

# The Cover Story

## Oh, The Things You Can Learn Stamp Collecting!

### Torquay, England – A Little Detective Work

by Mike Schumacher

As we philatelists know a stamp, cover, or postcard may catch our eye even though the item may not be in our area of collecting and yet we scoop it up and take it home for further investigation. The lettercard addressed to Pfc Clifton Johnson (dated April 21, 1945) featured on the cover [Figure A1 on front cover] of this newsletter from Torquay, England was one of those items for me.

Even though I had lived in England for three years in the 1970s (stationed at Royal Air Force Chicksands), I had no idea where Torquay was located. Torquay is a seaside town on the southern coast of England in the county of Devon. It is believed that the Torquay area has been inhabited since the Paleolithic period. What may be the oldest human remains in Europe were found in Kents Cavern in Torquay; Roman soldiers visited Torquay during the period Britain was part of the Roman Empire.

There appears to be quite a story to tell here. Obviously, further investigation and a bit of detective work would be needed and who better to assist than the “Legendary Sleuth of the Silver Screen” Hercule Poirot. [Figure A2 on front cover] Hercule Poirot of course is the fictional Belgian detective who appeared in 33 novels and more than 50 short stories published between 1920 and 1975, created by the world-famous author Agatha Christie [Figure A3 on front cover].

Agatha Christie was born on September 15, 1890, in Torquay, England and her real name is Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller. She was home schooled and learned to read by the age of five. She loved the children’s stories of the time – such as The Story of the Treasure Seekers & The Railway Children by Edith Nesbit [Figure A4] and Little Women by Louisa Mae Alcott [Figure A5]. Agatha’s father died when she was 11 and the family struggled with money worries. By age 15, Agatha was taking piano and singing lessons. She was very talented and could have been a professional pianist, however, she was extremely shy in front of people. By 18, Agatha was amusing herself by writing short stories. The families’ money woes continued and in 1910 they went to spend a three-month period at the Gezirah Palace

Figure A5



Figure A4

Hotel in Cairo. [Figure A6] In 1912, Agatha met Archie Christie, an aviator



who had applied to join the Royal Flying Corps. They married on Christmas Eve 1914 and spent their honeymoon night in the Grand Hotel in Torquay. Archie served in France during the war years and Agatha worked with the Voluntary Aid Detachment in a Red Cross Hospital in Torquay. While working at the hospital, Agatha completed the examination of the Society of Apothecaries. In 1918, Archie was reassigned and stationed at the War Office in

London and they bought a house and called it “Styles”. It was during the war years that Agatha turned to writing detective stories. Her first was “The Mysterious Affair of Styles” where she found her characters on a tram in Torquay and put her new-found expertise in

poisons to good use. She described the murder’s use of poison so well that it received the honor of a review in the Pharmaceutical Journal. Her marriage to Archie did not last, as he fell

Figure A7



Figure A6



in love with a friend of the family and fellow golfer, Nancy Neale. Agatha went on to pursue a lifelong ambition to travel on the Orient Express, [Figure A7] which lead to traveling to Baghdad and onto the archaeological site at Ur where the following year she met Max

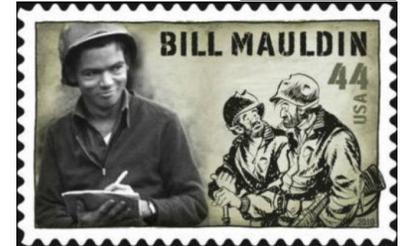
Mallowan, who later became her second husband. During World War II, Max served in Cairo while Agatha remained in England where she pursued her writing and volunteered at the University College Hospital in London. Agatha also wrote romance novels under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott, so she could better explore the human psychology and be freed from the expectations of her mystery fans. In later years much of Agatha's time was consumed with theatrical productions of her works. In 1971 she was appointed a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire for her literary contributions. Her last public appearance in 1974 was on the opening night of the film version of Murder on the Orient Express where Hercule Poirot was played by Albert Finney [Figure A8]. Agatha died January 12, 1976 at the age of 85. Over a billion copies of her books have been sold and she remains the best-selling novelist of all time. She and Hercule Poirot have also been well represented on postage stamps as we see in a few examples presented in this article.

Figure A8



Not wanting to forget where this article started – the Torquay lettercard – the investigation reveals that it contains a fold-out of six black & white photos of sites in Torquay and is canceled in Torquay on January 21, 1945. It is addressed to Pfc. Clifton Johnson, Stars & Stripes, United Kingdom Base, A.P.O. 413, U.S. Army. From this information more fascinating learning takes place. I think it is

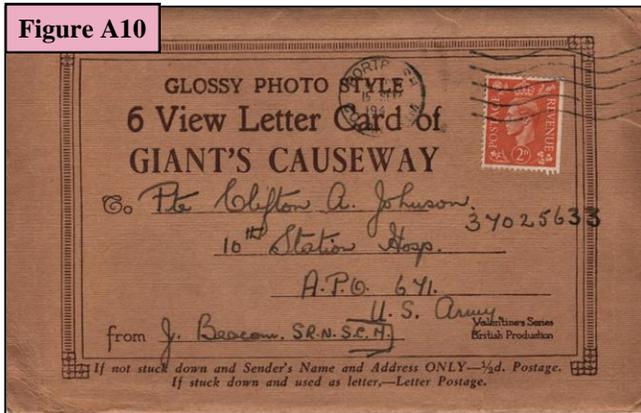
Figure A9



safe to conclude that Pfc. Clifton Johnson was assigned to the Stars & Stripes, which has long been a U.S. Military newspaper. The Stars & Stripes was first published on November 9, 1861 during the Civil War by the Illinois Regiments that set up camp in Bloomfield, Missouri. The purpose of the newspaper was to report about their activities. This early newspaper and the current Stars & Stripes published by the Department of Defense, headquartered in Washington D.C., bear no continuity, however, but the Stars & Stripes Museum/Library Association is located in Bloomfield, Missouri.

During World War I, the Stars & Stripes was published by the American Expeditionary Forces and the editor was Harold Ross, who after returning home from the war founded The New Yorker Magazine. During World War II, Bill Mauldin published his popular cartoon series "Up Front" in the Stars & Stripes. [Figure A9] Bill Mauldin went on to have a successful career as a cartoonist and won two Pulitzer Prizes. Other notable staffers from the Stars & Stripes include, Andy Rooney and Steve Kroft from CBS 60 Minutes; Shel Silverstein, author and songwriter; Tom Sutton, comic book illustrator and many others.

Figure A10



My investigation currently has not resulted in any information on Pfc Clifton Johnson's career; however, my investigation does find that U.S. Army United Kingdom Base, A.P.O. 413 was in Torquay, England and was the headquarters for the "Overlord Movement" (AKA the D-Day Invasion). During Operation Overlord more than 23,000 members of the U.S. 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division departed Torquay for Utah Beach. One must wonder, if Pfc Clifton Johnson was one of those 23,000 soldiers -- and did he survive the D-Day invasion? I found the answer to this question in the following lettercard of Giant's Causeway canceled Sept. 15, 1945. [Figure A10] On this lettercard Pfc

Clifton A. Johnson is now at the U.S. Army 10<sup>th</sup> Station Hospital A.P.O. 641. The location of this hospital was at Camp Bowie in Brownwood, Texas. The hospital was activated on July 6, 1942 and inactivated on Nov. 4, 1945.

Figure A11



the location of some water sports events for the Summer Olympic Games. [Figure A11] The Olympic flame passed through Torquay again in 2012, as it

made its way around the UK, but no Olympic events were held there that year.

Who would have thought a Torquay lettercard could be so interesting? Oh, the things you can learn stamp collecting!