for not being able to work out what vessel(s) handled whatever item of postal history you might be researching. Chapter 3 describes the service from Malta to Corfu, Greece (Zante, Patras), and Cephalonia (from 1836), from 1830 to 1858. Chapter 4 covers the Malta-Marseilles service, 1837-1854, and its extension to Alexandria from June 1848. The change to a P&O contract in 1853 is covered, but the RN packet vessels were still employed, conveying urgent business of state, as relations between Russia and Turkey deteriorated in the run up to the Crimean War. Chapter 5 describes the 'branch' service from Alexandria to Beyrout, 1836-1839: how (and why) it came into being, and the (imperial) desire to find a faster route by which mails to and from India could be transmitted. Chapter 6 covers miscellaneous minor routes. These were not part of a formal mail system, but appear to have been run as required by the packet vessels running errands for either Flag Officer Gibraltar, or the C-in-C Mediterranean Fleet at Malta. Colin tabulates all discovered voyages from Gibraltar-Morocco, 1844-1845, Gibraltar-Spain (various ports), 1841-1844, and Malta-Tripoli-Tunis-Barcelona, 1842-1845, and 1847-1853. Chapter 7 describes the postage rates relevant to the service described here, 1830-1856. He's managed to disentangle the bewildering history of the postal charges both within the UK at this time, and the other charges – i.e. for packet conveyance, and the charges for transit via France (for the Marseilles connection). After noting the sources of his data/information he presents the data clearly and concisely (no fuss, no frills) in tabular form for ease of use. Chapter 7 is an awesome achievement in its own right.

In summary this book is a very impressive text, and from a postal history point of view, I can't think that it lacks anything: it's compellingly readable, informative, and entertaining. If you collect maritime mail to and from the east in the mid-19th century, this tome should answer all your questions: most highly recommended.

[Original review by Dr NM Colley. Published with permission of Colin Tabeart]

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