



INFORMATION SHEET NO 5

Early Post Offices



The title "Oldest Post Office in the Country"

The individual post offices listed below were claimants to the title "The oldest post office in the country" offered in the January 1966 issue of the Post Office Magazine. All were said to have been in the same building (some even in the same family) for over one hundred years. The oldest claimant, Sanquhar, dated from c1800.

Appearance of early post offices

The earliest post offices were usually housed at inns, where the only duties of the Innkeeper-cum-Postmaster were the acceptance and handing-over of letters, the exchange of mail bags, and the provision of fresh horses for the Post-Boys who carried the mail over the major roads of this country before the establishment of the Mail Coach Service in 1784.

By the early 1800s many new postal routes had been opened up, and mail coaches were passing through or near towns and villages where, not so very long before, the nearest postal facilities had often been many miles away. To serve the inhabitants of such places post offices were established - often just a room in the Postmaster's own house, with a window to the street through which letters could be handed in or delivered to callers. Few towns then had an official Letter Carrier; but often the Postmaster was willing to employ his own servant on the delivery of letters - for a fee! This was usually between 1d and 2d a letter. It was not until 1897 that a free delivery was granted to every house in the Kingdom, as one of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee concessions. Many of these early Postmasters, if they happened to be shopkeepers as well, conducted all the business of the Post Office in their shop - as do scale-payment Sub-Postmasters today. Usually, the only sign that these shops and houses were also post offices was the opening in the window and a number of Post Office notices and instructions displayed on the walls. For example, in those days, the whole business of the Exeter post office was done in a single room - although the staff consisted of the Postmaster, 3 Clerks, and 7 Letter Carriers! There was no protection from the weather for the public and, as free delivery was restricted to houses in only a small part of the City, callers had to queue in the rain and then mount two or three steps to reach the opening in the wall through which their letters were delivered. At Paignton the village's incoming mail was delivered by the mounted Post-Boy through a pane 12ins by 10ins made to open in the window of the Postmaster's sitting room! Sanquhar's ancient post office dates from this time.

After 1840 and the arrival of Uniform Penny Postage - followed by a far greater use and range of postal services - better accommodation and separate counters for the sale of postage stamps, etc., became essential, and post offices began to develop on the lines we know so well today.

By the early 1850s the new cheap penny postage had even encouraged the people of remote villages and hamlets to write letters and the Post Office, to meet their demands for a local official postal service, was obliged to open letter receiving houses in places hitherto cut-off from the General Post network. The post offices of Edderton, Shipton-under-Wychwood, King's Worthy, Wormshill, Dennington, Guyhirn, and Potterspury date from this period.

Although an official postal service in such villages dates only from the arrival of Uniform Penny Postage, other villages throughout the country had been more fortunate, having known 'penny postage' long before 1840. These were places near large commercial cities such as Edinburgh, Manchester and Liverpool; or resorts and important market towns, where the number of letters sent through the post was enough to justify the expense of organising a local Penny-Post network, within which letters circulating to and from the controlling Post Town were only charged one penny. Penny-Post receiving houses were then opened at convenient points within the network at which Post-Boys could safely leave mail and collect any outgoing letters. Few such Post-Boys had a mail cart, or even a horse, and many were expected to walk up to seventeen miles in a day, seven days a week! The post offices of Donaghmore, Penshurst, and Stoke Climsland began as Penny-Post receiving houses.

Claimants to the title in 1966

Sanquhar Sub Office, Dumfries c1800

The earliest known evidence of the existence of a post office in Sanquhar is an entry in the Edinburgh Almanack of 1763, which told the public that the Post for Sanquhar left Edinburgh on Saturday evenings at 9.00 at night, arriving back in Edinburgh on the following Friday afternoon. The postage on a Single-letter between Edinburgh and Sanquhar was then 2d., a Single-letter being one made up of a single sheet of paper, folded, sealed, and the address written on the outside. Double postage was charged on letters made up of two sheets of paper. Few people could have afforded these, or Treble-letters, and it was common practice to write both horizontally and vertically across a single sheet of paper to save the expense of using an additional one.

By 1788 Sanquhar was receiving a Post from Edinburgh three times a week, but the postage on a Single-letter had risen to 5d!

The earliest reference to Sanquhar in Post Office archives is dated 1802, when a 3-day Post between Cumnock and Sanquhar was recommended to speed the Mail between Ayr and Dumfries. Until 1867 Sanquhar's status was that of a District Head Post Office today (1988).

The Sub-Postmaster in 1966, Mr J Hogarth, whose family had held the post office since 1908, said that there was no doubt that the Office had been in the same building since 1800, if not earlier, and that the title deeds of the premises dated from 1760. The name of John Halliday, a known Postmaster of Sanquhar, appears on the deeds for 1809.

A photograph of the office taken in 1966 is available (see appendix).

Donaghmore Sub-Office, Dungannon possibly 1834

Post Office archives show that a Penny-Post receiving house was opened in Donaghmore in April 1834, with a salary of £5 a year to the Receiver of Letters.

Mrs W A Bell, the daughter of a former Sub-Postmistress, said in 1966 that the post office had been in the same building since her great-grandparents' day. As her mother was born in 1860 it is quite possible that the office had been in the same premises ever since its establishment in 1834.

A manuscript dated 1906, recording the early memories of one John Brown of Donaghmore, reads: "Until 1830 [1834?] we had no Post Office. Letters were brought from Dungannon by a messenger to the brewery and he also carried those for the village. The mail coach from Dublin to Coleraine brought letters to Dungannon. Our first Postmaster had the munificent salary of £3 [£5?] annually".

A photograph of the office taken in 1960 is available (see appendix).

Crathie Sub-Office, Aberdeen 1842

Post Office archives show that an official letter receiving house was established in the village of Crathie in September 1842, a Mr Anderson guaranteeing to meet the Post Office's expenses of £5 a year. Crathie's first Receiver was Charles Thomson, head forester of the Balmoral Estate, who, realising, soon after the introduction of Uniform Penny Postage in 1840, that the village needed a post office had set about building one. His new home and post office were very much like any other cottage in the area: thick granite walls and a low-pitched roof. It also possessed the usual bare wood dresser found in most highland cottages - but Thomson's dresser had a special drawer set aside for all the paraphernalia of the post office. It was from this cottage that Thomson carried on the business of the Post Office for forty-five years, until his death in 1887.

Queen Victoria had become a frequent visitor* and upon, Charles Thomson's death, she expressed the wish that his son Albert, then following a successful commercial career in London, should take over the office. When she realised that he would have to accept a substantial drop in income if he agreed, she undertook personally to make up the deficiency. And so Albert Thomson became Postmaster of Crathie by Royal request. Later, the Queen suggested that the building was too small. Upon Albert informing her that his request for permission to extend the premises had been rejected, the Queen undertook to see to it - and permission was soon granted. Two rooms were added, and the post office moved to the new wing. In December 1933, after forty-three years service, Albert Thomson died. His widow had already taken over the office in the preceding May, and she continued as Postmistress until her eldest son, Albert, was appointed Postmaster in 1947.

Albert Thomson, aided by his brother Gordon, was still Postmaster in 1966, carrying on the business - in the same building - which had been part of the Thomson's family life for over one hundred years. The office was also well known to the thousands of tourists who have visited the other building just a few yards away, Crathie Kirk, where Her Majesty the Queen worships when she returns to Balmoral, her Highland home.

*Queen Victoria first visited Balmoral in 1848; the present castle was built in 1855.

Edderton Sub-Office, Dingwall pre-1876, probably 1834

Post Office archives show that a receiving house was opened in the village of Balblair in October 1843, for which the villagers and one Andrew Ross, the nominated Receiver of Letters, guaranteed to meet any expenses incurred by the Post Office.

The Sub-Postmistress in 1966, Mrs Ross, said that the post office had been in the same premises since before 1876, when it was taken over from a Miss Margaret Ross (no relation). Therefore, it was probable that the then post office building was the very one in which Andrew Ross set up the village's first receiving house in 1843. But this theory cannot be proved, either by official or local records.

Balblair Sub-Office was renamed Edderton in 1879 and, in the same year, during the night of the Tay Bridge disaster, its original thatched roof was blown off.

A photograph of the office taken in c1920 is available (see appendix).

King's Worthy Sub-Office, Winchester, 1845

Post Office archives show that a receiving house was opened in King's Worthy in March 1845, with a salary of £3 a year to the Receiver of Letters. He was Noah Vincent, the first husband of the last Sub-Postmaster's grandmother.

The Hampshire Directory of 1855 records that one John Holdaway, ancestor of the last Sub-Postmaster, Mr J R Holdaway, then held the office.

Mr Holdaway said in 1966 that the post office had been in the same building since his ancestor's time, and that he had a family photograph of the office obviously taken in the middle of the 19th century.

Copies of this photograph, and one taken in about 1900, are available (see appendix). The post office closed in November 1966.

Shipton-under-Wychwood Sub-Office, Oxford, circa 1845

The earliest reference to this office in Post Office archives is the issue of a hand date-stamp for "Shipton-under-Wychwood" in July 1847.

But the Sub-Postmistress in 1966, Mrs K H Wiggins, had a letter addressed to her great-grandfather "Richard Cross, Post Office, Shipton-under-Wychwood" dated 1845. This is evidence that the family's home was recognised as the village's post office at least two years before the issue of an official date stamp. The 1841 census return shows that Richard Cross was a weaver, and, at that time, he may also have been the village's unofficial Postmaster-cum-letter carrier. In his day Shipton-under-Wychwood's letters would have been sent through Chipping Norton, the nearest Post Town, which was served by a Mail Coach service from Oxford. Mrs Wiggins said that the post office had been in the same building ever since her great-grandfather's time.

A photograph of the office, taken in c1900, is available (see appendix).

Wormshill Sub-Office, Sittingbourne, 1847

Post Office archives show that a receiving house was opened in Wormshill in May 1847, with a salary of £3 a year to the Receiver of Letters.

The lady holding the position of Sub-Postmistress in 1966, Mrs Irene Bugden, bought the premises which then housed the post office in 1950 and removed her office from the nearby cottage which had been the village's post office since 1923. She remembered the office being in its present building when she was a child and, whilst examining the roof timbers soon after she bought the property, she found a pile of ancient Post Office notices and instructions dating from 1849. Her exciting discovery is evidence that Wormshill's post office was then back in the very building that it occupied over a hundred years ago, and there can be little doubt that the building (which is about 500 years old) is also the very one in which the village's first post office was established in 1847.

A photograph of the office taken in c1886, is available (see appendix).

Dennington Sub-Office, Woodbridge circa 1847

Post Office archives show that an official Post from Framlingham was established to the village of Dennington in May 1845. Although it was impossible in 1966 to discover the date on which the village's first Receiving House was opened records do suggest that it was about 1847. Dennington is included in the list of Post Offices in the first-ever Postal Official Guide, 1856.

When the Sub-Postmaster of 1966, Mr B R Missen, took over the office in 1955 his predecessor, now dead, told him the post office had been in his family, and the same building, for 125 years, ie since 1830. So it is quite possible that, before the Post Office granted an official postal service to the village in 1845, the building had been the unofficial postal centre, with the occupier undertaking to carry the villager's letters to and from the nearest Post Town.

A photograph of the office taken in c1915 is available (see appendix).

Banbury Head Post Office 1849

Post Office archives show that in 1849 Banbury's post office was moved from Parsons Street (where it had been since about 1836) to the building it occupied in 1966 in the High Street, by William Braine, Postmaster and Carrier. The premises were bought by the Post Office in 1877, after which they were modernised and enlarged many times. Much alteration took place in 1936 but in 1966 the shell of the original building still remained.

The office was only a few steps from the White Lion Inn where, in coaching days, Banbury's mail was offloaded from the London-Birmingham Mail Coach and transferred to the official receiving house opposite. The mail was then carried to the post office in Parsons Street by the town's Watchman-cum-Letter Carrier.

In 1846, just three years before the office moved to its 1966 location, Banbury's only Letter Carrier earned ten shillings a week, this amount being thought "quite sufficient as he is occupied for only 6 hours a day". In 1966 the Head Postmaster had 58 Postmen under his control.

Photographs of the office, taken in c1900 and after its modernisation in 1936, are available (see appendix).

Stoulton Sub-Office, Worcester circa 1850

Post Office archives show that a letter receiving house was opened in the village of Stoulton in July 1850, with an annual salary of £3 to the Receiver, William Grizzell. Soon after, Grizzell resigned and one William Woodward, brewer, was appointed in his stead.

Mrs L Merriman, the Sub-Postmistress in 1966, ran her office in the very premises used by Woodward over one hundred years earlier, and she said in 1966 that the old malthouse where he brewed his beer still existed. The premises might also have been those used as a post office by Woodward's predecessor, Grizzell, but there is no documentary evidence of this.

A few yards away from the post office of 1966 is an old house known as The Mount. Local legend has it that this was once a posting house for travellers, and "Paterson's Roads" for 1829 shows the village of Stoulton to be a stage on the London-Worcester coach road.

Photographs of the post office taken in c1966 (showing Woodward's malthouse), and the house known as The Mount, are available (see appendix).

Kincardine O'Neil Sub-Office, Aberdeen circa 1860

Post Office archives show that, following a memorial to the Postmasters General from the inhabitants of Deeside, a letter receiving house was established at Kincardine in August 1793. A Runner carried mail between the office and the nearest Post Town, Aberdeen, three times a week.

Kincardine O'Neil was a busy junction of many drove roads and, until 1824, its post office was a stopping and sorting stage for the Mail which served the line of road from Aberdeen to Braemar and Strathdon.

From 1862 until 1963 (when Mr G Mather, the Sub-Postmaster in 1966, took over the office) the office was run by the Petrie family; and it is believed to have been in the same building since well before 1860 - perhaps ever since the post office was first established in the village in 1793.

Penshurst Sub-Office, Tonbridge 1861

Post Office archives show that the village of Penshurst was made a 'Penny-Post', under the control of Tunbridge Wells, in 1828, with a salary of £3 a year to the Receiver of Letters.

The Sub-Postmistress in 1966, Mrs G Eagleton, said that the post office had been in the Eagleton family, and in the same building, since 1861.

Stoke Climsland Sub-Office, Plymouth 1862, possibly circa 1839

Post Office archives indicate that a Penny-Post receiving house, under the control of Callington, was opened in the village of Stoke Climsland in about 1839, when a hand date-stamp was issued for the "Stoke Climsland Penny Post".

The Sub-Postmaster in 1966, Mr R H Birch, said that the post office had been in the same building since 1862 when one James Mitchell was appointed Postmaster (Mitchell, incidentally, held the office until his resignation in about 1911.) Local belief then had it that the post office was in its present building even before Mitchell's appointment in 1862 as local records do not show any other suitable premises being in the village at that time.

A photograph of the building taken in c1966 (which is classified as an Ancient and Historical Monument), is available (see appendix).

Potterspurty Sub-Office, Towcester circa 1866 (site dates from 1845)

Post Office archives show that a receiving house was opened in Potterspurty in January 1845, to "serve the villages of Potterspurty, Yardley, Gobions and Grafton Regis, the letters for which amount to 216 in a week. The expense of this arrangement to be 10s a week for a foot post Messenger to deliver the letters and £4 a year for a Receiver of Letters at Potterspurty".

The post office building of 1966 was said to stand on the site of the village's first receiving house of 1845, which was demolished about a hundred years ago. An ancient stone cottage which adjoined the original post office still existed in 1966. The Sub-Postmaster in 1966, Mr F C Osborne, said that his family had held the office ever since the premises were rebuilt in about 1866, and probably even earlier.

Darlington Head Post Office 1865

The Head Post Office of Darlington of 1966 was built in 1865, and was the first post office in the town to have been provided by the Post Office. Previously, as was quite usual, the accommodation for the post office had been provided by the Postmaster, at his own expense.

Edinburgh General Post Office 1866

The foundation stone of Scotland's GPO in Edinburgh was laid by HRH Albert, Prince Consort, in October 1861, this being one of the last public acts of his life. The ornamental stone vases on the roof were added to the original plan at his express wish, from a design sketched by his own hand. The office was opened in May 1866.

A modernised public counter and office was opened by HRH The Prince Philip in May 1966, exactly one hundred years later.

Photographs of the office, taken in c1890 and in 1910 are available (see appendix).

Caergeiliog Sub-Office, Holyhead 1894, unofficial postal centre circa 1840

Caergeiliog is not recorded in the list of post offices in the Post Office Guide until the January 1894 issue.

But family legend has it that in about 1840 the ancestress of the Sub-Postmaster in 1966, Mr R F Griffiths, opened a shop in the very building which housed his post office. Also, that by the 1850s she was sending a man out into the village delivering letters for a fee of one penny a letter - a common practice in places without an official postal service.

During the coaching era Caergeiliog was on the route of the London-Holyhead Mail Coach, and the ancient toll gate is very near the post office of 1966. But it is very improbable that, in the absence of an official receiving house, the Mail Coach would have offloaded the village's mail in passing. It is much more likely that, in the absence of an official postal service, the ancestress of Mr Griffiths undertook to carry the villagers' letters to and from the nearest Post Town - for a fee.

A photograph of the building taken in c1906 is available (see appendix).

POST OFFICE ARCHIVES

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/APPENDIX

PHOTOGRAPHS AVAILABLE

Note: All are stock items available to order from the Post Office Photograph Library (see below). When ordering prints both the File Title and the Negative Number should be quoted as well as the subject. Unless otherwise stated (in brackets), the File Title is "POs-Historic".

Early Post Offices

Exteriors:

Artist's impression of 1890 of a typical post office of 1790: ZE1

"A Country Post Office" by B V Rippingille 1837: P3942

A post office of 1850 (from Illustrated London News): P5145

Redcar post office of 1820, photo dated c1850: P3011

Bacup sub-office, Manchester c1892: H1256

Interiors:

"St Valentine's Day" 1820: P2471

A Branch Office 1921 (POs-counter scenes): 6321

A village sub-office 1936 (POs-sub offices): P1271

Ditto of 1921 (POs-counter scenes): 6321

Claimants to Title in 1966, in alphabetical order

Banbury c1900: H490

Ditto 1936: H489

Caergeiliog c1906: H494

Dennington c1915: H493

Donaghmore 1960: H501

Edderton c1920: H492

Edinburgh GPO c1890: P10041

Ditto 1910: P10044

King's Worthy c1850: P10944

Ditto c1900: H491

Sanquhar 1966: 39924

ARC44

Shipton-under-Wychwood c1900: H499

Stoke Climsland c1960: H500

Stoulton c1966: H496

Ditto H497

Ditto, The Mount c1966: H495

Wormshill c1886: H486

Prints available from: The Photograph Librarian, Photograph Library, PRD,
Room 75, PO Headquarters, 33 Grosvenor Place, LONDON, SW1X 1PX.