



INFORMATION SHEET NO 15

St Valentine's Day 14 February



It is not known for certain which of the two Saints Valentine who were martyred near Rome on the 14 February in about the year 270 is being honoured today as the Patron Saint of Lovers; but this special day of romantic celebration is connected with ancient customs which can be traced back to pagan times. One of the most important festivals celebrated by the Romans was the Lupercalia - a Spring festival involving fertility rites, and one of many brought to Britain by the Romans.

Centuries later local customs connected with St Valentine's Day varied in different parts of the country, for example, in Derbyshire, girls peeped through the keyholes of their house doors before opening them on St Valentine's Morn - and if a cock and a hen were seen in company this was an omen for the peeper to be married that year. In many other places, even as recently as Victorian times, it was the custom on St Valentine's Eve for young men to draw by lot the names of young women to be their Valentines for the coming year - or for life.

The earliest known Valentine is dated 1477. Held in the British Museum, it is in the form of a love letter from Margery Brews to John Paston, a member of the Norfolk family famous for their letters describing their everyday life in medieval England.

Until around 1760 it was the custom to give expensive presents to one's Valentine but, later, a love token or a prettily composed letter would be given instead. Before the postal reforms of 1840, when uniform penny postage was introduced, the high cost of postage prevented poorer lovers from sending these through the post and so it was more usual for them to be left outside the sweetheart's door. Valentines in a postally-used condition dating before 1840 are thus very uncommon.

Before the postal reforms of 1840 an unkind trick sometimes played upon someone against whom one bore a grudge was to send a rude or malicious Valentine. Postage was seldom pre-paid but collected from the addressee upon delivery and so the victims of unwelcome Valentines were doubly outraged by having to pay the postage on them. By the 1820s the Post Office was annually receiving complaints from people who although anxious to receive Valentines were, after seeing the contents, just as anxious to have their postage refunded. Sometimes, the Post Office relaxed its rules and if the Valentine had been sent in an envelope - causing it to be charged as a double letter on which double postage was raised - half the postage was refunded. At that time it was not uncommon for some postmasters and letter receivers to sell Valentines that had been refused by the addressees. By the mid-1830s, especially in London, the Post Office faced "a most extraordinary influx" of Valentines on or about St Valentine's Day, sometimes as many as 60,000, and a moderate sum was



allowed to the postmen "for refreshments etc to get through the extraordinary exertions of the 2 or 3 days ....." . It had long been the custom for Valentines to be sent anonymously and for many years it was a practice of obliging postmasters with youthful and romantic hearts to deliberately smudge, at a lover's request, the postmark of a Valentine to conceal the place of posting.

It was once the custom for married as well as single people to be drawn by lot as someone's Valentine, or special friend, for the coming year. By Pepys's time, the 1660s, this old custom had become a pleasant observance amongst friends in which presents or love-tokens such as mottoes and anagrams and word puzzles were given. Some early Valentines were in the form of puzzle-purses, skilfully folded love letters, and sometimes containing a reward, such as a ring, for unfolding and reading the love messages in the correct order. Others were in the form of the traditional Endless Knot of Love, with its several love messages twisting around every loop of the handdrawn design so that it took care and time to read. A recurring theme of Valentines of the Napoleonic Wars period was 'The Sailor's Farewell'.

The Golden Age of the Valentine began in the 1840s, following the introduction of uniform penny postage. This event, just three years after the young Queen Victoria's accession to the throne, changed the writing habits of the kingdom almost overnight, and occasions such as St Valentine's Day were celebrated as never before. From the 1840s Valentine makers produced some of their most beautiful work. The quarto sized Valentine continued to be the most used as it allowed more scope for the kind of ornamentation so dear to the Victorians. Less expensive Valentines printed as woodcuts on cheap papers, sometimes roughly splashed with colour, were also produced in great numbers since poorer lovers, perhaps for the first time, could now afford to send their Valentines through the post. Valentines were sometimes produced in pairs, or sets such as "The Marriage Market" by Rock & Co of London, part of which is included in the exhibition. Fourteen was a 'Valentine dozen'. The lover's greeting added in manuscript to the commercially produced Valentine was often compiled - and frequently miscopied - with the aid of a 'Valentine Writer' containing verses with sentiments such as the popular "My Love is fixed I cannot range, I like my Love too well to change".

Paper embossing had already reached a high standard of perfection in England by the 1790s. Among English embossers of note was Charles Whiting, one of the prize-winners in the 1839 Treasury Competition for the first postage stamp, and examples of whose work are among the treasures of the Phillips Collection in the National Postal Museum.

During the Golden Age of the Valentine there were a number of manufacturers in London producing embossed and lace paper work of very fine quality, many examples of which can be seen in the exhibition. Valentines bearing their imprint dating from before the 1850s were probably made entirely by them, but from the 1850s they sold their fancy paper to others, such as small shop keepers and stationers, to be assembled into Valentines. These later



Valentines can sometimes be recognised by the mixed decoration used in their assembly and, often, different kinds of paper and decorative 'scraps' of inferior quality were used. Examples that have survived show clearly that the 1850s-1860s were a period of transition in design. 'Assembled' Valentines were being produced in ever-increasing numbers, carrying decoration often very beautiful but sometimes excessive. Puzzle-purses were still in vogue and, as though perpetuating the age-old custom of making one's Valentine search for the message of Love, Loving words such as True, Good, Clever would be concealed in the design, perhaps beneath the petals of stuck-on flowers. A Valentine-maker of note was De La Rue & Co of London, well known from the 1830s for their playing cards and one of the first to manufacture envelopes. Later, they were also to become printers of postage stamps. Their Valentines of this early period are rare.

Printers and publishers were quick to take advantage of the new fashion in envelopes from the 1840s, and produced specially printed and decorated envelopes for occasions such as St Valentine's Day. These were often delicately printed, or embossed, and were sold matching the Valentine or separately in packets for general use. At first, envelopes were manufactured without gum and so, for St Valentine's Day, prettily designed wafers were available, to seal them. The envelope was not always saved and cherished with the Valentine and so examples of this period are quite rare.

An ancient custom decreed that the first young lady sighted by a man on February 14 became his Valentine for that year. As such, she could expect to receive a gift of a pair of gloves from him, to be worn on the following Easter Sunday. This custom was kept alive in Victorian times by Valentines in the shape of a pair of gloves bearing rhymes such as: "If that from Glove, you take the letter G, The Glove is Love and that I send to thee". Realistic bank-notes and cheques made out by the Bank of True Love had been published since 1847 but the authorities had to take steps to stop such jokes when faced with a Valentine in the shape of a £5 note looking too much like a real Bank of England note. The Post Office objected, too, in later years, when confronted with imitation Love Office telegrams looking too much like real Post Office telegrams.

In sharp contrast to the pretty, sentimental Valentines of the Golden Age were the rude and vulgar ones being produced in great numbers from the 1840s. Frequent targets of this traditionally British style of humour - reflected today in so-called comic seaside picture postcards - were Postmen and other workers in everyday occupations, and spinsters. By the end of the 19th century Valentines such as these, had virtually killed the age-old custom of sending Valentines. Towards the end of the 19th century manufacturers tried in vain to foster a revival of the custom. Unanimously, they agreed to maintain high standards both in quality and taste, and to discourage the sale of vulgar and distasteful cards - but it was too late, and the public generally failed to respond. During the Edwardian era about the only Valentines to be popularly used were those published as postcards, and with the coming of the First World War St Valentine's Day was almost forgotten.



During the late 1920s, however, the custom was revived commercially and soon the old idea of sending a pretty card to one's sweetheart or particular friend caught hold again. In 1936 the Post Office also entered into the spirit of things by issuing a special Greetings Telegram for use on St Valentine's Day only. Its first Valentine telegram was designed by Rex Whistler.

As early as the 18th century St Valentine's Day was as popularly celebrated in the United States as it was in Britain, having crossed the Atlantic with other old customs. The early American hand-made Valentine was, as in Britain, gradually replaced by the manufactured Valentine of the 1840s. American Valentines produced in the 1840s. American Valentines produced in the 1840s were mainly lithographed and hand-coloured. Others were woodcuts, or hand-made on decorated paper imported from England. Valentines elaborately and tastefully assembled from coloured scraps and novelties were not then being produced in America, and it was left to the enterprise of Esther Howland, the young daughter of a stationer who imported Valentines from Europe, to introduce the manufacture of this kind of Valentine to the United States. Early in 1848 Esther declared that she could make even prettier Valentines than those of Europe. Her small manufactory, staffed by her young girl friends, quickly prospered, and in time her New England Valentine Co monopolised the business in the US.

NOTE: The source for this brief look at the history of St Valentine's Day and valentines was the book by the postal historian, Frank Staff, entitled "The Valentine and its origins" (Lutterworth Press 1969).

Post Office Archives

December 1986