

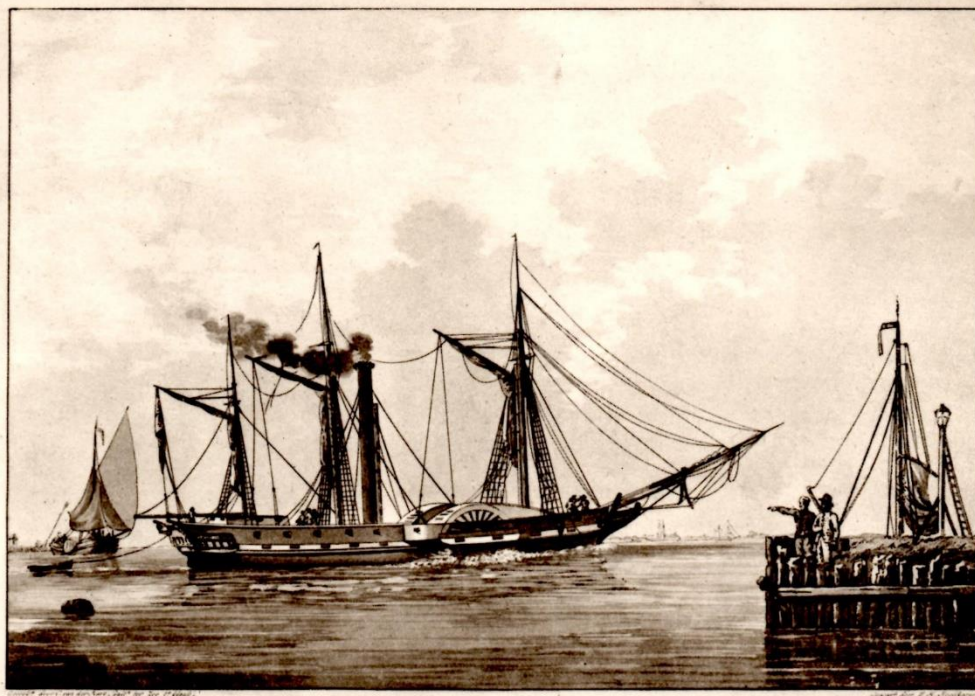
Faster Caribbean Mail By Steamship

by Dr David Watson

In the early 19th Century mail from the West Indies took about a month or even longer to travel the four thousand miles to Europe. Dependant on the vagaries of wind and war, mail by sailing ship provided a very slow and unpredictable service.

The advent of steamships offered a considerable opportunity to speed up the mail. The first to exploit this were the Dutch who sent the paddle steamer 'Curacao' to the Dutch West Indies in 1827 (Figure 1). Her return journey took 25 days. British Admiralty packets - small 6 gun brigs - carrying mail to the UK just couldn't compete. Figure 2 shows mail from the quickest sailing ship journey of the time that I have recorded (29 days transit time).

From 1830 steam started to replace sail enabling a more regular & predictable service.



Z. M. STOOMSCHIP CURAÇAO.

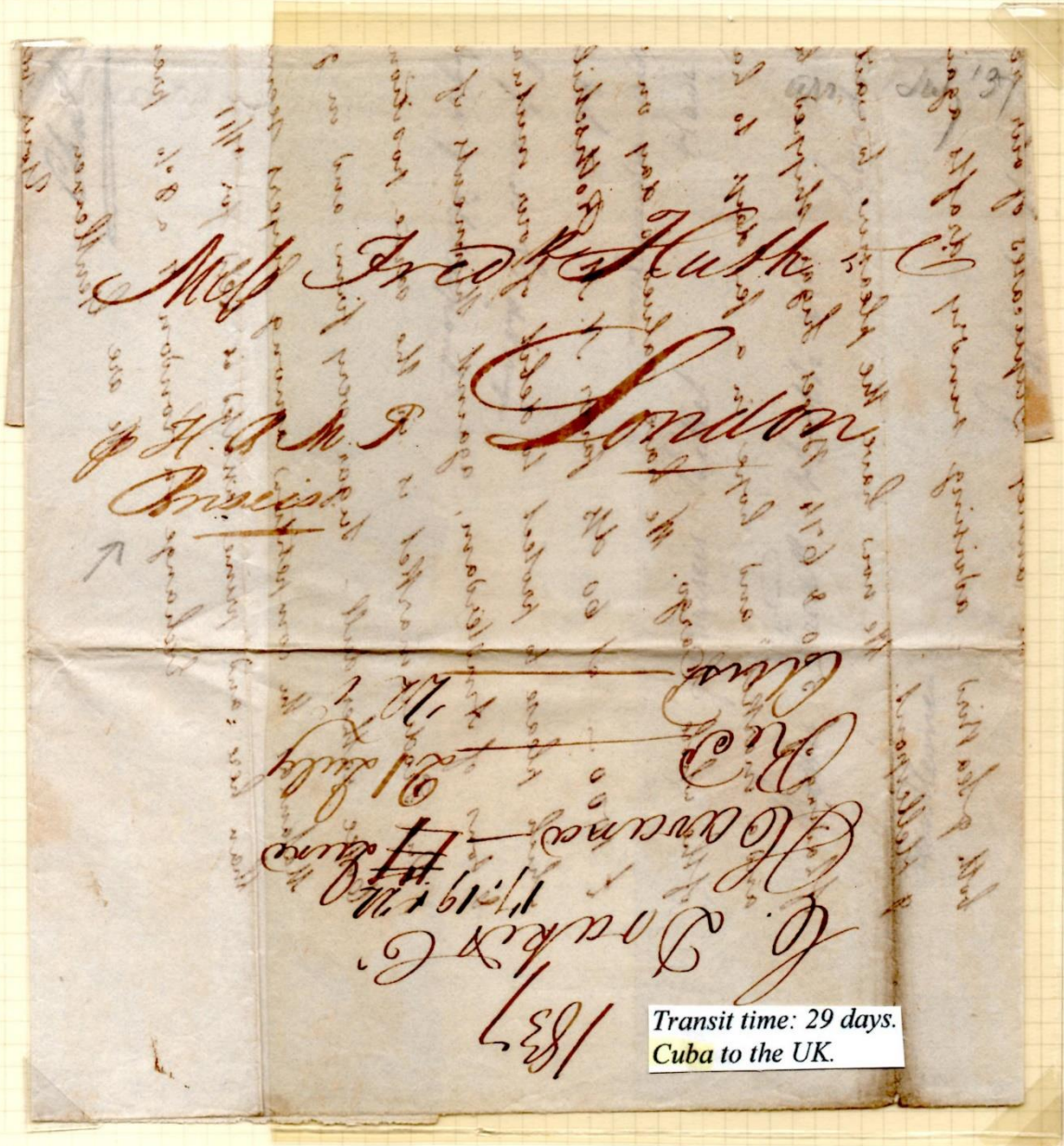
With the advent of Steam, the despatch of mails became quicker and safer. One of the first ships used on the West Indies run was a British "Sidewheeler", combining steam with sail, named "Calpe", which the Netherlands bought, while she was on the "Stocks" at Dover, and re-named her "Curaçao". In 1827 she made her first voyage to Curaçao and return. By doing three quarters of the return trip under steam, she did it in twenty five days. Wars now intervened and the "Curaçao" ended her days in the Netherlands East Indies' Service as a warship. Letters carried by the "Curaçao" would probably be cancelled by the handstamp "Zeebrief Hellevoetsluis" on arrival.

Riddell, J.D. (1970) Suriname: a postal history 1700-1956.

Figure 1

ROYAL NAVY PACKET MAIL

1837 Letter from a merchant in Havana to another in London about a cargo of sugar. This letter was carried on H(er) M(ajesty's) P(acket) Briseis. This was a naval brig - a sloop fitted with guns. She was used as a Falmouth mail packet in 1824 and 1837. (Stone, 1993) Transit time: 29 days.



FREDERICK HUTH CORRESPONDENCE

The Briseis was lost 'supposed foundered' in the Atlantic, with all on board, in January 1838. Before she was used as a packet ship, she had been involved in a naval action. H.M.S. Briseis, armed with six guns, was part of a small force under a Captain Goate, in 1809, that captured a battery of six 24-pounder guns and blew up a fort at Cuxhaven on the German North Sea coast.
[www.pbenyon.plus.com; www.cronab.demon.co.uk]

Figure 2

Faster Caribbean Mail By Steamship

by Dr David Watson

The introduction of steamer mail between the Caribbean and the UK had an immediate effect on the time it took to get the mail home (Figure 3). It also, eventually, reduced variability in journey time. Initial problems in establishing routes and the use of paddle steamers to traverse very large waves were eventually overcome. By the late 1850's the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company could rightly claim that it provided a reliable scheduled mail service between the Caribbean and the UK.

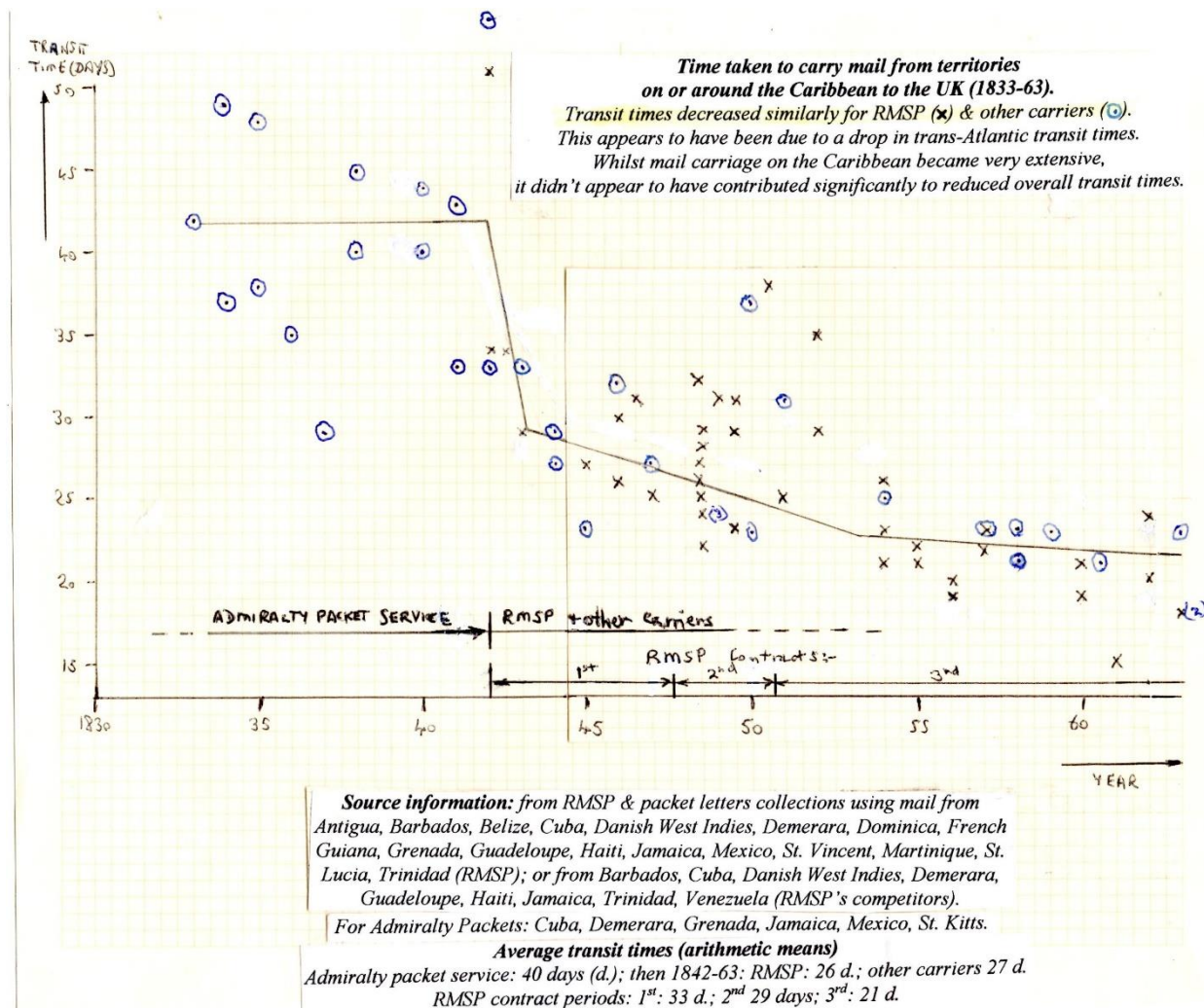


Figure 3

Slowness has a habit of returning to this route. Anyone who sends a postcard home today would appreciate that things can still work slowly between the Tropics and Europe.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Joe Robertson, a first class researcher of tropical postal history, one of whose last acts was to send me a postcard from the West Indies. Sadly it arrived after he had died.

References:

- Julsen, F.W. & Benders, A.M. (1976) A Postal History of Curacao and the other Netherlands Antilles, publ. Van Dietien, The Hague.
- Kenton, P.J. & Parsons, H.G. (1999) Early routings of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company 1842-1879, publ. The Postal History Society.
- Rego, M. R. (2005,7,8) Steamship Lines to the Caribbean, vols. 1, 2 & 3, publ. BWISC.
- Salles, R. (1992) La Poste Maritime Francaise Tome IV. Les Paquebots de l'Atlantique Nord, Antilles - Amerique Centrale et Pacifique Sud, Etats Unis, publ. J. Bendon, Limassol.
- Stone, R.G. (1993) A Caribbean Neptune: The Maritime Postal Communications of the Greater and Lesser Antilles in the 19th Century, publ. The Philatelic Foundation, New York.