

## TPOs – Time for New Research

Mike Murphy (ESC 240)

Eleven of the 14 members at the meeting on January 8 showed TPO material – yet, remarkably, when we published a register of members' interests in 2007, not a single member volunteered TPOs as an interest. Perhaps this is because although everyone has TPO markings, the listings in Peter Smith's magisterial *Travelling Post Offices of Egypt* had led people to believe that all the work had been done.

But Peter's book was published in 1983, and the discoveries made since then

– but not recorded – must run into hundreds if not thousands. A glance at any recent ESC auction list will show several entries detailing earlier or later dates, or varieties in type, or even different routes using the same type of marking. The book, though apparently comprehensive, was no more than a first step...

Clearly there is much to be done to augment the sterling work of Professor Smith. The late Anatole Ott was interested in TPOs, but his collection has now been sold. Peter Heim in Germany has offered to co-operate by handing over his records to anyone interested in updating the listings. This is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss.

The January meeting was fascinating not only by the range of material but by the interest it aroused, some members encouraged to look at the markings for the first time, others to ask the basic question – how did the system work? How was it that some covers received postal markings on the train that carried them towards their destination? Members showed dates earlier than Peter Smith's, later than Peter's, or types that Peter had not recorded, or types similar to, but not quite the same as, those recorded in the book.



*Fig. 1 – Ambulant Suez with B reversed*

Enthusiasm for a study meeting was infectious. Agreement to defer the post-Monarchy meeting to next year and replace it with a TPO meeting in September was unanimous. This is a fascinating area where material is not difficult to find; very many covers travelled by train, a large percentage received TPO markings.



The meeting did throw up queries that could not immediately be answered, including (*left*), the date slug on this rare Ufficio Natante ("floating office", Smith pp. 19-20) marking, struck on a Third Issue 5-piastre, in which the date is clearly expressed as two figures (81) rather than the normal full four-figure year indicator. Brian Sedgley (ESC 268) asks if anyone has seen another? Another special variety was shown on a card from Edmund Hall (ESC 238), with the

"very rare" Suez Ambulant with star and crescent (Type 2A2) dated October 1891 and the "B" of Ambulant clearly reversed (*Fig. 1*). Has anyone seen one like it?

And what about the single-name markings of this type? If a postmark reads, for instance, Port Taufiq / TPO, or Suez / Ambulant – which two towns is it serving? Another lively discussion revolved around the various types reading Cairo / TPO 24 / E (5C1 and 5c1.1), and the TPO 19 / Alexandria (5E1). In the former case the "E" might indicate "Express" for Train 24 was indeed an Express – but running from Alexandria to Cairo, not the other way round. The Cairo-Alex Express was Train 25. And Train 19 was another Express, from Cairo to Alex.

An entirely different type of postal marking was presented by Cyril Defriez (ESC 172). Though it is clearly a TPO type, marked on train No 83 with the European wording *Ityai el Barud-Shabrakhit & V.V.*, it conforms to none of Peter Smith's types, and has only the word *saayra* (ie, "travelling") in the Arabic top segment (right). Again, has anyone seen one like it?



Although not strictly TPO, another query arose on a cover with two TPO transit marks, Dumiat-Tanta/TPO, 5A3, and Biala-Shirbin/Ambt, 3A1b, on the reverse – it seems that the cover from the unusual small town of Qostantinia to Cairo lost its stamp at some stage en route and was supplied with a large rectangular "FRANCO" handstamp indicating in effect, "postage paid". This marking is larger and more square than normally seen ... has anyone seen one like it?

The afternoon was full of such queries and produced a good deal of discussion and enlightenment. Clearly the experiment was a success, and it seems fitting that we should strike while the iron is hot and follow up quickly with a study meeting in September rather than introduce a different new area for research and study.



grist to the mill. It is happily not necessary to make further recordings of dates within those recorded in 1983; and members should please help the co-ordinators by listing their offerings in order according to Peter Smith's types, and classified by his type numbers.

The results of our researches will be placed on the Circle website, where they will help to realise one of the aims of the site – to publish updates to well-known material for the benefit of all members and without the necessity of going to the trouble and expense of publishing a new book!

\*\* As a footnote to the above, we are delighted to say that we shall shortly be putting on the website the complete text and listing of Peter Smith's wonderful – but long outdated – book *The Travelling Post Offices of Egypt*, published in 1983. We are grateful indeed to Professor Smith and to the Mobile Post Office Society of the United States, the original publishers, for allowing us to give all members the opportunity to check their collections against the listings in advance of the important TPO study meeting at Stampex on September 17.