

# 1940: A Desperate Year for Britain

## Introduction

This exhibit chronicles from a British perspective both military and civilian aspects of events during 1940, the first calendar year of World War Two. It is a year when despite defeats Britain determines to fight on.

Militarily the year opens quietly, British forces in France experiencing a 'Phoney War', but at sea the Royal Navy is fully engaged endeavouring to protect Atlantic convoys from German attack.

In April Germany invades Denmark and Norway before unleashing a *Blitzkrieg* attack against the Low Countries and France. By the beginning of June British forces are driven from continental Europe.

Come the summer the British people are adapting to war-time conditions while the armed forces prepare to defend the country against invasion. It is now that the Royal Air Force struggles to deny the Luftwaffe air supremacy over Britain during what has become known as the Battle of Britain.

Italy's declaration of war on 10 June compels Britain to fight on a second front, vital military resources needed to repel the anticipated German invasion now being diverted to the Mediterranean and North Africa to counter the Italian threat.

As the year draws to a close the threat of imminent German invasion recedes and initial Italian successes are reversed, but the combined might of the Axis Powers remains largely undiminished. 1940 has been a desperate year for Britain, but the country although bloodied is not bowed.

- > **Notes** - i) Scarce or rare items are mounted on dark blue. ii) All booklets in the exhibit contain their full number of stamps. iii) The main text is in 12 pt. supporting text in 9pt and Philatelic text in 9pt Italics.
- > **Philatelic Note** - Many covers in this exhibit are from members of the armed forces of the belligerent nations. Their mail was post-free, unless sent by airmail or registered post. Prisoner of War mail and mail sent by military personnel interned in neutral countries was also post-free.



While British politicians talk of peace Germany secretly reams and trains in preparation for war. Me 109 fighter aircraft are being built at Messerschmitt's Regensburg factory.

## Plan of Exhibit

- 1 Britain reluctantly goes to war again. (2 pages)**
  - 1.1 The failure of appeasement ....
  - 1.2 .... leads to the declaration of war.
- 2. 1940 opens quietly in France, but hostilities intensify at sea. (11 pages)**
  - 2.1 British Forces arriving in France, deploy, dig in ....
  - 2.2 .... and wait.
  - 2.3 Meanwhile the Royal Navy sallies forth to blockade Germany ....
  - 2.4 .... and defend Britain's maritime trade ....
  - 2.5 .... against determined German predators.
- 3. By spring British forces are being driven from continental Europe.... (14 pages)**
  - 3.1 Germany strikes north, ....
  - 3.2 .... Britain's failed Norwegian campaign .....
  - 3.3 .... prompting the occupation of the Faroe Islands and Iceland.
  - 3.4 Hitler's ensuing westward offensive quickly overruns Holland and Belgium ....
  - 3.5 .... and drives the British Expeditionary Force from France ....
  - 3.6 .... resulting in dire consequences.
- 4. ....while at home the civilian population is adjusting to a 'people's war'. (14 pages)**
  - 4.1 Fear of aerial attack prompts the implementation of drastic precautions ....
  - 4.2 .... while security measures are imposed and aliens interned.
  - 4.3 Industry goes onto a war footing, women enter the workforce and ....
  - 4.4 .... conserving resources is officially encouraged.
  - 4.5 Raising funds to fight the war and feeding the population become priorities.
- 5. Come the summer the threat of invasion becomes real .... (12 pages)**
  - 5.1 Despite defeat in Europe Britain determines to fight on ....
  - 5.2 .... supported by Dominion troops and other Allies in Britain.
  - 5.3 While RAF Bomber Command takes the battle to the enemy ....
  - 5.4 .... the dual for air supremacy over Britain becomes a tenacious struggle ....
  - 5.5 .... culminating in the Blitz.
- 6. .... as Britain is compelled to fight on a second front. (8 pages)**
  - 6.1 Italy's declaration of war ushers in a Mediterranean naval struggle ....
  - 6.2 .... and military engagements in north and east Africa.
  - 6.3 As Allied reinforcements arrive ....
  - 6.4 .... Greece becomes an unwelcome commitment.
- 7. The year closes with Britain bloodied, but not bowed. (2 pages)**
  - 7.1 With success in North Africa and ....
  - 7.2 .... the threat on invasion receding Britain remains defiant.

Total Pages in Exhibit - 64 (A3)



Motivated by a desire to avoid the carnage of another European war Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, pursues a policy of appeasement in his diplomatic dealings with Germany. The 'Wert Keinen Pfennig' (Not Worth a Pfennig) Feldpost card graphically reflects German opinion of Neville Chamberlain.

## 1. Britain reluctantly goes to war again.

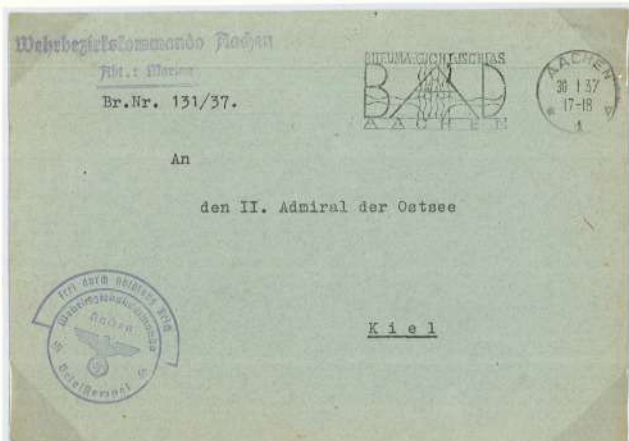
On coming to power in 1934 Hitler aggressively pursues a policy to recover former German territories lost under the terms of the Versailles Treaty. Within four years Saar, the demilitarized Rhineland and Austria are subsumed into the Third Reich. Britain raises little opposition.



Hitler gains support for this aggressive policy by exploiting German resentment towards the punitive terms of the Versailles Treaty.



The Saar Plebiscite, held on 13 January 1935, overwhelmingly supports the re-unification with Germany. The Saar has previously been under the jurisdiction of the League of Nations. Germany issued two stamps prior to the plebiscite emphasising its claim to Saar.



German troops re-occupy the Rhineland on 7 March 1936 in breach of the Versailles Treaty. British and French inaction encourages Hitler to continue his expansionist plans. Cachets identify this cover as coming from the Wehrbezirkskommando (Military District Headquarters) in Aachen, a town within the remilitarized Rhineland.



Hitler's response to the proposed plebiscite is immediate. On 12 March German troops march unopposed into Austria and on the following day Hitler proclaims the *Anschluss*, the union of the two countries. Hitler enters Vienna on 14 March to enthusiastic applause. Hitler's presence in Vienna was marked by this special slogan cancel used for only one day.



Germany and Austria issued stamps simultaneously to mark the plebiscite held on 10 April which endorsed the *Anschluss*. The German stamp is the larger of the two.



The 'Reich Commissioner for the Reunion of Austria to the German Reich' sets up his office in the Austrian Parliament building.



The Austrian Army is incorporated into the German Wehrmacht.

## 1.1 The failure of appeasement ....



Austria is the next acquisition. Despite being predominantly German speaking the Austrian Government attempts to resist Hitler's pressure to form a union of the two countries. Chancellor Schuschnigg announces a plebiscite for 13 March 1938 calling for a 'Yes' vote in support of Austria's continuing independence. Two cachets, 'Every Austrian vote with Yes' and 'With Schuschnigg for a free Austria - Yes', were used on 11 March.



German postal stationery bearing the imprint of the 'Austrian Plebiscite' stamp cancelled with a 'Day of the Great German Empire' hand stamp showing the merged countries of Germany and Austria.



Confident of not being challenged Hitler now looks to Germany's eastern borders. Following British and French acquiescence to his demands at Munich Hitler's troops occupy the Sudetenland, the German speaking area of Czechoslovakia, on 1 October 1938. They march into the remainder of the country on 15 March 1939.



Neville Chamberlain, Britain's Prime minister, returns to Britain believing he has secured 'Peace in our time'



Eduard Benes, the Czech President, resigns and flees to Britain.

The annexation of the Sudetenland is given visual expression on a German postal stationery card.



Posted in Asch this card bears the first 'Self liberation' cachet to be used in the Sudetenland. The text reads, 'The yoke has been removed and we are free and will stay free'. It is believed that this and similar cachets were prepared before the German invasion.

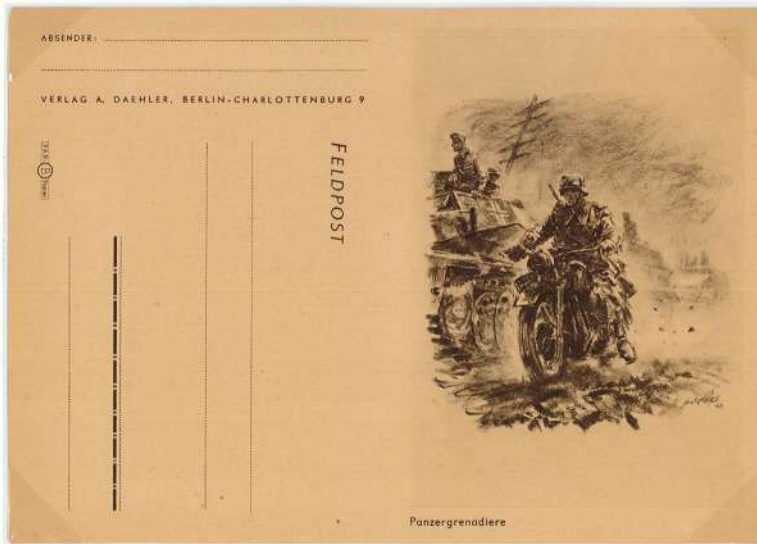


The Czech provinces of Slovakia and Bohemia & Moravia initially proclaim their separate identities by overprinting Czech stamps.

On 1 September 1939 Hitler invades Poland. Using a manufactured dispute over Danzig as a pretext, German forces cross the border into Poland at 04.30 hours unleashing a blitzkrieg assault that totally overwhelms the Polish defenders.



By concentrating tanks and mechanised infantry on a narrow front, closely supported by ground attack aircraft, the tactic of blitzkrieg enables German forces to decisively punch through Polish defensive lines.



In a radio broadcast to the British people Chamberlain declares war against Germany on 3 September 1939, Hitler having ignored Britain's ultimatum demanding the withdrawal of German forces from Poland.



Despite the Poles courageous defence of their country German tactics and superior military hardware renders it an unequal struggle. Poland surrenders on 27 September, its capital in ruins.

2. 1940 opens quietly in France, but hostilities intensify at sea.

The British military response to the declaration of war is immediate, advance army units of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) arriving in France on 4 September, the main force disembarking at Cherbourg six days later. Further reinforcements follow and by May 1940 the British Army in France numbers 394,165.



British light tanks disembark and move quickly away from the port areas.



A significant proportion of the BEF consist of under trained Territorial Army divisions.

Moving up to the French-Belgium border the BEF prepare defensive positions. What they do not anticipate is the long period of inactivity that drags on into 1940, what becomes known as the 'Phoney War'.



GHQ, BEF is established near Arras, close to the French-Belgium border.



Many troops are assigned to labouring duties including trench digging and airfield construction.

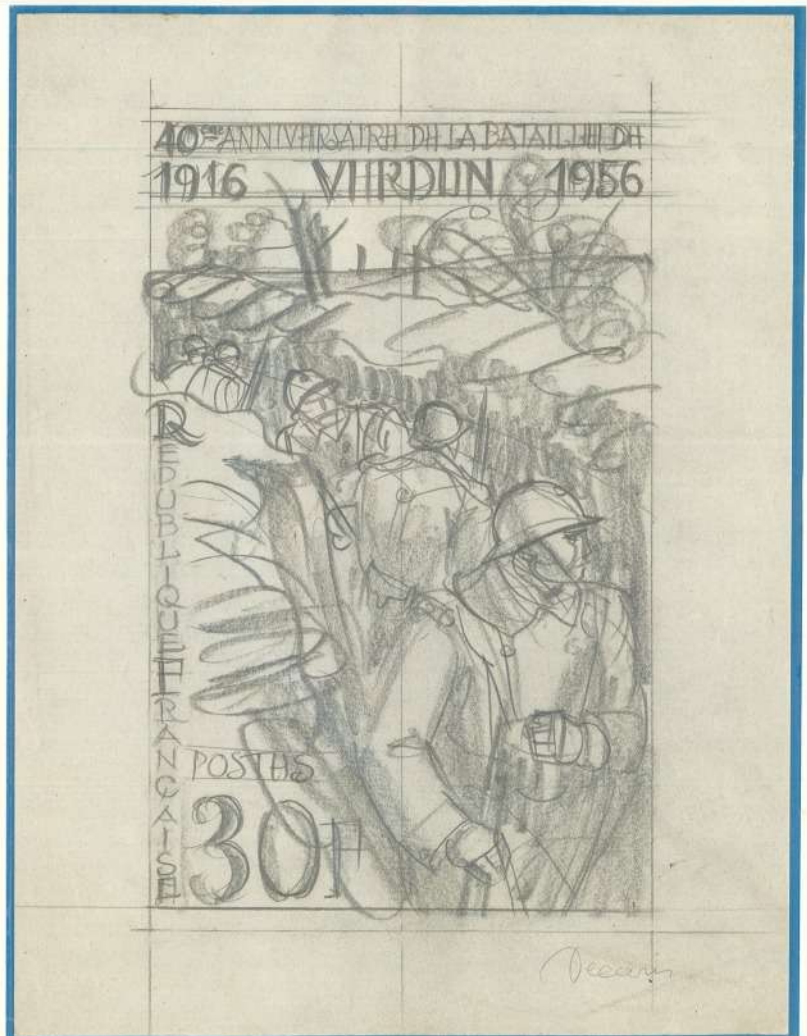


Endless nights of sentry duty on the French border results in 99% boredom, 1% fright.



Original artwork and die proof, both signed by the designer and engraver Albert Decaris. The issued French stamp marked the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Verdun.

2.1 British forces arriving in France deploy, dig in ....





Two separate RAF formations accompany the BEF to France, the Air Component of the BEF co-operating with the British and French Armies and the Advanced Air Striking Forces (AASF) under the direct control of Bomber Command. The RAF immediately goes into action, flying countless reconnaissance sorties and intercepting the occasional Luftwaffe incursion.



At the time of posting No 139 Squadron flying Blenheims from Bethenville is using the RAF Censor No 107 cachet. In France the RAF used its own identifiable Type R1 censor cachets. Field Post Office 33 (FPO) was used by an Air Force Postal Unit (AFPU) from 20 January.



Due to the bitterly harsh winter AASF pilots fly south to Perpignan/La Salanque to undertake bomb aiming, gunnery and night flying training.

Royal Mail Stamps Ten at 10p

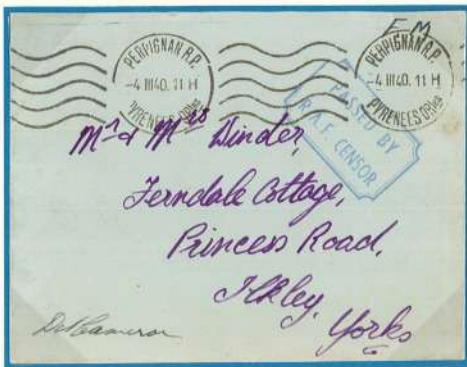
While Hurricane, Gladiator and Lysander squadrons of the Air Component fly countless reconnaissance missions the AASF Battle and Blenheim squadrons undertake regular training sorties in readiness for bombing operations against strategic targets. A squadron of Wellington bombers and a Communications squadron of Tiger Moths also arrive in France.

It is believed that this unusual RAF censor cachet was produced locally for use by the No 1 Armament Training Station at La Salanque, the usual Type R1 censor handstamp remaining at the squadrons' home bases in northern France. Detachments from Fairey Battle squadrons undertook training at this establishment between January and April.

Only four covers bearing this censor cachet have been recorded.



The AASF HQ was established in Reims. Four printings of this stamp can be identified, distinguishable by variations in the value inset and the central arch over the rose window.



British airmen 'downed' over neutral Belgium and Holland are interned. On 3 January, while on a reconnaissance mission, Flying Officer Kempster in a Blenheim of No 18 Squadron force lands near Raeren just inside the Belgium border. Together with Sgt F L Smith he is interned at Fort 2 Borspreek. The third crew member, AC P B Harris, is killed, his body being buried in the Liège (Robermont) Cemetery. Postmarked at Liverpool this cover was probably sent directly to the Censor's Office in Liverpool.

The British military are aware that keeping in touch with loved ones is essential for maintaining troop morale, particularly during this long period of waiting. The Royal Engineers Postal Service quickly establishes an efficient system for handling forces mail to and from France.



A mobile field post office attached to a unit might be housed in a tent, hut or the back of a lorry.



Stationary British Army Post Offices (BAPOs) are set up in a number of French cities including S.11 in Paris.

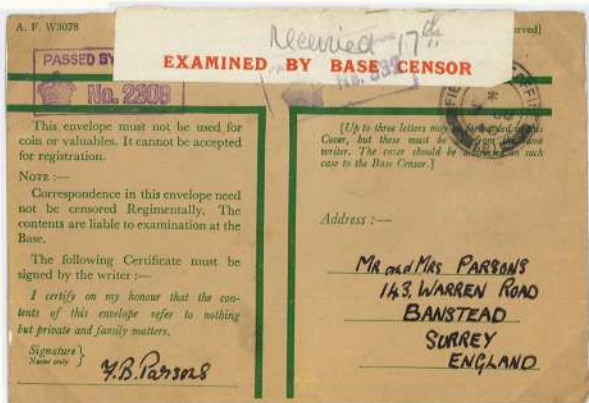


Base Army Post Office 1 is immediately installed in a Cherbourg warehouse to handle all incoming and outgoing mail carried daily between Cherbourg and Southampton. To process the increasing volume of mail two Krag continuous impression machines were sent to France in March, one to Cherbourg (Base Army P.O.1) and the other (Army P.O.) used by APO S.7, probably located at Amiens.

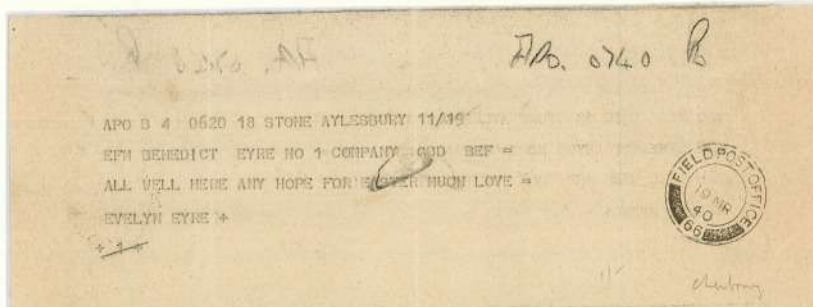


French railways ensure the mail's speedy transmission.

Mulready had earlier recognised the importance of keeping in touch with family members, a mother with her children avidly reading a letter probably from a husband in some far off land.



Mail was handed open into mobile postal units. Following censorship, usually by a unit's officer, the mail was sealed and a censor cachet and FPO cancel applied. Forwarded to a BAPO for onward transmission, mail was subject to sample random censoring resulting in a censor label and a second censor's cachet being applied. Signing the certificate at the base of an Active Service envelope, often referred to as an 'Honour' envelope, entitled the sender's correspondence to be forwarded uncensored. However on this occasion the correspondence was censored twice. FPO 181 was used between 21 May and 7 June by the 1st Armoured Division, the Division having arrived in France during May.



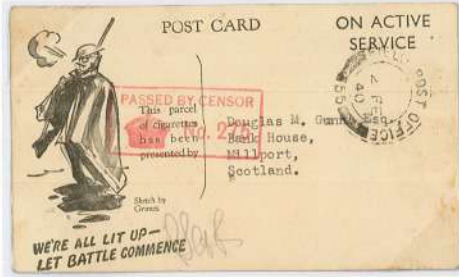
The telegram was an alternative means of speedy communication. The private telegram service commencing on 8 February, however its use by civilians is discouraged. FPO 66 was used at No 1 General Base Depot at Cherbourg, between 13 December 1939 and 8 June 1940.



The provision of home comforts and recreational facilities help to relieve the boredom and sustain the spirits of forces personnel as the prolonged period of inactivity continues.



Parcels from home are eagerly awaited.



The NAFFI provides the little extras to supplement basic rations. All five letters were never used on NAFFI perfins.

Organised by the Over-seas League Tobacco Fund large quantities of cigarette parcels are despatched to the BEF. Contained in the parcels are printed cards to enable the recipient to acknowledge receipt. FPO 55 was used in France between 13 December 1939 and 17 May 1940 by an unidentified army unit.



Some prefer to roll their own.



Gifts of French luxury goods including perfume are sent from France to loved ones back home.



Lille becomes a popular destination for off-duty troops



Ardath is a popular cigarette brand at this time.

Medical personnel accompany the BEF to France to provide for its medical care. While some are attached to forward troops on the Belgian border permanent hospital facilities are also set up at strategic locations, including Dieppe, which is designated an undefended medical port.



1,300 British Army QAIMNS sisters are serving in France.



Hospital trains bring casualties to the evacuation ports.



The 'HOPITAL COMPLEMENTAIRE' cachet indicates French medical facilities are also made available to British personnel. FPO 12 was used by 1<sup>st</sup> Corps PU in Boulogne from 12 September 1939 until 14 May 1940.



Reduced

The Army Blood Transfusion service is established in 1939. From its depot in Bristol transfusion fluids are supplied by air to transfusion units in France. 'Official Paid' cards were attached to the back of this Army Blood Transfusion Service booklet allowing for friends to be nominated as blood donors.



### 2.3 Meanwhile the Royal Navy sallies forth to blockade Germany ....

There was never a 'Phoney War' at sea, one of the Royal Navy's principal tasks being to immediately impose an economic blockade on Germany. Operating from the Home Fleet's anchorage in Scapa Flow and bases around the world patrols intercept ships thought to be destined for German ports and confiscate offending cargoes.



Initially consisting of eight old cruisers, including HMS Dragon, the Northern Patrol's operational area stretches from the Shetland Islands to Iceland. Most German ships attempt to return to home ports via this route.



Sailing from South Africa HMS Dorsetshire undertakes patrols in the South Atlantic.

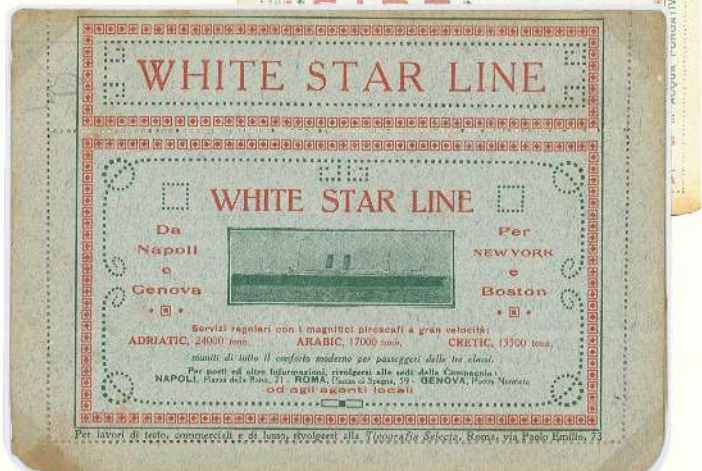


Based in Singapore HMS Durban carries out trade defence patrols in the South China Sea.

By the beginning of 1940 Royal Navy patrols are being reinforced by Armed Merchant Cruisers (AMC's). These ships, previously ocean liners, are requisitioned and converted into warships by the addition of limited and often obsolete armaments.



Front reduced



Nine Cunard White Star Line liners are requisitioned by the Admiralty and converted to AMC's. *Carinthia*, *Andania* and *Laurentic*, are sunk by U-boats while patrolling the North Atlantic.

*Busta-Lettera-Postale* advertising White Star Line cruises. Privately produced in Italy during the 1920's BLP's were issued by royal decree. (Insert contained within)



Requisitioned during August 1939 the Cunard White Star Line liner *Carinthia* joins the Northern Patrol in January 1940. On 6 June she is torpedoed by U-46 off the coast of Ireland and sinks the following day. Cancelled with PORTSMOUTH DOCKYARDS date stamps for 12 January 1940 this cover was probably sent from a crew member while the ship was being converted to an AMC.



The Canadian Pacific liners *Forfar*, *Montclare* and *Wolfe* sail with the Northern Patrol.



While officered by Royal Navy personnel the civilian crew often remain with their ship following its conversion to an AMC.



*Northern Sun* is one of nine trawlers with the prefix 'Northern' serving with the Northern Patrol. Those requisitioned and converted fishing trawlers fulfill the role of Armed Boarding Vessels, their task to escort seized ships into Kirkwall.

The *Northern Sun* was one of only a very few Royal Navy vessels continuing to use an identifiable censor cachet into 1940. The Navy 'tombstone' censor cachet on the reverse is dated 17 February 1940.