

An Oomph! Digest Special: The History of the Postal Service

To Serve the King

It was Henry VIII who first ordered a postal service for his court. He called upon Sir Brian Tuke to carry out his wishes. Sir Tuke successfully set up a postal service not only for Henry VIII's court in London but a national postal service serving all the nobility of the country, thus its title, 'The Royal Mail.'



Charles I saw the success of this exclusive 'Royal Mail' service and decided to open it up to the public. This was a huge moment of progression in the history of the UK as it meant people and businesses could communicate and correspond in a brand new way. Correspondence travelled by postmen on foot or horse back and provided a cheap way for ordinary folk to keep in touch.

The Royal Mail Livery



Between 1719 and 1763, Ralph Allen, postmaster at Bath, signed a series of contracts with the post office to develop and expand Britain's postal network. He organised mail coaches which were provided by companies in London and Bath. The early Royal Mail Coaches were similar to ordinary family coaches, but with the distinctive Post Office livery. The first mail coach ran in 1784, operating between Bristol and London.

It wasn't until 1793 that a postman's uniform was issued to London postal delivery. It was a mark of celebration and honour for Queen Charlotte's birthday.

This prized and illustrious uniform was a rich, red colour with a tailcoat with blue lapels and cuffs, and brass buttons with the wearer's number, a beaver hat and blue waistcoat. This was to mark the prestige of the service and those working for it.

The Trusty Postie

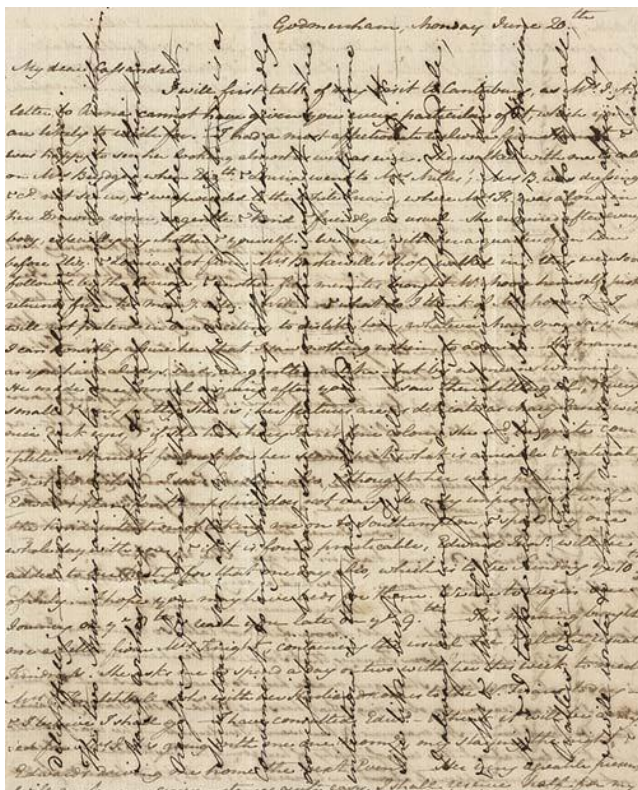
For about 150 years after the establishment of the first postal service, mail carriers travelled on horseback and delivered letters to postmasters. The postmasters removed local letters and added new mail to be carried off to distant places by the next rider.

This inefficient system meant that letters took a long time to be delivered. Not only did postmen have to manage long distances on horseback, but they also had to deal with the weather, terrible roads and the dreaded Highway Men. None the less, the development of the Royal Mail caused households to live and die by the postman's knock on the door.

Today, our trusted postie's route is a tad less treacherous, with the local dog being their main adversary.



Problems and Payments



In the early days of the postal service, letters sent were paid for by recipients rather than senders. Charges were based upon the number of sheets of paper in the letter and the distance the letter had travelled. This system meant that for those living in poverty, it was near impossible to accept letters. Postmen were open to striking deals however; a hot dinner, some ale, possessions or even locks of hair in exchange for a desired piece of correspondence was not unheard of.

Another issue was paper. Paper could be expensive and so writers had to be a little creative as you can see in the above letter... This is known as cross-writing or cross-hatching. To cross-write, you simply write a normal letter down the page and when you reach the bottom of the page, turn the page sideways and write straight across! It may have meant that many letters were somewhat lost in translation but it was an imaginative way to spare some pennies. There was also a delivery hierarchy. Upmarket areas of London for instance received their letters in the morning. For other areas or parts of the country, the post could be delivered anytime day or night.

Passover Quiz

- 1. Which King initiated the postal service?**
 - a) Henry VIII
 - b) Henry VII
 - c) Charles I
- 2. Who nationalised the postal service?**
 - a) Henry VIII
 - b) James I
 - c) Charles I
- 3. Which colour were the first uniforms?**
 - a) Navy
 - b) Purple
 - c) Red
- 4. How did the post travel cross-country?**
 - a) By coach, horse and foot
 - b) By plane
 - c) By bike
- 5. Who paid for the postage?**
 - a) The mail carrier
 - b) The recipient
 - c) The sender
- 6. When did the London upper classes receive their post?**
 - a) At dinner time
 - b) In the morning
 - c) No particular time

Answers
1. A)
2. C)
3. C)
4. A)
5. B)
6. B)