



INFORMATION SHEET NO 4

Cats on the Payroll



The first Post Office Cats 1868

In September 1868 the Controller of the Money Order Office, London, asked The Secretary of the Post Office for authority to pay 2/- pw for the maintenance of three cats.

The Secretary's reply reads "Three cats may be allowed on probation - they must undergo a test examination and should, I think, be females. It is important that the cats be not overfed and I cannot allow more than 1/- pw for their support - they must depend on the mice for the remainder of their emoluments and if the mice be not reduced in number in six months a further portion of the allowance must be stopped".

A further minute to The Secretary, later in the month, reads "These directions have been communicated to Tye (the Resident Porter) who will no doubt find means to inform the cats upon what terms they are to be employed, and what is expected of them ..... it is hoped the cat movement will be successful".

Extension of the scheme 1869-1873

On 5 May 1869 The Secretary, having called for a report on the cats, was told "..... whether influenced by The Secretary's caution that they would under certain contingencies have diminished rations or by a laudable zeal for the Service and their own character, cannot be clearly made out, but it is certain that the Cat System has answered exceedingly well, and that the cats have done their duty very efficiently, except as respects one point of the Secretary's order which implied a probable increase to that portion of the Establishment". The following suggestion was put to The Secretary "..... In the event of a Committee of Inspection being appointed I would suggest that Tye's evidence should be taken as to the test examination. I understand he can explain the reason why the cats have not acted up to orders in the matter of increasing the Establishment".

In April 1873 the Postmaster at Southampton, upon applying for an allowance of 1/9d pw for a cat, was told "This seems a good deal to pay for a cat who is to do much in the "rat-killing" way. In London from 6d to 9d pw is believed to be the usual allowance for a cat's board and wages, varying according to the supply of rats or mice ..... A reply to The Secretary reads "..... Mr Wadman, the Guard, whose duty it will be to look after the cat, argues that such a sum as 6d to 9d pw would be quite insufficient. He says no nourishment whatever can be derived from rats which reside in the Post Office Store Room; that picking such rats, fed as they are upon nothing but Mail Bags, is no better than picking Oakum ..... besides, he very properly points out, that the wear and tear of shoe leather in going to and fro will cost at least one fourth of the proposed allowance, and that whatever small balance there may be left over

after paying these expenses will not be more than sufficient to compensate him for the loss of dignity in carrying the cats' food through the Streets in Her Majesty's uniform".

The Secretary's clerk replied "..... Money Order Office mice are probably nicer and more tempting feeding than Southampton rats but, notwithstanding any difference in this respect, the Secretary would be quite unable to authorise more than 1/- at the very outside ....."

A further minute to The Secretary in May 1873, asking for an increase of 6d pw to the Money Order Office cats' allowance, reads "..... the House Porter's wife expends about 8d weekly out of her private income to provide them with milk .... their duties have much increased since the Telegraph clerks have been here, one cat bringing as many as twelve mice from the top of the building into the kitchen during the Evening ..... the mice of the town are rather dainty feeding, very different from the rats of Southampton. instead of mail Bags they live upon the choice morsels that escape from the Telegraph Clerks' lunches ....." In August 1873 the case was closed with a report from the Surveyor that the store had been boarded up and "as the floor is paved it is almost impossible for any rat, however clever he or she may be, to gain an entrance ....."

#### Further appointments to the payroll 1877-1950

In February 1877 the Nottingham post office was allowed 6d pw "for the keep of two cats"; in January 1887 the Deptford post office granted 15/- pa for the maintenance of a cat; and in November 1887 the Registrar, Post Office Headquarters, London, was granted an allowance of 6d pw for a cat.

In February 1915 The Secretary was advised that twelve cats' allowances were being paid in the London Postal Service but that applications from the Provinces, for such allowances, were comparatively rare. In May 1918 the Camden Road Branch Office, London Postal Service, on applying for an increase in their cat's allowance, was asked "Is there no alternative to feeding the cat on lights? ..... an increase of the allowance from 7d to 1/6d pw is rather difficult to justify ..... Is the milk diluted before it is given to the cat?" They replied "There seems to be no other food. Ordinary cat's meat is now 8d per lb and would be more expensive than lights. The milk is not diluted, the cat, always having been used to milk alone, will not drink milk and water. 7d per week would never have been sufficient to keep a cat, had there not been a fair amount of food left them from the dinner table to help. Since the meat rationing nothing is left and all food for the cat has to be purchased". Authority was finally given to increase the allowance to 1/-.

In February 1919 a Report from the Accountant General's Department, Telephone House, London, reads "..... a few telegrams have been eaten away by mice to such an extent as to be useless. Beyond the inconvenience caused by the mutilation of forms etc. I have no particular objection, but some of the ladies are rather perturbed ..... How about instituting an office cat?" The same officer later appealed "..... at least two cats seem to be necessary, but I am afraid I cannot undertake to supply them or to arrange for their maintenance. There is too much other work to be done ....." He reported in March, however, "that arrangements had been made for the employment of a cat".

In July 1919 the Officer-in-Charge of the Oxford Street BO, London Postal Service, which was said to be "overrun with mice", appealed to the staff to

find "a good male cat". The Head Porter replied "I have a thorough good mouser (male cat) on the building which I believe would give every satisfaction". On 9 September, however this cat was reported to have "disappeared". A few days later the Officer-in-Charge, reporting on the new cat, wrote "Every care is being taken to retain the cat, which is already doing good service. Three mice were caught the first night . . . . I might suggest that with milk at its present price, 7d pw is not sufficient allowance". In October the cat, which was said to be still "justifying its existence", was allowed an extra 5d pw.

In December 1920 the District Manager, Bristol, submitted the following report to The Secretary " . . . . a night or two ago a large rat dropped on the shoulders of one of the female cleaners as she was descending the staircase, which gave her a considerable shock . . . . On another occasion, whilst one of the female night staff was resting, in feeling for her bag she put her hand on a rat . . . . I shall be glad if steps can be taken by the Office of Works to stop the nuisance". The Secretary gladly sanctioned the appointment of a cat, granting an allowance of 1/- pw.

In January 1921 a formal report on cats' allowances read " . . . . on the average, both in London and the Provinces, an allowance of 1/- pw is sufficient to cover the cost of a cat's food. This apparently provides for one regular meal daily, leaving the cat to supplement its rations by the destruction of rats; it is thought that a cat will justify its existence to a greater extent if it is made to depend partly on its own exertions".

In September 1925 the St Tibb's Row Parcel Office, Cambridge, asking for permission to keep a cat, wrote " . . . . it is feared that, in the absence of a regular supply of milk and food, she would not stay, so we should be glad to be informed, before obtaining a cat, whether authority can be given for an allowance of 6d pw . . . ." This was readily granted by The Secretary. This cat's allowance was increased to 1/- pw in January 1928 following a report that "the cat has been very useful in destroying rats and mice during the past two years and there have been no cases of parcels damaged by vermin . . . ."

In January 1930 the Stores Department, London, asked the Accountant General "to note that an additional cat has been added to the strength of the Engineering Depot".

In March 1932 the Chester Post Office was authorised to spend 6d pw on the maintenance of a cat following a report that "the Females' Retiring Room is overrun with mice and it is feared that serious complaints will be received . . . ."

In January 1939 the Head Postmaster of Warwick and Leamington Spa wrote " . . . . After numerous complaints of damage to gift parcels of Cadbury's chocolate a cat was introduced into the Office . . . . It is not known where the cat came from, and no specific authority was given to keep it in the office, but it is now a well known and much appreciated amenity . . . . The Staff feed it at their own expense but have now asked for an official allowance of 1/- pw". In January 1952 a member of the same staff asked "whether it was possible to allow us a little more money to feed our office cat . . . . at the moment we get 1/- per week, while the fish and milk he has costs us at least 2/- per day. The allowance was increased to 3/6d pw. A further application for an increase, made in 1957, "because of the rising cost of foodstuffs", was refused.

In October 1939 the Registrar, Post Office Headquarters, was informed that "traces of rats and mice have been observed in the storage rooms at Harrogate . . . . the nuisance is kept to a minimum by the activities of a cat which is a particularly good mouser. The ownership of the animal is doubtful, and, after several attempts to find it a home, it has always return to its old haunts . . . . the cat is living on the vermin it catches, supplemented by milk etc purchased by the staff . . . ." An allowance of 1/- pw was granted. This allowance ceased, however, when in 1940, the Officer-in-Charge wrote "Peter has been destroyed and up to now I have not been able to find another cat . . . ." In May 1950 the Registrar reported that Minnie, the Official Cat, had "died on 16 May after over twelve years service". A later report in August reads ". . . . the new cat has arrived but it has been found, on enquiry, that for several years a kitten of the original cat has been kept in Headquarters Building and one of the cleaners has been looking after both animals. Since the death of its mother the 'kitten' (it is now fully grown) has proved its worth as a rat catcher and its retention is recommended. It is proposed to dispose of the newly acquired animal (which is an experienced mouser) by transferring it to the Aldersgate Street premises . . . ."

Unfortunately, in December 1950, the latter cat was destroyed, following reports of its "unclean habits", and of its "persistently attracting other cats to the building.

#### Questions in the House 1953

On 18 March 1953 the Assistant Postmaster General was asked, during question time in the House of Commons, "when the allowance payable for the maintenance of cats in his Department was last raised; what is the total amount involved; what is the present rate per cat in Northern Ireland; and how this compares with the rate in London?" He replied "There is, I am afraid, a certain amount of industrial chaos in the Post Office cat world. Allowances vary in different places, possibly according to the alleged efficiency of the animal and other factors. It has proved impossible to organise any scheme for payment by results or output bonus. These servants of the State are moreover frequently unreliable, capricious in their duties and liable to prolonged absenteeism. My Hon Friend has been misinformed regarding the differences between rates for cats in Northern Ireland and other parts of the United Kingdom. There are no Post Office cats in Northern Ireland. Except for cats at Post Office Headquarters who got the special allowance a few years ago, presumably for prestige reasons, there has been a general wage freeze since July 1918, but there have been no complaints! The Member then asked, "How does my Hon Friend account for the fact that no allowances are payable for cats in Northern Ireland? Is it because the post offices there are more sanitary, and will he say what happens if a cat has kittens? Is there a family allowance payment?" The Asst PMG replied, "There are no cats in Northern Ireland, I presume, because there are no mice in Post Office buildings. With regard to the children's allowances I am afraid there is none. But the Head Postmasters have full discretion to give a maternity grant". Another Member then asked whether the Post Office provided an adequate maternity service. The Asst PMG replied that it was "very adequate". He was then asked, by a lady member whether "this is one of the occasions on which equal pay prevails", to which he replied, "Equal pay has been accepted both in principle and practice".

(Post 30/England 1084/1899)

## Celebrity Cats

In December 1964, to the distress of the staff (including the writer), Minnie's kitten Tibs, the giant official cat of Post Office Headquarters Building, who weighed 23 lbs, died after fourteen years service. His wages had been 2/6d a week and his office was in the old St Martin's Refreshment Club in the Basement. Apart from being a well-known character in Headquarters Building, he was also something of a public celebrity. He had attended a special "cats and film stars" party, and had his photograph in the book "Cockney Cats".

Famous among Post Office cats of 1968 were Persil, who protected Dial House in Manchester, and Chippy, who looked after the Supplies Department in Bridgwater. Persil sometimes took only two hours to patrol his huge building, but when in 1968 he had attained thirteen years of age he did take the lift between floors. Chippy's only fault was said to have been that he frequently got into one of the railway vans bound for the neighbouring town of Taunton, when his keeper had to go and bring him back.

In April 1971 a strange, obviously lady cat, was observed wandering along basement corridors and rooms of Post Office Headquarters Building, trying to find a suitable place to call 'home'. No one knew where she had come from but as buildings were being demolished nearby it is likely she had been evicted from one of them. Various members of the staff befriended her. She was allowed access to a basement room, provided with food and milk and very soon produced a litter of five sturdy kittens. One of the male kittens, black and white in colour, was kept for duty at HQ. The rest were given to the first four members of staff who applied for them. The new Post Office employee was given the name Blackie, and taught to catch mice by his adept mother. She died a year later. Over the years that followed Blackie did a magnificent job in keeping HQ mouse-free. He even became a television star, appearing on BBC's "Nationwide". Like his colleagues on the payroll, Blackie at first received an allowance of £1 a week for extra food and drink. However, in June 1983 the Personnel Manager for PO HQ, John Roxby, pleaded to the PO Pay Group for an increase in Blackie's pay - the cats' Official Allowance having stood at £1 a week, unreviewed, since 1967. Top level pay talks were quickly held, and a pay award of 100% awarded to Blackie and all Post Office Cats.

Footnote: The story of Post Office cats, an illustrated history, can also be found in Russell Ash's "Dear Cats: The Post Office Letters" (Pavilion Books, 1986).

JF  
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