



INFORMATION SHEET NO 9

Headquarters of the Post Office



1 Early days

1635 Establishment of a state postal service by Royal Proclamation of Charles 1, throwing open to public use the facilities of the Royal posts.

The posthouse was situated in Bishopsgate (possibly at the "Black Swan").

Earlier London posthouses (ie in the days when the posts were primarily for the service of the King and Court) are believed to have been situated "at the sign of the Windmill in Old Jewry [c.1526]"; in Sherborne Lane; and in Cloak Lane, Dowgate Hill (c.1600).

("The Old Home of the Post Office", A M Ogilvie, "St Martins le Grand Magazine" 1890-91, page 78; and "History of Revenue Buildings", HMSO c.1926).

1637 Posthouse established in the Barbican (for the receipt of mails for the Great North and Chester Roads) and at Charing Cross (for the Western or Plymouth Road).

The Letter Office in Bishopsgate continued to serve as the chief posthouse where the mails from the branch offices were finally dealt with.

("Early English Posts", ms. account by J G Hendy, Curator of the Post Office Muniment Room, c.1900 pages 7, 88, and 95-96).

1666 Sept During the Great Fire of London the "General Post-Office" was "for the present held at the two Black Pillars in Bridges Street, over against the Fleece Tavern, Covent Gardens, till a more convenient place can be found in London".

(The London Gazette, September 3-10, 1666).

2 Lombard Street 1678-1829

1678 Ladyday "Ye Post Office in Bishopsgate Street" removed to the mansion of Sir Robert Viner (a banker and Lord Mayor of London) in Lombard Street.

(Post2/Cash Book 1677-1682).

By 1829 the accommodation taken up by the various offices of the Post Office, and the sleeping quarters of its staff, had extended southwards, and the site was now bounded by Sherborne Lane and Abchurch Lane.

2 The new General Post Office (GPO East) 1829-1912

On September 23rd 1829, the General Post Office was removed from its cramped and sprawling quarters in Lombard Street to a new building in St Martin's-le-Grand. Part of the old Lombard Street premises, however, continued to serve as a post office, and today a Branch Office still stands on the site.

The ground covered by the New General Post Office, and later by GPO West and GPO North, once formed the sanctuary of the ancient church of St Martin's le Grand. A college was founded here in 1056; and on Christmas Day, 1068, in the second year of the reign of William I, a Royal Charter confirming the privileges of St Martin's was granted to the canons. Later Edward III affirmed St Martin's and Westminster Abbey to be places of privilege for treason, felony, and debt. Nevertheless, during the peasants' revolt in 1381 the followers of Wat Tyler dragged one Roger Lyett from the high altar of St Martin's and decapitated him in Cheapside - despite the fact that to seize one who had taken sanctuary was a heavily punishable offence, also incurring the wrath of Heaven. Miles Forest, one of the alleged murderers of the young Princes in the Tower, is said to have "rotted away piece meal" here, for a criminal was not fed in sanctuary. After the demolition of the collegiate church in 1548, making way for buildings of a secular nature, the new inhabitants still claimed the ancient privileges of their predecessors. Thus, the area soon became a den of thieves and murderers, and a place notorious for the manufacture of spurious coin, plate, and jewellery. During the plague of 1593 a memorial to the Lord Treasurer complained that "There are certayne of the inhabitants [of St Martin's le Grand], whose houses God hath visited with sickness, which ... will not keep shutt there doores and windowes, or keepe themselves in their houses, but commonly make fourthe, and the red crosse set on their doores at night is strycken out by mornigue, and threaten to mischief such as shall come to sett any suche crosse on their door ...". In 1623 the right of general sanctuary was abolished; but St Martin's le Grand still retained much of its unsavoury character and reputation, until the building of the New General Post Office.

The New General Post Office had been designed by Sir Robert Smirke (who also designed the West wing of Somerset House, added in 1829) in the Grecian Ionic style, and was of brick faced with Portland stone. It was 380 ft long, 120 ft broad, and about 64 ft high; and its site (bounded by St Martin's le Grand, Gresham Street, Foster Lane, and Newgate Street, Cheapside) covered more than two acres. In clearing the site over 130 houses had to be demolished and nearly 1,000 inhabitants had to seek accommodation elsewhere.

The building was lit by a thousand argand gas burners and, like the old Lombard Street office, it served both as a post office (with sorting offices etc, and windows opening on to a public thoroughfare through which letters were handed in or passed over to callers) and as the centre of administration.

This splendid building soon became one of the sights of London, and every evening crowds gathered to see the departure of the mail coaches to all parts of the Kingdom. Excitement was so intense at the closing of the huge Post Office windows that a police constable was in daily attendance to keep law and order.

Visitors came from far and wide and, in his "Autobiography", the novelist Anthony Trollope recalled the memorable evening when, as a young clerk in the service of the Post Office he had to escort the Queen of Saxony around the building and show her the despatch of the Night Mails.

The introduction in 1840 of Rowland Hill's plan of uniform penny postage resulted in a heavy increase in the number of letters sent through the post and, by 1846, additional sorting office accommodation was sorely needed. This was provided by the construction of a penthouse comprising two large sorting offices for letters and newspapers. The new roof was supported by arched iron trusses; and to avoid encumbering the lower floor with any orthodox supports or pillars, the floor of the new sorting offices was supported by iron suspension rods - two rods depending from each of the seven overhead arches. An "ingenious machine" was contrived "to raise and lower the letters and letter-carriers from the bottom to the top of the building, and vice versa". It consisted of two endless chains worked by a steam engine, which carry in rapid succession a series of shelves, each large enough to hold four or five men with their bags ...".

By the late 19th century the Post Office had outgrown the New General Post Office of 1829 (despite the erection of a further storey in 1895), and additional administrative buildings were erected in the vicinity. These were designated GPO West, GPO South, and GPO North, to distinguish them geographically from the old building - which, henceforth, was known as GPO East.

GPO East was demolished in 1912, and the site disposed of a few years later (1923). Numerous Roman and medieval remains were discovered during demolition work (but not the legendary treasure, searchers for which had been pronounced accursed in 1299 by the Dean of St Paul's). These relics were passed to the Guildhall Museum.

Today, the Post Office still uses part of the old GPO East site, renting accommodation in Armour House, Union House, and Empire House (erected during the mid-1920s, after the widening of St Martin's le Grand).

3 Central Telegraph Office (GPO West) 1874-1967

In 1869, a year before the telegraph companies were taken over by the Post Office, work began on a new building in St Martin's le Grand, opposite GPO East and bounded by Newgate Street, Roman Bath Street, and Angel Street. The building had been designed (in a style similar to that of GPO East) by Mr James Williams of the Office of Works. It was completed in 1874 and became the home of the Engineer-in-Chief and the Central Telegraph Office. The new building was designated GPO West to distinguish it from the old building across the road, GPO East.

From 1882 the Post Office gradually began to acquire premises on the ground at the rear of GPO West (between Roman Bath Street and King Edward Street) for additional accommodation. Some rebuilding by the Post Office took place.

Later, the premises on this new site were linked to GPO West by two overhead bridges across Roman Bath Street (an overhead bridge across Angel Street also linked GPO West with GPO North). An additional storey was added to GPO West itself in 1884.

In 1896 the young Guglielmo Marconi successfully demonstrated his system of wire-less telegraphy to the Engineer-in-Chief, on the roof of the building*. In its heyday, between the two world wars, the Central Telegraph Office was the centre of a vast copper network, its telegraph circuits reaching out to all parts of the country and to all parts of the world. Enemy action in 1917 caused some damage, but far more serious was the havoc created by fire bombs dropped on the building on the night of 29/30 December, 1940. The building was partly restored in 1945 and 1947, and continued to serve as the Central Telegraph Office until October 1962, when new accommodation was provided in Fleet Building, Farringdon Street.

For a few years the CTO housed an overflow from PHQ Building (including the Philatelic Bureau, opened in 1963). Later, however, it was declared unsafe, and was demolished in 1967. In the 1970s an archaeological excavation on the site was conducted by the Museum in London, which provided much new and important evidence of London's distant past and origins.

By 1984 a new headquarters for British Telecom (a body separate from the Post Office since 1981) had been erected on the CTO site.

4 Faraday Buildings (GPO South) 1880

In 1877 work began on another new building, in the newly-opened (1871) Queen Victoria Street, to house the Savings Bank and other administrative departments (including the Money Order Office, see para 5) which had outgrown accommodation in St Martin's le Grand. Occupation of the new building, designated GPO South, took place in 1880.

In 1890 occupation began of a new building on the other side of Knightrider Street**, at the rear of the Queen Victoria Street block and backed by Carter Lane. This became known as the Carter Lane block; and, later still, as the North Block. Adjoining it today, on the corner of Carter Lane and Godliman Street, stands a fortified structure which was built during the second world war to provide bomb-proof accommodation for the Communications Department. This small fortress is about thirty feet deep and has walls of reinforced concrete.

From 1903, when the Savings Bank Department moved to new premises in West Kensington, the two blocks comprising GPO South (separated by Knightrider Street but linked by an overhead bridge) served mainly as telephone exchanges and offices of the Post Office's London Telephone Service. The Money Order Office departed from GPO South to a new building in Holloway in 1911.

* Post 30/England 23109/1899

** Here, knights once passed by on their way to the joustings, in Smithfield. On the site occupied by GPO South once stood part of Doctors' Commons, established in the reign of Elizabeth I for trials of a civil and ecclesiastical nature.

In May 1933 a new building on the south side of Knightrider Street, with its frontage in Queen Victoria Street, was opened. It had been designed by Mr A R Myers O.B.E., F.S.I., A.R.I.B.A., one of the senior architects of HM Office of Works; the new building being linked to the North block by bridges and subways, as before. An extension (on the corner of Queen Victoria Street and Godliman Street) was completed in 1939.

GPO South ceased to house the headquarters of the London Telephone Service in 1925. Today, it is known by the more familiar title of Faraday Buildings (named after the great scientist Michael Faraday), home of the City and Central telephone exchanges and part of the International and Continental exchanges. The site is bounded by Queen Victoria Street, Addle Hill, Carter Lane, and Godliman Street.

5 Mount Pleasant 1887-

Centuries ago, long before the Great Fire of London, the site of Mount Pleasant embraced open fields on rising round above the Fleet River, about half a mile outside the walls of London City.

Perhaps the name "Mount Pleasant" held the memory of the green Fields of those times, but certainly it also possess a distinctly satirical twist. By this time, a local landmark had appeared in the form of a huge rubbish heap which had grown on and around the site of an eighteenth century bathing place, known as 'Cold Bath Spring' because of the coldness of the waters of the nearby well. History relates that the rubbish heap was eventually cleared to make way for the Middlesex House of Correction, otherwise known as Coldbath Prison or Clerkenwell Jail.

First a criminal jail and then a debtors' prison, the building was taken over by the Post Office in 1887 to house the new and growing Parcel Post. The prison building was gradually replaced by a Post Office building(s) as more and more space was needed to deal with the steady growth of the parcel post and to accommodate the London Letter Post Office, transferred from St Martin's le Grand in 1900.

The name "Mount Pleasant" clung to the locality however, and soon came to be applied to the Post Office buildings. The story of how this came about, is told by Mr R C Tombs, in St Martin's le Grand Magazine, 1900. He writes:-

"...Soon after the aquisition by the Post Office of the part of the old prison which included the treadmill house, bakery and other out offices, the Inspector-General of Mails and I had been to the gloomy structure to arrange respecting the conversion of the building for Post Office purposes, and on leaving the place and walking cityward, beneath the high prison walls, I told him that the parcel post officers in the city were raising an objection to working in a building styled 'Coldbath Fields' so long associated with prison life. The Inspector-General said, "Well, what name would you give it?" and happening to glance up at the name plate of the short street leading from Clerkenwell Road to Grays Inn Road and seeing upon it the words, 'Mount Pleasant' I pointed to it and said, "What could be better? No sentimental Post Office clerk could object to such a designation." "Mount Pleasant" we will name it then." said the Inspector-General, Mr F E Baines, CB, in his quick, decisive way, and Mount Pleasant" it has remained to this day...."

An official memorandum was issued on 6th November, 1888, in which the Postmaster General decided that the designation "MOUNT PLEASANT" was to be officially used for all the Post Office premises at 'Coldbath Field'.

6 Former Headquarters Building (GPO North) 1895-1984

In 1886 the Post Office began to acquire an additional site in St Martin's le Grand to the north of the Central Telegraph Office (GPO West), bounded by Angel Street, King Edward Street, and the burial grounds of St Leonard, Foster Lane; Christchurch, Newgate Street; and St Botolph's, Aldersgate Street. These disused burial grounds (bordered by Little Britain*), together with an additional plot of land bought by public subscription and opened in 1900 as a garden of rest for City workers, are now known as Postmans' Park. A tablet on the railings commemorates the site of the conversion of John and Charles Wesley in 1738. In a shelter in the garden are a number of tablets, commemorating deeds of heroic self-sacrifice on the part of Londoners. A statue of a minotaur stands in the garden. Close by, during excavation work for the new Post Office building, a medieval plague pit was unearthed. On this site once stood Northumberland House, the mansion of the Earl of Northumberland (and where, it is said, the first edition of the Authorised Version of the Holy Bible was printed **); a French Protestant Church; the Bull and Mouth Inn (formerly, in the coaching era, one of London's principal mail coach centres); and the old Money Order Office. Along the northern boundary still runs a long stretch of the old wall of London (see also para 7).

Three years later, in 1889, work began on a new building, to house the Postmaster General's Office, the Secretary's Office, and various other administrative departments. It had been designed by Mr Henry Tanner, Surveyor to the Office of Works, and constructed of Portland stone in the classic style. Over the archway of the entrance leading to St Martin's le Grand is an ornamental head which is believed to be a portrait of H C Raikes, PMG 1886-1891; the head over the archway leading to King Edward Street is believed to represent A Morley, PMG 1892-1895. One of the two heads overlooking the inner courtyard is believed to represent that of the architect.

Occupation of the new building, designated GPO North, began in 1895. The building also became known as the Secretary's Office and later, from the mid-1930s (when the office of Secretary to the Post Office was replaced by that of Director General) as Headquarters Building.

From 1935 until 1969 (and the demise of the GPO as a government department) on days when the Postmaster General was in attendance, the doorkeeper wore a scarlet coat and a black silk top hat. This ceremonial dress was largely based on the uniform worn by London Letter Carriers during the period 1793-1861.

* This thoroughfare derives its name from the mansion of John, Duke of Bretagne, in the time of Edward II. By the 17th century Little Britain had become a centre for booksellers and a gathering place for literary men (Milton once lived here). Nearby Aldersgate, one of the ancient gates to the walled City of London, was pulled down in 1617. During the reign of Charles II a later gate (demolished in 1761) carried the severed heads of a number of traitors.

** J M Handover's "Printing in London".

In August 1984, because of the need for refurbishment, the Chairman's Office and Post Office Headquarters as a whole, removed from HQ Building to 33 Grosvenor Place, SW1X 1PX.

7 King Edward Building (London Chief Post Office) 1910

In 1902 a site at the rear of GPO North (bounded by King Edward Street, St Bartholomew's Hospital, Giltspur Street, Newgate Street, and Christchurch passage) was vacated by Christ's Hospital (otherwise known as the Bluecoat School, which had recently moved to Horsham, Sussex) and divided between St Bartholomew's Hospital and the Post Office.

King Edward Street was named after Edward VI who, a few days before his death in 1553, donated the lands formerly held by the Greyfriars' monastery and founded a home for poor fatherless children and foundlings. This thoroughfare was one known as Stinking Lane because of the filth accumulated here from the nearby Newgate and Smithfield Markets. The Greyfriars's church (to which the Queens of the first three Edwards, and other famous people such as Dick Whittington, gave generous donations) became the burial place of many persons of importance, including four Queens and the "Holy Maid of Kent" (executed at Tyburn in 1534 for raving against Henry VIII's repudiation of the Pope). It was renamed Christ's Church within Newgate in 1547, and rebuilt in 1704 by Sir Christopher Wren. Only its gutted shell and tower, partly restored in 1960 remains today, for it was heavily bombed during the second world war.

In 1905 the foundation stone was laid by Edward VII of a new building which was to accommodate the Controller of the London Postal Service and become London's chief post office (with sorting offices, etc), formerly housed in GPO East. The new building, named the King Edward Building, was designed by Sir Henry Tanner C.B., Principal Architect to the Office of Works and occupation began in November 1910 (a few months after the death of Edward VII). Whilst excavations for the foundations of the new building were being made remains of the old Roman wall of London, with angle bastion, were discovered. These are now open to public view by appointment.

Today, the King Edward Building is also one of the main stations of the Post Office's own underground railway (opened in 1927), and the home of the National Postal Museum (opened in 1966). In the Museum can be seen the silver plate presented by a grateful nation to Sir Rowland Hill, the founder of Uniform Penny Postage (introduced in 1840). A statue of Sir Rowland Hill stands outside the main entrance in King Edward Street.

NOTE: Principal sources for the above (some already quoted) were: "History of Revenue Buildings", HMSO, C.1926; various PMG's Annual Reports to Parliament and issues of the "St Martin's le Grand Magazine" (a former house magazine of the Post Office); "The Story of the Tablets", Headley Brothers, c.1907; "Historical Post Office Sites", H G Sellars, "CTO Veteran", 1950; extracts from "The City Saints", M V Hughes, J M Dent Ltd. 1932, Annotated by Mr A F Turner of the LTR c. 1960; and "The Face of London", H P Clunn, Phoenix House Ltd, 1951.

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