

# Aspects of British Postal History

A selection of factsheets

The Society of Indexers gratefully acknowledges permission from the Postal Museum and Archive to use these factsheets in an indexing exercise.

All material ©Postal Heritage Trust

THE BRITISH  
POSTAL  
MUSEUM  
& ARCHIVE

Tel +44 (0)20 7239 2570  
info@postalheritage.org.uk  
www.postalheritage.org.uk

Freeling House  
Phoenix Place  
LONDON  
WC1X 0DL

## Contents

|                                  |    |
|----------------------------------|----|
| The Mail Coach Service           | 1  |
| Bicycles and Motorcycles         | 5  |
| The Travelling Post Office (TPO) | 9  |
| Post Office Uniforms             | 13 |
| Pillar Boxes                     | 17 |
| Animals in the Post Office       | 23 |

# The Mail Coach Service

### Origins and the first mail coach

When a public postal service was first introduced in 1635, letters were carried between 'posts' by mounted post-boys and delivered to the local postmaster. The postmaster would then take out the letters for his area and hand the rest to another post-boy to carry them on to the next 'post'. This was a slow process and the post-boys were an easy target for robbers, but the system remained unchanged for almost 150 years.

John Palmer, a theatre owner from Bath, had organised a rapid carriage service to transport actors and props between theatres and he believed that a similar scheme could improve the postal service. In 1782, Palmer sold his theatre interests, and went to London to lobby The Post Office. Despite resistance from senior Post Office staff, who believed the speed of the mail could not be improved, William Pitt, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, accepted the idea. An experimental mail coach journey, undertaken at Palmer's expense, started from Bristol on 2 August 1784, at 4pm. It reached London at 8am the next day, exactly on schedule. A journey that had taken up to 38 hours now took just 16.

### Extension of the service

The success of the trial led Pitt to authorise other mail coach routes and by spring 1785, coaches from London served Norwich, Liverpool and Leeds. By the end of that year there were services to Dover, Portsmouth, Poole, Exeter, Gloucester, Worcester, Holyhead and Carlisle, and by 1786, the service had also reached Edinburgh. That same year, Palmer was made Surveyor and Comptroller General of the Post Office.

### Method of operation

The mail coach, horses and the driver were all provided by contractors. Competition for the contracts was fierce because it meant status and a

regular income in addition to passenger fares. The first mail coaches were poorly built but an improved patented coach, designed by John Besant, was adopted by The Post Office in 1787. Besant, later in partnership with John Vidler of Millbank, enjoyed the monopoly of supplying the coaches. Every morning, when coaches reached London, they were taken to a constructor's works, usually Vidler's, to be cleaned and oiled. In the afternoon, they were returned to the coaching inns, where horses were hitched up for journeys to all parts of the country. Outside London, coaches also made journeys between the main post towns. The average speed of the coaches was usually 7-8 mph in summer and about 5 mph in winter, but with improvements to the quality of the roads, it had risen to 10 mph by the time Queen Victoria came to the throne.

### Mail coach guards

The only Post Office employee aboard the mail coach was the guard. He was heavily armed, carrying two pistols and a blunderbuss. He wore an official uniform of a black hat with a gold band and a scarlet coat with blue lapels and gold braid. He also had a timepiece, regulated in London to keep pace with the differences in local time, and recorded the coach's arrival and departure times at each stage of the journey. The guard sounded a horn to warn other road users to keep out of the way and to signal to toll-keepers to let the coach through. As the coach travelled through towns or villages where it was not due to stop, the guard would throw out the bags of letters to the Letter Receiver or Postmaster. At the same time, the guard would snatch from him the outgoing bags of mail. One guard, Moses Nobbs, served for 55 years (1836-1891) on coaches and later on trains.

### Mail coach livery

From the establishment of Besant's patent coach in 1787, the livery remained the same. The upper part

of the coach was painted black while the door and lower panels were maroon. The wheels were what is now known as Post Office red. The Royal Coat of Arms appeared on the doors along with the title 'Royal Mail' and the name of the town at either end of the coach's route. The stars of the four principal orders of knighthood – the Garter, the Bath, the Thistle, and St. Patrick – appeared on the upper panels of the body. The cipher of the reigning monarch was on the front boot, and the number of the coach on the back boot.

### Travelling on the coaches

Initially, four passengers were carried inside the mail coach but later one more was allowed to sit outside next to the driver. The number of external passengers was increased to three with the introduction of a double seat behind the driver. No one was permitted to sit at the back near the guard or the mail box. The mail coach travelled faster than the stage coach but whereas the stage stopped for meals where convenient for its passengers, the mail coach stopped only where necessary for postal business. The journey could get quite rough in places and the passengers had to get out and walk if the coach was going up a steep hill in order to save straining the horses. The contractors organised fresh horses at stages along the route, usually every 10 miles.

An unusual event occurred in October 1816 when the Exeter mail coach, while on its way to London, drew into the Pheasant Inn on Salisbury Plain. The leading horses were attacked by a lioness which had escaped from a travelling menagerie. The lioness then turned her attentions towards a large dog which had proceeded to attack her, which she chased and killed. The lioness's owner eventually recovered her from underneath a nearby granary. The passengers had taken refuge inside the inn, bolting the door and stopping anyone else from entering.

### Demise of the service

The development of the railways led to the end of the mail coaches, with railways first carrying mail on 11 November 1830, between Liverpool and Manchester. Other rail lines developed and by the early 1840s many London-based mail coaches were being withdrawn from service. The last regular

London based coach service was the London to Norwich, via Newmarket, which ended on 6 January 1846. Mail coaches survived however on services between some provincial towns until the 1850s. Many mail coach guards found continuing Post Office employment as mail guards on the trains.

### Sources

**POST 10:** Inland Mails Organisation: Road (1786-1934)

**POST 58:** Staff: Nomination & Appointment (1737-1954)

**POST 96:** Private Collections: John Palmer (1786-1792)

**POST 97:** Private Collections: Lord Walsingham (1787-1794)

Portfolio collection

Harris, S. 1885. *The Coaching Age*.

Robinson, H. 1948. *The British Post Office*.

Vale, E. 1960. *The Mail Coach Men of the late Eighteenth Century*.

# Bicycles and Motorcycles

### Bicycles

The Post Office bought or hired a few early bicycles or 'velocipedes', which cost £6 to £8 each, prior to 1880. However, their trials failed, mainly because it was difficult to find men fit enough to ride the bicycles. In 1880, two tricycle posts were used as an experiment in Coventry, because it was thought that it was less tiring to ride a tricycle. The Post Office paid the riders a weekly allowance of five shillings for the tricycles' purchase and maintenance.

In 1882, Edward Burstow, a Horsham architect, invented the 'Centre Cycle'. Nicknamed the 'Hen and Chickens' it had a large central wheel and two small wheels at each end, and brackets above the small wheels supported a basket for mail at each end. In 1883, following the introduction of the parcel post, this type was used for the increasing loads in rural areas. It was apparently successful in Horsham, but less encouraging reports from other areas ended the experiment.

Between 1883 and 1895, bicycles and tricycles were used on a trial basis for carrying post and telegram deliveries. By 1895, sixty-seven cycle posts had been established throughout the country, using bicycles and tricycles provided by their riders. The riders received a weekly allowance in return. In 1895, the number of cycles used led to the weekly allowance being fixed at four shillings per rider.

Post Office bicycles were first officially introduced in 1896, when 100 were bought, largely to cope with the extension of the radius for the free delivery of telegrams from one to three miles. After this initial purchase, bicycles were specially made for the Post Office. However, this only lasted until 1904 when the Post Office specification was abandoned because many cycle manufacturers felt unable to produce the design which required special machinery. Manufacturers were therefore asked to produce quotes for bicycles of their own specifications,

provided that they were suitable for Post Office work. As a result, from 1904 the Post Office used various designs, gaining experience about each type's advantages and disadvantages. However, maintenance problems arose because separate stocks of parts were needed and the Post Office decided to return to a standard design.

In 1929, the standard cycle was introduced, and annual purchases changed the whole fleet to this standard by about 1935. The 1929 design was used until 1992. Postal cycles had free-wheels and two brakes whereas telegraph cycles had a fixed wheel. The cycles, usually painted red, were required to carry loads weighing up to 50lbs, and had to last at least four years.

A booklet entitled *The Cycle Handbook* was available at every office to assist Postmasters and others in the management of their cycles. The riders were responsible for keeping the cycles in good condition, and were supplied with a card entitled *How to use and take care of Post Office Cycles*. Repairs were carried out by local tradesmen with parts supplied by the Post Office.

In 1977, W R Pashley of Stafford became the main supplier of bicycles to the Post Office. In 1990, 55 prototypes of a three-speed bicycle, developed by that company, were tested. The new design, the first since 1929, had a lighter frame, plastic mudguards and all-weather hub brakes. A plastic container for mail was carried at the front. The new design, introduced nation-wide on 22 September 1992, was intended to gradually replace the Royal Mail's fleet of 35,000 'boneshakers' as they wore out. In January 1993 an electric motor was introduced for going uphill or when carrying a heavy load. However, postmen still had to pedal when going downhill or on flat stretches.

### Motorcycles

During the early part of the twentieth century,

experiments were made in the use of motorcycles. In 1903, a motor tricycle was on trial in London and in about 1910, a postman on a rural service near Watford used a petrol motor auto-wheel device attached to a bicycle.

By 1913, some Post Office staff used private motorcycles for their official duties. They were paid an allowance of three pence a mile for use of the vehicles. The following year, motorcycles were provided by the Post Office on an experimental basis. Twenty heavy motorcycle combinations were bought, comprising ten New Hudsons, six Douglases and four Rovers. They were all single-cylinder machines of 3½ horse-power with wicker or metal side-carriers. They were introduced on rural collections and deliveries to replace postmen on horseback. However, between 1914 and 1919 the experiment was suspended, due to wartime petrol rationing.

In 1919, the use of motorcycles by the Post Office was resumed, and more powerful, twin cylinder, machines were introduced. In 1920, another trial with the auto-wheel device, attached to a bicycle, took place in Douglas. The start of the 1920s was the beginning of the Post Office's motor transport scheme, during which it purchased Matchless, Triumph, BSA, Enfield, Douglas, Clyno and Chater Lea motorcycles. BSA was found to be the best for price and quality and acted as supplier to the Post Office for a number of years.

In 1924, light solo motorcycles and light motorcycle combinations were first used experimentally to carry post. The combinations were slightly more expensive to operate but were more satisfactory and by the early 1930s were gradually replacing the solo motorcycles. By 1925, 400 twin cylinder motorcycles were in use, in all types of postal work.

Following experiments in Leeds in 1933, motorcycles were soon adopted by telegraph messengers. However, only messengers over 17 who had their parents' consent and a declaration of fitness from a doctor were eligible for riding them.

Until the 1960s, companies such as BSA and Raleigh supplied motorcycles to the Post Office. In September 1967, fifty Raleigh Supermatic mopeds,

modified for Post Office use, were introduced. Earlier trials of mopeds had shown they were suitable for rural collections and deliveries, deliveries on housing estates on the outskirts of towns, patrol and inquiry work and telephone kiosk cleaning. In the 1970s, BSA and Raleigh gave way to makes such as Honda. The Honda VT500 was used from 1988, and the Kawasaki GT500 from 1989. The Honda SH50 City Express moped was used from 1993, mainly for low volume deliveries in towns or rural areas.

### Sources

**POST 10:** Inland Mails Organisation: Road (1786-1934)

**POST 30:** England & Wales Minutes (1792-1920)

**POST 33:** General Minutes (1921-1954)

Wheeler, C. 1933. *The Development of Mechanical Transport in the GPO St Martin's-Le-Grand Shipway*, H.S. 1934. *Post Office Cycles*. Post Office Green Papers No.11

Post Office Vehicle Club. 1981. *GPO Vehicles - A Concise Guide: 1906-1946 and 1946-1969*.

Information from Same Day delivery, Parcelforce depot, London, 1996

Portfolio collection

# The Travelling Post Office (TPO)

## Introduction

As early as 1826 Rowland Hill had written about the possibility of sorting letters along the road in specially fitted mail coaches. Despite the fact that mail was first carried by train on 11th November 1830, it took a further seven years before George Karstadt, a Post Office Surveyor, first suggested the idea of using special railway carriages for the sorting of mail whilst en route.

This led to an experimental Travelling Post Office (TPO) on the Grand Junction Railway between Birmingham and Warrington. The first TPO was a converted horse box and was manned by Edward Ellis and Henry Mellersh together with George Karstadt's son, Frederick. The first journey undertaken by the TPO took place on 20 January 1838.

This trial was so successful that, within a couple of months, a Bill was passed which obliged Railway Companies to provide a separate carriage for sorting letters en route. The first train carrying a purpose-built sorting carriage ran from Euston to Denbigh Hall, where the mail was transferred to mail coaches to continue the journey by road. The London to Birmingham line was opened throughout its entire length in September, and by the end of 1838 the TPO service had extended to Preston.

## Extending the Service

The establishment of new rail routes, together with the heavy increase of mail following the postal reforms of 1840, ensured the rapid growth of the TPO service. By 1852 there were 39 railway clerks employed and the service stretched as far as Perth, Newcastle, and Exeter.

In 1859 agreement was reached for the Night Mail trains to and from the north to have strictly limited passenger accommodation and increased postal

facilities, and in 1885 Special Mails, trains devoted solely for Post Office purposes, were introduced. 1885 also saw the first parcels sorted en route.

In the years leading up to the First World War, there were over 130 TPOs making up an intricate web of interconnecting routes reaching every corner of the land. However, the War saw many TPOs suspended due to war-time economics and staffing difficulties. Recovery after the War was slow and a number of trains were never reinstated. It was not until the 1930s that substantial investment was made in TPO rolling stock again.

## Later Developments

In 1936, the GPO Film Unit made the classic *Night Mail* documentary showing the Postal Special's nightly run from London to Scotland. Featuring a verse by W H Auden and music by Benjamin Britten, the original production budget was set at £2000 but upon completion it had cost an estimated £3546. However, even from its first public showing at the Arts Theatre, Cambridge, it was apparent that it would be a great success.

The centenary of the TPO service in 1938 was marked with an exhibition at Euston station. A selection of Rolling Stock was on display, including a replica of an 1838 sorting carriage. There was also a working model representing the 'Down and Up Special', a term assigned by the Post Office in 1923 to the Euston-Aberdeen TPO.

The TPO service was again suspended during the Second World War, from 1940 until 1945. During this period a few key services still ran as 'bag tenders', trains which only carried closed bags of mail. Services were quickly restored after the War, but the reduction in the number of deliveries saw only 43 of the pre-war 77 services reinstated.

The nationalisation of the railways, following the Transport Act in 1947, led to a process of standardisation of TPO vehicles, although the first BR-designed TPO stock was not used until 1959.

With the introduction of a two-tier postal system in 1968, it was decided to sort only first class mail on the TPOs. This led to the withdrawal of a few marginal TPOs on economic grounds. During the mid 1980s, large scale revisions and alterations to the TPOs were undertaken to align them with the Royal Mail Distribution network, reducing the number of TPOs to 35 in 1988. The network in 1994 consisted of only 24 TPOs operated by approximately 550 staff.

In September 1996 there was a major development in the working of TPOs. As part of Royal Mail's Railnet project, trains for almost the whole of the South-East of the country now depart from the 16-acre London Distribution Centre in Willesden, and smaller developments will cover the rest of the country. This will eventually eliminate the need for TPOs to leave from main line railway stations. Many routes will be renamed, and some will be discontinued.

### Exchange Apparatus

The Post Office had been experimenting with a mechanical apparatus to pick up and put down mail from a moving train since 1837. This wasn't ready by the time TPOs were introduced and mail was exchanged manually. Trains merely slowed down and mail bags were thrown out; to collect mail the guard was expected to seize bags from the end of a pole that was thrust towards him.

A new system was developed by a senior Post Office clerk, John Ramsay. This consisted of an iron frame covered with a piece of net, and was attached to the near side of the TPO. This net opened out to receive mail bags suspended from the arm of an upright post erected by the side of the railway line (known as a gibbet). As one bag was collected into the net, another was released from the train and dropped on the ground. Successful trials were held in May 1838 and the first gibbets were erected at Berkhamsted and Leighton Buzzard in June.

Ten years later, John Dicker, an inspector of mail coaches, submitted an improved design, with nets fixed at the side of the railway track to catch the bags dropped by the train. His system remained in use, largely unchanged, from its introduction in 1852 until the demise of the apparatus system in 1971. The use of high speed trains means that it is no longer necessary to transfer mail whilst moving, and TPOs now stop at stations instead.

### Sources

- Post 18: Inland Mails Organisation: TPOs (1838-1959)
- Post 30: England & Wales Minutes (1792-1920)
- Post 35: Postmaster General's Minutes (1794-1920)
- Obradovic, A. 1994. *The Travelling Post Office*.
- Wilson, H.S. 1996. *The Travelling Post Offices of Great Britain & Ireland*.



# Post Office Uniforms: Key dates

### 1700s

Buttons inscribed with the words 'General Post Office' issued for the Captain and/or the crew of the packet ships.

### 1728

Letter carriers issued with a brass token bearing the King's Arms to identify them as Post Office employees.

### 1784

Mail coach guards issued with a uniform of a scarlet coat with blue lapels and gold braid, a black hat with a gold band.

### 1793

London General Post letter carriers issued with a scarlet coat with blue lapels and cuffs and brass buttons with the wearer's number, and a beaver hat and blue waistcoat.

### 1837

London's 'Two Penny Postmen' issued with a cut-away blue coat with a scarlet collar, a blue vest and a beaver hat.

### 1851

Identifying numbers on uniform buttons replaced by embroidered numbers on coat collars. Letter carriers in the largest provincial towns were now wearing uniforms.

### 1855

London letter carriers issued with trousers for the first time. Previously they had to provide their own. The extension of the uniform to the provinces was gradual and initially 'trouserless'. Waterproof capes were also introduced.

### 1859

The glazed hat was replaced with a hard felt hat.

### 1861

The scarlet uniform was replaced by blue. On each side of the collar the letters 'GPO' (General Post Office) were embroidered in white, above the

postman's number.

### 1862

The single peak shako hat was introduced, covered in a dark blue cloth with red piping, and a straight glazed peak.

### 1868

The military style tunic replaced the frock coat and waistcoat.

### 1870

The Post Office took over telegraph companies and began supplying uniforms to the new grade of boy messenger.

### 1872

Uniforms issued to rural letter carriers (including auxiliaries). The entire delivery force was now uniformed. Good conduct stripes consisting of gold lace bars worn on the left breast introduced for London letter carriers.

### 1882

Good conduct stripes scheme extended to include provincial letter carriers.

### 1894

Postwomen issued with a waterproof cape and skirt.

### 1896

London postmen issued with a double peaked shako which replaced the single peak. A lighter version was authorised for summer wear.

### 1909-10

The winter shako was abolished and the summer shako became standard issue for London and provincial postmen.

### 1910

Committee on Uniforms reduced uniforms to six classes, corresponding to six grades. This ended the distinction between London and the provinces. The tunic-style jacket was replaced by a new design based on a 'civilian' lounge pattern, which had red piping,

## Post Office Uniforms: Key dates

but no red collar or cuffs.

### 1914

Good conduct stripes were abolished, but employees were allowed to continue wearing their existing stripes.

### 1916

Postwomen issued with a blue straw hat, blue serge coat and skirt, waterproof cape, waterproof skirt and boots.

### 1922

Brass buttons on postmen's jackets replaced by black buttons. The letters 'GPO' on the cap were replaced by an oval badge with the postman's number in the middle and a crown on top. The badge also appeared on the jacket.

### 1929

Postwomen's straw hats replaced by a blue felt hat.

### 1932

The shako begins to be phased out and replaced by a 'military style' flat cap.

### 1937

New cap badges with chromium-plated letters and figures were introduced. The jacket badge was withdrawn.

### 1941

Postwomen allowed to wear trousers. Postwomen's hat superseded by a peaked cap.

### 1955

New-style summer uniform introduced of a biscuit-coloured jacket.

### 1956

Double-breasted jackets replace single-breasted ones.

### 1958

New-style badges introduced. Garment badge included the postman's number and the code letters of the parent office. The cap badge featured a post horn and St Edward's crown.

### 1969

Grey adopted for uniform, and extended to postwomen's uniform in 1970.

### 1986

Navy blue uniforms introduced as part of a set of

universal all-weather clothing.

### 1988

The Post Office could supply 46 standard sizes of uniform to its 130,000 postmen and women.

### 1990

Black training shoes issued to postmen and postwomen. Lighter weight trousers, shirts and slacks were also issued for summer wear.

### 1991

Culottes issued after an overwhelming response for their introduction from postwomen. Sleeveless sweaters were also introduced for postmen.

### 1992

Postmen allowed dark coloured shorts in hot weather.

### 1995

High-visibility jackets and waistcoats and shoes with toe protection made available to ensure safe working practice.

### 1996

Storm-proof jackets issued to provide Post Office employees with better protection from the weather.

### 1999

Introduction of sweatshirt and baseball cap to provide a 'relaxed yet smart' uniform.

### Sources

**POST 30:** England and Wales Minutes (1792 - 1920)

**POST 33:** General Minutes (1921 - 1954)

**POST 61:** Staff uniform and Discipline (1766 - 1948)  
*Post Office Green Papers No 27.*

Today, the pillar box is quite literally ‘part of the landscape’. The history of its development shows evolution in design, technology and awareness of customer needs.

### Why letter boxes?

Following the introduction of Rowland Hill’s Uniform Penny Postage in 1840, the volume of mail greatly increased. As the number of posting offices was limited, the public urged The Post Office to adopt the continental practice of installing roadside letter boxes. Such boxes had been used in Paris as early as 1653.

### The first pillar boxes

On 23 November 1852, the first four British pillar boxes were introduced as an experiment in St Helier, on the island of Jersey. This was on the recommendation of a regional Surveyor’s Clerk, Anthony Trollope (now famous as a novelist). The red-painted hexagonal boxes were cast locally in the foundry of John Vaudin. To complete the trials, three further boxes were erected on Guernsey in February 1853. These proved very successful and popular.

Consequently, in September 1853, pillar boxes began to be installed on mainland Britain. Early designs were similar but not identical to the Channel Islands’ box, each Post Office District Surveyor having an input into the manufacture and design. The first mainland box stood in Botchergate, Carlisle but unfortunately no illustration of this historic box survives. Another early type of octagonal design, made by John Butt and Company of Gloucester, was installed in the south-west of England. At this time many boxes were painted a dark green

The first six London pillar boxes were installed on 11 April 1855. These were rectangular in shape and

stood about five feet (1.5 metres) above ground level, with a horizontal posting aperture on the side of the roof. Designed by A.E. Cowper, a Post Office consulting engineer, they did not prove very successful. It was difficult to remove the mail and the very low notice plates were quickly covered in wet mud and rubbish from the street making them difficult to read. It was clear that a new design was required.

### Early experimentation

The evolving design of early pillar boxes developed through trial and error, and the influence of the local District Surveyor. Pillar boxes of the 1850s were produced in various shapes and sizes, and at varying costs. From 1856, Smith and Hawkes of Birmingham made pillar boxes for the Midlands and Southern District in the style of a fluted Doric column with a vertical posting aperture. However, unclear manufacturing instructions meant the first three were eight feet (2.4 metres) tall, with a high domed roof, topped by an ornate crown! Further boxes were correctly produced and made without the domed roof and crown. They were distributed until about 1857, with either vertical or horizontal posting apertures. Several designs of early boxes have vertical apertures as there was no firm opinion on which was the most secure orientation.

Early in 1857, a cylindrical box designed by the Department of Science and Art was adopted in London, and was also sent to Dublin, Edinburgh and Manchester. This new design was about a foot (0.3 metres) shorter than earlier models, highly ornate, and had a horizontal posting aperture in the slope of the domed roof. An economy version without the ornate decoration was produced for use outside the major cities.

### National Standard pillar box

The National Standard pillar box was first introduced in March 1859. It incorporated the best features of earlier boxes, together with a protective hood on the roof covering a horizontal posting aperture and an internal wire cage to hold the mail when the door was opened. For the first time the boxes were available in a choice of two sizes. A variation on this style was the 'Liverpool Especial', a few of which were made in 1863. This box differed in having the words POST OFFICE round the circumference and a crown on top.

### The Penfold pillar box

Calls for a more attractive pillar box were answered seven years later in 1866, by the introduction of a hexagonal box topped with an acorn. It was designed by J.W. Penfold, an architect and surveyor. The 'Penfold' was made in three sizes and the design lasted for 13 years during which a number of small alterations and improvements were made. From 1874, all letter boxes were painted bright red as opposed to green in order to increase their visibility. Penfold pillar boxes remain very popular and in 1988 copies of the Penfold were reintroduced at various historical and tourist sites.

### Anonymous pillar boxes

A simple cylindrical design, introduced in March 1879 to replace the Penfold, has remained virtually unchanged until the present day. By accident, pillar boxes made between 1879 and 1887 bear no royal cypher or crown, only the maker's name, Handyside. It is for this reason that they are referred to as the 'Anonymous' boxes. In 1887, The Post Office corrected this oversight and subsequent boxes were cast with the wording 'POST OFFICE' and the 'VR' cypher. Since this time all boxes have a cypher of the current monarch. In Scotland, however, boxes feature only the Scottish Crown and not the EIIR cypher of Queen Elizabeth II, this is a matter of national identity and because the Queen is not Queen Elizabeth II of Scotland.

### Early 20th century developments

In the 20th century, there have been several periods of experimentation with pillar box design. In the

late 1920s, a combined posting box, stamp vending machine and telephone kiosk (K4) was trialled. In the early 1930s, oval letter boxes with stamp vending machines were also trialled. Neither type, however, proved successful and only limited numbers were installed.

### Airmail boxes

Between June 1930 and October 1938, distinctive blue boxes for airmail correspondence were installed firstly in London and then extended to the major cities of Birmingham, Liverpool and Glasgow. They were normal cylindrical pillar boxes painted light blue with an oval airmail sign attached to the top of each box. From 1932 they had double notice frames - one showed posting times, the other postal rates.

### Modern boxes

A new rectangular pillar box was first installed in October 1968. The shape allowed a new internal mechanism, which meant that the box could be emptied much faster. Two boxes could also be placed side-by-side to form a double aperture box. Made of steel rather than cast iron these boxes, unfortunately, did not stand up to the British weather!

In 1974 they were replaced by different rectangular cast iron boxes. These were known as the 'G' type pillar box and had an angled notice plate for easier reading and a rotary dial which displayed individual collection tablets.

At the end of July 1980, The Post Office unveiled the cylindrical 'K' type pillar box. This box, designed by Tony Gibbs, had a much smoother look and a slightly recessed aperture within its door, but does not have a separate domed top. The box did retain the angled notice plate and the rotary collection dial. This modern design, however, was not universally popular or acceptable in established areas. In 1990, the traditional style of cylindrical box was re-introduced as an alternative.

### Business boxes

Traditionally, meter franked mail has had to be taken to a post office, often quite a distance from

the business. To make life easier for the business customer it was thought a local posting box would be helpful. Royal Mail created a specially designed box for pouches of franked mail. Introduced in 1995, these can be found in business parks, industrial estates and some high streets where companies produce large volumes of meter mail.

### Recent developments

The words 'Royal Mail' first appeared on a British pillar box in 1991, reflecting organisational changes in the business. In 1994 a cylindrical indoor pillar box made of glass-reinforced plastic was introduced for use at special locations. In February 1995, the first pillar box in a departure lounge was placed at Heathrow Airport's Terminal Four. For security reasons this box has a very narrow aperture so that only letters and postcards can be posted. It is constructed from reinforced plastic with a transparent back for customs officers to observe any suspicious or illegally posted items.

### Preservation

In 1972 the Department of the Environment recognised that some rare and early examples of pillar boxes dating from the period 1852-79 were of special architectural or historic interest. Since then almost all of these surviving early examples have been officially listed by English Heritage. Subsequently, in 2002, both English Heritage and Royal Mail agreed a policy for the retention of all letter boxes in operational service at their existing locations, unless certain exceptional circumstances force them to be moved.

### Sources

**POST 14:** Inland mails organisation and circulation

**POST 15:** Inland mails organisation, letter books

**Post 30:** England & Wales minutes

**Post 33:** General minutes

**Post 92:** Post Office publications

Young Farrugia, J. 1969 *The Letter Box*.

Robinson, M. 1986 *Old Letter Boxes (2nd Edition, 2000)*.

More information on letter boxes in The Museum collection is available on our website and on request.

Further information on the listing of letter boxes may be obtained from:

English Heritage,  
Customer Services Department,  
PO Box 569,  
Swindon,  
SN2 2YP  
Tel: 0870 3331182  
Email: [customer@english-heritage.org.uk](mailto:customer@english-heritage.org.uk)

*Royal Mail Letter Boxes: A Joint Policy Statement by Royal Mail and English Heritage* October 2002

For further information about letter boxes also contact:

The Letter Box Study Group  
38 Leopold Avenue  
BIRMINGHAM  
B20 1ES  
[enquiry0801@lbg.org](mailto:enquiry0801@lbg.org)

# Animals in The Post Office

### Cats

Cats were first officially appointed by The Post Office to catch rats and mice in September 1868 (although there had undoubtedly been cats in post offices before!). Three cats worked on probation at the Money Order Office in London, with an allowance of one shilling a week. The cats had to rely on mice for the rest of their food, with the Post Office Secretary warning that if the problem with mice was not reduced within six months the allowance would be cut. Happily on 7 May 1869, it was reported that “the cats have done their duty very efficiently”. In 1873, they were awarded an increase of 6d per week to their allowance. The official use of cats soon spread to other post offices with the cost of maintaining them varying at each office.

In 1952, articles appeared in several newspapers and journals stating that Post Office cats had not received an increase in their salary since 1873. The following year a question was raised in the House of Commons asking the Assistant Postmaster General, Mr L D Gammans, “when the allowance payable for the maintenance of cats in his department was last raised...”. Mr Gammans replied that “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 animals and other factors. It has proved impossible to organise any scheme for payment by results or output bonus ...there has been a general wage freeze since July 1918, but there have been no complaints!”

The whole question of using cats raged for several years after Mr Gammans’ speech, until it was finally agreed that they should be retained and, in 1956, Head Postmasters and Telephone Managers were able to authorise an allowance of 1s 6d a week for the upkeep of a cat. However, with the rising cost of milk and cat food, the allowance was soon raised to 2s 6d a week and by 1958 was 3s 6d a week.

### Celebrity cats

Minnie, the official Post Office Headquarters cat, died on May 16 1950. She was replaced by one of her fully-grown kittens, believed to be Fluffy. The most popular cat of all, however, was one of Fluffy’s offspring, Tibs, who was born in November 1950. Tibs eventually weighed in at 23lbs and lived in the Headquarters’ refreshment club in the basement of the building. He not only kept Post Office Headquarters completely mouse-free during his 14 years’ service, but found time to appear at a ‘cats and film stars’ party and have his portrait included in a 1953 book *Cockney Cats*. After Tibs died on 23 November 1964, his obituary in the January 1965 Post Office Magazine was headed “Tibs the Great is No More”.

In April 1971, a mysterious female cat was seen wandering the basement of the Headquarters building. She gave birth to five kittens, four of which were found good homes and the fifth, a black and white male named Blackie, was kept for duty at HQ. His mouse-catching skills were exemplary and he even became a television star, appearing on the BBC’s Nationwide programme. Officials pleaded for an increase in Blackie’s pay in 1983 and, after top-level negotiations, Blackie and all his fellow Post Office cats received a 100 per cent increase to their £1 a week salary. Blackie died in June 1984, since when there have been no more cats employed at Post Office Headquarters. Their numbers declined after cloth mail bags, regarded as a delicacy by mice, were replaced by the not-so-tasty plastic variety.

### Dogs

Controversy has long raged as to whether mail was ever carried by dog cart. Legend has it that between 1830 and 1850, mail was conveyed between Chichester and Arundel, Sussex, in a cart drawn by four large dogs, and that this cart was once the victim of an attempted robbery by highwaymen.

A letter in the April 1965 Post Office Magazine describes an unusual cart found in Swansea. A plaque on it showed a coat of arms, the words "Royal Mail Cart", the maker's name (Simpson, Fawcett and Co., Leeds) and a patent number. The company first appeared in a telephone directory in 1900-1901 and the patent number was confirmed as being issued for a dog cart. A "mail cart" had been authorised for bags sent on Sunday between Leeds and Cross Gates in 1903, so it was possible that the cart was bought and used by a contractor to The Post Office, even though the use of draught dogs was made illegal in 1855.

In 1939, during the building of The Post Office's new transatlantic radiotelephone receiving station at Cooling Marshes, near Rochester, air began to leak through the cables connecting the 16 aerials to the station. As an experiment, a dog was used to detect the location of these leaks. A Mr H S Lloyd, who trained dogs for the Home Office, brought along his labrador retriever named Rex and a gas, which smelled strongly of cats, was added to the air pumped into the cable. Rex went along the route smelling out any leak three feet or so below the surface, and began to dig wherever he detected the smell of the gas. He found 14 leaks in total, which meant the cable could be repaired without digging up two miles of the cable route.

### Horses

Horses have been used to carry messages from very early days when they were "posted" at intervals on main roads so that messages from Court could be sent from London as swiftly as possible. In 1784, these reached speeds of up to 10 mph. The teams of horses were changed at inns every ten miles meaning that some routes required over 100 horses. The vast underground cellars of the Bull & Mouth Inn, one of London's principal coaching inns, served as stables for up to 200 horses at a time.

The horses were not employed by The Post Office but were provided by contractors. They were, however, entitled to sick leave. A note from 1898 states that "Mr T C Poppleton's horse of The Post Office is suffering from sore shoulders and unable to perform his official duties". Horses continued to be used after the demise of the mail coach service to pull mail carts and vans, but by the late 1930s they

had largely been replaced by motorised vehicles. Horses were, however, used on a limited basis in remote areas and even London had a horse-drawn mail van until 1949.

Mail has also been carried by donkeys, which were supplied by contractors to pull mail carts. A donkey was used, for example, to carry the mail up the very steep High Street in Clovelly, Devon.

### Sources

**POST 30:** England & Wales Minutes (1792-1920)

*The Post Office Magazine* January, April and June 1965.  
*Post Office Press Notices* No.1548B, 1939

Portfolio collection

Ash, R. 1986. *Dear Cats: The Post Office Letters*.

Farrugia, J. & Gammons, T. 1980. *Carrying British Mail*.

The Royal Mail Archive Search Room at Freeling House is open Monday to Friday, 10.00am - 5.00pm, and until 7.00pm on Thursdays. We are open selected Saturdays 10.00am - 5.00pm, please call or see our website for dates.

Please bring proof of identity to get an archive user card. In most cases there is no need to make an appointment, but please contact us in advance if you have any questions.

**The Royal Mail Archive** [www.postalheritage.org.uk](http://www.postalheritage.org.uk)

Freeling House  
Phoenix Place  
LONDON  
WC1X 0DL

T +44 (0)20 7239 2570  
F +44 (0)20 7239 2576  
Minicom +44 (0)20 7239 2572  
info@postalheritage.org.uk