

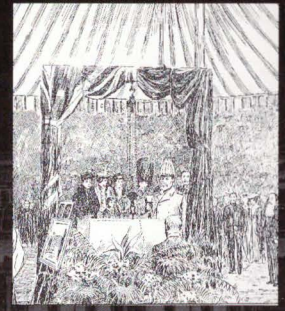
1. Photo of the Newgate Street side of the building, c1923
2. Drawings of the Blue Coat School buildings, 1905
3. Drawing showing King Edward VII laying the foundation stone, 1905



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The Post Office & King Edward Building

By Andrew Perry

For over 80 years King Edward Building in the City stood proud as London's Chief Post Office. The building was designed in the English Renaissance style by Sir Henry Tanner, principal architect of the Office of Works. It opened in 1910 after taking more than five years to build and was a pioneer of the then new technique of thin-walled construction using reinforced concrete.

In 1997 it was announced that the US investment bank Merrill Lynch were to buy the KEB site for their new headquarters, thus ending the historical connection of Post Office buildings around St Martin's-le-Grand which had lasted since 1829.

Site History

Up until the beginning of the 13th century the land on which King Edward Building stands was one of the numerous vacant spaces in the north-west portion of the area enclosed by the Roman wall. In 1225 John Iwyn, a London mercer, presented a void space of land on the north side of what is now Newgate Street to the Franciscan or Greyfriars Order. In due time, the southern part of this land was occupied by the great Greyfriars Church. The much larger northern section was taken up by the monastery buildings and precincts, and it is on this part that the KEB was to be erected many centuries later.

The Franciscan order dedicated itself to the service of the poor, and the Greyfriars Church and Monastery became one of the architectural splendours of London.

The friars' simple life attracted a number of admirers and benefactors, and for more than three centuries a succession of illustrious dead were laid to rest in the church and the cloisters. They included three queens, three princesses, a French Duke of Bourbon, and many members of the most powerful and significant families in England.

With the dissolution of the greater monasteries Greyfriars was put into the hands of King Henry VIII in 1538. The church was used as government storehouses for hoarding wine plundered from French ships and some of the buildings were used for private dwellings. In 1547 Henry gave most of the old monastic buildings to the City of London to be used to help the poor, and the church was renamed Christ Church.

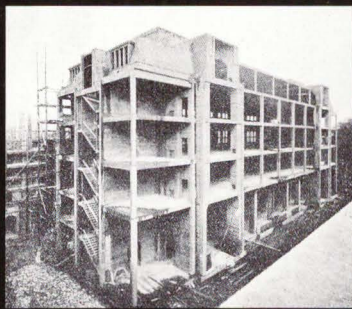
Ten days before his death in 1553, King Edward VI founded Christ's Hospital - a hospital for orphans. The old Greyfriars monastery buildings were given to the hospital, and within six months it was able to accommodate 340 boys. A school was added shortly afterwards, which was known as the Blue Coat School because of the distinctive uniform of long blue coats and yellow stockings worn by the boys.

Many of the old monastic buildings were rebuilt after the Great Fire of London. The north and west of the site had been bounded by the old city walls and the town ditch, an open sewer until 1552. With the filling in of the ditch and the levelling of the walls, Christ's Hospital started to extend northwards.

Across the ditch, Sir Christopher Wren was busy erecting a Writing School, a Mathematical School, and to the south of the cloisters a Latin School. The old great hall on the west side of the cloisters, once the friars' refectory, was rebuilt in 1680 by the President of the hospital, Sir John Frederick.

King Edward Street was named in 1843 in memory of Edward VI. Its early connection with butchers' slaughterhouses had previously given it the names Stinking Lane, Chick Lane, Blowbladder Street, and Butchers' Hall Lane. The butchers had left by 1720 to be replaced by milliners and seamstresses, so a change of name must have been welcomed.

New ideas on hygiene in the late 19th century led to the transfer of several of the great London schools to the fresher air of the countryside. A new Blue Coat School was built at Horsham, Sussex in 1902 by Aston Webb and Edward Ingress Bell. The old site was sold and divided between the Post Office and St Bartholomew's Hospital. Most of the original buildings were destroyed, but some portions were moved to Horsham. Christ Church remained until it was destroyed by fire during an air raid in December 1940.



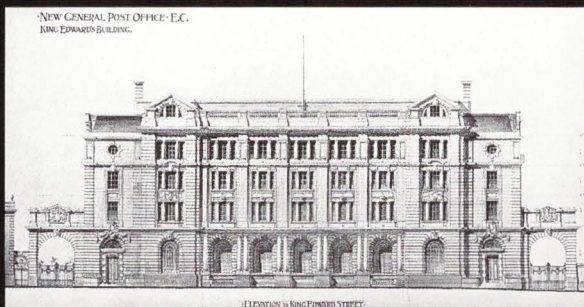
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Need for a New Post Office Building

When the General Post Office transferred in 1829 from Lombard Street to St Martin's-le-Grand (later to become GPO East), the sole public service was the conveyance of letters and newspapers. All the 800 Headquarters staff were housed in this one building, but by the early 1900s the Post Office had expanded to include services such as money orders, the savings bank, telegraphs, postal orders, telephones and parcels. With the advent of inland penny postage the volume of mail had increased dramatically. Over 24,000 staff were employed in seven buildings.

In 1829, around 400,000 letters a week were delivered within a 12-mile area of the GPO by 564 postmen. There was one daily general collection of letters for the country throughout London, but between the hours of 5 and 6pm, postmen collected letters by walking through the streets and ringing a bell. There were six daily collections in the centre of London and two in the outskirts.

By the turn of the century there were almost 20,000,000 letters a week being delivered by 11,000 postmen. There were 18 collections of mail in central London and the one evening despatch to provincial towns of 1829 had risen to eight despatches daily to each provincial office. It was obvious that the building, now GPO East, was not large enough to handle this growth of business.

New Building

Work began on a new Post Office building in 1869. It was situated opposite GPO East and designed in a similar style by James Williams of the Office of Works. It became the home of the Engineer-in-Chief and the Central Telegraph Office upon its completion in 1874, and was known as GPO West to distinguish it from the building across the road. From 1882 premises at the rear were acquired for additional accommodation, and they were later linked to GPO West by two overhead bridges across Roman Bath Street. An additional storey was added in 1884.

Subsequently, the CTO was heavily damaged during World War II and partly restored in 1945 and 1947. New accommodation was found for the CTO in 1962 and the building served to house an overflow from the then Postal Headquarters, including the new Philatelic Bureau. The building was finally declared unsafe and demolished in 1967 and British Telecom erected a new headquarters on the site in 1984.

Other New Buildings

GPO South, situated in Queen Victoria Street, was opened in 1880 to house the savings bank, money order, postal order and telephone departments. A new building on the other side of Knightrider Street was used from 1890 and connected to GPO South by an overhead bridge. When the savings bank department moved to West Kensington in 1903, the two buildings were used mainly as telephone exchanges and offices of the London Telephone Service.

The Money Order Office moved to Holloway in 1911.

In 1886 the Post Office began to acquire an additional site in St Martin's-le-Grand in order to build a new headquarters. GPO North was opened in 1895 to house the Postmaster General's Office, the Secretary's Office, the Accountant General's Office and the Solicitor's Office. A garden of rest for city workers was opened in 1900 close to the building, and it became known as Postmen's Park because of the numerous postmen who came to eat their lunch and to feed the pigeons.

The building remained as postal headquarters until August 1984 when the Chairman's Office and Post Office Headquarters as a whole moved to 33 Grosvenor Place, SW1. GPO North was sold in 1985 and its current owners, Nomura International PLC, have entirely refurbished the interior.

Purchase of Another Site

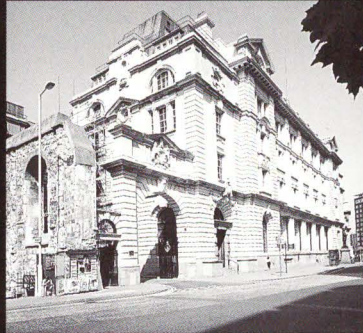
A committee was set up in 1903 to look into the question of providing improved accommodation at GPO East. Their report issued in December of that year recommended that all ideas of reconstructing the present building should be abandoned and that the Christ's Hospital site be acquired to erect an entirely new Post Office building. This was to be offset by the sale of GPO East. The Post Office had to act quickly as two schemes being proposed would render the ground useless. The Governors of St Bartholomew's Hospital had expressed an interest in acquiring part of the site for themselves, and the Corporation of London



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4. Photo of half-built KEB, 1908
5. Photo of mail vans in KEB yard, 1931
6. Photo of KEB counter, c.1930
7. Scale drawing showing front of building in King Edward Street, c.1910
8. Photo of sorters and mail bags in the foreign section, 1955
9. Photo of paintings stored in the tunnel of the Post Office Railway, c.1916
10. Photo of Rowland Hill's statue next to the air mail pillar box, 1935
11. Photo of behind the Post Office counter, c.1980
12. Façade of KEB in King Edward Street, c.1990s

were willing to contribute towards the formation of a street through the site from King Edward Street to Giltspur Street.

The Post Office made an offer to the Governors of Christ's Hospital of a perpetual rent charge of £23,000 a year for the freehold of the whole remaining portion of their site. There would be a rebate of half rent for the first two years, and a condition that if the Governors ever wanted to sell the whole or part of the rent, the Post Office would have a right of pre-emption at 28 years' purchase. The Governors wanted a right of pre-emption of 30 years, but would settle for 29 if they were given any money from a strip of land should it be required for the widening of King Edward Street. The revised offer, to start from 4 April 1904, was finally accepted.

Laying the Foundation Stone

A milestone in the development of KEB was reached on 16 October 1905 with the laying of the foundation stone by King Edward VII. The old school buildings had already been removed, and a large circular marquee with tented approach and seating for 4,500 people was erected. Banks of flowers, flags of various nations, the Union Flag and Royal Standard, and the strains of the 24th Middlesex (Post Office) Volunteer Band greeted the arrival of the royal party and distinguished guests.

Amongst those in attendance were the chief officers of the Post Office departments, the Home Secretary, the Earl of Derby, the Japanese Minister Viscount Hayashi, as well as diplomatic representatives of 16 foreign

states and eight British Colonies. Three generations of the Royal Family were represented with the King and Queen, Princess Victoria, the Prince and Princess of Wales and their two eldest sons. The royals passed through lines of children from the Post Office Orphan Homes, and postmen wearing medals awarded for active service during the Boer War and the Sudan Campaign.

The huge foundation stone was lifted a few inches by chains and pulleys, and a bronze box was placed beneath the stone containing coins of the realm, postage stamps of each denomination, London date stamp impressions showing 16 October 1905, a copy of the Postmaster General's latest report, and the current Post Office Guide. The King then tapped the stone with his mallet and declared it well and truly laid. The ceremony was concluded with the recital of prayers by the Bishop of London.

Interesting Items Found on the Site

During the work of excavating the ground in 1907, the Post Office invited representatives of the Society of Antiquaries and several anatomical specialists to overlook the work. A large part of the Roman wall composed of rough flints, stones and lime, with alternate layers of red brick tiles was uncovered running from the direction of Aldersgate towards Giltspur Street. Other remains of Roman London included a number of fragments of tessellated pavement with decorative art burnt on the glaze, several urns (possibly used for cremation ashes), bone skates, and broken

vases. In addition there was a Norman vase dated about AD 1100, leather bottles, 460 various coins, 16 lead coffins, about 30 skeletons without coffins, and pieces of broken mediaeval pottery. All the artefacts were presented to the Corporation of London for exhibition in the Guildhall Museum.

Building Work

When the building was nearing completion, the Post Office published some statistics which gave an idea of the magnitude of the work. It cost over £350,000 to build and included 4½ acres of buildings and yards. There were 700 men employed daily using 11,000 tons of cement, 20,000 cubic yards of concrete, 3,000 tons of steel rods and bars, and 200 miles of electric cables. There were also eight acres of block wood paving, 35 acres of painting, each with three coats, 2¼ miles of tables for sorting, two acres of yard space for mail vans, 15,000,000 labels for letter sorters' shelves, 37,000 brass panels, 200 four-faced synchronising clocks and 13 lifts.

KEB Opens for Business

The last despatch of mail from GPO East was on Sunday, 6 November 1910, after which the work was transferred to the new building for the start of duty at midnight. The transfer went smoothly, and the first delivery from KEB on 7 November went without a hitch. That same day, a reception was held to mark the formal opening of the public office situated on the ground floor. The public office opened for business at 6.45 am on Tuesday, 8 November after the

work had been transferred from St Martin's-le-Grand from the close of business the previous night.

The KEB consisted above the ground of two parts: a block facing King Edward Street containing the public office on the ground floor and the offices of the Controller of the London Postal Service on the four upper floors; and a much larger block containing the main sorting offices both for foreign and colonial mail and for the Eastern Central or City district. Between the two blocks was a loading and unloading yard for the mail.

Known officially as London Chief Office, the public office was the largest public post office in the country measuring 152 feet by 52 feet, with a counter running the whole length. The inside walls were lined throughout with marble - green Irish marble in some areas and a light Italian marble in others. The pilasters and piers had bases and capitals of bronze, and bronze was also used for the counter edges, table edges and the electric light fittings.

The basement of the sorting office block extended not only under the sorting offices, but also under the eastern yard and public office block. In the eastern portion of the sub-ground floor, under the public office, was the posting room into which fell the mail posted in the letter boxes above. Mail posted in the letter boxes in Newgate Street was brought to the posting room by a cable conveyor. A band conveyor sent all the mail for London and overseas to the ground floor of the sorting office in baskets. Mail for the provinces, dealt with at Mount Pleasant, was put into bags, and another band conveyor carried them to the departure platform at the west side of the sorting office.

In the ground floor of the sorting office block was housed the E.C. district sorting office. Arriving mail was brought to the eastern end of the office, where if necessary it was faced and cancelled, before being sent to one of two main divisions - mail for all parts of London (except the E.C.) went to the northern end, and mail for one of the 12 daily deliveries in the E.C. district went to the southern end. The first floor was devoted entirely to mail for overseas. The work was brought up by lifts from the eastern platform to be dealt with in its preliminary stage at the eastern end of the office. Mail for the continent was then dealt with on the northern side, with mail for all other parts of the world handled on the southern side. A band conveyor running east to west sent the bags for despatch to

the top of a spiral shoot at the west end, where they were shot down to the departure platform on the ground floor.

The second floor was used for storing the accumulation of foreign mail bags awaiting despatch, and most importantly for paying the wages of the sorting office staff. Located on the third floor was the kitchen and refreshment accommodation, and retiring rooms for the various classes of staff. Two wooden rifle ranges were opened on the roof on 28 January 1911 for use of staff in the newly formed rifle club. The ranges remained until they were dismantled in 1934 when the structure was considered dangerous. Also on the roof were large ventilating fans to supply constant fresh air to the rooms below.

Some Notable Events

The men of the Post Office Rifles spent their last night at KEB before leaving for France to fight in the First World War, and a nearby memorial commemorates their endeavours.

KEB was one of the original eight stations on the Post Office underground railway, sandwiched between stations at Mount Pleasant and Liverpool Street. Its tunnels were used to store art treasures belonging to the National Portrait Gallery and the Tate Gallery during World War I. The building's foundations meant that the tunnels had to be arranged in a figure of eight, and twin blind tunnels running under Angel Street were meant for an extension of the railway south-east to London Bridge, but it was never built. Economics after the War meant that the railway was not opened until 1927.

The lavishly decorated public counter was for many years open for business 24 hours a day, the whole year round.

In 1923, the statue of Sir Rowland Hill by Onslow Ford was erected outside the front of KEB in King Edward Street. It was removed from its original site outside the Royal Exchange in 1920, and kept in a Post Office storehouse until the new location was found.

The blue air mail pillar box located next to Sir Rowland's statue was both the first box of its kind to be erected in 1930 and the last to be removed in 1938.

Opening of the National Postal Museum

In 1965, Reginald Phillips presented his collection of 19th century British stamps to the nation, as well as a gift of £50,000 towards the establishment of a National Postal Museum. It was opened by the Postmaster General, Edward Short, on 12 September 1966 in converted rooms in the Chief Post Office. The original accommodation was the first stage of a planned expanded area, and on 19 February 1969 the Queen officially opened the new 5,000 square feet of museum designed by Frederick E Jones. As well as the Phillips material, also on display was the Post Office's collection of 19th and 20th century British and World postage stamps.

Following the transfer of the Philatelic Bureau from Post Office Headquarters, London, to the Head Post Office, Edinburgh in 1966, a special philatelic sales counter was opened at the London Chief Office.

The End of an Era

The counter at KEB closed its doors to the public for the last time on 22 April 1994 and in July 1996 the work of the City deliveries and the Foreign Section was transferred to Mount Pleasant. This left the Museum as the sole occupiers of the building until Post Office Counters Headquarters staff moved into the public office block in March 1997. The sale to Merrill Lynch was confirmed in the summer of 1997, with 5,500 of their staff due to start moving in in mid-2001.

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