

The head of the Post Office has been known by many different titles— Master of the Posts, Comptroller General of the Posts, and Postmaster of England. It was not until 1657, that the head of the Post Office became known as ‘Postmaster General’. This continued for 312 years, until September 1969 when the office of Postmaster General ceased to exist.

King Henry VIII became the first monarch to establish a regular service for the carrying of Royal messages in c1516 when he appointed Sir Brian Tuke as ‘Master of the Posts’. In 1635, when King Charles I opened up his private Court mail system to the general public, it was the beginning of the Post Office as we know it today. Although an Act passed in 1657 first created the office of Postmaster General as the Head of the Post Office, it was not until another Act passed in 1660, after the death of Cromwell and the Restoration of the monarchy, that officially confirmed the office of the Postmaster General.

The appointments of Postmasters General were not generally made for a fixed length of time, which meant that many new Postmasters General were only appointed upon the death, retirement, or resignation of the previous postholder.

Famous Postmasters General include Henry Bishop (1660-1663), founder of the ‘Bishop mark’ the first Postmark, Anthony Wedgewood Benn (1964-1966), and Neville Chamberlain (1922-1923).

Head of the Royal Posts 1516-1655

In this period there was a lot of dispute over the position of Master of the Posts. This related especially to the boundaries between mail within England and mail between England and the continent. In 1619 Matthew De Quester (who had previously been employed under Stanhope), was appointed Postmaster of the Foreign Posts. This was a newly created position, independent of the Master of the Posts. This was opposed by Stanhope who believed that the letter patent, granting him his position, included the foreign posts. This controversy explains the lack of clarity over dates in this period, and occasional overlap.

Date of appointment	Name
c1516-1545	Sir Brian Tuke
1545-1566	John Mason
1567-1590	Thomas Randolph
1590-1607	John Stanhope (Baron)
1607-1635	Charles Stanhope (son of John)

Date of appointment	Name
1619-1632	Matthew de Quester (Postmaster of Foreign parts)
1632-1640	Thomas Witherings (Postmaster of Foreign parts, England and Scotland)
1637-1642	Philip Burlamachi (Postmaster of England and Scotland under the Secretaries of State)
1642-1653	Edmond Prideaux
1653-1655	John Manley

Postmasters General from 1660 (The Post Office Act 1660 officially created the position of Postmaster General)

Date of appointment	Name
1655-1660	John Thurloe, Secretary of State
1660-1663	Colonel Henry Bishop
1663-1664 (died)	Daniel O'Neale
1664-1667	Catherine O'Neale (wife of the above. She inherited the position, and was the only female Postmaster General. However Lord Arlington took over the administration)
1667-1685	Lord Arlington (Henry Bennett)
1685-1689	Earl of Rochester (Lawrence Hyde)
1689-1691	John Wildman

Joint Postmasters General from 1691-1823

In 1691, there were two main parties in government who were bitter rivals. These were known as the Whigs and the Tories. From 1691 onwards, two men were appointed to hold the position of Postmaster General jointly— one was to be a member of the Whig party and the other one a Tory. This continued until 1823 (although it had lost much of its political significance before then) and ended with the appointment of the Earl of Chichester— the first sole Postmaster General since 1691.

Date of appointment	Name
1691-1708	Sir Robert Cotton
1691-1715	Sir Thomas Frankland

Postmasters General (contd.)

Date of appointment	Name
1708-1715	Sir John Evelyn
1715-1720	Lord Cornwallis
1715-1720	James Craggs
1720-1739	Edward Carteret
1720-1725	Galfridius Walpole
1725-1732	Edward Harrison
1733-1759	Lord Lovel, Earl of Leicester
1739-1744	Sir John Eyles
1745-1758	Sir Everard Fawkener
1759-1762	Earl of Bessborough
1759-1765	Robert Hampden
1762-1763	Earl of Egmont
1763-1765	Robert Hyde
1765-1766	Lord Grantham
1766-1768	Earl of Hillborough
1766-1781	Francis, Lord le Despencer
1768-1771	Earl of Sandwich
1771-1789	H. F. Thynne (later Lord Carteret)
1782	Viscount Barrington
1782-1783	Earl of Tankerville
1783-1784	Lord Foley
1784-1786	Earl of Tankerville (2nd term)
1786	Earl of Clarendon
1787-1794	Lord Walsingham
1789-1790	Earl of Westmorland
1790-1798	Earl of Chesterfield
1794-1799	Earl of Leicester
1798-1804	Lord Auckland
1799-1801	Earl Gower
1801-1806	Lord Charles Spencer
1804-1806	Duke of Montrose
1806-1807	Earl of Buckinghamshire

Date of appointment	Name
1806-1807	Earl of Carysfort
1807-1814	Earl of Sandwich
1807-1823	Earl of Chichester
1814-1816	Earl of Clancarty
1816-1823	Marquess of Salisbury

Sole Postmasters General from 1823 onwards

Date of appointment	Name
1823-1826	Earl of Chichester (continued as Sole Postmaster General)
4 July 1826	Lord Frederick Montague
17 September 1827	Duke of Manchester
14 December 1830	Duke of Richmond
5 July 1834	Marquess of Conyngham
31 December 1834	Lord of Maryborough
8 May 1835	Marquess of Conyngham (2nd term)
30 May 1835	Earl of Lichfield
15 September 1841	Lord Lowther, Earl of Lonsdale
2 January 1846	Earl of St Germain's
14 July 1846	Marquess of Clanricarde
6 May 1852	Earl of Hardwicke
8 January 1853	Viscount Canning (later Lord Canning)
30 November 1855	Duke of Argyle
13 March 1858	Lord Colchester
24 June 1859	Earl of Elgin
11 May 1860	Duke of Argyle (2nd term)
28 August 1860	Lord Stanley of Alderley
19 July 1866	Duke Montrose
30 December 1868	Marquis of Hardington
24 January 1871	William Monsell (Lord Emley)
13 November 1873	Lord Lyon Playfair

Date of appointment	Name
3 March 1874	Lord John Manners
14 May 1880	Henry Fawcett
7 November 1884	George John Shaw-Lefevre (Lord Eversley)
29 June 1885	Lord John Manners (2nd term)
10 February 1886	Lord Wolverton
5 August 1886	Henry Cecil Raikes
21 September 1891	Sir James Fergusson
19 August 1892	Arnold Morley
5 July 1895	Duke of Norfolk
10 April 1900	Marquess of Londonderry
15 August 1902	J. Austen Chamberlain
9 October 1903	Edward George Villiers, Lord Stanley
11 December 1905	Sydney Boxton
19 February 1910	Herbert L. Samuel
10 February 1914	Charles E. H. Hobhouse
28 May 1915	Herbert L Samuel (2nd term)
21 January 1916	J. P. Pease, Lord Grinford
13 December 1916	Albert H. Illingworth, Lord Illingworth
4 April 1921	Frederick G Kellaway
2 November 1922	A. Neville Chamberlain
12 March 1923	Sir W Joynson-Hicks, Viscount Brentford
29 May 1923	Sir Laming Worthington-Evans
23 January 1924	Vernon Hartshorn
13 November 1924	Sir William Lowson Mitchell-Thomson
10 June 1929	H. B. Lees-Smith
4 March 1931	C. R. Atlee
4 September 1931	W. G. A. Ormsby-Gore, Lord Harlech
12 November 1931	Sir Kingsley Wood
7 June 1935	Major G. C. Tryon
5 April 1940	W. S. Morrison
6 February 1943	Captain Harry Crookshank

Date of appointment	Name
4 August 1945	Earl of Listowel
23 April 1947	Wilfred Paling
2 March 1950	Ness Edwards
6 November 1951	Earl De La Warr
8 April 1955	Charles Hill
17 January 1957	Ernest Marples
21 October 1959	Reginald Bevins
19 October 1964	Anthony Wedgewood Benn
4 July 1966	Edward Short
5 April 1968	Roy Mason
1 July 1968	John Stonehouse

Sources

POST 58: Staff nomination and Appointment 1737-1972

POST 59: Staff Establishments 1691-1946

POST 69: Letter Patents 1715-1964

POST 122: Registered Files, Minuted and Decentralised Papers 195-1973

'Postmasters General' portfolio (including a list obtained from Howard Robinson's *Britain's Post Office*, Oxford University Press, 1953)

Individual Postmasters General portfolios

The History of the Post Office, from its Establishment down to 1836, Herbert Joyce, London, Richard Bentley & Son, 1893

The Royal Mail Archive Search Room at Freeling House is open Monday to Friday, 10.00am - 5.00pm, and until 7.00pm on Thursdays.

We are open selected Saturdays 10.00am - 5.00pm, please call or see our website for dates.

Please bring proof of identity to get an archive user card. In most cases there is no need to make an appointment, but please contact us in advance if you have any questions.

The Royal Mail Archive www.postalheritage.org.uk

Freeling House	T +44 (0)20 7239 2570
Phoenix Place	F +44 (0)20 7239 2576
LONDON	Minicom +44 (0)20 7239 2572
WC1X 0DL	info@postalheritage.org.uk