

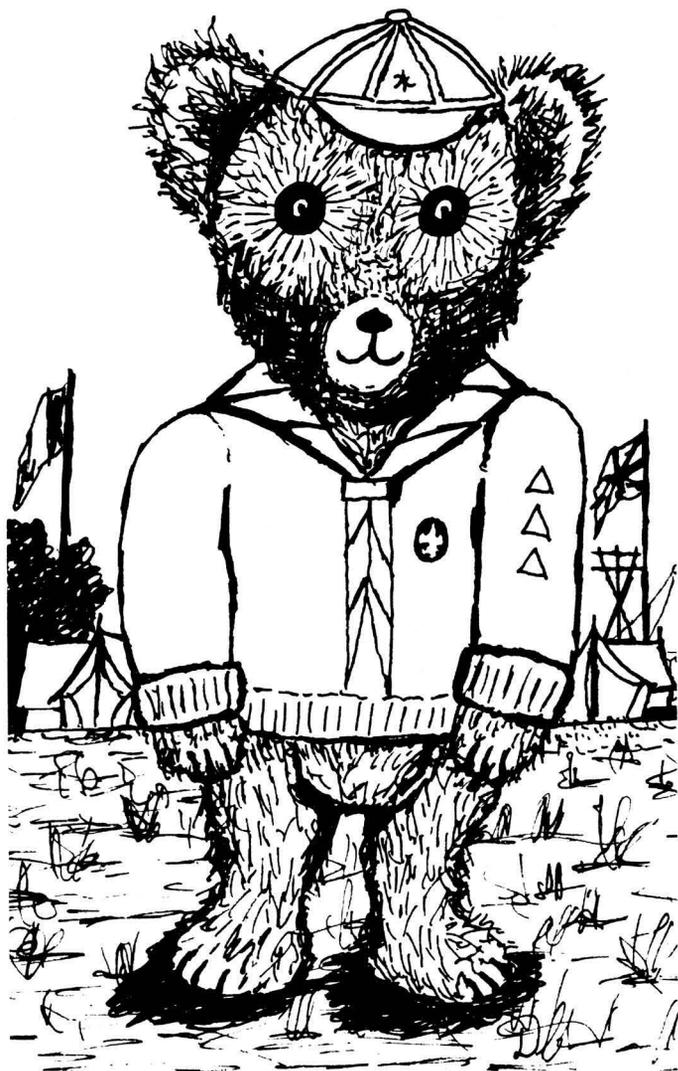
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Britain's Scout Post

by Chad Neighbor

Boy Scouts, of course, are renowned for doing good deeds, but in 1981 the government of Britain did the country's scouts a major good turn. One obscure law made it easier for them to raise money, paved the way for huge amounts of free publicity, got many members involved in challenging activities, allowed the scouts to perform a major

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The law, in effect, gave charitable organizations the license to print stamps — and put them on greeting cards and deliver them in direct competition with the Royal Mail. The scouts, with their organization of willing youths and adults, were ideally suited to the task.

And so Britain's Scout Post, as it has come to be known, was born. Now, each December across Britain, nearly a hundred services give villages, towns, and cities their own local posts and postage rates — and create a wealth of stamps and covers of philatelic interest. The operations range from one troop's service in a cluster of rural villages delivering a thousand or two cards to a massive effort in the major city of Sheffield, which sees more than a million cards delivered each year.

To be sure, legal and practical considerations ensure that the Scout Post never becomes a major competitor to the Royal Mail, which otherwise has a monopoly on all pieces of mail that cost under two dollars to send. The Scout Post is allowed to operate only between November 25 and January 1 and may handle only greeting cards. The scouts, eager to maintain their fund-raising service, observe these limits carefully.

With a few minor exceptions, logistical realities mean the posts are only for cards originating and being delivered in the same area. While the scouts are not barred from receiving a card in London and delivering it 400 miles north in Glasgow, in practice such a service

has to be left to the professionals.

"It's a fund-raising thing we can do which is also a service," comments Robert Murray, an Edinburgh scout leader who also, by coincidence, happens to be a stamp dealer operating Scotland's largest stamp store. "We can say to people: 'You give us twelve pence (twenty cents). We're raising money — and you're saving six pence.'"

The scouts charge less than the second-class rate, about thirty cents in Britain at Christmas time last year, to help drum up business and because they acknowledge their service can never rival the Royal Mail's. "It's not a wonderful speed service," notes Alan Willoughby, area secretary for the Boy Scouts in Edinburgh.

But, especially in cities such as Sheffield and Edinburgh, it is a comprehensive one. Edinburgh scouts last year delivered 528,000 cards, more than one for every resident. Huge centers of operation are set up, and procedures painstakingly built up over years are carefully followed, resulting in correct, pre-Christmas delivery of more than ninety-nine percent of all cards entrusted to it. "We approach the delivery aspect in a very businesslike way — you go and get the job done as quickly as you can," Willoughby said. Last year, he noted, Edinburgh scouts got just twenty-two phone calls of complaint, and many of those were not justified — people phoned on the last day of deliveries, for instance, to say a card had not arrived, forgetting that the scouts delivered as late as ten that night.

The Royal Mail, to its credit, does not begrudge the scouts their piece of the postal action. Martin Cummings, a Royal Mail representative, said, "We think we can be generous to charities that are trying to make a bit of money." Anyway, he notes, the Scout Post has only "denied us pennies." While Scout Post delivery numbers seem impressive, he says, in Edinburgh they work out to less than two percent of the 38.6 million cards and letters the Royal Mail delivered in Edinburgh the three weeks before Christmas 1991. In fact, when an Edinburgh Scout Post letter finds its way into a Royal Mail box, it's usually forwarded free of charge to scout headquarters rather than being delivered to the addressee with an extra postage due charge, as regulations would dictate.

The Edinburgh Scout Post, which

began in 1984 by delivering 18,500 cards, has seen its business grow so rapidly that it has had to reorganize its operation totally several times. Originally, sorters picked up handfuls of cards and walked around dropping them into boxes, each of which covered part of Edinburgh. Now the sorting operation fills a large meeting room in the scout headquarters, with 1,700 pigeonholes for streets or batches of streets as worked out on a computer data base.

Groups provide workers based on how many cards they have collected (from almost a thousand boxes at churches, nursing homes, stores, and so forth), and up to 250 people may be in the building processing the torrent of cards during the busiest evenings. When a pigeonhole has its maximum of about 150 cards, the cards are moved into mailbags, rechecked to make sure they have been sorted properly,

Mail Tales

As can be expected with volunteers handling thousands of pieces of mail, Scout Post deliveries don't always go off without a hitch.

Once an Edinburgh scout left a heavy bag of mail at the bottom of a stairwell in an apartment building for a few minutes while he climbed the stairs to deliver cards.

In his absence, a resident chanced upon the bag, thought it had been misplaced, carried the letters to the nearest mailbox, and conscientiously stuffed them into it. The appalled scout, upon his return, quickly guessed what had happened and stood by the mailbox until a mail carrier came to collect the mail. The scout managed to get all his cards back on the spot.

And then there are problems with wrong or incomplete addresses. Many a card is dropped in the scouts' boxes in churches, community centers, and stores with no identification other than "Mom and Dad" or "Jim." Others are directed to such non-Edinburgh addresses as Melbourne, Australia. (The Scout Post tries not to accept such letters, but if one gets through, it usually pays the normal postage and mails the letter the usual way.)

Robert Murray, an Edinburgh scout leader and stamp dealer, handled one letter simply addressed to a common Scottish name at "Trinity." Trinity is an Edinburgh neighborhood, so he assumed the addressee was a resident of the area. It turned out, through inquiries, however, that Trinity was the name of the person's house — in another part of Edinburgh.

Murray also got a letter in the area his troop once covered with an address only of four initials. As the first two were the Latin abbreviation for the Virgin Mary (this is the sort of thing not everyone knows), Murray tried the local priest. The priest didn't understand the "address," but he knew the people and was going to see them the next week, so he took the letter.

But Murray's favorite tale is of an adult scout leader who took a card addressed to an expensive home in one of Edinburgh's best neighborhoods. Even to get in through the gate he had to identify himself through a video and intercom system. The posh lady of the house took the card, once he got to the door, and said: "Thank you very much, but next year, if you are delivering, could you deliver to the tradesmen's entrance?"

He was there not only to deliver the card, the quick-thinking leader replied, but to deliver personally the season's wishes of the Scout Association.



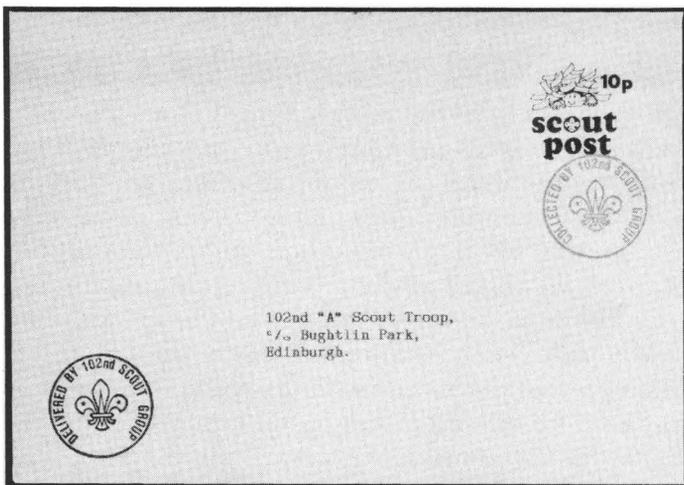


Figure 1. An Edinburgh Scout Post cover given the philatelic treatment with the addition of collection and delivery handstamps.

and then handed over to the delivering group.

Deliveries take place over several weeks, on weekends wherever possible to take advantage of daylight — younger scouts never go out on their own in the dark — with most of the work being handled by adult leaders and older scouts. In Edinburgh, 120 groups with about 1,000 deliveries handle the last, crucial part of the process.

The groups are well rewarded for their efforts. Groups get five pence (about eight cents) of the twelve-pence cost to the public for collecting a letter and six pence for deliver-

ing one. The extra penny is retained by the scout central organization for the printing of stamps and other essential expenses.

The largest Edinburgh group collected 49,000 cards and delivered 53,000, which works out to an impressive \$12,000. As Robert Murray, whose troop in a less-than-wealthy area raised nearly £1,000 (\$1,800) last year, notes, "In our area it takes quite a lot of things to raise £1,000."

At the end of the season, after all the cards are delivered (or returned as undeliverable in some cases), all is not done. Scout Post items generally carry stamps of a multitude of designs, and these are growing rapidly in popularity with philatelists. The experience of the Edinburgh operation would even allow for a collection of Scout Postal history.

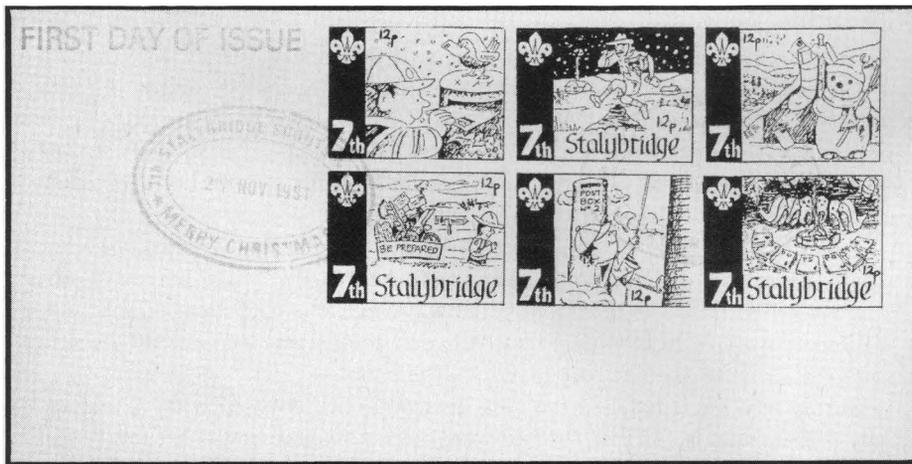
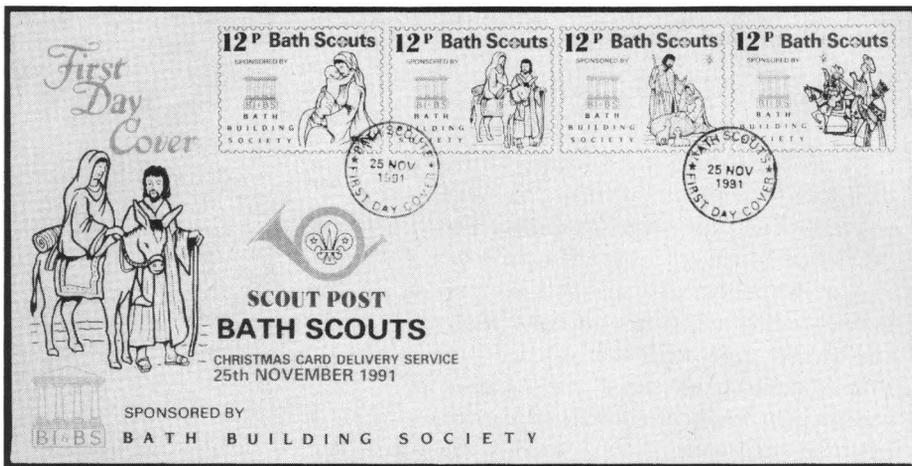


Figure 2. Se-tenant and first day covers from Bath and Stalybridge, England, are samples of the more elaborate designs being produced for Scout Posts. A se-tenant strip of five from Sheffield, the biggest Scout Post operation, commemorates Soviet space achievements and the flight of the first Briton in space, Helen Sharman.



In the first year the Edinburgh scouts simply bought sticky labels and hand-stamped them with "Delivered by Edinburgh Scout Post" or used a handstamp featuring a scout badge. The next year the scouts used their own print service to turn out imperforate labels with gum. The scouts laboriously had to cut and stick down the stamps, and unused ones invariably turned into sticky lumps.

Then the scouts started using printed sticky labels featuring a Boy Scout buried in cards and then a design — still in use — featuring a Christmas pudding. For security reasons, colors usually were changed from year to year if the design did not.

The Edinburgh central organization does not produce strictly philatelic covers, as many smaller outfits do, feeling that it was busy enough with the task of getting cards on the road and through mail slots. But — and can this be a surprise? — stamp dealer Murray's troop produces covers canceling the stamp (Scout Post stamps often are not canceled) with a green handstamp saying "Collected by 102nd Scout Group" and a red one saying "Delivered by 102nd Scout Group" (Figure 1). Murray sells them in his shop for the equivalent of eighty cents each.

The popularity of such items is not surprising. Many of the stamps are quite attractive, with well-designed se-tenant strips and blocks being produced (Figure 2). A variety of attractive handstamps to cancel stamps in a variety of colors helps result in collectible items. A group in Colchester, England, further differentiates its service by calling it the Cycle Mail; some of its stamps feature a bicycle (Figure

Figure 4. A Falkirk, Scotland, Scout Post cover mistakenly mailed in a Royal Mail box and delivered by the Royal Mail with a handstamp noting 32-pence postage due. The sender of this card was most optimistic, as it was not even mailed in Falkirk, but in the nearby town of Stirling.

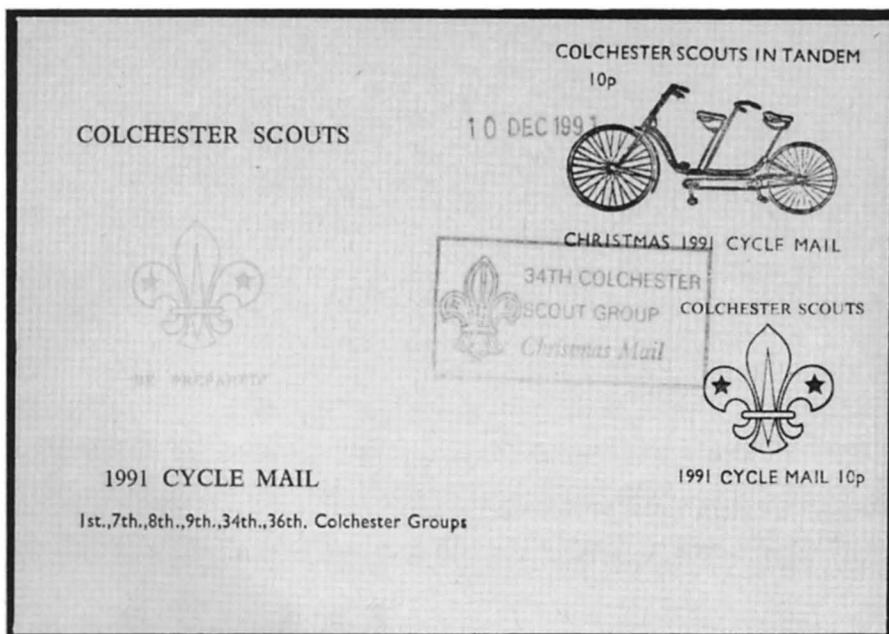
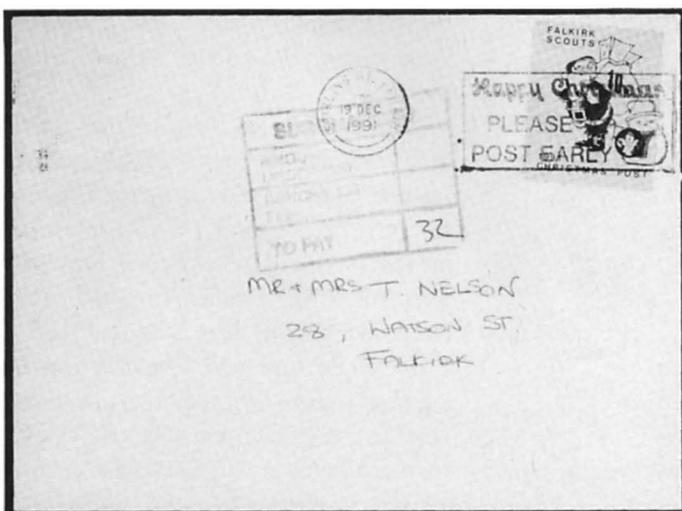


Figure 3. The Colchester scouts operate a Cycle Mail service which is illustrated clearly on this 1991 cover.

3). Many groups also have started issuing first day covers.

While the various covers are produced in tens and hundreds rather than thousands, items rarely cost as much as a dollar. Delivered ones, of course, are free, and these, too, are collected avidly by philatelists. Interesting varieties occur, such as Scout Post letters dropped in Royal Mail boxes and then canceled and delivered as normal with a postage due handstamp (Figure 4).

The sales service of Britain's Scout and Guide Stamps Club, set up to provide members with Scout and Girl Guide stamps and philatelic items, now strives to make available as much Scout Post material as it can uncover. The decentralized nature of the operation, of course, means that when groups do not make up covers for the Scout stamp club, the items are difficult to obtain outside a small area. The job of finding out which groups operate a service, however, is simplified by listings in the latest edition of a book published in Ireland, *The 1992 Checklist of Scout, Guide and Brigade Stamps of the World*. The thirteenth edition of this work has an extensive listing of Scout Post labels.

This area, it could be said, is one where a lot of scouting will prove beneficial.

References

Scout and Guide Stamps Club, Sales Service, Peter J. Duck, 256 St. Margaret's Road, Twickenham, Middlesex TW1 1PR, England.
The 1992 Checklist of Scout, Guide and Brigade Stamps of the World, available from the author, David McKee, 3 South Park Drive, Foxrock, Dublin 18, Ireland. \$15 air mail (bills only), \$11 surface mail. Checks and postal orders cannot be accepted.

The Author

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