



INFORMATION SHEET NO 6

Postal uniforms 1784-1984



1 Before 1784

"One of the earliest references to the wearing of distinctive postal clothing dates from 1590 when the Council of Aberdeen ordered for Alexander Taylor, 'the post', a livery of blue cloth with the armorial bearings of the town worked in silver on his right sleeve (this was, of course, in the days before the State Postal Service, which dates from 1635 when Charles I, by Royal Proclamation, threw open the facilities of his 'posts' to the general public)".

"In 1728 the Secretary to the Post Office ordered 'that every letter carrier shall, as a badge of his employment, wear a brass ticket upon the most visible part of his clothing with the King's Arms upon the same'".

"Sir Walter Scott, in his notes on Woodstock, quotes the following rhyme written about 1746:-

The post who came from Coventry
Riding in a red rocket,
Did tidings tell how Lunsford fell,
A child's hand in his pocket.

The rocket (otherwise rokels or roquelaure) was a cloak without sleeves (and although this rhyme does not refer to an official Post Office uniform) the coincidence of the association at this early stage of red with the Post Office is of interest, in view of the subsequent appropriation to itself by the Post Office of that particular colour. Red had been from early times the Royal colour of England, and as the Post Office organisation had its origin in Royal couriers, established for the conveyance of the King's despatches, the Royal colour was the natural choice for the British Postal Service ..."

Note: Before the introduction of mail coaches, each armed with a guard, the mail was carried from stage to stage by mounted Post-boys. These men were not uniformed (Green Paper No 27)

2 Mail Coach Guards 1784

From the beginning of the mail coach service in 1784 mail coach Guards (the only Post Office employee aboard the coach) were provided with an official red uniform, as follows:-

Black hat, with a gold band

Scarlet coat, with blue lapels and gold braid

He was also given a brace of pistols, a blunderbuss, a posthorn, and a time piece. The mail coach driver usually sported a copy of the Guard's gay uniform.

When the introduction of armed mail coaches was under consideration, a suggestion was made that ex-soldiers be recruited for the office of Guard. As the colour of soldiers' uniforms was red the need to give a military image probably influenced the choice of that particular colour for their uniform as much as its traditional connection with Royalty.

3 London Letter Carriers provided with a uniform 1793

It appears that, in 1792, the Secretary to the Post Office was against the idea of providing Letter Carriers with a uniform. He argued:-

"... it occurs to me that many of them who have acquired property and that reputedly, would object to the wearing of Uniform.

I cannot help thinking that a man who is determined to commit a bad action will so concert his measures that his Uniform shall not expose him to detection, nor will it I presume prevent him.

The great good to be derived from the adoption of Your Lordship's (Lord Walsingham, Joint PMG) ideas respecting the Letter Carriers, would be the prevention and detection of their loitering and mispending their time in Ale Houses or disorderly places - but I presume to think this good is not equal to the expense the Revenue would incur by clothing such a number of persons ... I would suppose there would not be less than 230 men to be thus clothed and that the annual expence must exceed £600 per year ..."

(Post 40, Report to No 3/1792)

"The letter carriers when in private clothes were exposed to temptation from which the wearing of uniform would protect them.... Nor can it be denied that, so long as there was no distinctive dress, letter carriers in want of a holiday were a little apt to take one without permission, supplying their place by persons of whose character they knew little or nothing. It was in order to check irregularity of this kind and as a means of protection to themselves and the public that uniform was now (1793) introduced".

(Joyce's "History of the Post Office", 1893)

"More important than the feeling that the men should present a creditable appearance was, that uniforms would tend to the security of the revenue, Postage fees were high and were usually collected on delivery by Letter Carriers who were required to pay in that money every few days, thus they were frequently responsible for large sums of money. As Lord Walsingham, Joint PMG, wrote to the Treasury:-

"If all our Letter Carriers were to have a Uniform it would draw public attention to their persons, and make it more probable that they should be recollected as Letter Carriers even when appearing in other clothes, and it would occasion their being observed either if they were loitering in Ale Houses when they might have been delivering their letters, or if they were frequently seen in Pawn Brokers' Shops".

The men objected to being put in uniforms on the grounds that it was a reflection on their honesty, and would mark them out as persons with probably large sums of money on them when they would be exposed to the danger of being plundered. Postmasters General Lord Walsingham and Lord Chesterfield assured them that Letter Carriers in other countries wore uniform without regarding it as a

mark of disgrace, and to minimise the personal danger arranged for them to pay in their money each day"

(Memo on early uniforms by E C Baker, former PO Archivist)

"Uniform supplied officially to the London General Post Letter Carrier in 1793 comprised:-

Beaver hat, with gold band and cockade

Scarlet coat (cut-away style), with blue lapels and cuffs.

Buttons were of brass, on which the wearer's number was inscribed.

Blue cloth waistcoat

It was proposed to renew the uniform annually, The original distribution should have been made on Queen Charlotte's birthday, but could not be got ready in time and the issue was delayed until the autumn (1793) because 'in the Summer everyone would be going out of town and the men would dirty them before the Winter when everyone would be in town'.

One of the reasons advanced for the introduction of uniform was the ragged condition of the letter carriers' own clothes; nevertheless, the men were still required to provide their own trousers ..."

(Green Paper No 27)

"It is recorded that the splendid coats and hats presented a strange contrast/above the 'ragged cloaths' of trousers which seem to have been not uncommon with the Letter Carriers of those days".

(Report on Uniforms 1954)

4 Uniform extended to letter carriers in principle provincial cities c 1834

"In 1834 a suggestion was put forward that the London General Post letter carriers should be supplied with waterproof capes to be affixed to the coats as a protection from adverse weather conditions, but the application was refused. A somewhat similar suggestion that the coats should be made of a waterproofed material was also rejected.

By this time (1834) the supply of uniforms by the Department had been extended to the Letter Carriers in Edinburgh and Dublin

(Green Paper No 27)

"Certain other large cities followed, until by 1851 the number of men receiving uniform was about 1,700 - recipients including post messengers, watchmen (or lobby officers), and certain Letter Carriers in the largest provincial towns" - Also in 1851 the identifying numbers of the buttons were replaced by embroidered numbers on the coat collars".

(Report on Uniforms 1954)

5 Uniform extended to London's Twopenny Post Letter Carriers* 1837

"Three years later (1837) the London 'twopenny postmen' were included in the uniform clothing distribution, the issue in their case consisting of:-

Blue cut-away coat with a scarlet collar

Blue vest

Beaver hat, with gold band and cockade

Humourists of the day seized upon the absence of trousers from the outfit provided, and cartoonists depicted the postmen in negligé".

*ie the men employed in carrying letters within London.

(Green Paper No 27)

6 London uniforms standardised 1855

- a. General Post and London District Post Letter Carriers given identical uniform:
- b. Vest replaced by trousers.
- c. Coat and hat style changed
- d. Waterproofed capes introduced

"In 1854 (1855) waterproof capes were issued to London Letter Carriers, as was a frock coat 'being of more protection' than the coat formerly issued. (Trousers were supplied), the vests being withdrawn. A glazed hat, as worn by Paris Letter Carriers, replaced the beaver (and without a gold band)".

(E C Baker)

"Before the adoption in 1855 of the glazed tall hat of the type used by the Paris postmen, the English contractor had suggested that this would probably not be very comfortable in wear owing to 'its lack of resiliency' and that it would be quite unwearable in summer owing to 'its attraction to the rays of the sun; in cold weather the jappan becomes so brittle that the least pressure or fall would cause it to crack'. Nevertheless, on the plea that what was satisfactory in France should prove serviceable in this country the hat was introduced. In the issue of "Punch" of 2 June, 1855, however, it was stated that 'we hear that the new hat weighs very heavily on the heads of the Department on whose behalf we seriously suggest the removal of an invention which gives both heaviness and headache to a very meritorious class of public officers'. Its vogue was, in fact, shortlived and four years later (1859) it was superseded by a hard felt hat, which in its turn gave way to the single-peaked shako".

(Green Paper No 27)

"At the same time (1855) the London District Letter Carriers were brought into line with those of the General Post (ie men handling letters other than local) and both classes appeared in scarlet frock coats and grey trousers) (London District men previously had blue coats).

Although the London General Post carriers had displayed scarlet coats for over 60 years, the appearance of the 'twopenny postmen' in coats of the same colour occasioned considerable comment in the Press. The Illustrated Glasgow News of June 1855 said:-

'So brilliant and complete does the tout ensemble appear, even from the crown of the new hat to the tip of the ample tail of the red coat, not forgetting the yellow band round the hat and the leather wallet round the shoulder, that we are astonished at the liberality of the Government in the matter and cannot help thinking that the coats, or the cloth at least, must have been cabbaged from the Crimea'

"Punch", however, under the heading "The Post Office in a Blaze", recommended:-

'We lately had our eyes very uncomfortably dazzled by the sight of the Postmen in a glaring red uniform, more fitted for the Fire Brigade than for a peaceful body of men connected with the department of literae humaniores, as the carriers of letters.

We cannot comprehend the taste which has pinned a large pair of scarlet skirts to the coat of the Postman, and caused us to mistake him for a sentinel off his post, by his resemblance to a Foot Guardsman in one of the new regulation wrappers. Considering there is a Reward payable for the apprehension of a Deserter, we wonder that half the Postmen in London are not taken into custody every night on suspicion...

We can see no necessity whatever for the military aspect which is given to these men; and indeed in these war times it is enough to alarm half the old women in London, to have their portals thundered at every hour of the day by men of military aspect. In the days of distinction between the town and country post there might have been some cause for the red coats of the latter, if it were only for the sake of the mild joke that used to be perpetrated by asking the London Postman - 'Well, Two-Penny, how's the General?

We recommend the immediate abolition of this very martial attire, which is likely to cause some delay in the delivery of letters, by elevating the Postman into a very formidable rival to the Policeman, in those little flirtations with our female servants, which have often kept a sentimental Constable grunting hoarse nothings into our Housemaid's ear, while some burglarious gentleman has been emptying our neighbour's plate-chest. Now that the Postman is rendered so killing by his military costume, we can scarcely hope that the Cooks who take in the letters all the way down Fleet Street, will allow him to reach 85 with his usual punctuality.

The Post Office is in every respect a Model Department, and the new costume has probably not originated from its heads, which are too much occupied with improving our means of communication to be able to bestow much time on the cut and colour of the Postmen's attire. Perhaps the matter is of little importance, though we hear that the new hat weighs very heavily on the heads of the Department, on whose behalf we seriously suggest the removal of an invention which gives both heaviness and headache to a very meritorious class of public officers'.

Regarding the days before Letter Carriers were provided with trousers, the following supposed petition from the wives of postmen was also included in the article quoted above:-

"To Her Gracious Majesty the Queen: the Humble Petition of the Wives of the Postmen

Madam,

May it please your gracious goodness to look with a smiling eye upon the husbands of your Petitioners. Your gracious goodness supplies to 'em from the Crown a coat, a waistcoat, and a hat with a band which only the illiterate multitude take for gold. Your Petitioners pray that the Crown would not leave off at the waistcoat, but continue its bounty in the way of trousers, and end it with shoes. Then would your Majesty's Postmen be all of a piece. As it is, half of your Majesty's Postmen belongs to the Crown - and half to the Jews. They get their coats and waistcoats from the Government, and (saving your Majesty's presence), their trousers and high-lows from Holywell Street!

If your Petitioners' husbands were like mermaids, and never but half-showed themselves, your Petitioners would not approach you with their distressed tale - but as your Petitioners' husbands are often respectable about the shoulders, at the same time that they are seedy about the toes and knees, your Petitioners pray that you will be graciously pleased to make their husbands all alike.

Your Petitioners humbly appeal to your Majesty's sympathies as a wife. What would be your Majesty's feelings to see Prince Albert in the fine laced coat of a General (or a late Twopenny), with shabby trousers and boots not fit for any painter to take him in?

Your Petitioners would not distress your Majesty's feelings by dwelling on the dreadful sight, but again entreating that your Majesty will give orders that all - instead of part - of their husbands may henceforth be the care of a maternal government, so that in future they may not complain of half-measures on the part of the tailor..."

(Green Paper No 27 and the St Martins le Grand magazine 1915)

7 Further extension to the provinces 1856

"In 1856 the Treasury had given authority to 'furnish uniform clothing at those Provincial towns where the number of Letter Carriers would render the measure desirable'. In practice that was 13 Letter Carriers including auxiliaries.

The Surveyor of Manchester pressed for a lower limit, saying:-

"With the number of Pillar Letter Boxes that are being erected, it becomes not merely a question of appearance ... but it is important to the safety of correspondence posted in the such pillars that anyone seen opening a pillar should at once be recognised by the public as our servant".

The same kind of argument was used for Post Office Messengers employed in receiving and delivering bags at railway stations.

By 1859 the limit had been reduced to four, and in 1860 uniform was given to all Letter Carriers in post offices at which there was a scale of wages proper to them.

By 1859 Auxiliaries in London with wages of 10s and upwards, and Labourers in London, were granted uniform.

The uniform classes were then Letter Carriers, Mail Guards (by then trains had replaced mail coaches, and Travelling Post Offices had been in use since 1838), Mail Messengers, Mail Cart Drivers, Porters and Labourers".

(E C Baker)

8 Frequency of uniform replacement 1859-1860

"... periods of wear were reduced until by 1859 London Letter Carriers were receiving two pairs of trousers and a new hat each year, and a winter coat and a summer coat in alternate years. This scale was further improved in 1860 when two coats were issued each year, waistcoats were reintroduced, and capes were issued biennially.

The provinces still lagged sadly behind London and under the 1860 concessions the provincial scale of entitlement was one hat and two coats each year and a cape biennially (no trousers or waistcoat)".

(Report on Uniforms 1954)

"The Postmaster of Liverpool wrote:-

'So long as the men have to furnish themselves with trousers they will wear articles so shabby as to be a discredit to the Service on the ground that their small wage will not enable them to provide better. It would greatly tend to elevate the character of the men, especially in the eyes of the public, if they were clothed in a proper uniform throughout'.

(Green Paper No 27)

9 Scarlet uniform replaced by blue 1861

"Further, as it had been found that the scarlet uniforms of the Letter Carriers very quickly became soiled, this colour was discarded, beginning with the 1861 issue, in favour of:-

Blue coat with scarlet collar and cuffs, and scarlet piping - the letters GPO above the wearer's number being embroidered in white on each side of the collar.

Blue vest, similarly piped with scarlet.

Blue winter trousers, with a broad scarlet stripe. The summer trousers, in grey, had a scarlet cord stripe

Thus the predominance of scarlet in postal uniforms came to an end (and the colour of Letter Carriers' uniforms reverted to that worn by London's Twopenny Postmen' during the period 1837-1855)".

(Green Paper No 27)

10 Frock coats replaced by tunic-style coats 1868

"In 1868 the frock-coat style was replaced by a tunic of military pattern which was fully buttoned in front and had a (red) stand-up collar. The waistcoat was again withdrawn.

For Edinburgh and London a tunic with tails was adopted because it was claimed that the Letter Carriers in these cities were required to do so much stairclimbing that it was often inconvenient for them to wear their great-coats and the tailcoat gave them the necessary protection from the cold.

The tunic style of jacket remained as the normal winter garment until the Departmental Committee on Uniforms reported in 1910".

11 Uniform supplied to the newly-introduced grade of Telegraph Messenger 1870

"When the Telegraph Companies were taken over by the Post Office in 1870 the Department recognised the need to supply uniforms to the new grade of Boy Messenger. Part of the reason for this was that some of the Telegraph Companies had supplied the boys with uniforms, and it had become the practice to regard this provision as being a supplement to the wages paid".

(Report on Uniforms 1954)

12 Uniform extended to Rural Letter Carriers 1872

"This conception of uniform as being of the nature of wages was an important new development and it influenced the Department in its attitude towards the provision of uniform for Rural Letter Carriers. Up to this time the latter had received no uniform but in 1872 a supply was authorised for established Rural Letter Carriers (including auxiliaries) as part of the review of wages".

(Report on Uniforms 1954)

13 Double-peaked shako introduced 1896

"In 1896, the shako of the London postmen (the title Letter Carrier had been superseded in 1883 upon the introduction of the Parcel Post Service when the men ceased to handle letters only) was provided with a cloth covered peak at the back as a protection against rain, and a drop-front peak of glazed leather; a lighter weight shako slightly higher in the crown with a cloth covered horsehair body was at the same time authorised for summer wear.

This double-peaked shako (adapted from a specimen of a French postmens kepi sent over from France in 1894, for examination) was not received with approbation in all quarters, a leading London newspaper referring to it as 'the ugliest peaked fore-and-aft headgear ever designed".

(Green Paper No 27)

14 Uniform revision 1910

"The 1910 Committee on uniforms reduced all types of uniform to six classes corresponding to six groups of Post Office grades from Inspectors to Boy Messengers. For each class they proposed, generally, one style of uniform. Thus the distinction between the style of dress in London and provincial Postmen

disappeared (except that different style of shako should continue if the staff preferred this, and the London and Edinburgh Postmen were to be allowed to retain their tailcoats) and the tunic style of jacket with stand-up collar was abolished.

The jacket to be retained was the then existing summer style and this was of the civilian 'lounge' pattern.

Red collars and cuffs disappeared and red piping was introduced.

They recommended the introduction of knickerbockers and puttees for cycling duties but these garments did not retain their popularity and they were withdrawn in 1925".

(Report on Uniforms 1954)

15 Uniform issued to newly-introduced grade of Postwoman 1915

"Postwomen, who joined the Department in large numbers during the 1914-1918 War, first became entitled to uniform in 1915, when they received:-

Blue cap and/or blue straw hat *

Blue serge skirt and cape, and boots

Postwomen's straw hats were replaced by the more becoming blue felt hat of the 'girl guide' pattern in 1929, partly because of the current fashion of 'bobbing' the hair".

(Green Paper No 27)

16 Major changes 1932-1984

1932: Shako replaced by a peaked cap

1955: New-style summer uniform introduced

1956: Single-breasted jackets replaced by double-breasted jacket

1958: New-style cap and uniform badges

1969: Colour grey adopted (extended to Postwomen's uniform in 1970)

1984: Reversion to traditional navy-blue (trials)

Post Office Archives

August 1988

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

ARC51