

# Bicycles and Motorcycles

### Bicycles

The Post Office bought or hired a few early bicycles or 'velocipedes', which cost £6 to £8 each, prior to 1880. However, their trials failed, mainly because it was difficult to find men fit enough to ride the bicycles. In 1880, two tricycle posts were used as an experiment in Coventry, because it was thought that it was less tiring to ride a tricycle. The Post Office paid the riders a weekly allowance of five shillings for the tricycles' purchase and maintenance.

In 1882, Edward Burstow, a Horsham architect, invented the 'Centre Cycle'. Nicknamed the 'Hen and Chickens' it had a large central wheel and two small wheels at each end, and brackets above the small wheels supported a basket for mail at each end. In 1883, following the introduction of the parcel post, this type was used for the increasing loads in rural areas. It was apparently successful in Horsham, but less encouraging reports from other areas ended the experiment.

Between 1883 and 1895, bicycles and tricycles were used on a trial basis for carrying post and telegram deliveries. By 1895, sixty-seven cycle posts had been established throughout the country, using bicycles and tricycles provided by their riders. The riders received a weekly allowance in return. In 1895, the number of cycles used led to the weekly allowance being fixed at four shillings per rider.

Post Office bicycles were first officially introduced in 1896, when 100 were bought, largely to cope with the extension of the radius for the free delivery of telegrams from one to three miles. After this initial purchase, bicycles were specially made for the Post Office. However, this only lasted until 1904 when the Post Office specification was abandoned because many cycle manufacturers felt unable to produce the design which required special machinery. Manufacturers were therefore asked to produce quotes for bicycles of their own specifications,

provided that they were suitable for Post Office work. As a result, from 1904 the Post Office used various designs, gaining experience about each type's advantages and disadvantages. However, maintenance problems arose because separate stocks of parts were needed and the Post Office decided to return to a standard design.

In 1929, the standard cycle was introduced, and annual purchases changed the whole fleet to this standard by about 1935. The 1929 design was used until 1992. Postal cycles had free-wheels and two brakes whereas telegraph cycles had a fixed wheel. The cycles, usually painted red, were required to carry loads weighing up to 50lbs, and had to last at least four years.

A booklet entitled *The Cycle Handbook* was available at every office to assist Postmasters and others in the management of their cycles. The riders were responsible for keeping the cycles in good condition, and were supplied with a card entitled *How to use and take care of Post Office Cycles*. Repairs were carried out by local tradesmen with parts supplied by the Post Office.

In 1977, W R Pashley of Stafford became the main supplier of bicycles to the Post Office. In 1990, 55 prototypes of a three-speed bicycle, developed by that company, were tested. The new design, the first since 1929, had a lighter frame, plastic mudguards and all-weather hub brakes. A plastic container for mail was carried at the front. The new design, introduced nation-wide on 22 September 1992, was intended to gradually replace the Royal Mail's fleet of 35,000 'boneshakers' as they wore out. In January 1993 an electric motor was introduced for going uphill or when carrying a heavy load. However, postmen still had to pedal when going downhill or on flat stretches. Motorcycles

During the early part of the twentieth century,

experiments were made in the use of motorcycles. In 1903, a motor tricycle was on trial in London and in about 1910, a postman on a rural service near Watford used a petrol motor auto-wheel device attached to a bicycle.

By 1913, some Post Office staff used private motorcycles for their official duties. They were paid an allowance of three pence a mile for use of the vehicles. The following year, motorcycles were provided by the Post Office on an experimental basis. Twenty heavy motorcycle combinations were bought, comprising ten New Hudsons, six Douglases and four Rovers. They were all single-cylinder machines of 3½ horse-power with wicker or metal side-carriers. They were introduced on rural collections and deliveries to replace postmen on horseback. However, between 1914 and 1919 the experiment was suspended, due to wartime petrol rationing.

In 1919, the use of motorcycles by the Post Office was resumed, and more powerful, twin cylinder, machines were introduced. In 1920, another trial with the auto-wheel device, attached to a bicycle, took place in Douglas. The start of the 1920s was the beginning of the Post Office's motor transport scheme, during which it purchased Matchless, Triumph, BSA, Enfield, Douglas, Clyno and Chater Lea motorcycles. BSA was found to be the best for price and quality and acted as supplier to the Post Office for a number of years.

In 1924, light solo motorcycles and light motorcycle combinations were first used experimentally to carry post. The combinations were slightly more expensive to operate but were more satisfactory and by the early 1930s were gradually replacing the solo motorcycles. By 1925, 400 twin cylinder motorcycles were in use, in all types of postal work.

Following experiments in Leeds in 1933, motorcycles were soon adopted by telegraph messengers. However, only messengers over 17 who had their parents' consent and a declaration of fitness from a doctor were eligible for riding them.

Until the 1960s, companies such as BSA and Raleigh supplied motorcycles to the Post Office. In September 1967, fifty Raleigh Supermatic mopeds,

modified for Post Office use, were introduced. Earlier trials of mopeds had shown they were suitable for rural collections and deliveries, deliveries on housing estates on the outskirts of towns, patrol and inquiry work and telephone kiosk cleaning. In the 1970s, BSA and Raleigh gave way to makes such as Honda. The Honda VT500 was used from 1988, and the Kawasaki GT500 from 1989. The Honda SH50 City Express moped was used from 1993, mainly for low volume deliveries in towns or rural areas.

### Sources

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Portfolio collection

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