

A History of Mount Pleasant

Early history

The area on which Royal Mail Mount Pleasant now stands was originally open fields on rising ground above the River Fleet. In the 18th century, a cold spring on the site was reputed to have great medicinal properties. This attracted many bathers and the site became known as 'Cold Bath Fields'. However, the fields were later used as a rubbish tip which, with more than a hint of sarcasm, became known as 'Mount Pleasant'.

In 1790 the site was cleared to make way for a new prison. Opened in 1794, it was initially called the Middlesex House of Correction, but soon became known as Cold Bath Prison and later Clerkenwell Gaol. Originally a criminal jail, it later became a debtors prison before closing in 1885.

The Post Office takes over

In 1887 the Post Office adapted part of the vacant prison, the treadmill houses, for use as a temporary parcel office. The site was ideal because it was "in convenient proximity to the three great Railway Stations on the north side of London". However, postal workers objected to working at 'Cold Bath Fields', a name long associated with prison life, so the designation 'Mount Pleasant' was formally used from 1888.

The old prison site was officially transferred to the Post Office in 1889. The old prison was gradually replaced to make way for Post Office buildings as more and more space was needed. The first Post Office building, devoted to the parcel post and the housing of postal stores, was completed in 1890. An extension was built in 1900 to accommodate the transfer of the London Letter Post Office from St Martins-Le-Grand. The original prison gate was incorporated into this new sorting office and not demolished until 1901.

The last remaining sections of the prison were demolished in 1929 to make way for an extension of the Letter Office. On 2 November 1934, the new building was officially opened by the Duke and Duchess of York, the future King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. This building was to house the Inland Section Sorting Office, the Postal Stores Depot and the administrative offices.

The Post Office Underground Railway (now known as Mail Rail), which connected the Letter and Parcel Offices with King Edward Building, the Eastern District Office and the West Central District Office, was opened in 1927. The station beneath Mount Pleasant was the largest of the eight original stations within this system. Mail Rail's main workshop, where any maintenance was carried out, remained at Mount Pleasant until the Mail Rail system closed.

Emergencies

As early as February 1937, the Post Office began to prepare for war, so that there would be as little disruption to the mail as possible. Staff were trained and prepared to take on extra duties and structural alterations were made to provide access to the Post Office Railway so it could be used as an air-raid shelter for staff. The auxiliary bomb disposal unit which was set up at Mount Pleasant earned high commendations from the commanding officer of the Royal Engineers for their efforts during the war.

On 16 October 1940, a high-explosive bomb fell on the Farringdon Road entrance to the Parcel Block, the resulting crater caused the collapse of the road way; fissures ran across the whole of the East Yard right up to the wall of the building, making the yard impassable. In addition, the water main running along Farringdon Road was broken and the Post Office Railway tunnel was flooded.

On 18 June 1943 the parcel section building was completely destroyed by a single bomb. The bomb

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struck the block towards the North East corner causing a fierce fire which soon had the whole building ablaze. Despite being fought for four hours, the entire building, except for a large part of the basement, was gutted – including 77,000 parcels. Two members of staff were killed, a porter and a temporary sorter, and another 34 injured.

Fire raged at Mount Pleasant again after the war on 5 October 1954 when the supplies department, based on the top floor, was severely damaged. About a thousand employees were evacuated, along with the mail – the only casualty was an exhausted fireman!

Later developments

Mount Pleasant pioneered the use of Optical Character Recognition sorting equipment with the installation of the machinery in 1979. An electronic eye reads printed addresses and the machine converts the postcode into a series of phosphor dots which it prints onto the envelope. This allows the sorting machines to 'read' each address automatically.

Re-organisation of parcel work saw most of the Parcel Section transferred to Brent Cross in 1983.

Today 'The Mount' is the principal Processing Centre in the London Division. Improvements have been made in all aspects of the office.

From summer 1996, three major London postal operations, the City deliveries, the Foreign Section and Centrally Controlled Services began operating from Mount Pleasant. The office is presently the largest automated processing centre in the UK, fully using the Mount's site and its large automated processing equipment.

February 1997 saw the refurbishment of the Electronic Services Centre. One of only two centres in the country, the Electronic Service Centre transforms electronic data into conventional mail for business customers. Mount Pleasant is the most highly developed unit within Royal Mail and fully equipped to serve far into the future.

Sources

POST 30: Registered Files, Minuted Papers (England & Wales), 1792-1952

POST 33: Registered Files, Minuted Papers (England & Wales), 1921-1960

POST 56: War and Civil Emergencies, 1859-1969
Portfolio collection
St Martins-le-Grand
Post Office Magazine

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The Royal Mail Archive **www.postalheritage.org.uk**

Freeling House
Phoenix Place
LONDON
WC1X 0DL

T +44 (0)20 7239 2570
F +44 (0)20 7239 2576
Minicom +44 (0)20 7239 2572
info@postalheritage.org.uk