ARRIVAL OF THE MAIL IN MELBOURNE
(The Stamp-Collector’s Magazine – Jan. 1, 1865)

None but those who have visited and resided in the Australian colonies are aware with what
anxiety the arrival of the mail is monthly expected. By the ever-onward movement of civilization, steam
has been introduced into the postal service between London and Australia, and letters now arrive in six
weeks, which were formerly between three and four months on the passage. A letter posted in London on
the 26th of January will, if the passage be a good one, be delivered in Melbourne on the 9th of March.
Letters and papers to be sent via Southampton, leave on the 20th of each month, and via Marseilles on the
26th. They are due in Melbourne about the 10th of the next month but one.

About the 5th of each month, the telegraph authorities in Melbourne make their first preparations
for the reception of the summary of the English news. One of the clerks in the office, called an operator,
has to sleep all night in the office with a bell over his head, which is rung by electricity. This arrangement
is a very necessary one, as the arrival of the mail is sometimes telegraphed in the middle of the night. The
mail telegraphic communication in nine cases out of ten is first carried on between Adelaide, the capital
of South Australia, and Melbourne, the capital of Victoria. It is at Adelaide that the mail-steamer arrives
first, and that town, consequently, is the first to get the European news, and the first to transmit it. It will
perhaps be as well if I briefly trace the course of the letters from Southampton.

The contract is in the hands of the ‘Peninsular and Oriental Company;’ and they employ a fine
large fleet of steamers in carrying on the mail-service.

The last load of letters and papers arrives in wooden boxes at Southampton about two o’clock on
the 20th of each month, and is immediately placed on board, and all those who are not passengers having
left the ship, the steamer passes down Southampton water into the Channel, and commences her voyage.
Letters for Gibraltar are landed in about five days; for Malta, in about eight and a half, and for
Alexandria, in about twelve days. The mail-boxes are put in the train at Alexandria, and passing through
Cairo, are taken to Suez. Here they are placed on board a small steamer, which takes them to the mail-
ship, lying a few miles down the Red Sea. In about nine days, they reach Aden, and such mail-boxes as
are intended for that most uninteresting, inhospitable-looking locality, are left there. In about a week’s
time the steamer arrives at Point de Galle, a southern point in the island of Ceylon, and there discharges
all her Australian mail-boxes, while she herself goes on to Calcutta. A steamer is in readiness at Galle to
receive the Australian letters, and they are transhipped into her a few hours after arrival. Their next
resting and discharging place is Albany, a little village-town on the southern coast of Western Australia,
which lies at the head of King George’s Sound, where the steamer arrives about fifteen days after leaving
Ceylon. Here the mail-steamer is met by a small one belonging to the Australian Steam Navigation
Company, which immediately takes on board the South Australian letters, and steams away for Adelaide.
The Peninsular and Oriental steamer having coaled, proceeds to Melbourne, where she usually arrives in
about five and a half days. There she discharges her letters and papers for the colony of Victoria, and then
steams on six hundred miles to Sydney, the capital of the aristocratic old colony of New South Wales.

There is always a kind of race between the large and small steamers that leave King George’s
Sound. The distance being shorter, the smaller generally arrives first at Adelaide, its destination. On
reaching the pier, the reporter on board rushes to the Telegraph Office, and hands in a summary of the European news. This is immediately telegraphed a distance of three hundred miles, to a place called Mount Gambier, on the borders of South Australia and Victoria. It then is sent another three hundred miles to Melbourne. A flag is run up at the Telegraph Office with R.M. on it, signifying Royal Mail; and it soon becomes known over Melbourne that the mail-steamer has been telegraphed. A reporter from the office of the Argus, the leading journal of Melbourne, is in waiting at the Telegraph Office; and when a portion of the summary from Adelaide has been written off, he hurries in a hansom to the office, and slips are at once printed. This is done till the whole of the news has been telegraphed and written off. The first entire slip is courteously sent to his Excellency the Governor; and then the printing of the extraordinary edition of the paper is proceeded with. Little boys very much below zero in the thermometer of cleanliness crowd the Argus office, and as each one gets his batch, he runs about in all directions shouting: ‘Argis extraorarary – latest noos from England – arrival of the mail.’ These ‘extraordinaries’ are nominally threepence each, but I don’t think they are to be had from the boys for less than sixpence. Great numbers are printed, and very soon bought up. The summary contains the leading events of the month: news about the Queens, the Americans, Danes, &c.’ shipping intelligence; names of eminent persons who have died during the month; names of Derby and Oaks winners in May or June; funds, stock, wool-sales, &c. In the summary is also the latest special telegram via Suez, which is sent from London on the evening of the 3r of the month following that during which the mail-steamer leaves Marseilles. For instance, the steamer with letters and papers leaves Marseilles on the 27th of June, and on the 3rd of July, a telegram is sent to Suez, which is there put on board the steamer, and carried on to Melbourne; so that the latest news received in Australia from England is only five weeks old, and this news travels eleven thousand one hundred and seventy-one miles, or thereabouts, by the overland route.

About two days, or rather less, as a general rule, after the steamer has been telegraphed, she herself arrives in Hobson’s Bay, at the head of which is Sandridge, the port of, and two and a half miles distant from, Melbourne. A small steamer goes alongside the Peninsular and Oriental vessel, and receives the mail-boxes. She takes them to Sandridge, and there they are placed in carts, and driven up to the General Post-office in Melbourne, but it is found more convenient and expeditious to put the boxes in spring-carts, and send them by road. I believe the average number of boxes containing the letters and papers is three hundred. Extra hands are taken on at the post-office to assist in bringing in and opening the boxes; and the regular clerks sort the letters and papers with wonderful quickness. A notice is placed outside the post-office, intimating to the public when the letters, &c., will be delivered.

The arrival of the mail naturally causes a temporary excitement, which lasts for perhaps twenty-four hours.

A few words with respect to the departure of the mail. The Peninsular and Oriental mail-steamers leave Sydney on the 22nd of each month, and Melbourne on the 26th. The post-office closes at ten o’clock, but an office is kept open at Sandridge till noon. The mail-steamer sails very punctually at two, and up to the last minute almost, letters can be posted on board in a box on deck for that purpose. Letters, however, posted after ten can only go via Marseilles. The office closes for newspapers, via Southampton, at six o’clock on the previous day. The rush to the post-office during the last five minutes is very great indeed. Melbourne is very subject to floods, as it has over-ground sewers. These become swollen by the rains, and inundate the streets. I had to post my letters last November nearly up to my knees in water. The water
around the post-office was several inches deep; cabs would take you through the deepest part, but to reach the letter-box itself, you were obliged to go through some water. This will, I believe, be obviated when the new post-office, a magnificent building, is finished. – Chambers’s Journal.