

Archive Information Sheet

The Post Office during the Second World War

THE BRITISH
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Extracts from Post 56: War and Civil Emergencies
1859-1969

Arrival of Dunkirk evacuees at Dover – 5 June, 1940

“...as boats of every size imaginable were emptied of their human cargoes hundreds of telegrams were handed in...who could handle such messages and remain unmoved by the urgency of their appeal; the senders, somebody’s fathers, somebody’s sons, were indeed straight from the jaws of Hell, back from the gates of death, and the little we could do to assist them to relieve the anxiety at home was so gladly undertaken.”

Work goes on as the bombs fall – September 1940

From August 1940 Dover was in range of the German Army’s long range guns on the French side of the channel at Cap Gris Nez. In addition, the town was frequently attacked by German aircraft.

“Many of the homes of members of staff have been badly damaged, necessitating living in semi darkness or in patched rooms. Many of the men have evacuated their wives or families, yet in no case has Hitler been cited as an excuse for failure to report for duty. One girl who was off duty at 8.0pm reported back at 9.0pm with a request for permission to sleep at the office as her home had been demolished by a shell that evening – that was all – back on duty the next morning as usual, the only unusual feature being that she had to wear the same jumper and skirt as on the previous evening...”

Source: Post 56/125 ‘Dover Post Office and its Staff in War Time’ June 1940-December 1943: a typed account written by Dover’s Head Postmaster, Mr A.W.B. Mowbray.

Radio broadcast from the General Post Office

“You may know a good deal about the difficulties of the black-out...but I wonder if you know quite as much about it as, let’s say the postmen and the railway men, who are making sure that your mails get through...but this can only be done if you will help us by posting early and by early I mean before you go to lunch at noon to 1 o’clock...and when you are in your shelters I hope you will remember that the letters you posted...are being handled by postal and railway workers who still carry on in spite of barrage, blitzkrieg and black-out...This war has changed a great many things and it doesn’t seem too much to ask that you should change your postal habits. Remember, post your letters every day before you go to lunch.”

Source: Post 56/97 Broadcast talk given by T. H. Boyd, Assistant Director General, GPO during the 6 o’clock news on Friday 8 November, 1940.

Unbowed by the Blitz

“Endeavour was made to meet this difficulty [disruption of evening train departures by air raids] by setting up a duplicate of the Night Mail network, being founded on trains leaving London and other great centres in the afternoon instead of the evening, for letters posted by about 1pm... City dwellers in general, however, and Londoners in particular, refusing to be shifted from their homes despite Hitler and his bombers, equally refused to be shifted from their well established posting habits and made little use of the new range of services until the closing months of the war... The Londoner posted his letters at dusk, made for home and the comparative safety of the suburbs as speedily as he could and felt mildly aggrieved if shrapnel began to fall about him before he came in sight of his Anderson shelter. He gave no thought to the Post Office men and women who, as night fell, had to make their way from their homes into inner London and who had to carry on in glass roofed sorting

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offices...and who, when the job was finished, found themselves in the centre of the danger area with no means of getting home.”

Source: Post 56/22 ‘An Account of the Work of the Post Office During the Second World War 1938-1945’ by Sir Thomas Gardiner, Director General of The Post Office 1936-45.

Stiff upper lip – instructions in the event of an invasion

“All members of the staff must know that it is their duty to STAND FIRM and to CARRY ON with their normal vocations along with the rest of the civilian population, unless they are definitely instructed to the contrary.”

Source: Post 56/173 Instructions regarding what Post Office staff should do in the event of an invasion – July, 1941.

The Post Office’s role in D-Day

General Eisenhower’s D-Day invasion force relied on communications laid by GPO engineers. As Sir Thomas Gardiner, Director General of The Post Office writes:

“The telegraph network ...was three times as extensive as the whole pre-war civil telegraph network. Nearly 60,000 telephone circuits had been provided for the use of the Forces. The mileage of trunk telephone lines made available to them was greater than that of the whole trunk network available for public use at the outbreak of war.”

After D-Day in June 1944 General Eisenhower wrote to the Postmaster General:

“The build up of the necessary forces for the current operations has involved the construction of a vast network of communications radiating from the key centres of vital importance in the United Kingdom. The greater part of this work has been undertaken by the Engineers and Staff of the General Post Office. It is my great pleasure, on behalf of the Allied Expeditionary Force, to ask you to pass on to them my sincere appreciation for their contribution and for the long hours they have worked and for the excellent cooperation they have given toward our success.”

Source: Post 56/22 ‘An Account of the Work of the Post Office During the Second World War 1938-1945’ by Sir Thomas Gardiner, Director General of The Post Office 1936-45.

Communication with Prisoners of War and civilians in Japan and Japanese occupied territories

“Under Japanese regulations communications are limited to 25 words and must be typewritten or written clearly in block lettering... Only relatives and close friends should write, and no one family should write more than once a fortnight to the same prisoner. These restrictions are in the interests of the prisoners: it is to be assumed that comparatively few English-reading censors are available to the Japanese authorities and the delay in censorship abroad is certain to be considerable if letters... are too numerous.”

(Post Office Leaflet P2327B) published December 1944

Source: Post 56/89 1940-1944 Instructions relating to communicating with prisoners of war and civilian internees in Europe and in Japan and Japanese Occupied Territories.

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POST 56 also contains material on:

Instructions to the public, 1915-1944, Instructions to staff, 1938-1944

Extracts from Post Office press announcements, 1939-1945

Staff, 1909-1950, War diaries, 1935-1946

Air raid precautions and damage, 1939-1945, Censorship, 1870-1945

Committee reports and minutes, 1918-1957

Director General's Emergency Committee, 1937-1939

Committee for co-ordination of air raid precautions in industry, 1939

Forces postal services, 1899-1969, Overseas Mails Branch, 1907-1945

Post Office Home Guard, 1939-1945, 11th City of Edinburgh (11th G.P.O.) Battalion, 1940-1945, Post Office Rifles, 1859-1965

Prisoners of war and civilian internees, 1907-1945

Telecommunications, 1898-1951, Insurrection in Dublin, April 1916 (Easter Uprising) Histories, 1945-1946

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