

THE BRITISH
POSTAL
MUSEUM
& ARCHIVE

Our history through the post



VICTORIAN INNOVATION



1837 - 1901

www.postalheritage.org.uk



Introduction

QUEEN VICTORIA came to the throne on 20 June 1837. Her reign lasted for the rest of the 19th century until her death in January 1901. The Victorian entrepreneurial spirit and engineering genius made this an era of innovation and this was particularly true in postal affairs. This exhibition concentrates on the introduction of selected new ideas, products and services in the British Post Office.

1. The Postage Stamp

ONE of the most radical innovations of the early Victorian period was the adhesive postage stamp – a deliberate piece of social as well as postal reform.

Before 1840 postage rates were very high and based upon the distance the letter travelled. If it consisted of more than one sheet then the cost doubled or tripled. On the other hand there were a large number of anomalies. Mail to and from members of parliament (both Commons and Lords) was carried free up to a certain number and there were many local postal systems costing one penny for letters posted and delivered within that area. Many detailed charges could be added and so the system was complex, open to abuse and ripe for reform. The postal service was also a source of considerable revenue to the government.

Rowland Hill suggested in 1837 that the anomalies and abuses be eliminated and that postal charges be reduced to a basic rate of 1d. Letters would be charged by weight rather than distance and prepaid rather than by the recipient. Methods of prepayment suggested

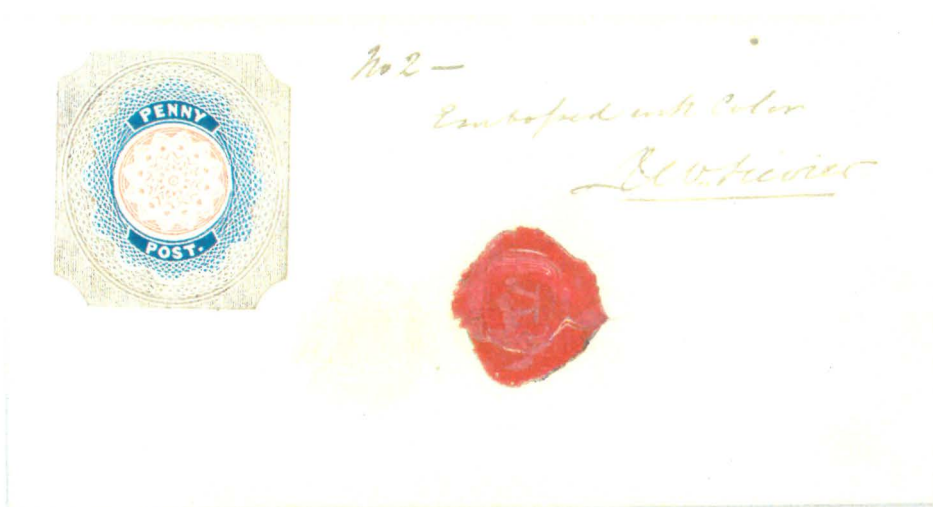
included stamped covers and most famously “a bit of paper just large enough to bear the stamp, and covered at the back with a glutinous wash” which became the adhesive postage label or stamp. After a long campaign these proposals were accepted and became law in August 1839.

To implement them a competition was organised by the Treasury (the governing body of the Post Office) asking the public for ideas. Some 2,600 letters were received, a few with examples of the method of prepayment proposed, some sent anonymously. These are now known as Treasury Competition entries or essays, though many so-called were never submitted to the competition. Hill’s report on the competition used some of the suggestions submitted to reiterate his ideas for prepayment, the “stamps” to be in four forms: lettersheets, envelopes, adhesive labels and stationery handed in by the public to be stamped to order. The last was not to be introduced immediately due to difficulties with the die.

The label was based upon an engraving drawn upon the City medal by William Wyon featuring the head of a young Queen Victoria. Wyon was the finest medallist of his time and the head of Victoria was chosen as this, and expensive engraving, made forgery more difficult. The die was engraved by Charles and Frederick Heath during January and February 1840 with a security background of engine-turned engraving. Space for corner ornaments and the value were added and a printing plate was made by rolling the image from the die 240 times (240 pennies making £1). Then individual pairs of letters were punched in on the plate making each stamp different, to prevent re-use. The “Old Original” master die is still extant but all printing plates were destroyed.

Printing, in recess (or intaglio), on watermarked paper by Perkins, Bacon & Petch in Fleet Street began in mid April. Once dry the sheets were gummed. The Penny Black went on sale in London on 1 May 1840, becoming valid for postage on 6 May. Immediately afterwards the 2d label (the Twopenny Blue) also became

October 1839. Treasury Competition entry by Robert Sievier.





The original master die for the Penny Black

available. By the end of January 1841 some 11 plates had been used for the Penny Black from which over 68 million stamps were printed. Two plates for the Twopenny Blue printed almost 6½ million stamps. Clerks selling the labels had to cut them from the sheets with scissors.

A canceller in the form of a Maltese Cross was used to prevent the labels being cleaned and re-used. On a black stamp this meant a red cancelling ink but it was found that this could be removed and so exhaustive trials took place with both printing and cancelling inks to prevent this. It resulted in the penny stamp changing from black to red-brown in colour and the cancelling ink from red to black. Essentially the same design, the Penny Red, was to last in various formats and shades from February 1841 until 1879.

The invention of perforations and the change-over to letterpress printing

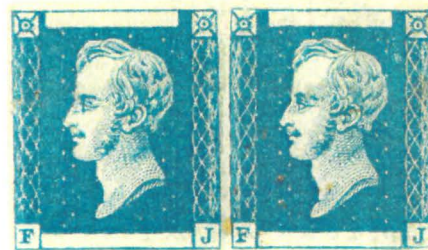
Cutting labels from printed sheets by hand was time-consuming and inaccurate. However, in October 1847 one Henry Archer suggested to the Stamps & Taxes Office (later the Inland Revenue) a machine which would roulette sheets to separate the stamps by small slits in the paper. He also claimed that the stamps would adhere to the letters better as a result. After various private experiments rouletting slits changed to punching out perforation holes and in January 1850 his (third) machine was delivered to Somerset House where further experiments were conducted. In the

end, amid some acrimony, Archer's patent was bought by the government for £4,000.

There is no known portrait of Henry Archer.

With recess, or intaglio, printing of the lower value labels precise spacing was a problem as the paper was wetted during the printing process. When the paper dried it shrank. This meant that mechanical separation was difficult. To demonstrate the value of his perforating machine Archer advocated printing the labels by letterpress, a dry printing process. In April 1851 he proposed that he and Robert Branston engrave, print, gum and perforate sheets of labels, preparing everything that might be required, for 4½d for every 1000 stamps, lower than the current contract with Perkins, Bacon for the 1d and 2d stamps. Branston was a well-known wood-engraver and at this time an essay was produced based on the Penny Black but with the portrait of Albert, the Prince Consort. This they printed

Proof of the Prince Consort essay



letterpress and perforated on Archer's machine. It can be regarded as the forerunner of later Victorian stamps.

With Archer's quotation the Inland Revenue pressured Perkins, Bacon into reducing their charges for recess-printed stamps and so these continued for the

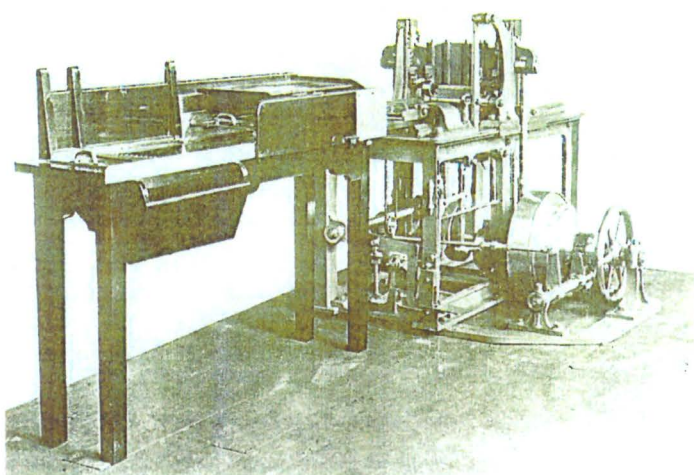
Perforated 1855 4d carmines printed letterpress





low values until 1880. However, the authorities accepted that a dry printing process was better for perforating. At the time values above 2d were laboriously embossed singly at Somerset House.

From 1855 these began to be replaced by sheets of stamps printed letterpress by De La Rue. The first was the 4d carmine of 31 July and this and all subsequent new values above 2d were printed and perforated in this format. From 1880 all Victorian stamps were printed by this method by De La Rue.



Napier perforating machine

Archer's machine successfully demonstrated the feasibility of stamp perforation. It was, however, unreliable and saw little or no service. Four new machines were, therefore bought from David Napier & Son, two of which were for postage stamps. The first machine began work in January 1854 and the first officially perforated postage stamps were put on sale in February 1854. These machines, and another purchased from Napier in 1858, continued in service until 1880 when they were transferred to De La Rue, having perforated some 80 - 90 million sheets of stamps.

Perforations were a great step forward in stamp production and this brought with it the introduction of letterpress printing for postage stamps, a fundamental change.

De La Rue envelope-folding machine demonstrated at the Great Exhibition of 1851

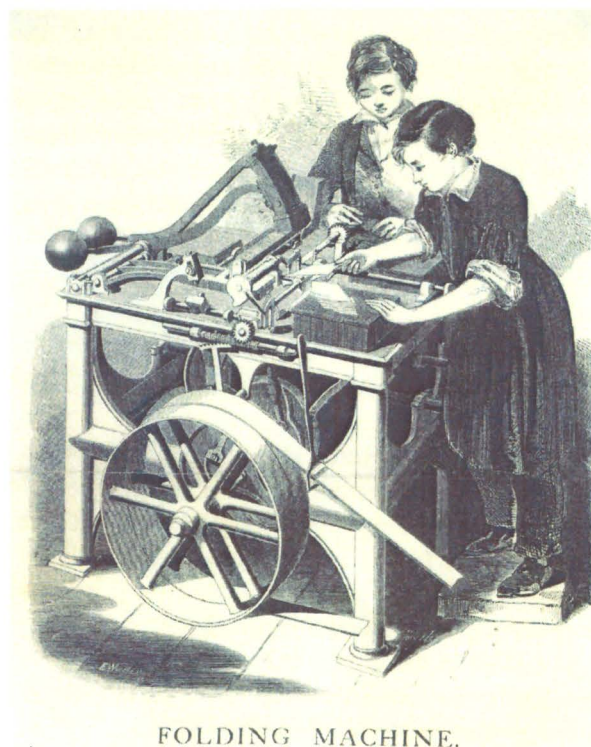
2. Postal Innovations

Payment by weight

THE first postal innovation of Victoria's reign was the payment by weight rather than by distance and the number of sheets of paper. It was introduced on 5 December 1839 when Uniform Fourpenny Postage began, the first intermediate part of Hill's postal reform. At the same time private letter balances or scales were made so that individuals could weigh their letters at home. Perhaps the most interesting was the range published by Henry Hooper in August 1839 even before the Postage Duties Bill became law. Probably devised by Henry Cole it bore a coin-like counterweight inscribed "For Rowland Hill's Plan of Penny Postage." Other candlestick letter weights were manufactured by Robert Winfield of Birmingham and Joseph and Edmund Ratcliff, also of Birmingham.

Envelopes

Because of the charging system before 1840 virtually no paid mail was enclosed in an envelope. By 1855 it was estimated that 93% of domestic letters were sent in envelopes. Although not a British



FOLDING MACHINE.



innovation, it was only with postal reform that envelopes came to be used commonly in the United Kingdom. Envelopes, or covers, were well known on the continent, originating in Northern Italy, possibly ultimately in the Ottoman Empire. At the same time as the postage stamp was introduced a design was commissioned from William Mulready RA for use on lettersheets and envelopes. These became valid for postage on 6 May 1840 but the design was immediately ridiculed giving rise to a large number of political and anti-Irish caricatures.

Initially, envelopes were all hand-made. Gumming was first suggested in late 1840. Then, Rowland Hill's brother Edwin, who oversaw postage stamp production, invented a prototype envelope-folding machine. Various developments of this were patented by Warren De La Rue and the resulting machine was demonstrated at the Great Exhibition of 1851. The catalogue of that exhibition described its operation as follows:

“The feeding boy places the previously cut blank envelopes on to a small platform, which rises and falls in the rectangular recess formed by the cylindrical axes of the folders (shown open in the engraving), the bearings of the folders serving by their elongation to guide the envelope into its place at the moment of the small platform falling. A plunger now descends and creases the envelope by carrying it between the folder axes, at the same time turning the flaps upward in a vertical direction. The plunger, which descends as a whole, now divides into two parts, the ends rising and the sides remaining down to hold the envelope until the end folders have operated; these latter turn over the flaps, the one on the right of the feeding-lad taking a slight precedence, and being closely followed by the gumming apparatus which takes gum from an endless blanket working in a trough and, after applying it to the two end flaps, retires, at the same time the remaining half of the plunger moves upward, to allow of the side folders turning over the remaining two flaps, the folders nearest the feeder taking precedence. During these operations the end folders have remained at rest and the whole four open simultaneously. The taking-off apparatus, with its fingers tipped with vulcanized caoutchouc [latex from rubber trees], now moves forward over the folded envelope, which is lifted upward by the rise of the small platform and retreats with it, placing each envelope, as it is successively folded, under those which have preceded it. The envelopes are now knocked over on to an endless blanket, and are conducted by it between two cylinders for a final squeeze, and then rise in a pile up the trough seen

against the right arm of an attendant, who is represented in the engraving as fetching away the folded work. There is a provision in the machine by which the gummer is prevented placing gum upon the platform in case the feeder omits feeding in an envelope. This machine works at the rate of 2,700 envelopes per hour, and although superseding hand labour in folding, it is satisfactory to find that, instead of displacing hands, its introduction, by extending the consumption, has, in reality, created work for more than it has displaced.”

By 1851 De La Rue had 11 such machines at work.

Letter Boxes

In 1851, Anthony Trollope (better known today as an author) was a Surveyor's Clerk in the Channel Islands, sent there to improve the postal services. As it was often a long distance to the principal receiving office he suggested the erection of iron, roadside letter boxes as used in nearby France. Letters now already bore postage stamps and “all that is wanted is a safe receptacle for letters” and regular times of collection. This was accepted as an experiment for both St. Helier on Jersey and St Peter Port on Guernsey.



Unadopted designs by Silk Pearce for the 2002 Pillar Box stamp issue featuring Victorian boxes

The following year an order was given to John Vaudin of Jersey to produce some 10 six-sided boxes in cast iron which were to be painted red and fitted in solid granite blocks two feet deep. Four were erected in St Helier in November and six on Guernsey in February, 1853.

With the success of letter boxes in the Channel Islands they began to be introduced on the mainland. Each District was responsible for ordering its own boxes so the early letter boxes varied considerably in design. In London six boxes designed by E A Cowper (Consulting Engineer to the Post Office) were



installed in April 1855. They were rectangular in shape and about five feet in height.

During 1856 criticism of the design of boxes in London led to a new, highly decorative box being created. Designed by Richard Redgrave of the Department of Science and Art, South Kensington (and often referred to as the "Science & Arts" or the "London Ornate" box) it was supplied to London, Dublin and Edinburgh. Early in 1857 the Postmaster General decided that all country pillar boxes should be of the same standard pattern as these new boxes in London but omitting the external decoration. This plain "economy" version was in distribution by June 1857. Later standard versions improved on this. Red became the standard colour from 1874.

Other types of box also came into use, in particular wall boxes (from 1857) and lamp boxes (from 1896). The latter resulted from Londoners who did not want to walk even a short distance to post letters late at night. A cheap, practical alternative to pillar boxes was proposed to be attached to lamp posts. Manufactured by Andrew Handyside & Co they were introduced generally from 1897.



Early Pearson Hill machine cancellation

Machine cancellations

With ever increasing volumes of mail after the postal reforms of 1839-40 the burden of cancelling the stamps also grew dramatically. From 1840 to 1850 the volume of mail doubled (from 168 million letters to nearly 350 million). Five years later it had risen to over 450 million. The Post Office had already adopted faster means of transporting the mails; now it needed to create machines to speed up the obliteration of the stamps.

In the mid 1850s Pearson Hill, son of Rowland Hill, began experimenting with cancelling machines. By March 1857 he had a crude version constructed out of such rough materials as he had to hand. A more

robust version was built by the Post Office and was tested in London from 17 September that year.

It produced distinctive double cancellations. Three types were developed and tried over the next year but it was not very successful. A replica machine was built from the patent drawings in 1991.

A number of foreign cancelling machines were tried out later in the century, in particular the German Azemar machine from 1869 to 1872 and the Höster machine (more correctly Loffelhardt and Haller) in the 1880s. Three of his improved machines were purchased in July 1884. Towards the end of the century machines were tried from the United States and Canada, though none of these became standard equipment until the early part of the 20th century.

Post Office Savings Bank

In the latter half of the 19th century a number of other services, not strictly of a postal character, were taken on by the Post Office. Numerous local post offices across the country were convenient centres for various activities. One of these was banking. To encourage thrift, especially among the poorer classes, the Post Office Savings Bank began on 16 September 1861. It started in England, and was extended to Ireland and Scotland in February the following year. At the time there were only 638 old savings banks in the whole country and many areas had none at all. Some 2,532 post offices had savings banks established at the end of the first year of operation. Deposits could be made at any of these offices, as could withdrawals, but interest rates were low so as not to compete with commercial banks.

The minimum deposit was fixed at one shilling. In order to encourage small deposits, especially among children, a "stamp slip deposit" was introduced by Henry Fawcett on 13 September 1880. Twelve penny stamps could be affixed to a free form making a shilling deposit. Initially, this was tried out in all the Post Office Savings Banks in nine counties in the United Kingdom but it was so successful that in November the same year it was extended to all offices. More than half a million slips were received by the end of March, nearly half of which opened new accounts.

By the end of the century the Post Office Savings Bank had over eight million accounts containing about £125 million.



Postcards

The first postcards with imprinted stamps were issued by the Austrian postal administration on 1 October 1869 based on a proposal by Dr Emanuel Herrmann, but ultimately on an idea of the great German postal innovator Dr Heinrich von Stephan - an open communication sent at a special, cheap, printed matter rate without any additional fee for the actual card. Wary of loss of revenue the British Post Office was not in

22 November. This punch had been supplied by Joseph Sloper whose machines already perforated Money Orders with a date. It was trialled in different formats in London and Liverpool and in June 1871 four machines were ordered (three for London and one for Liverpool) at a cost of seven guineas each. Other methods of punching the cards included clipping (Manchester) and single central holes (Birmingham, Edinburgh, Liverpool and Bradford). This use of punching ceased in 1876.

Over the years new versions of cards were introduced: private stamped to order, foreign and reply-paid and from 1 September 1894 adhesive postage stamps could be affixed to private unstamped cards. This relaxation of the regulations also tacitly allowed private manufacturers to print an illustration on the reverse of the address side. Initially, this illustration was relatively small to enable a message to be incorporated. Already well known on the continent this form of holiday souvenir proved extremely popular and the number of cards posted soared. By the end of Victoria's reign over 400 million were sent annually.

Postal Orders

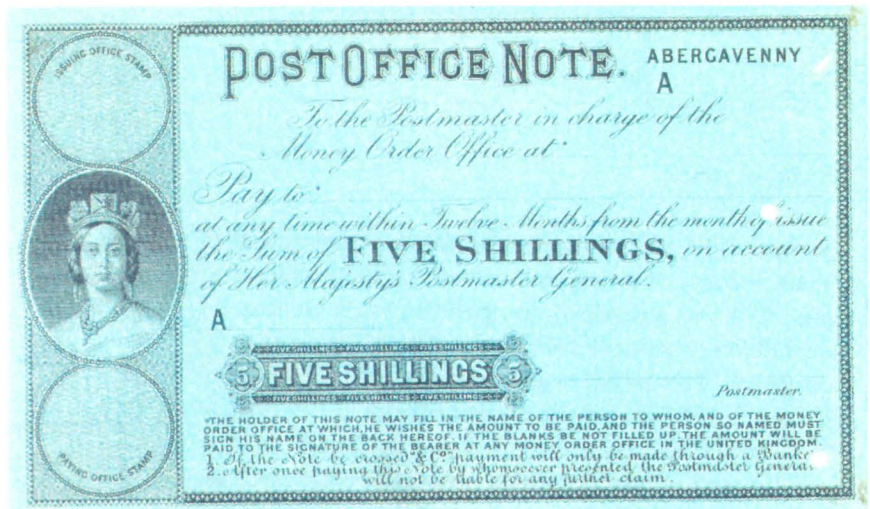
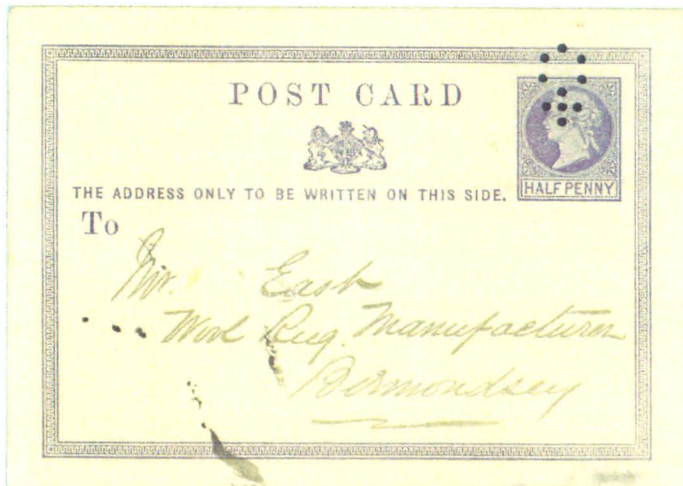
Money Orders had existed from the early part of the 19th century but once the office became part of the Post Office it was not financially viable because of the bureaucracy involved. Postal orders were designed to provide the poor with the means of transmitting the small amounts of money which the banks would not, and charges were kept deliberately low. In 1874 George Chetwynd, Receiver and Accountant General

1878. "Post Office Note" design by Bradbury Wilkinson

The first postcard cancelled with a Sloper perforin punch (the earliest known date - 22 November 1870)

favour but the public were enthusiastic about the new idea. Exactly one year after the Austrians Britain issued its first card imprinted with a ½d stamp of new design. It came in two sizes both sold at the same price of one ½d.

Some 575,000 cards passed through the London Chief Office on the first day (1 October 1870) and in the first full year 75 million were posted. This popularity, and the resultant extra work in cancelling postcards, had been foreseen. In a *Circular* of 10 October postmasters were informed "The postage stamps on some of the Post Cards will be obliterated by means of a punch instead of by the ordinary obliterating stamp. Postmasters will not tax such cards with postage on this account." Only a few very large offices were affected by the volume of cards. In London the punch cancellation was of perforated holes in the form of an orb and cross, with an earliest known date of





of the Post Office, suggested that “circular notes” be made available which, for a small fee, could be exchanged for cash. Notes were to resemble a bank note with a printed stamp and spaces for both the issuing and receiving postmaster. Preliminary designs were produced by the printers Bradbury Wilkinson. After much investigation and opposition a law was passed in July 1880 to enable the new notes and the first went on sale on 1 January 1881.

As with postage stamps the prospect of forgery meant that safeguards such as watermarks had to be incorporated. The Post Office therefore asked the Bank of England to print the new “postal orders” and because of lack of time incorporated the poundage stamp. The Inland Revenue at Somerset House added the names of the offices where they were to be issued and the serial numbers. Originally, there were 10 denominations from 1s to 20s and a total of nearly 1.5 million orders were initially printed. Such was the demand that another million were required before the end of the first year and the number of denominations was subsequently expanded.

Postal Orders 1st Series 1881 (1st print order)

| Denomination | Poundage | Numbers Printed |
|--------------|----------|-----------------|
| 1/- | ½d | 200,000 |
| 1/6d | ½d | 150,000 |
| 2/6d | 1d | 150,000 |
| 5/- | 1d | 200,000 |
| 7/6d | 1d | 100,000 |
| 10/- | 2d | 200,000 |
| 12/6d | 2d | 80,000 |
| 15/- | 2d | 100,000 |
| 17/6 | 2d | 80,000 |
| 20/- | 2d | 200,000 |

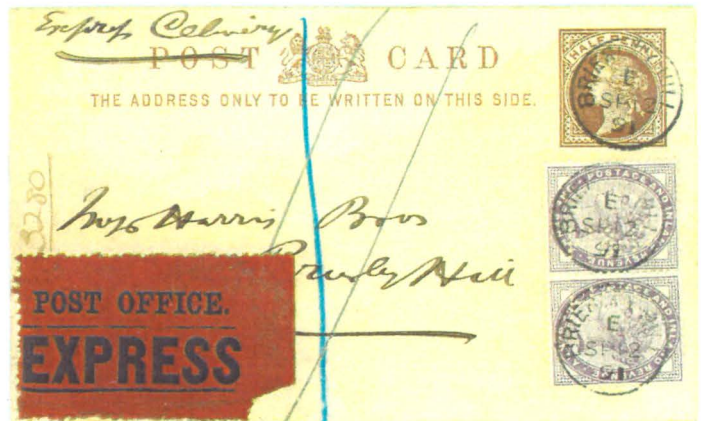
Express service

In April 1888 a Committee was set up to examine the establishment of an express service using boy messengers. This was a result of competition from various local delivery services such as the Boy Messenger Company. The service was eventually introduced on 25 March 1891 in various district offices in London. By 4 April it had been extended to a total of 91 in London and others in various provincial cities such as Edinburgh, Dublin, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow

and Birmingham and later to 43 provincial offices. Detailed returns were kept for each office.

Charges additional to the postage were 2d for the first mile and 3d for each succeeding mile, though the fee could be much higher if no public conveyance was available and a cab needed to be taken. Initially at least the latter was avoided, buses, trains and even a steamboat being used. “As a rule the boys have managed to find their way about tolerably well.” On the opening day a total of 141 items were delivered in and about London.

The only stipulation was that the words “Express Delivery” should be boldly written on the top left of the address side. Mostly items were sent to the Editors of evening newspapers. At the same time an “Electric Call” system was introduced to clubs and hotels in London where a messenger was called by telephone.



12 September 1891. Express delivery within one mile in the revised system (2d extra) with the first type of new label

A revision of the system was originally announced for 1 July 1891 but suddenly postponed till 1 August. Now there were two services. The first was for local delivery by express throughout as before. A new service was for letters conveyed by the regular post to an express delivery office and then delivered by special messenger. The same fees were applicable. Between the original announcement and the belated introduction of the revised system there was one significant addition: red express labels were now to be attached to each item.

New rates applied from 1 January 1892, fixed at 3d per mile throughout up to 11lb for both services. Postage was no longer required. From 1 August 1892 the express service was extended to certain foreign coun-



tries, most main continental European countries, Japan, Siam and a few others (Chile, Liberia, Paraguay and San Salvador). Inward delivery from the same countries would be handstamped "Express Fee Paid 3d" or "Express Fee Not Paid" as appropriate.

3. Revolutions in Postal Transport

Mail by Rail

It was not long after the opening of the world's first public railway in 1825 that the Post Office took an interest in this new form of transport. The first carriage of mail by railway took place on Thursday, 11 November 1830 between Manchester and Liverpool, less than two months after that railway opened. Obviously, mail carried by rail depended on the railways being there and it was not until the very first years of Victoria's reign that major lines began to open and link up, especially in the southern part of England where landowner opposition was strongest (they also provided fodder for the horses drawing the mail coaches).

4 July 1837 *Grand Junction Railway* opened from Birmingham to Warrington, joining the Liverpool and Manchester Railway and so linking to both cities.

20 July 1837 First section of the *London & Birmingham Railway* (London to Boxmoor) was opened, extended to Tring in October. On 9 April 1838 it reached Denbigh Hall (where it crossed the Holyhead coach road) and another stretch of the line was brought into use between Birmingham and Rugby, with the intervening section being connected by coaches. The Holyhead mail coach was transported on a rail carriage to Denbigh Hall whence it continued its journey by road.

21 May 1838 First section of the *London & Southampton Railway* opened from Nine Elms to Woking.

31 May 1838 First section of the *Great Western Railway* (Paddington to West Drayton) formally opened.

17 Sept. 1838 *London & Birmingham* opened its entire length joining the *Grand Junction* line and therefore linking up to Liverpool and Manchester.

7 Nov. 1838 Opening of the *North Union Railway*

from Warrington to Preston, thus allowing direct connections from London to Preston.

All these lines had contracts to carry mail, often arranged before they opened. By 1841 the Post Office employed mail guards at some 20 different major rail routes including one in Ireland and mail was carried on a further five in Scotland. As a result the transport of mail was speeded up considerably but the trains were unreliable and innumerable reports went to the Postmaster General detailing late arrivals due to breakdown, weakness or the slowness of locomotives.

| NIGHT MAIL. | | GENERAL POST-OFFICE. | |
|--|-------|------------------------|---|
| The EARL OF LICIFIELD, Her Majesty's Postmaster-General. | | | |
| London to Preston Rail Way TIME BILL. | | | |
| Names or Numbers of Engines | M. P. | Time allowed H. M. 183 | Despatched from the General Post-Office, the of |
| | | | 12.16 With a Time-Piece safe (No. to |
| | 2.2 | 18 | Arrived at the Rail Way Station, at 7.15 |
| | | 12 | Minutes allowed. Off at 7.27 |
| | 17.0 | | Arrived at Watford, at |
| | 13.6 | 21 | Arrived at Tring, at 7.57 |
| | | 3 | Minutes allowed |
| | 8.4 | | Arrived at Leighton Buzzard, at |
| London and Birmingham Company. | 11.0 | 25 | Arrived at Wolverton, at 10.52 |
| | | 11 | Minutes allowed |
| | 10. | | Arrived at Blisworth, at |
| | 7. | 24 | Arrived at Woodon, at 11.28 |
| | | | Minutes allowed |
| | 14. | | Arrived at Rugby, at |
| | 10.6 | 7 | Arrived at Coventry, at 1.00 |
| | | | Minutes allowed |
| | 18.2 | 37 | Arrived at the Rail Way Station, Birmingham, at 2.37 |
| | | 2.0 | Minutes allowed. |
| | | | Off from the Grand Junction Railway Station, at 2.39 |
| | 9.4 | | Bescot Bridge |
| | 4.0 | 32 | Arrived at Waterhempston, at 2.53 |
| | | | Minutes allowed |
| | 9.6 | | Penridge |
| | 5.2 | 35 | Arrived at Stafford, at 3.13 |
| | | | Minutes allowed |
| | 5.6 | | Norton Bridge |
| | 8.2 | 33 | Arrived at Whitmore, at 4.11 |
| | | | Minutes allowed |
| Grand Junction Company. | 10.6 | | Arrived at Crewe, at 4.31 |
| | 7.2 | | Wingford |
| | 27 | | Arrived at Hartford, at 4.52 |
| | 4.4 | | Preston Brook |
| | 6.0 | | Arrived at Warrington, at 5.20 |
| | | | Minutes allowed |
| | 6.4 | | Newton |
| | 1.1 | | Arrived at the Rail Way Station, Park Side, at 6.1 Off at 6.6 |
| | | | Minutes allowed |
| North Union Company. | 6.6 | | Wigan |
| | 9. | | Cherbury Station |
| | 6.4 | | Arrived at Preston Railway Station, at 7.6 |
| | 16 | | Arrived at the Post-Office, Preston, the of |
| | 221.2 | 17.21 | 183 at 7.27 by Time Piece |
| | | | Delivered the Time-Piece safe (No. to |

By Command of the Postmaster-General,
GEORGE STOW,
 Surveyor and Superintendent.

200.—Sept. 1838.

1838 Time Bill for the Night Mail from London to Preston

On 14 August 1838 the Act to provide for the Conveyance of the Mails by Railways became law. "Whereas it is expedient that provision should be made by law for the conveyance of the mails by railways at a reasonable rate of charge to the public ..." It allowed the Postmaster General to require railway companies to transport mails by ordinary or special trains as he might direct. Companies were also to provide carriages fitted for the sorting of letters if the PMG so instructed. Disputes regarding remuneration were to be decided by arbitration.



Each opening, or extension, of line meant the demise of those mail coaches which had served that route, or their complete re-organisation, and that of the “rides”, in order to convey the mails to and from the railway stations. The last horse-drawn mail coach from London to Norwich via Newmarket was withdrawn in January 1846 but coaches continued to run in the provinces. From Lancaster they carried the mails to Glasgow and remained in the more remote areas through the latter half of the 19th century.

Travelling Post Office

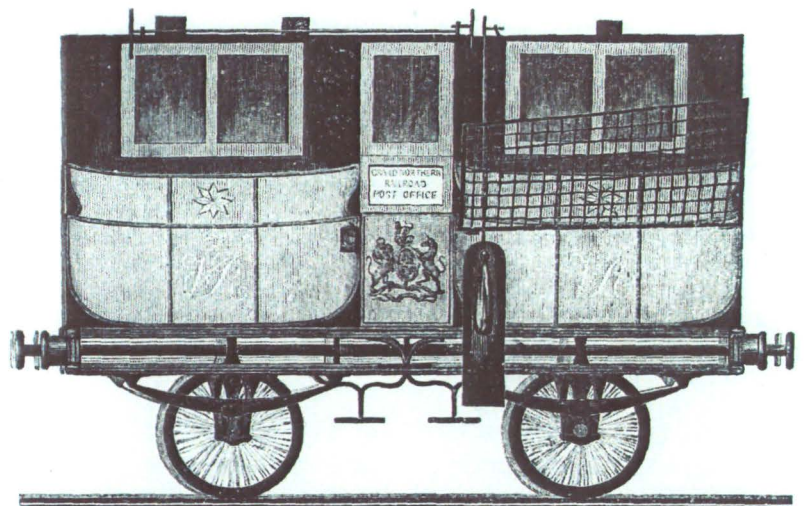
The year 1838 not only saw the opening of important railway lines, and the Act of Parliament, but also the introduction of two vital inventions: the travelling post office and an apparatus for picking up and putting down mail bags from a moving train.

Back in August 1826 Rowland Hill had first suggested the sorting of letters on mail coaches but this came to nothing. Now, a proposal by George F Karstadt, a long-standing Post Office surveyor, was formally made via George Louis, the Superintendent of Mail Coaches, on 6 January (though it may have originated with Karstadt’s son Frederick).

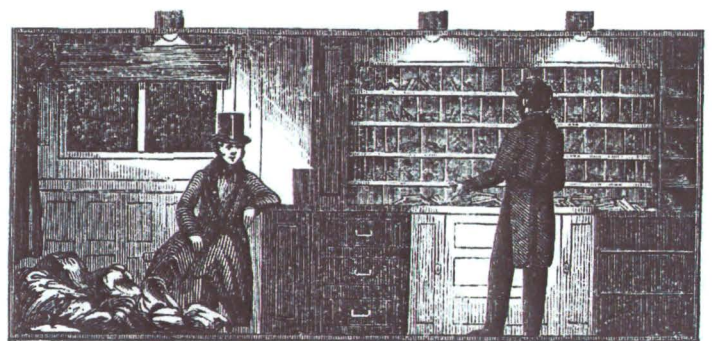
What was proposed was a “travelling office” where mail could be sorted into the required bags *en route*. Louis suggested that “the measure should be experimental and that two intelligent and well disposed persons should be selected to perform the experimental duty between Birmingham and Liverpool when the Postmaster General and Colonel Maberley [Secretary] will be enabled to judge how the experiment answers and how far it may be right to adopt it permanently when the Rail Way from London comes into operation.” He recommended one of his clerks (Ellis) and Frederick Karstadt who had not worked for the Post Office before. This was approved by the Postmaster General and Karstadt junior was duly appointed. The first run took place on the Grand Junction Railway later in January (probably on the 20th) using a converted horse box, the journey from Birmingham to Liverpool via Warrington taking four and a half hours.

After the experiment had been running for a few months a purpose-built carriage was proposed. At the beginning of May a sketch was submitted, with dimensions stated to be: height 7 feet, length 16 feet, and width 7 feet 6 inches, which caused arguments with

the railway companies. The number of wheels was left to the railway company directors and engineers even though this was a basis for payment. It was eventually agreed that four would suffice. Lichfield, the PMG, approved with the necessary instructions given that it “may be commenced forthwith”. Initially, it was built for the London & Birmingham line even though this was not yet fully open. The following month, another was constructed to the same plan for the Grand Junction Railway to replace the temporary converted horse box. Four were built in all. On 1 October, after the opening of the full length of the London & Birmingham Railway the new Travelling Post Office was carried from London through to Liverpool and with the opening of the North Union Railway on 7 November it continued direct to Preston, thus accelerating all the mails carried further by coach to Scotland.



TRAVELLING POST-OFFICE, ON THE LONDON AND BIRMINGHAM RAILWAY.



Illustrations of both the exterior and interior of the carriage in the *Illustrated London News* had the following commentary: “Here is a specimen of that exhaustless ingenuity which bids fair to annihilate time and space an improvement which enables the Post Office to practically work double tides, in other words to



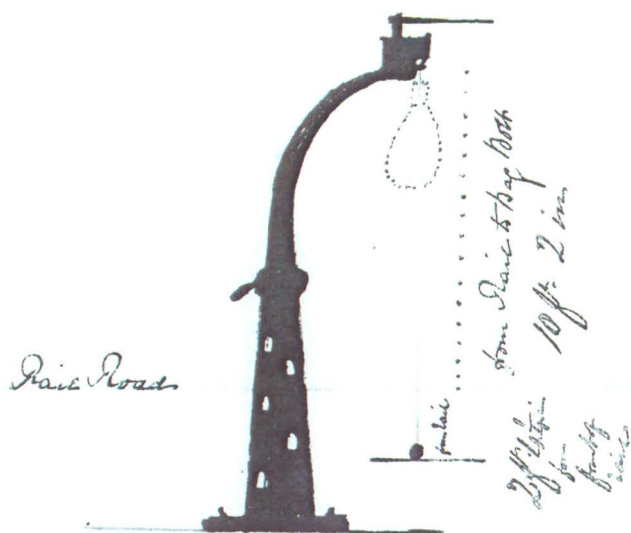
Unadopted stamp artwork by Rosalind Dease for the 1969 Post Office Technology issue featuring the purpose-built TPO carriage of 1838 with its Ramsey pick-up net

duplicate time by travelling and working at the same instant.”

Despite improvements in construction over the years conditions on board were far from ideal, with poor ventilation and the risk of serious injury, or even death. Seating was first supplied only in 1859. Then, in 1900, lavatory accommodation was installed on an Irish TPO which was “highly appreciated” by the staff.

Automatic pick-up apparatus

From the outset the purpose-built T.P.O. was fitted with an apparatus to drop and pick up mail bags while the train was still moving. The first idea for a mail bag exchange apparatus was submitted by Nathaniel Worsdell, carriage builder to the Grand Junction Rail



Original drawing of Ramsey's pick-up apparatus standard

way in Liverpool. Although he patented his idea on 4 January 1838 his proposal was not accepted. Another idea was put forward by John Ramsey, a Senior Clerk in the Secretary's Office. In May it was agreed to try out his scheme and a model was exhibited in London. It consisted of an iron frame covered by a net and attached to the TPO carriage. This opened out to receive a bag suspended from the arm of a standard erected at the side of the railway line. At the same time as a bag was delivered into the net another was dropped. The first experiment took place at Boxmoor station on the London & Birmingham Railway on 30 May, and was regarded as very successful.

In June instructions were given for the erection of standards manufactured by Barrow & Turner at Berkhamsted and Leighton Buzzard and further experiments took place. The following year it was introduced generally on 5 March. Ramsey's apparatus was rather complicated and gave some trouble. An inspector, Dicker, later improved on this model but the same principle lasted until 1971 when the apparatus was taken out of service.

Steamships to ocean liners

Inland, trains replaced mail coaches as the main form of mail transport. Overseas, steamships replaced sailing vessels. This was spurred by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the engineer of the Great Western Railway. Talking of the line which was soon to connect London and Bristol he is quoted as saying “Why not make it longer and have a steamboat to go from Bristol to New York and call it the Great Western?” This he then built, but it was not first across the Atlantic.

Sailing ships were unreliable and depended upon the weather and so were also slow. Steamships did not need to wait on the right wind, but for long journeys there was a problem with the quantity of fuel. So the first of these in the early 1820s only crossed the Channel or the North Sea. Built in 1837 for the service between Cork and London the *Sirius* was chartered by the British and American Steam Navigation Company to beat the *Great Western* as the first steamship across the Atlantic. Her passage lasted 18 days 10 hours arriving at New York on 22 April 1838. However, she only made two round trips.

Of more lasting importance was Brunel's first ship, the famous *Great Western* which was built for transatlantic trade and to join up with the railway of the same name then being constructed. A paddle steamer built of oak



she carried mail across the Atlantic to the United States from 1838 until 1846 (and then to the West Indies).

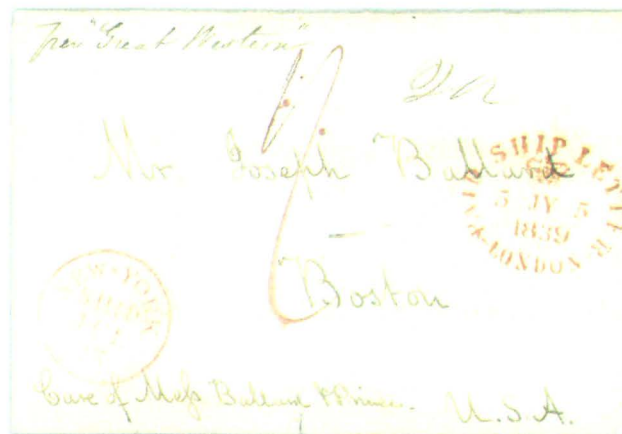
Right from the outset the Great Western company's somewhat buccaneering business attitudes caused problems for the Post Office. A company advertising poster for the maiden voyage from Bristol to New York announced a charge for letters (1s per single sheet). This caused the Post Office to ask the Government's law officers if it was legal for the company to collect money to carry letters (it was not). Return trips from New York had huge quantities of mail (some 20,000 on the first trip in May for which the U.S. post office paid 25c or 1s each) and these had to be dealt with in the Bristol office. Further complaint arose due to this quantity being delayed and resulted in the number of people employed in the office, and wages paid, having to be increased.

Company proprietors tried to gain commercial advantage by pressurising the Post Office. Complaints appeared in the *Sun* and *Times* newspapers and merchants in Liverpool were provoked into demanding a late express connection to Bristol. Initially refused,



The paddle steamer *Great Western* on unadopted stamp artwork by David Gentleman for the 1969 *British Ships* issue

some of this pressure bore fruit with the Secretary, Maberley, minuting "the only course to be adopted is, as I conceive, to provide every additional facility in our power at the port which is now likely to become so considerable a channel for Ship Letter correspondence so as to avoid unnecessary delay in the transmission of the letters." Special Ship Letter bags were to be made up at Liverpool to connect with the Bristol sailings. The company then caused outrage by demanding £200



1839 mail carried by the Great Western from Bristol to New York

for each crossing to carry the mails, rather than 2d per letter the Post Office was used to pay.

This pressure may have been counterproductive. In 1839 tenders were invited to carry mail by steamship between England and North America and the contract was awarded to the British and North American Royal Mail Steam Packet Co. (later Cunard) sailing from

Liverpool, rather than Falmouth or Bristol. Sailings began in July 1840 with the *Britannia* and lasted through to the end of the century, with competition from other lines.

However, undaunted, Brunel strove further with innovations. The first ocean-going ship to be made of iron, and with a screw propeller rather than paddle wheels, his *Great Britain* traversed the Atlantic with mail in 1845-6 but after running aground was transferred to the Australia run.

Tonnage and speed increased dramatically in the next decades. In 1840 the paddle steamer *Britannia* had been 1,154 tons; the

Majestic of 1889 was almost 10,000 tons and no longer had auxiliary sails. Where the first steamships had taken over 14 days to cross the Atlantic, by the end of the century it was only half that. Then, long lists of vessels with sailing dates were regularly posted in Post Office *Circulars* for the benefit of correspondents wanting to send their mail by the quickest ship.

Parcels Post

The Post Office had a monopoly on delivering letters. Parcels, however, were transported by private carriers,



notably the railways when they came into existence. Because of the fragmentation of the railway network, however, sending “through” parcels by various companies was fraught with difficulty and confusion. Various schemes for a national Post Office service had been proposed but had come to naught because of opposition from the powerful railway companies and indeed the Treasury. Carriage over any distance would clearly often still be by rail, though not always.

Professor Henry Fawcett, the blind Postmaster-General, “regarded the Post-Office as an engine for diffusing knowledge, expanding trade, increasing



Henry Fawcett
1884

prosperity, encouraging family correspondence, and facilitating thrift,” not as a means to aid taxation. He became PMG in 1880 and soon began negotiations with the railway companies to create a service. Two years of tough argument later the Post Office (Parcels) Act became law. It allowed the railways “eleven-twentieth parts [55%] of the gross receipts of the Postmaster-General from such of the said parcels as are conveyed by railway”. This was much higher than previously envisaged but was the compensation required by the companies for their agreement. Charges were 3d for the first lb and 3d for each succeeding 2lbs up

to 7lbs. To distinguish them, and thus apportion money, parcels would receive a handstamp indicating “Railway Borne” or “Coach Borne”.

Called originally the “Parcels Post” or “Inland Parcels Post” the service was to start on 1 August 1883. Before that, however, a vast amount of organisation and re-organisation had to take place. Space had to be provided for the acceptance and sorting of parcels. This could involve whole new buildings. As early as April 1883 a distribution was made to all post offices of suitable scales and weights for weighing parcels. There followed labels, bags and baskets and instructions about the rules. A “Special Cork Obliterating Stamp” with the necessary stamping pads, tin saucer and “Stamping Composition” were supplied in June and a new value of postage stamp had to be issued.

Anticipating success with the parliamentary bill De La Rue submitted proofs of designs for special elongated stamps for the parcels post in October 1881. These were not adopted but the rates for parcels (3d, 6d, 9d and 1s) meant that a new 9d value of postage stamp would be required. This was issued on the first day of the new service and postmasters were reminded to have sufficient supplies of all the relevant denominations of existing stamps.



1881 proposed stamp by De La Rue for the Parcels Post

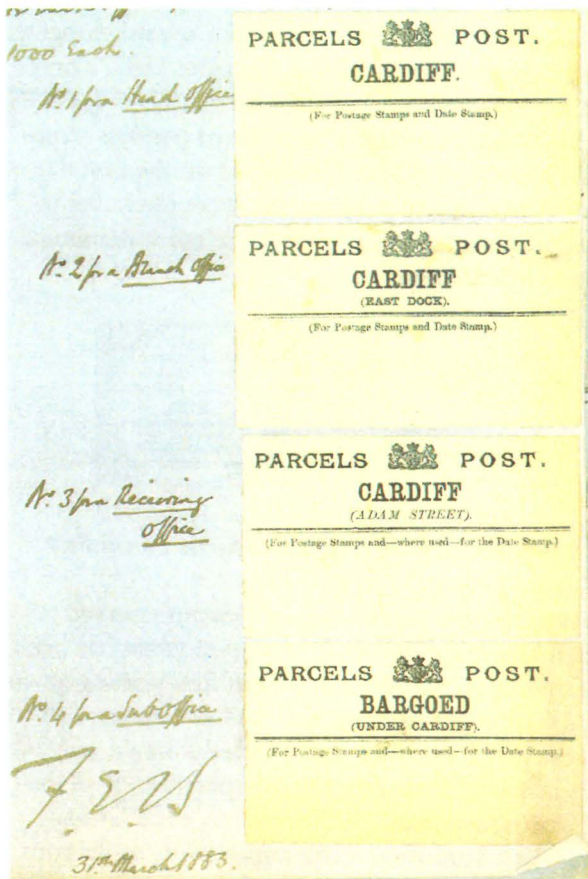
Shortly after the service began Fawcett thanked all staff for their endeavours. “A severe strain has been imposed upon the Department in first starting an enterprise of such magnitude as well as novelty, and the success which has thus far attended it could only have been achieved by the hearty co-operation of all the Officers concerned.” Nevertheless, experience showed up immediate problems, mostly to do with damage in transit. Three days after the inauguration a *Circular* emphasised that senders should be cautioned about insecure packing. Fragile parcels should be placed at the top of baskets, care should be taken with fishing rods, umbrellas etc, and “fruit and butter should be sent in tins, even rather than in wooden boxes, as fruit (strawberries, raspberries, etc.) is reduced to a pulp by jolting in the trains, and then exudes from the cracks of the Boxes. This has already



been observed in many instances.”

On 11 August there was an appropriate mention of game. A strong solution of carbolic acid was to be provided and “at all points of their transit care is to be taken to avoid delay in the onward transmission and delivery of these parcels”. Only a week later postmasters were informed that the carbolic acid was no longer necessary as the weather was cool and the grouse parcels were passing through the post in good order. Further detailed instructions about perishable items, and others, followed.

Postmasters were also reminded that the Parcels Post labels had to be specially printed for each office and needed to be ordered a month in advance. There were four types with minor differences for Head, Branch, Receiving and Sub Offices.



Proofs of the first Parcels Post labels

From 1 November rural carriers were required to accept parcels handed to them on their rounds though a limit was placed on the total weight. At this time their name changed. Since they now also carried parcels they were no longer merely “Letter Carriers” but became “Postmen”. Many complaints resulted

with accusations of being overburdened.

In July 1884 a review was carried out to simplify the service and at the same time proposals were made regarding a foreign service. Considering this Fawcett declared “I think in future the practice of calling the Post, the *Parcel Post* should be generally adopted”. This change from “*Parcels Post*” was announced on 12 August 1884 and all labels had to be altered accordingly. In November Fawcett died in harness. He was only 51 and the next Post Office *Circular* had a black border out of respect.

A Foreign & Colonial parcel service began gradually from 1 July 1885, firstly to India (including Aden and “British Burmah”), Gibraltar and Egypt. Gordon having just died at Khartoum, the Egyptian postal service did not extend farther south than Wadi Halfa. Parcels for Egypt, however, should not contain “arms, gunpowder, and materials for the composition of gunpowder, ‘Le Hachich’, books of the Mussulman religion, such as the Koran, &c”.

Gradually, it was extended to Malta, Malaya and China and by December 1885 to Southern Africa. It was not until 1 January, 1886 that parcels could be sent to the continent (Germany, Belgium and Constantinople) and the British West Indies.

In the first eight months of the inland service nearly 14 million parcels were sent, rising to almost 23 million in the first full year (1884/5). By the end of the century over 81 million parcels were being posted annually.

Railway Letter Post

Railway companies carried mail for the Post Office and parcels for themselves and the Post Office. They could not convey single letters. This changed on 1 February 1891 when the Railway Letter Post began. Provided the normal postage was paid and a fee of 2d to the railway company (paid by private company stamps of a standard design) letters could be accepted at any railway station for onward transmission by train and then in the normal post. This did not apply to letters over one ounce or to mail going abroad. Mail could also be sent to a station and kept “to be called for” over a period of seven days.

Designs were provided by De La Rue for special stamps for this service in February and April 1890. These bore a 3d denomination for the entire cost of



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Proof of a proposed Railway Letter stamp

sending a letter in this fashion. Difficulties in dividing the revenue meant that this was not adopted and separate railway company labels for 2d were introduced instead.

Douglas N. Muir
Curator, Philately
September 2005

Number of items sent (taken from Postmaster Generals reports)

| Year | Chargeable letters | Postcards | Parcels | Notes |
|--------|--------------------|-------------|------------|---|
| 1839 | 75,900,000 | | | |
| 1840 | 168,800,000 | | | Uniform Penny Postage |
| 1845 | 271,400,000 | | | |
| 1850 | 347,100,000 | | | |
| 1855 | 456,216,000 | | | |
| 1860 | 564,002,000 | | | |
| 1865 | 720,467,000 | | | |
| 1870 | 862,722,000 | | | October, 1870: Introduction of postcards |
| 1871 | 867,000,000 | 75,000,000 | | |
| 1875 | 1,008,392,000 | 87,116,000 | | |
| 1880/1 | 1,165,167,000 | 122,884,000 | | August 1883: Parcels service introduced |
| 1885/6 | 1,403,500,000 | 171,300,000 | 26,417,422 | |
| 1890/1 | 1,705,800,000 | 229,700,000 | 46,287,956 | |
| 1895/6 | 1,834,200,000 | 314,500,000 | 60,527,000 | September 1894: Illustrated postcards permitted |
| 1900/1 | 2,323,600,000 | 419,000,000 | 81,017,000 | |



1883. Song sheet for the new *Parcels Post*, with a postal worker sorting parcels inside the van.

The Royal Mail Archive records four centuries of the British postal service. It is an internationally important resource for social - and postal - history. It is managed by The British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA). The BPMA was founded in 2004 to care for the archive and museum collections of Royal Mail, but it is independent of Royal Mail Group plc.

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