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Serving Meter Stamp Collectors Since 1948

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Rare and unusual public, self-service, coin-operated meters



See page 18

Rare and unusual, public, self-service meters

by Richard Stambaugh

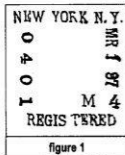


figure 1

and their relative obscurity and the difficulty of the chase has a special appeal to my adventure gene.



figure 2

Not all such stamps are hard to find though. Some, such as the production versions of the Pitney Bowes "Mailomat", which were used in the U.S. and Canada from the 1940s into the 1970s, are quite plentiful. But the Mailomats are the exception. Most metered, vending machine stamps are scarce to incredibly rare, and several are so obscure that we know virtually nothing about them. Introduced here are as many of these rare and obscure machines and their stamps as I have documented.

Some readers may be surprised to learn that the earliest postage meters were all public, coin-operated vending machines. This includes the first four postage meters in the world, the DiBrazza machine in New York, 1897¹ (figure 1), the Kahrs machine in Norway, 1900 (figure 2), and the Wales and first Moss machines of New Zealand, 1904 (figure 3). Although the stamps from these machines are incredibly rare, they are actually quite famous due to their pioneer status.

Also fairly widely known is the Wilkinson machine which was used on a trial basis in London, England from January to August, 1912 (figure 4). Despite the early year and the short period of usage, covers franked by this machine are not rare. Stamp collectors of the day were forewarned and created several hundred first day covers. Today these trade for around \$50. Non-first day covers, by contrast, are difficult to find and are highly sought after by specialists.

Similar to the British Wilkinson is the Egyptian Nessim machine of 1934 (figure 5). Stamp collectors took advantage of prior notice and cranked out first and last day covers leaving non-philatelic usages the rarities. The machine was invented by Kamal Nessim, a young Egyptian engineer, and built by the German Klussendorf company. It was in service for five months in early 1934.

Not as well known are the German experimental public, self-service meters of the early 1930s. Two machines produced by the Autofranc company were in use from 1931 to 1937. Stamps from both are very rare and closely resemble the far more common bulk mail post office stamps of the period (figure 6). They are most easily identified by the single-line date and star at the bottom of the town mark.

The world of meter stamp collecting is full of specialties and sub-categories. One of the most intriguing for me is stamps from public, self-service, stamp vending machines. The large majority of such stamps are the so-called 'Framas' (from the name of the first vendor) or 'ATM' stamps (the initials of the German words for automatic-stamp vending machine) which came on the market in the 1970s.

But meter stamp vending machines have been in use far longer than the Framas, and these other stamps are, to this writer at least, far more fascinating. Unlike the Framas, vended meter stamps are dated and must be used on the day they were purchased. The field is loaded with small players and rare stamps,



figure 3,
Moss stamp
above the
Wales



figure 4

¹ See *Meter Stamp Society Bulletin* 237, Fall 1997



18, El-Manakh Street

CAIRO
EGYPT

figure 5

Monsieur R. Chausson
4 Rue Franklin
Le Havre

J. Lufre

figure 7

France at this time also trialed a meter stamp vending machine (figure 7). From January to April, 1936, a coin-operated device was used in Paris. The 'engine' was a Neopost "Midget" postage meter that could print eight different values. Today only covers franked with the 25 and 50 centime values are known to exist and are rare.²

In the 1950s Germany tried again with public, self-service coin-operated postage meters (figure 8), and Italy also entered the game (figure 9). The Francotyp company produced a machine that saw duty at two locations in Berlin during 1954/55. The stamp impression includes the ironic slogan *ein fernsprecher spart schriftwechsel* (a telephone is faster than a letter). Properly used on cover this stamp is as rare as the Autofranc stamps of the 1930s. Unmailed proofs do exist and are less rare.

The Italian company OMT (Officine Meccaniche Taranto) produced four "Posto Automatico" machines that were set up at various locations in Rome from 1956 to 1965. The franks resemble regular meter stamps of

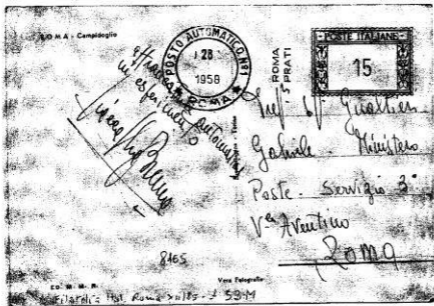


figure 9



figure 6



figure 8

the period but have "POSTO AUTOMATICO" in the town mark and print the machine's location vertically between the town mark and frank. These stamps are also rare, and few collectors outside Italy are aware of them. A single stamp from 1965 is known with the frank turned downwards instead of horizontal.³

Not as rare as the Italian "Posto Automatico" stamps but equally obscure outside their native New Zealand are the "Comac" machine stamps from the 1960s.

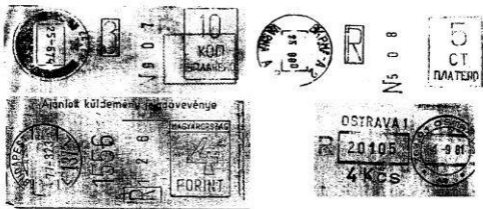
² See *Catalogue des Empreintes de Machines A Affranchir*, ACEMA, 1996

³ See *Le affrancatrici meccaniche negli Uffici Postali Italiani*, Mario Pozzati, AICAM, 1999

Coin Machines Ltd of Christchurch produced a single vending machine that was set up at the main post office for a six week trial in 1964.⁴ The stamp was large and contained "C.P.O. CH." (for Chief Post Office, Christchurch) in the bottom panel (figure 10a). Eight years later in 1972 Comac produced a suite of similar machines that were installed one each in all the larger cities of New Zealand. The stamps are smaller than the 1964 issue but still contain "C.P.O." and a town abbreviation (figure 10b). The smaller stamps are not as rare as the first version but are still difficult to find.



figures 10a and b



figures 11a and b over 11c and d

A strange group of meter vending machines for registered mail originated in the Soviet Union in the early 1970s. They were produced by the only native Soviet producer of postage meters which is usually referred to as the "Perm" company because little is known about it other than the town where it was located. The Perm factory produced much of the Soviet Union's stamp canceling machines and postage meters. In addition to within the USSR (figure 11a) Perm self-service registered mail machines were installed in Bulgaria (figure 11b), Hungary (11c) and Czechoslovakia (11d). It is possible Iron Curtain countries Romania. The stamps find other than as proofs. Surprisingly rarest of the lot, known unaddressed cover. Hungary stamp at 11c from the actual stamp the top.)



figure 12

Shortly before the Perm machine was installed in Czechoslovakia, a similar device, manufactured locally, was introduced at a post office in Prague and used also for registered mail (figure 12). During its short run in 1973 only 528 pieces of mail were franked, and of these perhaps about 25 exist in collectors' hands today.⁵

⁴ Details taken from the printed text on a first day cover

⁵ *A Short Outline of the History and Types of Postage Meter Stamps of Czechoslovakia*, Bouška and Leiš, privately published paper, date unknown



figure 13

You may think the stamps just described are obscure, but wait till you read about the next few puppies. In 1996 India's Kilburn company modified one of their Model K999 machines for use as a coin-operated, public vending machine (figure 13). The meter was in service for one month only (April) and decommissioned because of technical problems. The frank is identical to those of commercial Kilburn meters of the time and can be identified by the dateless town mark which reads "PARLIAMENT STREET H.O.100011" at the bottom.⁶

A small company in Japan, Kokuto Koki Kogyo, prepared two machines that were trialed publicly in 1970 and 1972 (figure 14). Beyond realizing the stamps are very rare we know nothing about the tests or the machines because the only documentation we could find is written in Japanese. We welcome help from any of our Japanese members. In 1975 the larger Matsushita Electric Corporation produced a fleet of meter stamp vending machines which remained in use for several years. The stamps are not rare.

Many years before the "Perm" self-service registration machines were fielded, a coin-operated self-service meter was demonstrated at the "Automatic Post Office" in the Exhibition of Socialist Communications in Moscow in 1933. A single cover, mailed locally within Moscow, is all that we know of today (see front cover of *Bulletin*).

In addition to the Perm registration machine used in Bulgaria, we have proof that an earlier self-service meter was used in Sofia. To quote from the *Meter Postage Stamp Catalogue* by S.D. Barfoot and Werner Simon, "At least one coin-free Post Office meter machine, for public use, is known to have been used in Sofia about 1938, value impressed - 2 leva." Mr. Barfoot's philatelic estate came on the market several years ago, and among his papers was a handwritten note with a diagram of the machine that produced this 2 leva stamp (schematic reproduction at figure 15). This is all we have; no stamp or cover known.

A more recent invention is the "SmartMail" system installed by the Midland Bank at Loughborough University in Britain (figure 16). It was a debit card-operated Pitney Bowes meter located in the entrance hall of the Student Union building. It was first installed as a countertop device in June, 1989 but was replaced by a more secure version locked in a kiosk in October (more secure against beer spills and such according to an observer). The trial lasted only until the end of August, 1990, a total of fourteen months. We know of the machine only because the son of a stamp collector attended the University at the time and wrote his father about it knowing he would be interested. The few covers franked with the stamp that exist today are due to this young man posting mail to his father. The frank is identical to those of any Pitney Bowes 6900 series meter of the time and can be identified by the town mark which reads LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY, the fact that it was printed in green ink, and the "SMART MAIL TRIAL" slogan.⁷



figure 16

⁶ *Indian Postal Meter Markings*, Dr. Ranjit Singh Gandhi, AICAM, 1999, page 113

⁷ Information derived from private correspondence and a Midland Bank brochure obtained by the referenced stamp collector and his son

Bulgaria P.O. Slot machine 1939.

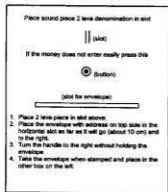


figure 15

And now one of my favorites: Some time ago I came into possession of a cover impressed with two different meter stamp impressions (figure 17). The bottom stamp, in purple, is a standard specimen of a Pitney Bowes Model H meter of the early 1930s except for its highly unusual single circle town mark that reads "DROFMATS .NNOC" ("STAMFORD CONN." backwards). A handwritten note says "flat [bed] press, single rubber platen". Interesting and worthy of research, but that's only potatoes compared to the meaty British stamp at the top. Applied in red, it is of a common design in use from 1937 to 1953 but differs in the meter number "PP1" and the single circle town mark with year date at bottom and time of day at right. No other British meter stamps have these features. The handwritten note for this stamp reads "British Pillar-Post Mach[ine]" which implies that the stamp came from a self-service meter operating at a public site sometime in 1939. Since I acquired this cover I have shown it to meter stamp experts in Britain, but they were as stumped as I am.

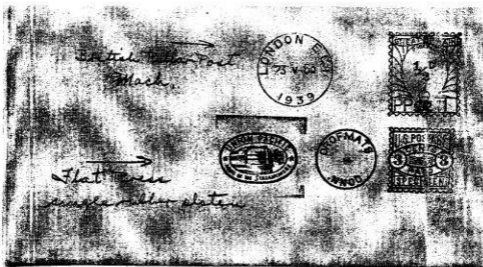


figure 18

Other rare and unusual, public, self-service meter stamp vending machines have been used. Among them are the "Zipster", ASM Services' "Automated Shipping Machine", Washington, DC's National Postal Museum postcard frankers, and the "Postcard Express" located in the Mall of America, Minnesota. All these are described in the Hawkins-Stambaugh *United States Postage Meter Stamp Catalog, 2001 Update*. Records exist of trials of several public, coin-operated machines from 1903 to 1906 in Australia but no stamps or covers are known to exist from these tests.⁸ We have a tantalizing memory of a cover from Romania or other eastern European country franked with a meter stamp that has the signs of vending machine origin, but the cover is now lost. I am certain other self-service meter trials took place and covers so franked exist. Perhaps you will be the first to discover one of them. Good luck!

⁸ *The History of the Franking Machine in Australia, Volume I*, Richard C. Peck, privately printed, 1977