

SYNOPSIS: For a proposed exhibit

The WWII Australian Government's "Undercover Mail Scheme" handled by Thomas Cook & Son in Melbourne.

The arrangement to allow people in Australia to be able to exchange letters with friends and family in Germany or German occupied places was a significant piece in that part of the world for Great Britain's effort to try to have such a service not only for the United Kingdom, but for all its Colonies and Dominions. Such a unilateral British Government scheme had been used in WWI on a smaller scale, including such a service for Canada handled by Thomas Cook in Montreal, and perhaps for Australia, too— but I have yet to find specific references to that.

The WWII service was widely announced in the United Kingdom using Thomas Cook & Son in London, and was successfully started in January 1940. Likewise, but in a lower profile way, service for Canada, official records show, was announced almost simultaneously in January 1940, but to be handled by the Canadian Government using the services of Thomas Cook & Son out of Toronto. From Australian newspaper articles, service for Australia was announced as available, but only through the Thomas Cook & Son London offices on identical terms as offered to people within the U.K.

To date, no separate usage information has been disclosed or been found to have survived with a detailed breakdown of the number of letters handled by area or country using the service through London.

One cover can now be shown here as a usage from Czechoslovakia to Lisbon's Box 506 that can be confirmed as a "reply" going to an addressee through Melbourne's Australian censorship in 1940. (To date no other usages that would be via London have been reported as possible to identify as Australia related.)

Subsequently, in the summer of 1940, Thomas Cook & Son in Melbourne actively pushed the London office, surviving records show, to transfer all handling of Australian mail entirely to Melbourne. This arrangement, along with the necessary agreements with British Censorship, were finally approved. This agreement called for using a new post office box in Lisbon. Records confirm that Lisbon agreed and rented a box numbered 520 in the Fall of 1940. Availability of this service was finalized and announced in the Australian press in November 1940. Also included is the apparently only surviving example of the Melbourne Censor Form advising a person in Australia of the instructions to use the "P.O. Box 520, Lisbon" service through Thomas Cook in Melbourne to send a letter to an enemy country.

This exhibit is intended to show as much as we can try to piece together by using many of the known and apparently representative examples of these Australian usages. This has now become more possible to do by getting to use here a surprising discovery of 9 "new" over-75-year-old covers only found within the past year. Along with the smaller number of additional covers collected over five decades, a better focus now seems possible on this long known about and definitely successful scheme in spite of it being very hard to find surviving examples of usages. It certainly also suggests what to look for and definite possibilities that have surely been overlooked in the past.

Ed Fraser 10-3-2025