

THE HUDSON BAY COMPANY

The Hudson Bay Company (HBC) was incorporated in England in 1670 to seek out the famed North West Passage to the Pacific Ocean and to occupy lands adjacent to Hudson Bay and carry on such commerce as might prove profitable from these lands.

In truth, the lands involved were immense. The territory became known as Rupert's Land (named after Prince Rupert, a cousin of King Charles II and first governor of the HBC) and extended from Labrador to the Rocky Mountains and from the headwaters of the Red River to Chesterfield Inlet. The map below shows the extent of the lands initially controlled by the HBC.



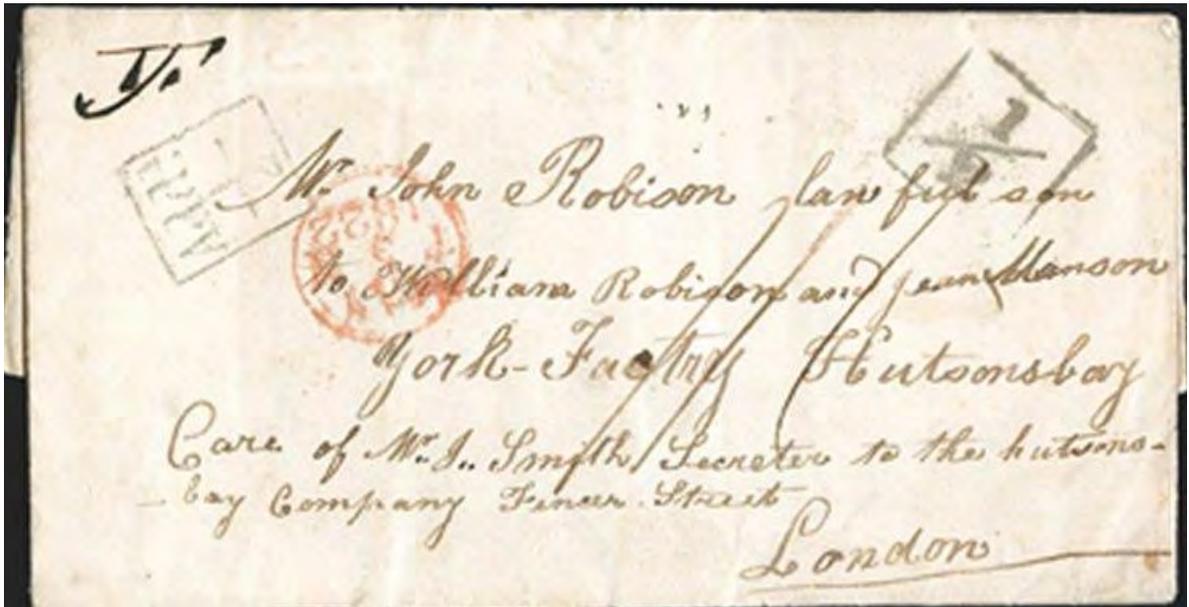
These lands grew significantly, to the west and north, when the HBC and the North West Company merged in 1821. The HBC initially established trading posts on the shores of Hudson and James Bays to facilitate the fur trade. After the British took control of Canada from France in 1760 they also built fur trading posts inland at Cumberland House (in 1774) and Norway House (in 1817).

In 1870, the HBC lands were sold to the Canadian Government for £300,000 plus title to one twentieth of the lands in the 'fertile belt' along with the mineral rights on all these lands.

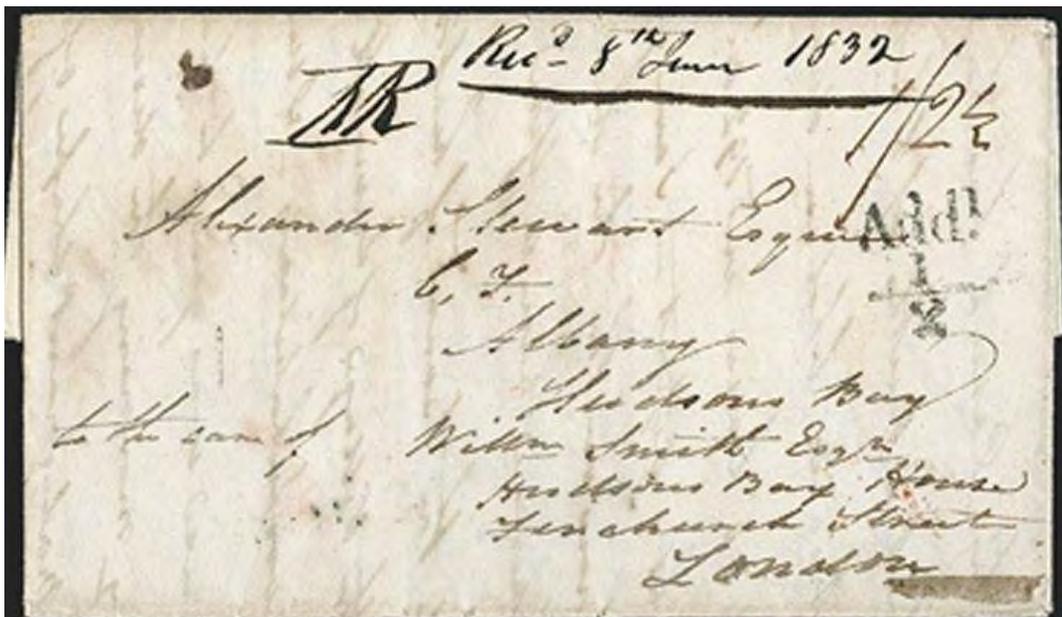
The HBC was governed solely from England until 1931. It continues to trade to this day and its' large department stores are a feature of most Canadian cities.

THE HUDSON BAY COMPANY – EARLY MAIL INTO CANADA

When the bay was ice-free from late May to October, the Company ran regular ships to and from it's trading posts on Hudson Bay to England, carrying supplies into the Forts and furs back to the UK. These ships also carried mails. These early mails into Canada were bundled up, at the HBC headquarters in London, for delivery to the various Forts with only the top copy carrying an indication of the destination of the bundle, written in manuscript ciphers as on the examples below.



May 1822 letter from Edinburgh to York Factory, showing the YF cipher at top left.



February 1832 letter from Musselburgh to Moose River, showing the MR cipher at top left.

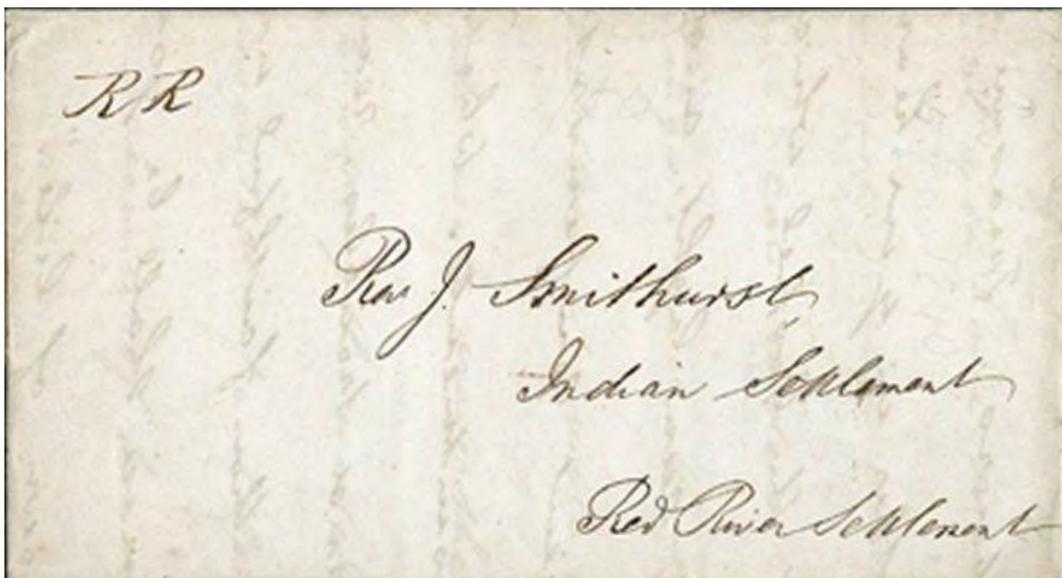
The postal rates shown on these covers are for the UK postage from origin to London.

THE RED RIVER SETTLEMENT – EARLY MAIL

The Red River settlement was established in 1811 by Thomas Douglas, the 5th Earl of Selkirk. Most of the early settlers to this area came from Sutherland in Scotland – a result of the Highland Clearances (1). The settlement was set up on a 120,000 square mile tract of land granted to Douglas by the Hudson Bay Company. Mail to and from the Red River Settlement was initially carried by the HBC. The main town in the settlement was Upper Fort Garry which, much later, was to become Winnipeg.



May 1826 letter from Stornaway, Lewis to the Red River Settlement sent via the HBC offices in London. Note the 'RRS' cipher at top left.



June 1840 letter from London, England to the Red River Settlement. Carried by the HBC and showing their 'RR' cipher at top left.

1. You can read about their incredible journey from Sutherland to the Red River in a book entitled 'Set Adrift Upon the World: The Sutherland Clearances' written by James Hunter.

MAIL FROM THE RED RIVER SETTLEMENT

By the early 1850's there was a significant settlement in the Red River area and a post office was opened at (Upper) Fort Garry in 1853, despite there being no postal network to connect the office to the remainder of the Canadian postal system. Any mail was carried on an informal basis across the USA border to the town of Pembina in North Dakota which lay some 2 miles south of the Canadian border. Letters were then routed via the USA postal service, which operated a monthly service as far west as Pembina, and crossed back into Canada further east. From 1853 to 1869 all mail sent out from Fort Garry was paid in USA cents or stamps with the addition of a 1 penny charge to carry the letter to Pembina.



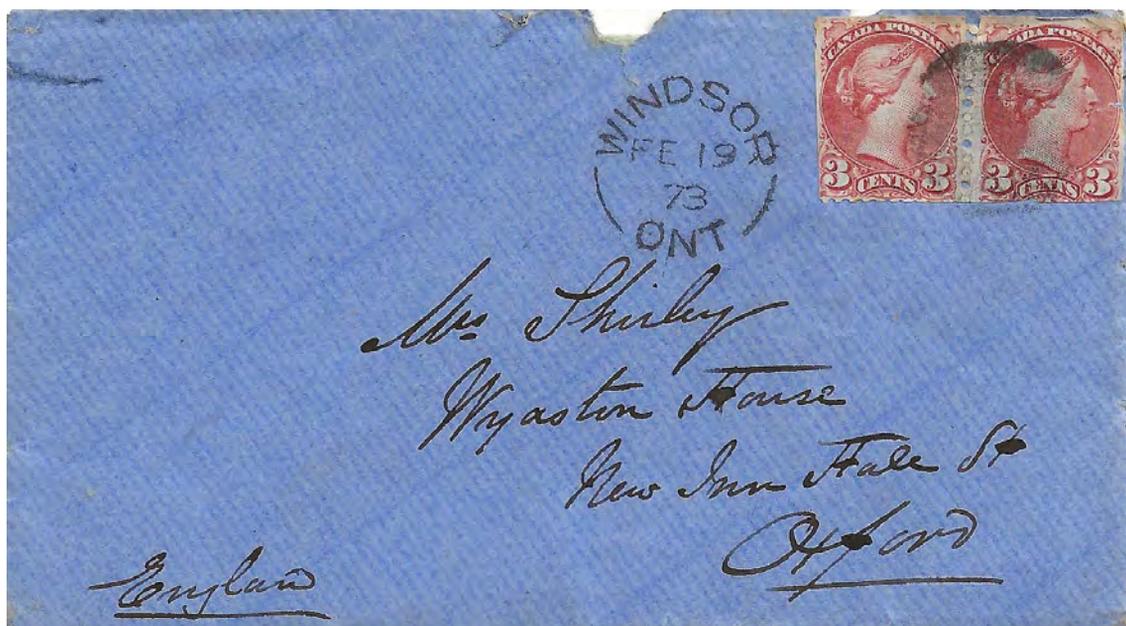
January 1856 letter from the Red River Settlement to Toronto. Carried by hand across the border to Pembina and placed in the USA mails and thus charged 10 US cents. The hand-drawn Red River postmark is one of two types employed on early mail from Upper Fort Garry.

In 1870, the mail service to and from Fort Garry became slightly more formal. From that date, correspondence between Manitoba and other parts of Canada and beyond passed in closed mails, made up at Fort Garry, to Windsor, Ontario. These mails were still conveyed by the USA post office via Pembina, St. Paul and Detroit. The service operated three times a week.

MAIL TO THE UK FROM YORK FACTORY

The letter below was written on 30 November 1872 at York Factory, a small settlement on the shores of Hudson Bay. It took 98 days to reach Oxford in England. The sender, W. Kirkby was an Archdeacon sent to the far north of Canada by the Church Missionary Society to 'convert the natives' to Christianity. The letter was carried by hand by Packeteers from York Factory to Norway House, some 500 miles distant at the northern end of Lake Winnipeg, and entered the mails in Fort Garry (now Winnipeg) another 300 miles south before passing to Windsor, Ontario via the USA postal system and onward to the UK by Allan Line vessel. The 6 cents Allan Line rate applied even from Manitoba.

York Factory, Manitoba to Oxford, England, 30th November 1872.

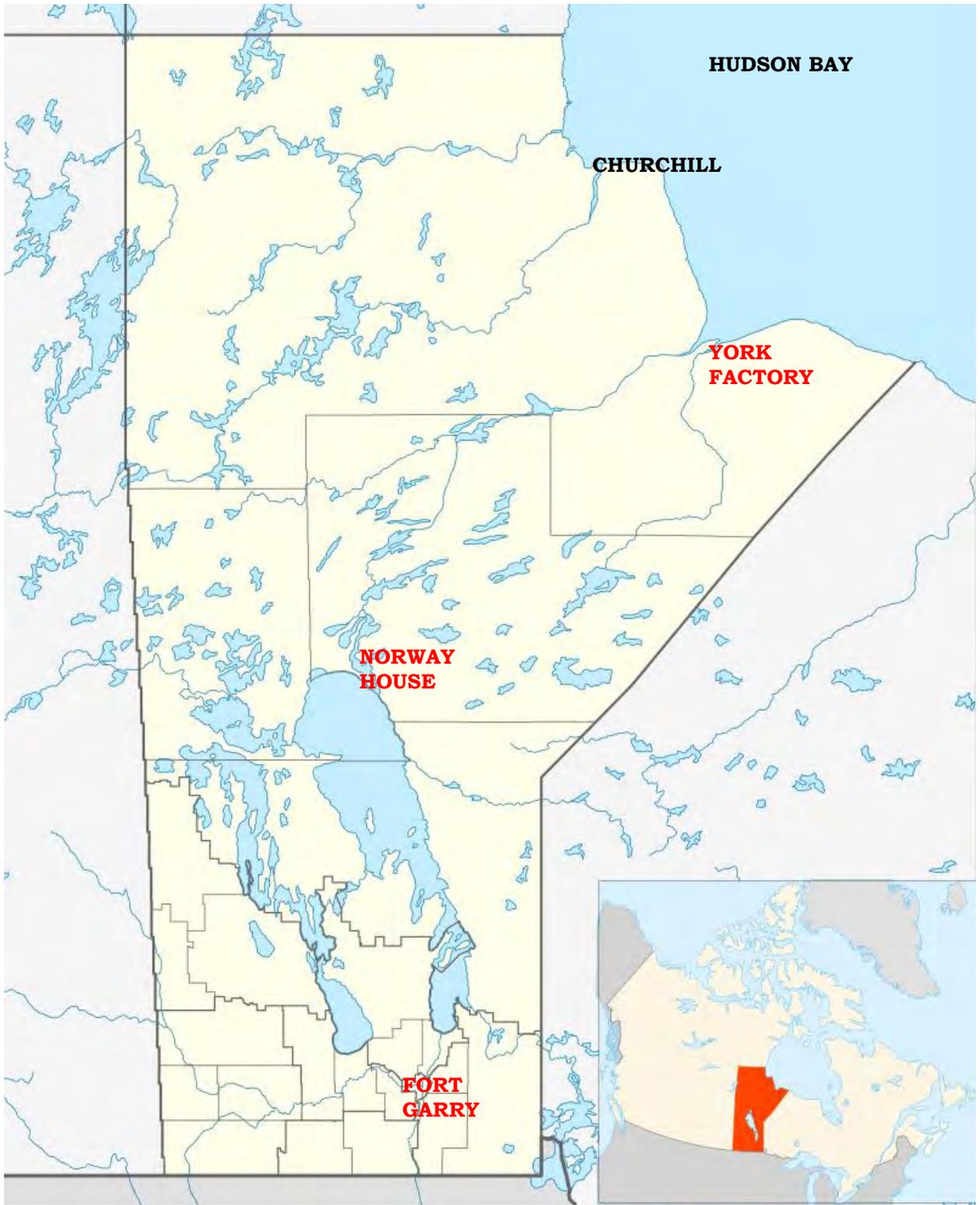


The enclosed letter reads in part.....'but I shall fully hope to have a letter from you by the returning of the Packeteers, they leave here on Monday to walk up to Norway House - 500 miles - and unless I send you a line now, I shall not have an opportunity of doing so until March.....but they will not return until the middle of January'

'..... In September we had a week or two of very nice weather which I devoted to photography..... I will enclose a specimen or two'

Some of the photos that were enclosed with the letter are shown on the following sheets.

YORK FACTORY – THE OVERLAND MAIL ROUTE IN AND OUT



Upper Fort Garry was renamed Winnipeg in 1876. Lower Fort Garry was built by the HBC in 1830 on the Red River about 20 miles north of Winnipeg. A Post Office opened at (Upper) Fort Garry in 1853 and was renamed Winnipeg in May 1876. A Post Office existed at Lower Fort Garry only from 1874.

YORK FACTORY IN SEPTEMBER 1872

York Factory is located at the mouth of the Hayes River as it flows into Hudson Bay. It lies approx. 200km south-southeast of Churchill. It was one of the first fur trading posts established by the Hudson Bay Company. Built in 1684, it was used for HBC business for over 270 years. The settlement was the headquarters of the HBC Northern Department from 1821 to 1873.



The Fort, Tents, Ice and bits of the Bay from the South



A front view of the Fort. Ice and snow outside the fence.

Photographs taken by Archdeacon W. Kirkby and enclosed in a letter sent to England in November 1872.

YORK FACTORY IN SEPTEMBER 1872



Mission House Office in York



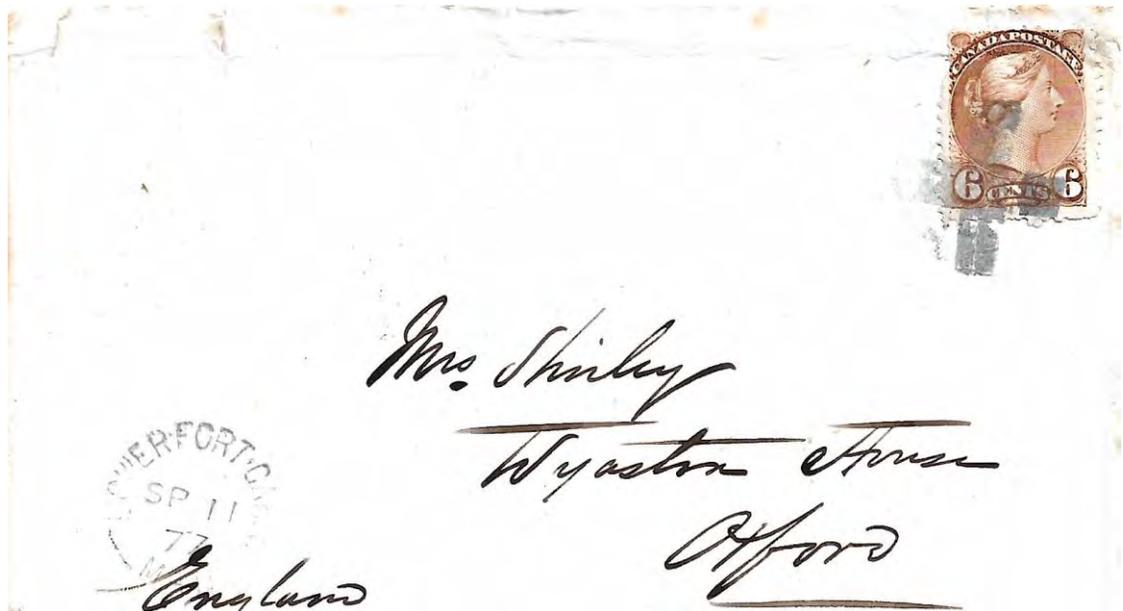
The Church and Fort from the North

Photographs taken by Archdeacon W. Kirkby and enclosed in a letter sent to England in November 1872.

MAIL TO THE UK FROM YORK FACTORY

The letter below was written on 25 May 1877 at York Factory, a small settlement on the shores of Hudson Bay. It arrived in Oxford, England on 2 October. The sender, W. Kirkby was an Archdeacon sent to the far north of Canada to 'convert the natives' to Christianity. The letter was carried by hand by Packeteers from York Factory to Norway House, some 500 miles distant at the northern end of Lake Winnipeg, and entered the mails at Lower Fort Garry (near Winnipeg) another 300 miles south on 11 September before passing via Hamilton, Ontario and onward to the UK by Allan Line vessel. Although the packet rate to England had been reduced to 5 cents in 1875, news of this had apparently not reached northern Manitoba even 2 years later!

York Factory, Manitoba to Oxford, England, 25th May 1877.



The enclosed letter reads in part..... ‘ I am now busy preparing for my long journey to Severn and Trout Lake..... The ice broke up 2 days ago We shall not see a single individual until we reach Trout Lake – a period of 18 to 20 days....’



MAIL TO THE UK FROM YORK FACTORY

The letter below was written on 24 August 1877 at York Factory, a small settlement on the shores of Hudson Bay. It arrived in Oxford, England on 24 November. The sender, W. Kirkby was an Archdeacon sent to the far north of Canada to 'convert the natives' to Christianity. On this occasion, the sender took advantage of a Hudson Bay Co ship that was leaving the area in September and asked them to carry the letter to London for him outside of the mails. The reverse carries the oval handstamp of Dickinson & Stewart, Mansion House Buildings, London. They put the letter into the mail in London and it arrived in Oxford the same day.

York Factory, Manitoba to Oxford, England, 24th August 1877.



home for the Bible Society to
print ~~and~~ I shall indeed rejoice
to

York Factory
Hudson's Bay
Aug: 24th 1877

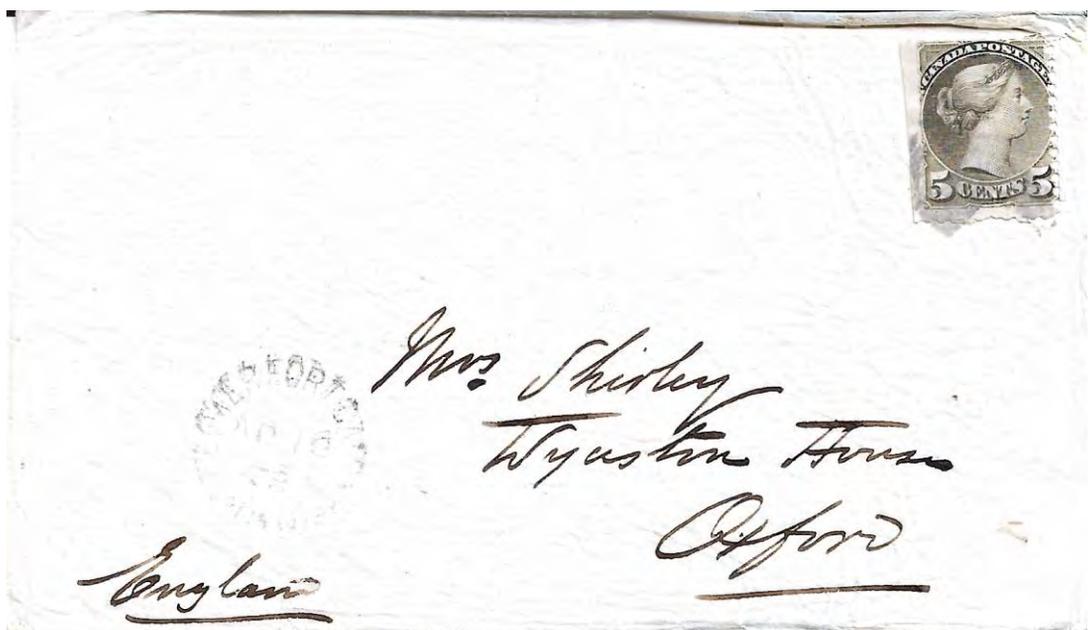
My dear Mrs. Shirley,
You must have forgotten
what I said to you about the beginning



MAIL TO THE UK FROM YORK FACTORY

The letter below was written on 14 February 1878 at York Factory, a small settlement on the shores of Hudson Bay. It arrived in Oxford, England on 9 May. The sender, W. Kirkby was an Archdeacon sent to the far north of Canada to 'convert the natives' to Christianity. The letter was carried by Packeteers from York Factory to Norway House, some 500 miles distant at the northern end of Lake Winnipeg and then entered the mails at Lower Fort Garry (near Winnipeg) a further 300 miles south. It was routed via Hamilton (24 April) and then onward by Allan Line ship to England.

York Factory, Manitoba to Oxford, England, 14th February 1878.



The enclosed letter reads in part..... 'I wrote to you by the departure of the Ship in September but of course that letter did not reach you until some time after the one lying before me had been sent....' Correspondence between the UK and these far flung parts of the Colony were clearly rather disjointed and it would have been rare to send or receive more than two letters in a year.