

Postal History in a digital landscape

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For the Stuart Rossiter Trust

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A bit about me

- I have only basic IT skills and I do not create digital content.
- For 25 years I have edited a journal, using Microsoft Publisher.
- I may need to learn new software by the demise of Publisher.
- I do not create on-line content – I am a consumer of content, like most of us in this room.
- So, my perspective today is “How can I find whatever is “out there”?”

Content of this talk

- The future of the posts, and of philatelic studies
- Honouring the quiet heroes!
- AI for good or ill
- Digital resources for philatelists
- Finding
- Digital publishing. For sale or free of charge?
- Promoting postal history on line

Obsolescence

- a natural consequence of human creativity

- Obsolete public transport includes:
 - Horses
 - Stage coaches
 - Steam railways
 - Sailing ships
 - Blue riband ocean liners
- But that does not mean any lack of enthusiasm for historical research or collecting artefacts, large (ships and locomotives!) or small (tickets)

History of Communications

- James Grimwood-Taylor starts his displays with a Sumerian clay tablet
- I include a fax and an e-mail in my display of Nigerian 419 fraud letters
- Postal = pertaining to the carriage of letters and packages between places
 - The clay tablet could have been a message to be carried between places, thus postal.
 - But the fax and e-mail were not “carried” in any postal sense.
- In the 21st century letter post is becoming obsolete.
- So, does postal history have a future?

Denmark

- Denmark abolished the Universal Service Obligation in Jan 2024
- Postnord ceased delivering letter mail and selling stamps in Dec 2025. Now a parcel service only.
- Digital letters by all public institutions are delivered and sent to and from an e-Boks that is mandatory for all Danish citizens (but 5% have opted out)
- But, in Danish law the option to send a letter must still exist,
- so, a private company, Dao, operates post shops where users hand in and pick up mail. There are no deliveries.
- Dao issues postage stamps that are valid for internal use only

Postal history

Are we historians or collectors?

- As historians, 21st century postal obsolescence is as worthy of study as the postal development of the 18th century and reforms of the 19th century.
- There is a natural human urge to collect and categorise
- A careful selection of redundant postal artefacts should be collected for future study by postal historians.
- Collecting postal history will continue to be a pastime for enthusiasts
 - Including as an adjunct to genealogy, famous personalities and autographs
- Collecting small sticky labels maybe not so much!

A digital problem: collecting ephemeral communications

- Artefacts of the postal service are tangible and 3-D
- Artefacts of digital communications are ephemeral.
- Significant communications of historical interest can disappear almost as soon as they are sent and received. Sometimes deliberately (Snapchat).
- When they are kept digitally, finding them is a “Raindrop in the Cloud”, (“A needle in a haystack”). For example, the Epstein files!
- But we are postal historians. We can let others worry about that!

This is nothing new

- “Most manuscripts nowadays are, more accurately, typescripts, and this is the first age when irreplaceable documents have begun to fade at an alarming rate. The old days of pen-and-ink written MSS have departed, yet there was a far greater permanence in their production. Today, after only 17 or 18 years, typewritten records of the War period become fainter...”
 - Preface to “The Konigsberg Adventure” by E. Keble Chatterton
 - Published 1932

Edward Gibbon wrote Decline & Fall of the Roman Empire between 1776 and 1788

- That was not the last word, there have been thousands more books about the Romans since then.
- So,
- if someone writes “The decline and fall of POSTAL SERVICES”
- It is certain that it will not be the last postal history publication ever!



ATTEMPTING TO CAPTURE A WILD LIBRARIAN USING
A TRAP BAITED WITH A BADLY-ORGANISED BOOKSHELF.

TOM GAULD

Digital resources - the quiet heroes!

Quiet heroes volunteer their time to:

- Preserve digital content: e-mails, Facebook pages, Youtube videos, LinkedIn profiles, websites (inherently ephemeral but potentially of interest to future researchers),
- Scan printed matter to digital format,
- Digitise microfiche,
- Convert from obsolete digital formats such as “floppy disk”.

Max Communications and volunteers have digitised and organised Perkins Bacon records.

Scanning is tedious but not hard. Everyone should do their bit, to benefit future researchers.

AI

For good or ill

- What AI can do

- Answer well defined questions (iterate)
- Search the web very fast
- Prepare legal drafts, reports and letters
- Create indexes and summaries. (my volume 2)
- Solve logic problems and even provide advice
- Create new images using elements in on line images
- Detect software vulnerabilities (Claude Mythos)
- Impersonation – face and voice (scary!)

- What AI cannot do

- Identify fakes produced using AI
- Create content without using other peoples' digitised work.
 - Millions of books are being used to train AI
- Distinguish fake news from real (yet)
- Respond ethically or morally
- Avoid control by hackers and cyber-criminals – exploiting software vulnerabilities
 - One AI recently hacked another!
- AI hacking is scaring the world's financiers

AI is imperfect

- AI is built by humans!
- Humans have decided what to scrape from the internet to train their model
- There is bias: —
 - images are scraped if they look “pretty” and attract “likes”.
 - The proportions of the internet are not equal to the world’s proportions.
 - bias towards white faces when AI creates marketing images because “western” photographers post more of the on-line images.
 - The written word is mostly Western or Chinese. Other cultures are under-represented by AI.
- Bias is increased when AI uses the images made by earlier AI!

The woman
arrowed here
could be identical
to the one being
served at the
counter.



This image and commentary is copied from Cambridge Alumni Magazine, Lent 2026.
The user specified "office life" but was delivered an image of a trendy coffee shop.

I asked ChatGPT to sharpen and colourise this image of sorters working at Kaduna Junction SO





It took about two minutes to generate this! The sharpening is extraordinarily good but the faces are South Asian, not African, and the sorter on the left seems to be looking at pornography!

I asked Chat GPT to “tweak” so that all the faces are Nigerian, all different, and turn the papers into envelopes.



Chat GPT’s generic caption is “Busy workshop with postal workers”. This is a fake image!

When AI works well

- A network in which software talks to many machines.
- AI's speed relies on predictability.
- Machine learning is predictive: if A and B, then C follows – an increasingly complex series of algorithms created by AI, not by humans.
- Human creativity at its best is unpredictable – a creative interaction with analogue materials and random conversations.
- But AI can appear creative by making connections between available information resources which would take human searches a long time.

Postmarks – AI not a success

- I tested whether Claude or ChatGPT can split postmarks from background.
- Not effective. It invents a similar mark!
- Better resource - Go to www.postmark-reveal.com.
- Free software but please do leave a donation

AI downsides

- AI absorbs misinformation as well as truth.
- No ethical restraint, hence breaking into other AI platforms.
- No legal restraint; copyright is becoming meaningless when millions of books are being scanned into it.
- Can create deepfakes and impersonation. Actors want to copyright their voices.
- How can users tell truth from fiction in any on-line resource?
- Even the software firms now say we need an international legal framework for AI and social media and a powerful regulator to provide an ethical framework.

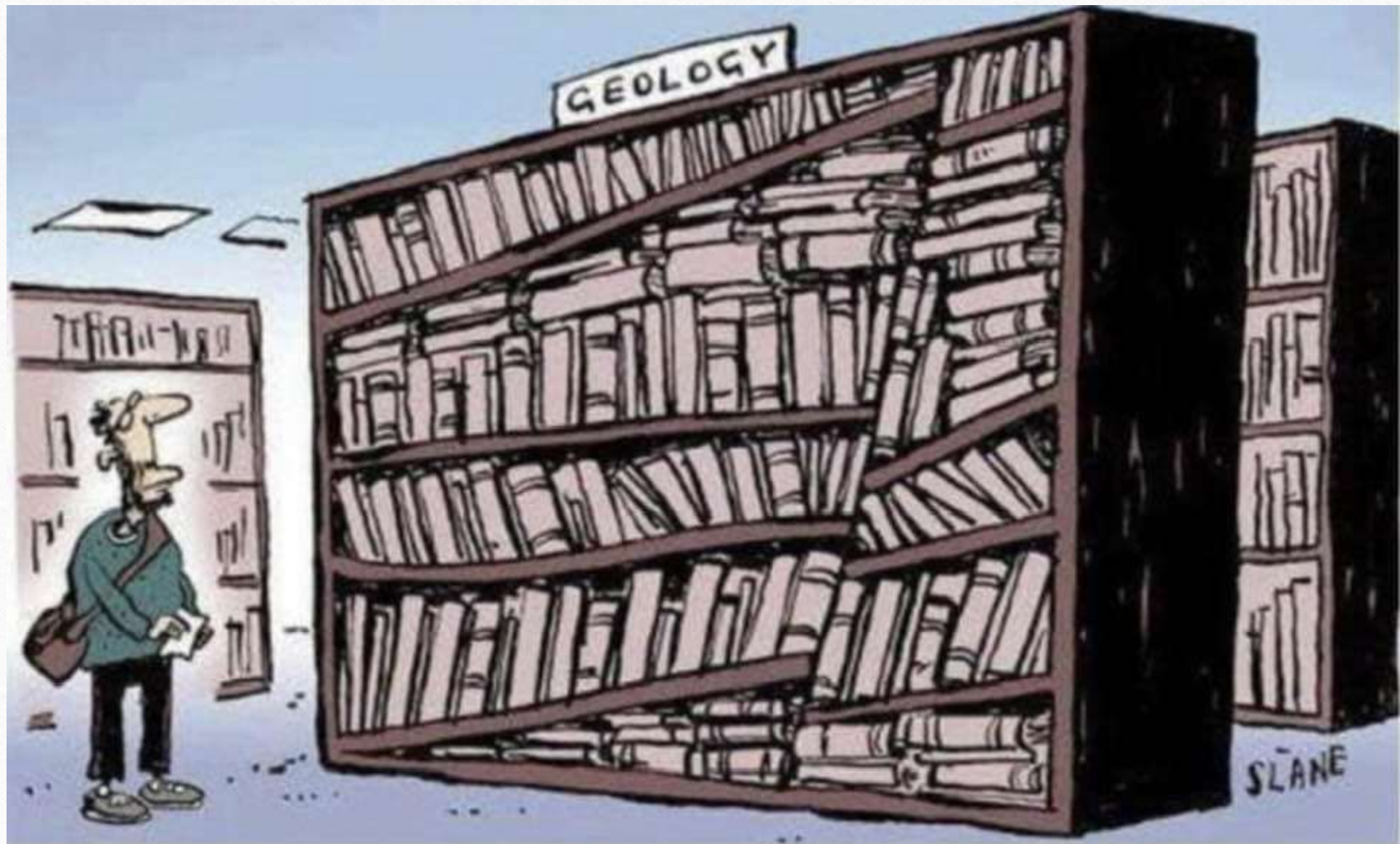
Using AI with eyes open

- Very useful for internet searches
- Excellent for indexing. I asked for the capitalised names in a 200-page pdf book to be indexed. It took a couple of minutes, but several more hours to tidy up by hand capitalised words that were not names and two-word names that had been indexed as single words!
- Excellent for citations
- Good at formulaic text, for instance property conveyancing
- Good at essays but no original content. The lazy undergraduate!
- Excellent at connecting software and systems. I asked ChatGPT to rewrite a recent Cameo from Publisher to Affinity. It asked me 3 supplementary questions. Then..
- The end result was perfect. But I decided Affinity is too hard for me to use afresh!

Main AI tools:

There are thousands now.

- **Claude** for text and creative writing. Least likely to generate business circumlocution.
- **ChatGPT**. Good all-rounder and now less sycophantic than in the recent past.
- **Google Gemini**. Another all-rounder
- **Grammarly**. Spell-checker that also helps make writing more concise.
- **GitHub Copilot** for help with coding. I have not used this!
- **Leonardo** for image generation. Can turn postcards into short videos!
- **Invideo**. Video generation tool for beginners. Give it a script and it will create a video using stock images and voice. I have not tried.
- **NotebookLM**. A tool to search only the documents YOU specify. Good indexer.
- **Perplexity**. Specifically for searching the net.



Finding research resources

- The volume of information available digitally is rising fast,
...which has been making finding it challenging!
- RPSL
- Global Philatelic Library
- Philatelic societies' websites, for example West Africa Study Circle (WASC)
- Major libraries
- Journals and e-books

Digital resource –RPSL’s website: spool down from “Catalogue search”

- Perkins Bacon archive digitised with open access
- London Philatelist digital – free to members, non-members can subscribe
- De La Rue collection flipbook – members only
- Digital journals – 20 titles with patchy coverage, members only
- Digital auction catalogues – patchy coverage. The website lists all paper copies with 0 in the right-hand column if not digitised.
- Some are available on auctioneers’ own sites eg Siegel, Feldman, Corinphila.
- Scans of philatelic collections and displays in RPSL archives
- Some past presentations are on Youtube

Digital resource –WASC website:

offered here as an exemplar for specialist societies

- Gives open access free of charge to many research tools. Go to **Publications** and to **Resources** from the home page.
- Includes extensive original resources on WW2 Air Routes worldwide, scanned by John Wilson
- Some WASC members have written e-books and made scans providing open-access resources for other researchers. Eg Frank Walton's Sierra Leone books, Paul Redhead's book on Nigerian Cancellations.
- Ray Harris's digital archive was loaded posthumously with permission. It needs rationalising and indexing! It includes advice on IT techniques.

Philatelic society websites with valuable content

- GBPS – freely accessible postal rates, GB official texts etc
- APS's Robert A. Mason digital library (<https://digital.stamplibrary.org>)
- The Philatelic Foundation – expert certificates accessible on-line (US only) and freely accessible US research notes
- <https://www.greenefoundation.ca/digital-resources>. Library of flipbooks freely available. 218 early Canada publications at present.
- The British Postal Museum is in process of digitisation but not yet public

Other websites with valuable content

- <https://www.colnect.com>. A digital stamp catalogue with images and a “stamp finder” facility
- <https://britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>
- <https://www.wesleyan.org/communication/archives> Missionary records
- <https://www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/bristol-archives>. Houses the National Commonwealth archive. Also records of shipping to and from Bristol
- <https://www.rmg.co.uk/national-maritime-museum>. Greenwich Maritime Archive
- <https://heinrich-koeehler.de/en/profi>. Provenance data accessible upon application

Digital journals

- London Philatelist is digital from issue #1, free to members.
- GSM <https://legacy.stanleygibbons.com/gsm-archive>. Subscription £79.99pa
- Some society websites have digital versions of their own journals
- The internet Archive (www.archive.org) has free digital copies of some American philatelic journals, eg Linns Stamp News, American Philatelist
- <https://heritage.lrfoundation.org.uk/lloyds-register-of-ships-online> is free
- A CENTRAL REPOSITORY OF DIGITAL PHILATELY would be useful.

Glenn Morgan Digital books

- Glenn Morgan makes his books freely available:
 - The handbook of stamp production in four volumes at:
 - <https://tinyurl.com/5n6hvwe>
 - <https://tinyurl.com/yc3f7b7e>
 - <https://tinyurl.com/3tuw5e85>
 - <https://tinyurl.com/bddtzcd2>

Philately and the Letter Box at <https://tinyurl.com/y46vkezu>

British Stamp Exhibitions, Philatelic events and Anniversaries at <https://tinyurl/52w577de>

Finding at Major Libraries

I needed to access the Nigeria Colonial Annual Reports, the P&T Department's Annual Reports and the Nigeria Weekly Gazettes.

COLONIAL ANNUAL REPORTS

Colonial reports are now all out of copyright (50 years for official publications)

- WASC (www.wasc.org.uk) now has an open access digital archive of Nigeria annual reports 1899 to 1955 and Gold Coast 1894 to 1954 (both with gaps in WW2)
- WASC intends to provide the same for Gambia and Sierra Leone
- Mined from scans already available on the Internet from some US University Libraries

Finding at Major Libraries

NIGERIA P&T ANNUAL REPORTS

- The British Library has colonial departmental annual reports on microfiche
- Before its system was hacked every page could be saved to my own e-mail address:
 - I had saved all the Nigeria P&T reports that way, before that crisis.
 - Sadly, that facility is not yet reinstated.
 - Since the hack, microfiche readers can only photograph the screens for future reference.
- I compiled the page grabs into single PDF books for each year using PDF24 software (Recommended free software to manipulate PDFs!) and uploaded them to the WASC website.
- So WASC is now a unique digital resource for these, Nigeria only, with free access.

Finding at Major Libraries

NIGERIA WEEKLY GAZETTES

Not digital:

- These very bulky volumes are available only in hard copy and even the major UK libraries have incomplete sets.
- WASC rescued the complete Gambia, Gold Coast and Sierra Leone sets in the 1990s when the Commonwealth Institute closed down.
- Nigeria was so bulky we could rescue only up to 1939... which filled the coal hole at 41 Devonshire Place!
- I hope other specialist societies might rescued others, because what was left went to waste.

Finding using AI

- I asked ClaudeAI for all references to Spanish Guinea postal history. Gave me:
 - Wikipedia
 - <https://stampworldhistory.nl>
 - Two articles in Linns Stamp News
 - Two specialist societies – Spanish Study Circle and WASC
 - An article at <https://bigblue1840-1940.blogspot.com/>
 - A link to the Smithsonian Postal Museum site at <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/international-philately-africa-western-africa/equatorial-guinea>

YOU CAN LEAD A
HUMAN TO KNOWLEDGE,
BUT YOU CAN'T
MAKE IT
THINK.



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www.jkrowling.com

Digital publishing

- This is new to me. “Internal Mail Routes of Nigeria volume 2: tracks and roads” will soon be published digitally by Rossiter Trust
- At present Rossiter Trust’s only digital downloads are free supplements to paid printed books.
- I think the author of any digital book will need to “publish” through an established website, or set up their own (like Glenn Morgan)
- Whether “Free of charge” or “paid for” should be at the author’s call.

Digital publishing – established websites

- There are “print on demand” publishers of out of copyright books, eg Forgotten Books which has digitised about 1.3m books so far. It **sells** printed books on e-bay and has a membership sub for searching.
- www.Gutenberg.org has **free** out-of-copyright books to download
- Internet Archive www.archive.org was set up in 1996 to deliver free access to knowledge and includes both old and recent books, published in EPUB format, for **free** download
- www.thedigitalphilatelist.com has a good index of e-links listed by country or by theme linking users to blogs, youtube, facebook and digital articles.

Promoting postal history on line

- Disorganised Philately! Organised philately may be dying, but on-line the hobby isn't.
- Youtube is the prime resource:
 - The Postal Museum has 39 videos
 - Exploring stamps (by Graham Beck) has about 60 episodes
 - The APS youtube @AmericaStampClub has 679 videos and 5500 subscribers
 - <https://www.youtube.com/@briefmarkenecke/videos>. Content in German and English
- www.learningaboutstamps.org (LASO) is a good site for collectors starting and developing. USA based but has lots of links to worldwide blogs. Not much postal history yet.
- I have not yet found any Youtube specifically for postal history.
- We study a form of communication, but it seems we are not great 21st century communicators!

Reviving organised philately?

- The FEPA website www.fepanews.com includes a prize competition branded **Philately Forward**, closing date 31 October 2026
£1,000 prize for the best idea for attracting new collectors
- I am not entering but my thought of some communities who could connect with postal history:
 - Genealogy
 - Military gamers
 - Transport enthusiasts
- Best place to link with these is on-line.
- Philately sometimes seems too much about money and rarity. Cost and competition rules can deter joiners.
- Remember this is a hobby - **Relax, have fun, socialise**

