



INFORMATION SHEET NO 16

The Post Office 1635-1969



1 General

Pre-
1635

The Post Office, as we know it today, has its beginning in the Royal Posts, lines of posts along the more important roads out of London, or to and from wherever the King and Court happened to be at the time. This Royal service for letters of the King and Court was under the supervision of a 'Master of the Posts', an official of the Royal Household. Postmasters were appointed for each stage of the route. These men, usually innkeepers, were responsible both for forwarding the Royal Mail to the next stage along the way and for the horsing of the Royal couriers and those private riders who were permitted the luxury of 'riding post'. Travellers were accompanied by a post-boy who, apart from bringing back the horse, also served as a guide along the poorly marked tracks of the day. Few private letters travelled by way of the Royal Posts; they were not excluded but nor were they encouraged.

1635

The idea of a separate public postal service as a means of raising funds to cover the cost of maintaining the Royal Posts was implemented in 1635, when, by Royal Proclamation, Charles I threw open the facilities of his posts to the public in general, in return for settled postage rates. Postage was assessed according to the number of sheets of paper making up the letter and to the number of miles over which it has been carried. A single letter carried under 80 miles was charged 2d; over 80 miles and not exceeding 140 miles the charge was 4d; and above 140 miles the charge was 6d. Letters to or from Scotland were charged 8d and letters to or from Ireland were charged 9d. Postage was normally paid by the addressee upon delivery of the letter. Improved and regular posts were laid along all the principal roads from London, and by-posts were also set up at places off the main roads. The aim of the newly-created 'Letter Office' was to carry the mail at a regulation speed of 7 miles an hour in Summer and 5 miles an hour in Winter, so that 'any man may with safetie and securitie send letters to any part of this Kingdom, and receive an answer within five days....' This had little hope of being realised, however, because of the bad state of the roads and the slowness of the posts.

1642-
1660

The Civil War disrupted postal services, but they became settled again during the Commonwealth period.

1660

In 1660, upon the restoration of Charles II, an Act was passed re-establishing the Post Office and 'legalising' the arrangements settled by a similar Act of the Protector's Parliament in 1657. The 1660 Act is often referred to as the Charter of the Post Office. As before, management of the Post Office was farmed to the highest bidder and postage rates assessed according to the number of enclosures to a letter and the mileage involved. The head of the Post Office had already become known by the title 'Postmaster General'.

- 1680-
1682 Although it continued to extend the postal routes out of London, the Post Office made no attempt to provide a local service for the collection and delivery of internal London mail. To meet this very real need of Londoners - who formed about a tenth of the population - an enterprising London Merchant by the name of William Dockwra set up a local 'penny post', under which he undertook to collect and deliver local letters and parcels for only one penny, prepaid. He divided the area of his penny post into districts, each with a central sorting office, and also set up hundreds of receiving offices. But within two years his service came to an end, as an infringement of the monopoly of James Duke of York (later James II), who then enjoyed the profits of the Post Office.
- 1682 Soon after its enforced closure, however, Dockwra's London Penny Post was re-opened by the Government - as part of the official service of the Post Office. Henceforth (until the reforms of 1840), Londoners enjoyed the privilege of both a comparatively cheap local service and the General Post for letters addressed further afield.
- 1715 By 1715 the Government's concern at the serious evasion of postage on letters carried over the by-roads resulted in the appointment of a team of Riding Surveyors. These men were to survey and supervise the posts along the main roads and the by-roads in order to discover 'Frauds and Mismanagement', each becoming responsible for the good management of his own part of the Kingdom.
- 1720 In 1720 the business of the by- and cross-road letters was placed under the control of one Ralph Allen, whose care and supervision resulted in a great improvement in the income from country letters. By the time of his death in 1764 he had provided England with daily post letters along all the principal post roads, as well as an elaborate network of cross posts, taking in the developing manufacturing centres.
- 1765 An Act was passed in 1765 permitting the setting up of local penny post networks in important towns outside London, but such posts were not implemented for many years. Dublin received a penny post in 1773, and a similar service opened in Edinburgh about the same time, as a private concern. But it was not until after 1793 that leading manufacturing centres, important market towns, and other populous places, were also given the benefit of a local penny post service. All such posts disappeared with the reforms of 1840, when nation-wide penny postage was introduced.
- 1840-
1897 By the 1830s the Post Office was already facing a growing pressure for reform of its postal system - especially for a lowering of its high and often irrational postage rates. Eventually, in 1840, a major reform of centuries old system of assessing postage according to the number of enclosures, and mileage involved, by a system of postage assessed according to the weight of the letter. The new minimum rate was one penny and, henceforth, postage was usually paid by the sender of the letter by means of an adhesive postage stamp serving as proof that postage had been paid. This major reform of the British Post Office was widely copied by other countries, and today Great Britain remains the only country in the world not required under international postal regulations to show the name of the country on its postage stamps, in recognition of her leadership in this field.

This radical reform of 1840 enabled the Post Office to work far more efficiently, as it did away with the need for the elaborate and complicated accounting required under the old system. It also brought the letter post within the reach of the humbler sectors of the population - a factor which soon resulted in a tremendous increase in the demands upon the resources of the Post Office.

To meet the pressure from rural areas for more posting facilities, the Post Office launched an ambitious programme which aimed at linking every community in one way or another with the postal network. This was partly met by the setting up of posting boxes at the roadside, to save the expense of maintaining a letter receiving office. In an effort to speed the delivery of letters in towns the Post Office began to urge householders to provide slits in their street doors, through which their mail could be dropped without the need for the Letter Carrier to waste time in waiting for a reply to his knock.

By 1850 some 700 new posts had been set up, for delivering more than 7,500,000 letters a week. By 1864 over 94% of the letters were delivered at the houses to which they were addressed. In 1897, as part of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee concessions, free delivery was granted to every house in the kingdom, no matter how remote.

- 1857-
1858 During 1857-1858 London was divided into ten postal districts, each working as an independent posttown able to exchange mails direct with other districts. This saved the need to route all mails through the General Post Office in St Martins-le-Grand - a former cause of much delay and additional pressure on the central sorting office.
- 1934 In 1934, resulting from further pressure for postal reform, a system of regionalisation was introduced. Under this, a central Post Office Board was created, a Director General replacing the Secretary as the permanent head of the Post Office. A number of regions replaced the old Surveyors' Districts, each being placed under the control of a Regional Director. London was divided into two regions, the London Postal Region and the London Telecommunications Region. The main purpose of regionalisation was to make possible the handling of routine day-to-day affairs locally, without the need for constant reference to London. This allowed administrative headquarters in London to concentrate on the framing of general policy.
- 1940-
1945 The advantages of decentralisation were fully realised during the second World War, when London suffered heavy air attacks. Despite its depleted staff and curtailed resources, and severe and prolonged raids on vital industrial centres, railway stations and ports, both within and outside London, the Post Office heroically kept essential communications going.

2 Transport

In the earliest days of the state postal service mail was carried from stage to stage by mounted post-boys or by messengers on foot. Roads were bad and, at certain times of the year, almost impassible. The regulation speed of 7 miles an hour in Summer and 5 miles an hour in Winter could seldom have been achieved. After 1750, however, roads began to improve and stage coaches were now able to make good use of the new highways.

- 1784 The year 1784 saw a revolution in the carriage of mails, by the introduction of the Mail Coach service. The first mail coach was that between London and Bristol, via Bath, and within two years mail coaches were serving all the principal roads from London. They travelled at about 9 miles an hour and changed horses about every ten miles. The journey between London and Edinburgh now took but 60 hours as compared with 85 hours under the old system of horse-posts. Apart from accelerating the mails over the main postal routes of the kingdom, the new service also secured them from attack by highwaymen, for each mail coach carried a well-armed Post Office Guard. By 1835 28 mail coaches were leaving London every night, to speed the mails to all corners of the kingdom. Crowds gathered every night at the General Post Office to witness this exciting event and, once a year, on the sovereign's birthday, even larger crowds gathered in the streets to watch the spectacle of the ceremonial procession of the mail coaches.
- 1830 The Post Office was quick to take advantage of the even greater speed and security offered by the railways. In November 1830, within a few days of the opening of this revolutionary form of travel, mail was being sent by the rail-road between Manchester and Liverpool. By 1838 railways had connected the great commercial centres of Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham, with the metropolis. In 1846 the last of the London-based mail coaches ceased running; this was the London-Norwich via Newmarket, coach. In 1838 an experimental 'travelling post office' was introduced on the Grand Junction Railway, in which mails could be sorted and bagged-up en-route. An ingenious apparatus on the side of the carriage and at the edge of the railway track enabled mails to be picked up and off-loaded while the train was in motion. Within a few years the plan was operating on many of the principal railways out of London, accelerating despatches between posttowns all along the way.
- 1838 In 1838 an experimental 'travelling post office' was introduced on the Grand Junction Railway, in which mails could be sorted and bagged-up en route. An ingenious apparatus on the side of the carriage and at the edge of the railway track enabled mails to be picked up and off-loaded while the train was in motion. Within a few years the plan was operating on many of the principal railways out of London, accelerating despatches between posttowns all along the way.
- 1887 In 1887, however, a few years after the introduction of the Parcel Post service, the high cost of sending parcel mails by rail caused the Post Office to re-introduce, under contract, long-distance horse-drawn mail coaches over certain lines of road from London. The first Parcel Mail Coach was that to Brighton. By 1895 coaches were also serving Oxford, Chatham, Colchester, Watford, Windsor, Tunbridge Wells, Bedford and Guildford. A similar service linked Manchester and Liverpool.
- 1897-1898 Like its quick response to the advantages of railway transport, the Post Office was also an early user of motor transport. In December experiments were made with a stream driven mail van between London and Redhill. The following year saw similar experiments in other parts of the country. Motorisation of the Parcel Mail coaches began in 1905.
- 1905
- 1919 In 1914, after experiments extending over a number of years, it was decided that a dependable Post Office owned motor service was possible. But, because of the outbreak of the first World War, it was not until 1919 that this idea was realised and the Post Office became the owner of a fleet of motorised mail vans.

- 1911 Mail was first carried by air in 1911. This was the special Coronation Aerial Post between Hendon and Windsor, part of the coronation celebrations of George V. The first regular air mail service, however, was that inaugurated between London and Paris in 1919. As international air routes developed so did the Post Office's air mail service. In 1934 the Post Office took the step of carrying all first class mail by air - without payment of the special air mail fee hitherto charged. By then air mail traffic had already totalled 122 tons a year, as compared with the 30 tons carried in 1930.
- 1927 In 1927 the Post Office (London) Railway was opened. This six miles long underground railway linked the main railway stations with London's principal sorting offices, greatly accelerating the despatch of London Mail and saving them from the heavy delays already being caused by street congestion in central London.
- 1963 In 1963, in an effort to improve the reliability of the parcel post service in East Anglia, and to reduce working costs, an experimental re-organisation of the service was introduced. This included the use of a number of large articulated vehicles to carry parcel mails by road between the seven parcel mail concentration centres.

Post Office Archives

September 1984

SPECIAL NOTE: On any reproduction of this summary, an acknowledgement should be made on the lines of "Reproduced by courtesy of Post Office Archives".