

H. StJ. B. Philby C.I.E.

Correspondence & History 1911 to 1953

This display shows covers from the family correspondence between Harry St.J. B. Philby, May Philby (his mother) and his wife Dora during his eventful life in the centre of the turbulent politics of the Middle East.

Also unusually, for a minor Government employee, the name Philby continues to appear frequently in the press, even in the 21st century. Unfortunately the press is mainly negative - well after his son Kim fled to Russia in 1963. However the family did have an immense impact on British foreign affairs.

Note that Harry Philby was brought up by a **single mother** – **won scholarships to attend both school and Cambridge University**. He joined the Indian Civil Service in 1907 and won prizes for his skills as a linguist. However he was in trouble with his superiors in India for marrying Dora without their permission, conducting his magistrates courts he presided over in the language preferred by the participants and for recommending an Indian national to be a member of his local golf club. Nevertheless in Mesopotamia, within 2 years and aged only 35, he was gazetted to become a C.I.E. (Companion of the Order of the Indian Empire only awarded 392 times in its 68 year history).

Philby became a senior post war advisor in Iraq and was promoted in 1922 to be High Commissioner in Jordan replacing the incompetent T. E. Lawrence. However Philby gave up and resigned just 2 years later as the British Government continued to ignore his advice on Arabia.

From 1926 Philby became effectively **Financial Advisor to King Ibn Saud of Arabia**. He later developed skills to become a renowned explorer, scientist and author describing not only **the geography but also the flora and fauna** of the remote areas in the Arabian peninsula. Of course, he earlier had sired a son called Kim who was also a proficient linguist and won scholarships to school and Cambridge, Hons Deg. 1933!

Display

..	Years	Principal Interest
Frame 1:	1911 > 18	WWI in Mesopotamia
Frame 2	1921 > 38	Iraq, Jordan and Early Arabia
Frame 3	1939 > 53	Oil, WWII and Postwar.

Sheet 2 : Much travelled item.. 'Kim' cover.

Sheets 3-9: WWI – Mesopotamia - free rates and censored.

Sheet 10 : First day usage of WWI charity label!

Sheets 11 and 13 show ½ anna civilian covers rate within Mesopotamia occupied by Indian Expeditionary Forces (IEF). NB majority of Mesopotamia occupied by Turkish Forces.

Sheet 15: 1917-18 Nejd to India via Hejaz - Egypt.

Sheet 16 : 1918 Only recorded cover from Riyadh(Nejd) camel to "KOWEIT" and to India'

Sheets 17 to 22 : 1921-36 Iraq and Jordan. Scarce as Dora and often May were with him

Sheets 23-36: 1926-1937 **Pre-oil** period when Saudi Arabia was poor GDP ~£40K, pre-1933. Scarce covers and frankings.

Sheets 33-6 : 1938-9 Oil struck but no oil exported until 1946.

Sheets 37-40: Censored Covers and MI6 letter ex Kew records plus Internee Mail

Sheets 41-7 : Post WWII mail to and from Arabia.

Sheet 48 : Epilogue.



References :

- E. Munroe : Philby of Arabia.
- Arabian Phil Assoc Journals : " Random Notes"
- Books By Philby : Arabia; The Empty Quarter, Arabian
- Davs. Land of Midian et al + 1930's Geographical Journals

C.I.E. Awarded



5th Aug 1917

1911 : Punjab to Camberley, London and back to Punjab

Letter from H. St John B. Philby



Postal History

- Mudapakpur, Ambala, Punjab** : H. St John B. Philby, revenue assistant with the Indian Civil Service.
Letter to his mother, May Philby. Ambala cancel dated 2nd November 1911 on Indian I anna.
- Camberley**: Backmark showing receipt on Nov 18th 1911. Mrs. Philby had already departed for India.
Letter is redirected to Bombay c/o R.M Philby, his brother in Bombay.
- Camberley** : Cancel on front showing redirected back to India on Nov. 24th 1911.
- Aden : Sea Post Office** : Backmark dated Dec 3rd 1911.
- Colaba, Bombay** : Backmarks dated Dec 8th. 1911 for 9am and 2.30pm. Redirected to the Dockyard.
- Bombay Fort** : Delivery backmark dated Dec 8th. 1911
Redirected to Ambala as Mrs Philby had already departed for the Punjab.
- Bombay-Karachi Sea Post Office**: Back mark dated Dec 21st. 1911
- Ambala Delivery**: Dec 26th 1911.

Historical Note

Harry St John Philby graduated with a 1st from Cambridge in 1907 and joined the Indian Civil Service in 1908. A natural linguist he very quickly picked up languages and won many prizes for language excellence. He negotiated with the local population in their native languages, and was very sympathetic to their progress in government. He married Dora Johnstone, daughter of an Indian Railway engineer in 1910.

And the reason for Harry's mother rushing to India and missing this letter – she was about to become a grandmother for the first time, Dora Philby was expecting her first child. A son duly arrived on January 1st 1912, he was named Kim- after the Rudyard Kipling story.

Later Kim Philby, like his father won a scholarship to Westminster school, became head boy, went to Cambridge University where he made new friends, Guy Burgess, Donald MacLean and Anthony Blunt.

Kim Philby features on this 1990 Russian stamp.



1915 : India to Mesopotamia

Letter to H. St John B. Philby



Postal History

Letter to Harry St.J. Philby from his wife Dora Philby showing the clear double ring Bombay GPO cancel for November 15th 1915 on reverse and the purple Bombay 32 Passed censor mark.
No stamps affixed probably as to an active war zone of Mesopotamia.

Postal Marks



Historical Note

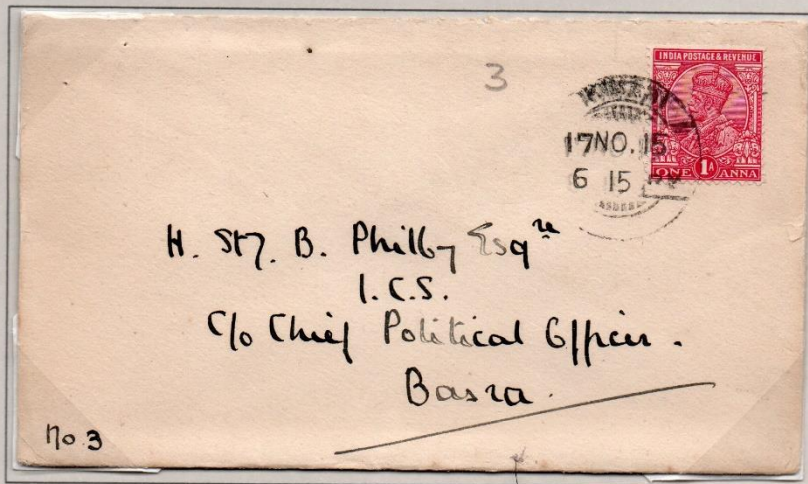
H. St John B. Philby was assigned to the Indian Expeditionary Forces in Mesopotamia as a Political Agent and arrived in Mesopotamia in November 1915

This letter is one of the earliest letters to him in Mesopotamia.
(probably the 2nd from Dora? - see manuscript 2 top centre of the cover)

1915 : India to Mesopotamia

17th November 1915

Letter to H. St John B. Philby



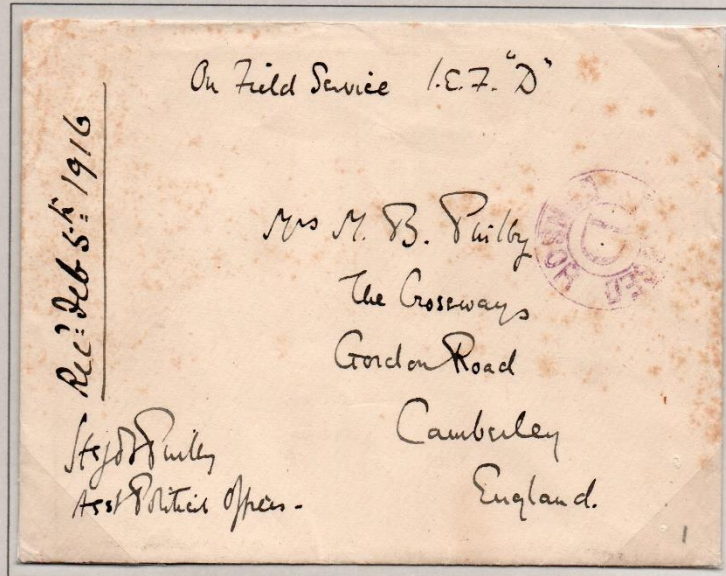
Postal History

Letter to Harry St.J. Philby from his wife Dora Philby just two days after the previous letter with an unclear double Ring cancel dated 17th of November . There are no route of receipt marks.

Historical Note

H. St John B. Philby was assigned to the Indian Expeditionary Forces in Mesopotamia as a Political Agent and left for Basra on 15th and arrived in Basra on 20th November 1915
This letter is one of the earliest letters to him in Mesopotamia – was Dora writing daily at this time?
This appears to be number 3 and Philby left on 15th. However she was also taking 4 year old Kim to England to stay with his grandmother' May Philby.

1916 : Mesopotamia to Camberley, England
Letter from H. St John B. Philby



Postal History

Inscribed On Field Service and I.E.F.D (Indian Expeditionary Forces "D"). Base Office cancel on reverse dated 8th. Jan (1916). Cover is signed by Philby Assistant Political Officer and is addressed to his mother.

Censor : Purple 25mm Double Ring "PASSED CENSOR D" .

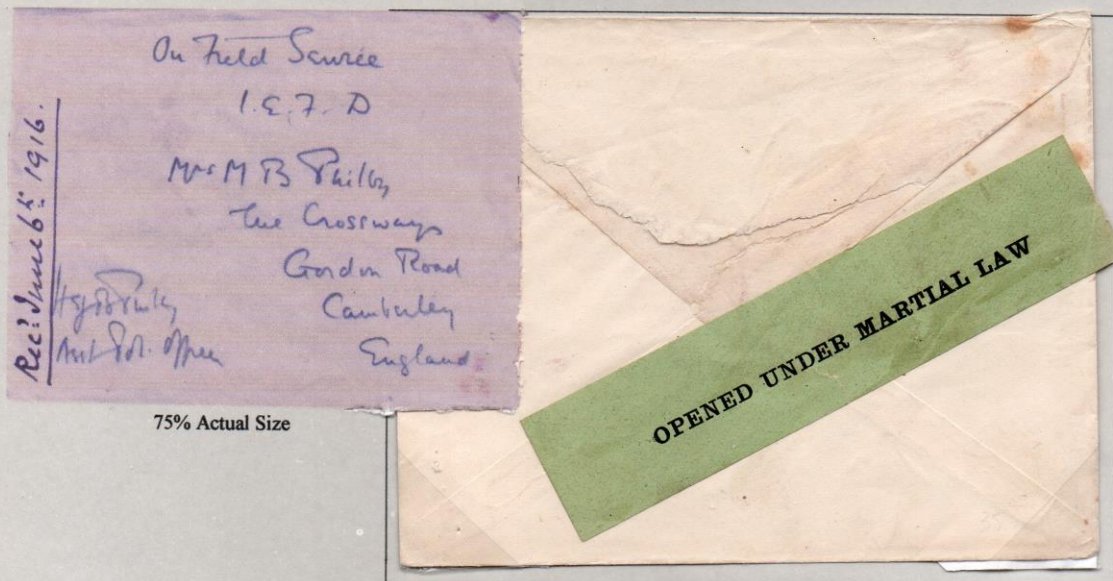


Receipt : Mrs May Philby annotated as received in Camberley on Feb 5th 1916 a fast transit of 4 weeks

Historical Note

This cover sent just a few weeks after H. St John B. Philby was assigned to the Indian Expeditionary Forces in Mesopotamia as a Political Agent.

1916 : Mesopotamia to Camberley, England
Letter from H. St John B. Philby



Cover is signed by Philby Pol(itical) Dept and is addressed to his mother.

Inscribed On Field Service and I.E.F.D (Indian Expeditionary Forces "D") No postage was required for active serving personnel.

Censor : The label 'Opened Under Martial Law' is not mentioned in Prouds "Postal History of Iraq".

Receipt : Mrs May Philby filed all her son's correspondence and annotated each letter as it arrived. This notes that the letter was received on June 6th 1916. A 4-6 six week transit time is probable.

Historical Note

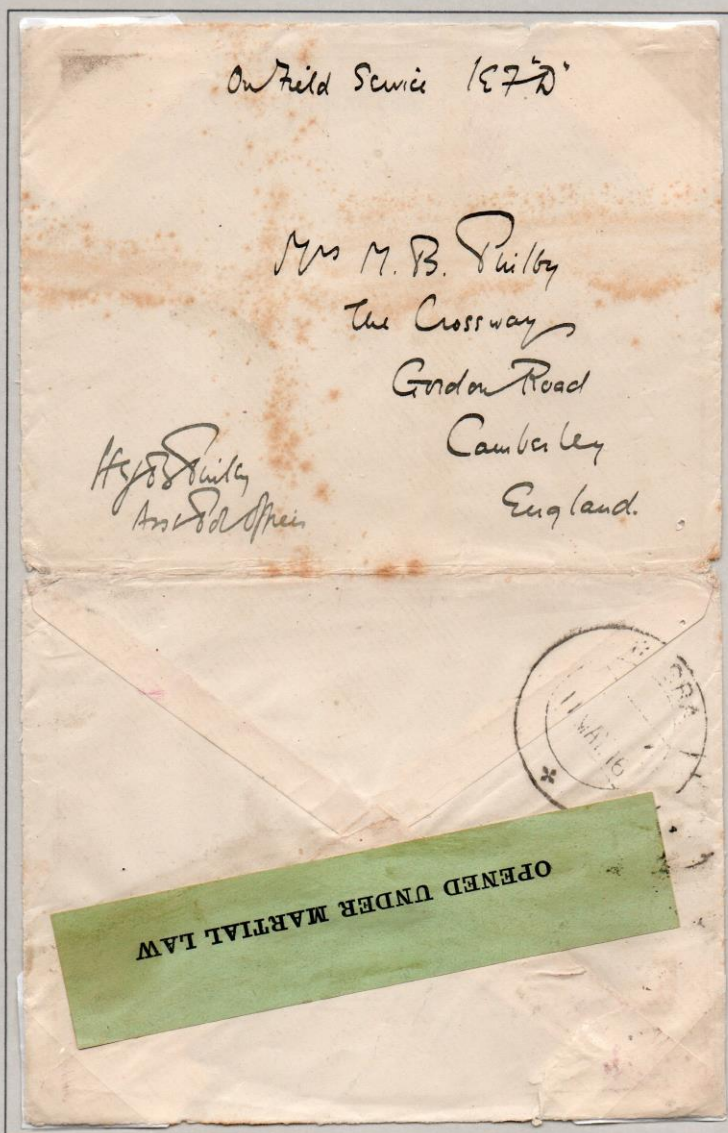
Harry St John Philby became unpopular in India because of his close ties with the native population – and for nominating a senior Indian lawyer for the golf club! Finding promotion blocked he wanted to get into the war and volunteered for the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force and was duly sent to Basra in November 1915 where his language skills were of great value and he became responsible for reporting on Arabian matters especially related to Ibn Saud.

The previous British officer assigned to Ibn Saud as an 'advisor' was William Shakespear. He was the only man who could fire the 4" field gun that the British had given to Ibn Saud to help against Al Rashid. Against the advice of Ibn Saud he went into battle still dressed in his British Army uniform. He was a clear target and was shot and killed.

At the time this letter was sent the MEF had just suffered a major defeat at KUT where General Sir Charles Townshend and 10,000 troops surrendered to the Turks on April 29th and prior to that many casualties were suffered trying to relieve the garrison. On the Red Sea coast in Hejaz Husain was yet to mount the rebellion against the Turkish forces – June 5th 1916

1916 : Mesopotamia to Camberley, England

Letter from H. St John B. Philby



Cover is signed by Philby Assistant Political Officer and is addressed to his mother but unusually the receipt date is not annotated.

Postal History : Inscribed On Field Service and I.E.F.D (Indian Expeditionary Forces "D"). Basra Double ring cancel for 11th May 1916 on back under the green "OPENED UNDER MARTIAL LAW" label.

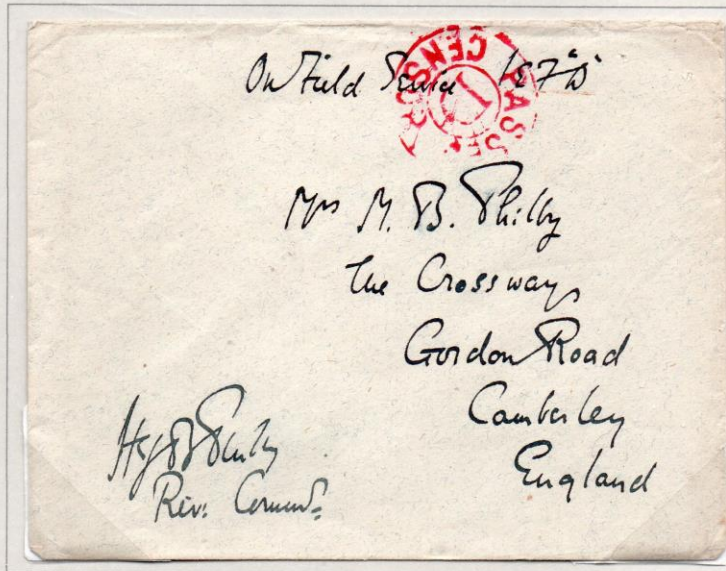
Historical Note

This cover sent just after the British Forces under General Townsend had surrendered with 11,000 men to the Turks at Kut on 29th April 1916. Also on 19th May 1916 the 'secret' Sykes/Picot treaty between France and UK was completed.

1916 : Mesopotamia to Camberley, England

4th September 1916

Letter from H. St John B. Philby



Postal History

All Indian Expeditionary Force "D" markings.
Letter with "On Field Service IEFD" manuscript notation indicating free postage
Overstruck with red Passed Censor "D" cancel,
but without censor tape indicating no actual inspection
Signed by "HStJPhilby Rev Commissioner".
On reverse poor Base Office D / I.E.F. cancel dated 4 SEP 16..

Historical Note

H. St John B. Philby was writing to his mother and, for the first time, signing the cover as "Revenue Commissioner" instead of "Assistant Political Officer".
He had just been promoted to this senior position by Sir Percy Cox, senior administrative officer for the Indian Expeditionary Force and British Political Officer in the Persian Gulf from 1904.
This senior position allowed Philby to bring his wife to Mesopotamia.
Note : Philby's son Kim was now in England with his mother, ready to go to school!

1916 : Mesopotamia to Simla, India

Letter from H. St John B. Philby



Base Office D - I.E.F 26th Oct 1916 Simla Receipt 6th Nov 1916

Both struck on reverse

Transit time of 11 days

Postal History : Inscribed On Field Service and I.E.F.D (Indian Expeditionary Forces "D"). Partial red censor mark on front, Base Office MEF double ring cancel for 26th October 1916 and the Simla DR receipt for 6th November on reverse notes a swift transit time of 11 days.

Historical Note

By November 1916 General Maude had been appointed and the MEF were about to launch the new offensive and eventually entered Bagdad on March 11th 1917

1916 : Simla, India to Basra, Mesopotamia

Letter to H. St John B. Philby
28th October 1916

First Day usage of
H.E. Lady Willingdon's ½ Anna War Charity Label
(Womens's Branch of Bombay Presidency War & Relief Fund)



Lady Willingdon's Charity Label on back of cover

Scan of front (75%)

Postal History : Poor Simla Double Ring Cancel on 1 anna but clearly dated 28th October 1916.

No route or receipt marks.

Note : Simla was the summer 'capital' of British India. 7,000ft up in the Himalays, ~ 1,100 miles north of Bombay. Modern names are Shimla and Mumbai

Lady Willingdon's Charity Label*: Printed by De La Rue in sheets of 120. Sold in booklets of 16 for for 2 rupees. Intended to be used in addition to normal postage and helped fund at least two hospitals in India.

Historical Notes :

Philby Family : Dora had just returned to India having taken 4 year old Kim to England to be looked after by May Philby. Paddy Philby, Harry's younger brother had just been killed in the war in France

H. StJ Philby : In late September 1916 Philby had a major promotion to be the Revenue Commissioner for Amara some 100 miles north of Basra and in October 1916 just behind the IEF front line.

Mesopotamia War. Kut, 100miles north of Amara and scene of the disastrous 5 month siege ending in April 29th 1916, was retaken in February 1917 - and Baghdad captured in March 1917.

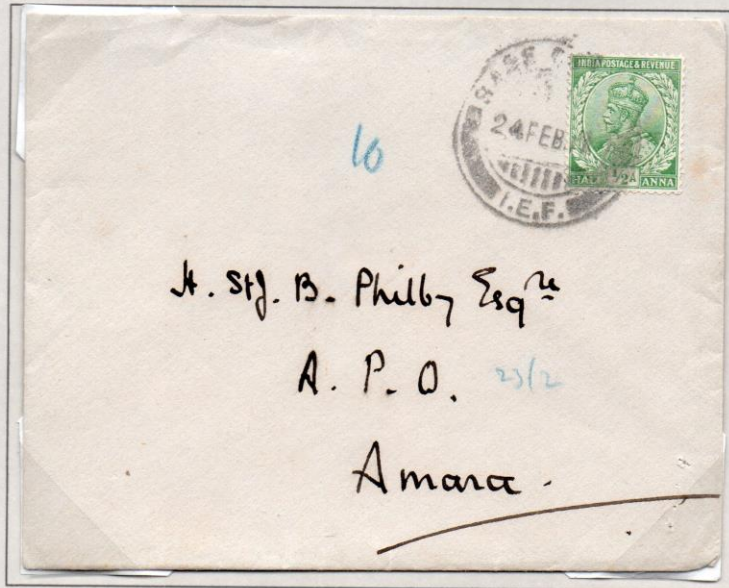
*Ref: Wikimedia ; Bombay Presidency War and Relief Fund Charity Label 1916

1917 : Basra to Amara, Mesopotamia

Letter to H. St John B. Philby

24th February 1917

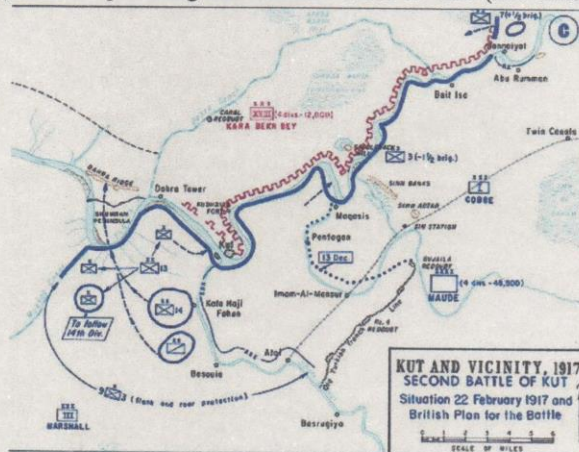
Mesopotamia Civilian Mail – Not censored



Postal History : Letter from Dora Philby in Basra Basra to her husband in Amara with ½ anna Indian GV stamp for internal postal rate. Posted directly through the Indian Expeditionary Force P.O. – and, thus, apparently avoiding civilian censorship. No other route or receiving marks.

Historical Notes : Philby's wife Dora had just arrived from India and staying in Basra. Since the major setback of the surrender of General Townsend and his forces at KUT the Indian Expeditionary Force was now lead by General Maud reporting to Whitehall and not through the Indian High Command. At the time the above letter was sent General Maud already had troops facing the Turkish Forces at Kut (200 miles north of Basra)*. Further IEF reinforcements were advancing through Amara (halfway between Basra and Kut.) where Philby was stationed as the Revenue Commissioner and organizing provisions not only locally but also from across the border in Persia.

*Map show the positions of the armies at Kut on 22nd February 1917. The IEF lines are in blue facing the Turkish positions in red across the River Tigris at Kut. The arrows at each end indicate the proposed line of attack. General Maud had the advantage of aircraft carrying out aerial reconnaissance as well as substantial new army divisions being available.



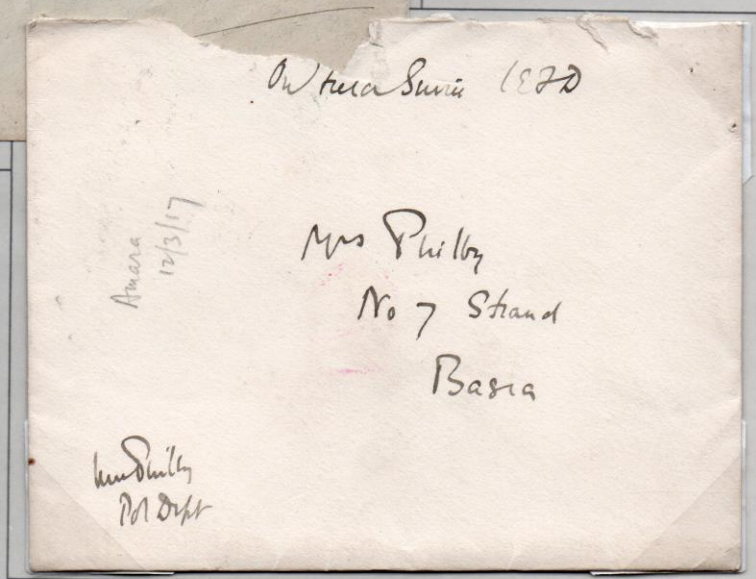
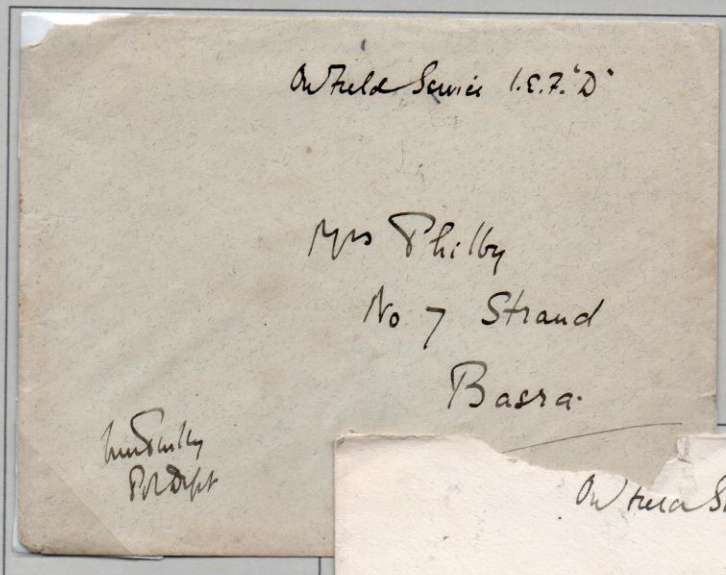
1917 : Amara to Basra, Mesopotamia

Letters from H. St John B. Philby

March 1917

Mesopotamia Internal Mail –

Amara is 100 miles north of Basra on the River Tigris



Base Office D receipt

Postal History : Two letters from Amara to Basra signed by Philby, political dept. and not censored. The second letter is canceled on the back with poor Single Ring Amara for 12th March the day after the Indian Expeditionary Force captured Baghdad. The DR Base Office receipt dated 14th March. The first letter with illegible cancels must be February or March 1917, the only time when Philby was in Amara and Dora in Basra. Note : As usual all mail "On Field Service IEF D" is free.

Historical Notes : Philby's promotion as Revenue Commissioner for Amara in September 1916 meant that his wife Dora was one of the very few wives allowed to come to Mesopotamia. Dora was in Basra for only two months when she had to return to India once Philby was transferred to Baghdad following the capture of Baghdad on 11th March 1917. Dora finally did get to Baghdad in late 1920 when Philby was selected to assist Sir Percy Cox shape post war Iraq.

1917 : Basra to Amara, Mesopotamia

Letters to H. St John B. Philby

February and March 1917

Mesopotamia Civilian Mail – Passed by Censor



Amara Receipt dated
3 days before Basra
cancel on stamp!

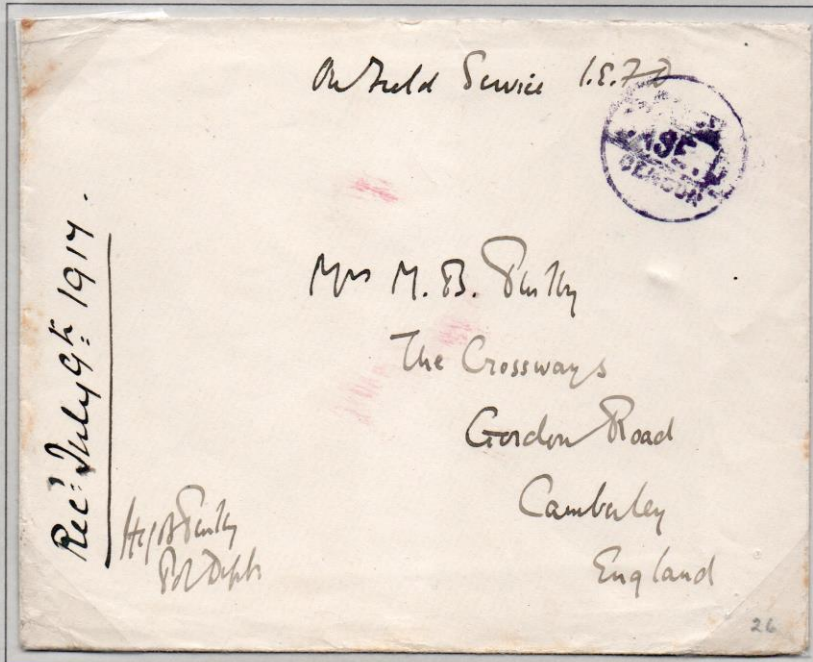


Postal History : Two letters from Basra to Amara with ½ anna Indian GV stamps paying the internal postage rate and cancelled in the Basra Post Office on 25th Feb 1917 and 14th March 1917 respectively. Both have the “Passed by Censor” purple cancels but no evidence of the letters actually being opened – no censor tape. The upper letter with an Amara SR receipt dated 22nd February – 3 days before the Basra Cancel* of posting. The second letter is canceled on the back with a Base Office receipt dated 15th March.

Historical Notes : * IEF reinforcements, now under General Maude, were advancing through Amara (100 miles north of Basra on way to recapture Kut (200 miles north of Basra) and capture Baghdad (300 miles from Basra) which occurred before the second letter was posted. 3 weeks later. The amount of civilian mail moving north at this time was likely to be miniscule – and possibly not updating the canceller could be excused! Philby had responsibilities of securing foodstuffs for the troops

1917 : Mesopotamia to Camberley, England

Letter from H. St John B. Philby



Postal History

FPO 55 : In 1917 H. St John B. Philby was stationed in Mesopotamia as a Political Agent.

Cover is signed by Philby Pol(itical) Dept and is addressed to his mother.

Cover cancelled on the back with Indian FPO 55 cancel dated 26 May but year 1917 is missing

This Indian FPO was stationed at Qurna during 1917 a station some 35 miles upriver from Basra on the opposite side of the Tigris.

Censor : The cover is cancelled with a BASE D purple censor but no evidence that the cover was opened for inspection – perhaps Philby was the inspector! Or his rank and signature were sufficient!

Inscribed On Field Service and I.E.F.D (Indian Expeditionary Forces “D”)

Receipt : Mrs May Philby was assiduous in filing all her son’s correspondence and annotated each letter as it arrived. This notes that the letter was received on July 9th 1917. A six week time is quite possible since the mail steamer to Bombay was only biweekly at this time.

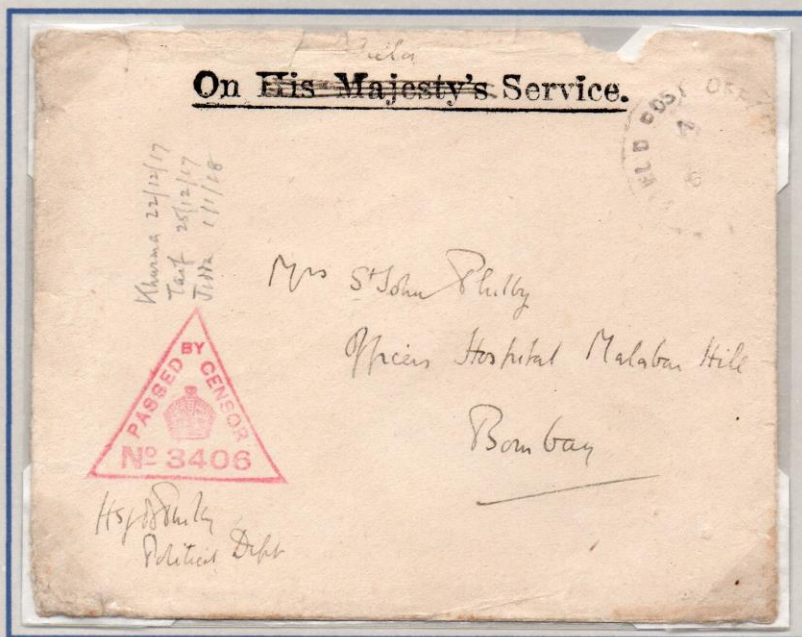
Historical Note

By the time this letter was sent the British forces had regained the initiative. Kut was retaken and Bagdad was captured on 11th March 1917. However there was still a risk from the flank due to Al Rashid siding with the Turks.

Nejd to India via Hejaz & Cairo

Letter from H. St John Philby

December 1917 > January 1918



This envelope, with the Government of India imprint on the flap, was carried by Philby on his pioneering trip across Arabia. The letter started being written at the Khurma oasis in Nejd and is the only letter ever recorded to have transited through Hejaz from Nejd. The letter appears to have been hand carried from Jeddah to Egypt where it was entered into the mail system after being censored by the Cairo censor 3406. It is signed by Philby as 'political agent' and no postal charges were due as he was "On Field Service".

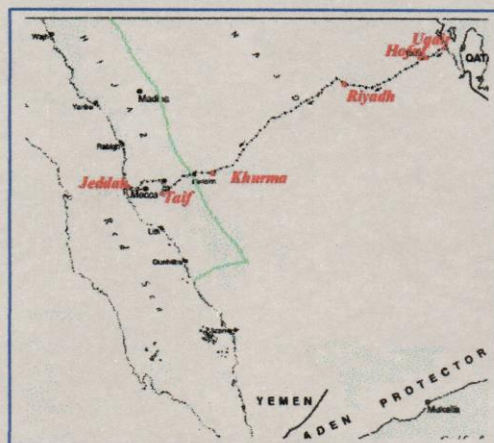
Historical Note

By December 1917 King Hussain in Hejaz and AbdulAziz ibn Saud of the Nejd were implacable rivals. In the west of Arabia Prince Feisal, son of King Hussein with Lawrence, had, by trekking north on camels captured Al Wejd and Akaba. The Turkish garrison in Medina were isolated and powerless. In the east of Arabia Ibn Saud had already driven the Turks from Al Hasa. The British, fearful that he would attack Hejaz sent Harry St. John Philby from The India Office in Mesopotamia to persuade ibn Saud to concentrate on Al Rashid in Hail who still supported the Turks.

Philby arrived in Ugair on Nov. 15th. 1917 and after a delay, traveling by camel, first went to Hofuf, then to Riyadh arriving on November 30th. Following discussions he left Riyadh on Dec 9th, again by camel and reached Khurma on the 21st. and Taif on 25th. December. Detained in Taif he eventually reached the British mission in Jeddah on Dec 31st.

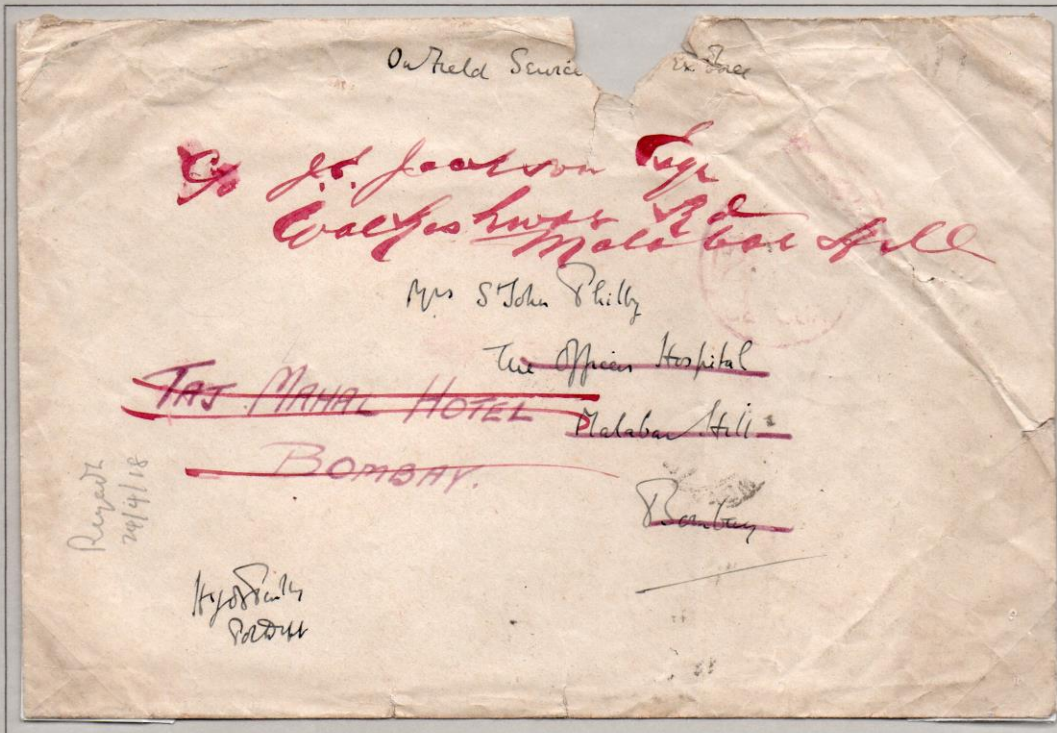
Philby was only the second westerner ever to cross Arabia and the first by a central route.

King Hussain refused to allow Philby to leave again by the 'back door' and he left Hejaz on HMS Hardinge on Jan 14th. 1918 for Suez. Philby returned to Riyadh in April 1918 via Bombay and Kuwait.



1918 : Riyadh to Kuwait (by Camel) and then to India

Letter from H. St John B. Philby



Postal History

Riyadh : This letter was written in Riyadh on April 29th 1918 to his wife. Then transported the 350 miles across the desert by camel to Kuwait – only method at this time.

Kuwait : Scarce **KOWEIT** cancel May 8th 1918, partially in red and using the old spelling.

Bombay : Malabar Hill, Bombay on May 21st. Redirected twice. Final route mark May 27th

Postage : No postage was required since Philby was “On Field Service – Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force” and his signature, Pol(itical) Dept are at the bottom left of the envelope.

Censor : A purple ‘PASSED CENSOR’ circular mark but no indication letter was opened, probably in Kuwait. Shows the envelope was already creased at that time – probably while being carried on the camel!

Note mail from Central / Eastern Arabia is unknown at this time apart from the few letters in the Philby correspondence. In fact it was 1934 before any further mail is known.

Historical Note

Philby had returned to Riyadh in April 1918 and had persuaded Ibn Saud to attack Ibn Rashid, an ally of the Turks, at his base in the northern city of Ha'il. In order not to be seen to be pressurising Ibn Saud Philby set off on May 5th until the end June exploring the desert south of Riyadh. The operation against Ibn Rashid began on August 5th 1918 with Philby in attendance but there was no great urgency the 300 mile journey took 3 weeks.. The operation failed since the promised British guns never materialized and in early October Philby was ordered back to Baghdad, by then in British hands. With the first World war over Britain lost interest in Ibn Saud.

Footnote : Ibn Saud eventually advanced against Ha'il again in 1920 and captured the city.

Philby continued in Baghdad and then succeeded T.E. Lawrence as political agent in Transjordan.

