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An amendment has been made from the original article to give the actual location of the Parcel Office in 1898. The Campbell Street Sorting Office was opened around 1913 and rebuilt in 1927, it was originally a cheese factory.

### Delivering the goods

The Royal Mail is like no other postal service in the world in that it is obliged by statute to deliver in person to every single address point. In this county that represents 350,000 addresses and more than 2 ¼ million items per week: figures to bear in mind when next a letter arrives later than expected or the price of a stamp rises. Sheila Coombs explores Postal Archives and talks to Brian Heywood, newly appointed District Head Postmaster.

It is easy to complain about any service, and the post is no exception: the letter delayed is remembered long after the rest that arrives on schedule. In theory, something posted first class by 5 pm in Loughborough will arrive at its Leicester address in time for breakfast the following day. But as Brian Heywood says, it's a matter of what is physically practical. With 5 ½ million items being handled each week a 94% success rate, although it has room for improvement, is not all that bad.

Neither is the cost of a stamp as exorbitant as some would like to believe. 20p (or 22p as it will shortly become) for delivery to the door is cheap compared to other countries, and certainly a fraction of what it was prior to 1840 and the uniform postal rate, when charges were based upon the number of pages in a letter and how many miles it was travelling. Writing a few lines to London would have cost 8d in 1838, more if it was enclosed in an envelope, and for Leicester people what we take for granted now would have been a privilege for the literate and the wealthy.

### **Post To Post**

Picture if you can the entire postal system in the UK, and what it must take to collect, sort and distribute something like 54 million letters each day (there are 1,400 post boxes in this county alone). Each letter is unique and personal - printed, typed, written clearly or scrawled illegibly, all shapes and sizes, each has to be treated individually. It takes a network of computerised technology to sort at a rate of 35,000 letters an hour, and a vast transport system to convey everything to its final destination.

Then imagine a mounted rider, galloping through the night with a vital message for the king - the postal service as we know it originated here, and most definitely one aspect that hasn't changed in 400 years is the human element.

Britain's service is unique in the respect that it is obliged by statute to deliver in person to every address point, be it the top of a mountain or the sixteenth floor of a high-rise apartment block. The benevolent Postman Pat is no myth, he is part of a very British tradition. Postmen and women have to be prepared to go anywhere, on foot, bicycle, boat and even horseback in some places. Leicestershire is relatively flat and easy, but even here 'Seldom Seen Farm' is seen quite often by the local 'postie'.

As the 36<sup>th</sup> District Head Postmaster, Brian Heywood holds an auspicious title almost as ancient as Lord Mayor. 'Masters of the Posts' in the 1500s were officials of

the Royal household, appointed to supervise the forwarding of messages from 'post to post' along the more important roads out of London, or to and from wherever the King and court happened to be at the time. They were often innkeepers who would also supply horses and hospitality to the Royal couriers and those private riders who were permitted the luxury of 'riding post'.

The concept of a public postal service did not materialise until Charles 1 opened up the Royal facilities to everyone - more to raise funds than an altruistic gesture. Charges were made according to the number of pages and the distance they were being carried; a single page within 80 miles would have been 2d, and the cost would normally be borne by the recipient.

Leicester was a Post Town on the Royal Road to Ireland, which went via Chester. There was no means of conveying letters to places other than Post Towns, and mail between two points not on the same road had to travel in and out of London incurring double charges. Under such conditions, illegal carriers organised by a growing network of waggoners whose routes interlaced all the well-populated places thrived well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

No radical change happened until the early 1700s when Ralph Allen, Postmaster of Bath, suggested a workable system of cross-posts which he operated at his own expense, in return for a stipulated annual rent and the profits from the extra postal charges. He died in 1764 a very rich man, having covered the country in a network of receiving posts. Later it was the mail coach, and subsequently the railway which gave speed to the delivering of mail throughout Great Britain.

### **In for a Penny**

In postal history terms, letter boxes are quite recent as is house numbering. For centuries houses were called by name, shop or inn as a guide to the Postmaster, and deliveries were only made to the door if extra was paid. On the whole the Postmaster would be working on his own, besieged by a crowd of local inhabitants all anxious to receive their letters.

In 1835, Leicester Post Office was in Gallowtree Gate run by William Parsons a stationer who grossed £336-10s-0p. Per annum, plus extras

for fees on private boxes, handling letters submitted late and for delivery. He employed one or more letter carriers at his own expense, or did the job himself leaving his wife in charge of the shop. By 1838 a number of deliveries went to outlying villages: the London mail arrived during the night by rail and at 7am a messenger took out the letters for Oadby, Great Glen and Wigston.

But this kind of communication was still out of the reach of poorer people. A penny post set up by an enterprising London merchant existed for local letters, but mail for destinations beyond the town was still charged at exorbitant rates. It wasn't until 1840 and Rowland Hill's Postal Reforms that the nation's writing habits were able to change on a large scale.

At this time the Leicester office was handling about 4,100 letters each week and a good many signatures were collected from local businesses to support a petition which was one of 2,000 to be submitted to Parliament. In 1840 the uniform Penny Post became legislation, and the first and famous Penny Black and Twopenny Blue

stamps became available.

British reform was widely copied throughout the world, and today it is the only country not required under international postal regulations to show the name of the country on its stamps.

### **Letters of love**

Postal reform brought efficiency, it also meant the occasion of St Valentine's Day could be celebrated as never before. It had been the custom to give expensive presents to one's Valentine, but later a love token or a prettily composed letter would be sent instead - left outside the sweetheart's door by poorer lovers who could not afford the postage.

For anyone of unkind disposition however it was the ideal opportunity to settle a grudge, or send a rude and malicious message which would be doubly outrageous because postage was paid by the recipient. The Post Office annually received complaints from people who, anxious to receive Valentine's were, after seeing the contents, just as anxious to have their postage refunded. Rules were sometimes relaxed and if the Valentine had been sent in an envelope - incurring double the postage - half would be refunded.

The constantly increasing volume of mail meant more staff in the Post Office, in particular to cancel the adhesive stamps at mail closing times (so they couldn't be reused). In January 1849 a Leicester letter carrier was paid an extra 3s/6d for this duty, and soon a clerk was taken on for the job. The argument in favour of a standard uniform 'to draw public attention to their persons' was won in the latter half of the century as well.

To meet pressure from rural areas the Post Office had launched an ambitious programme aimed at linking everyone in one way or another with the network. Roadside postboxes were installed to save expense in maintaining a letter receiving office, and to speed delivery householders were urged to provide slits in their street doors so that letters could be pushed through.

Leicester's first pillarbox was set up on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1853 at West Bridge - one year in advance of London. Others followed at Braunstone, Glenfield, Stonegate, Churchgate, and the midland Railway Station. Receiving houses or agents also appeared in the town. Mrs Canner ran a post office from her grocer's shop in Highcross Street, Mr Henry Allen from Oxford Street and Mrs Wheeler at 182, Belgrave Gate. The main Post Office was in Granby Street, but it sorely needed rebuilding and "did not reflect the service that was being offered".

By 1898 the parcel post had grown so much, that sorting needed its own premises, and was transferred to an office in Station Street opposite London Road railway station. The postmen's offices were moved to Campbell Street in 1913, and in July 1935 Bishop Street was officially opened by Mayor Tryon and the Postmaster General.

Having begun as a service of the crown and then becoming the General Post Office the Royal title was reinstated in 1985 (by special permission of the Queen whose family has been keen philatelists since the time of George V). Royal Mail now incorporates four separate companies; the letter service itself, Parcel Force, Post Office Counters Ltd., and Girobank, all motivated by profit targets, service and returns on capital. Brian Heywood describes "monopoly" as a "privilege earned by service to customers", and says that Royal Mail is the only postal service in the world, not subsidised by the state, *and* making a profit.

Massive investment in new technology to cope with ever increasing volumes of mail has included a completely automated office which has revolutionised the handling of letters. Optical character recognition machines can read up to 35,000 printed or typed addresses an hour in Leicester, yet the service remains as it probably always will - a labour- intensive business. 2,500 staff are employed to cover an area of 985 square miles to give a person to person service throughout the county!

### **Tail end**

Royal Mail has a history of recruiting cats to the payroll. In Leicester this fact is not quite so well documented as elsewhere. In September 1968, the Controller of the Money Order Office in London, asked the Secretary of the Post for authorisation to pay 2/- per week for the maintenance of three cats. His reply was "Three cats may be allowed on probation - they must undergo a test examination and should, I think be females. It is important that the cats not be overfed and I cannot allow more than 1/- per week for their support - they must depend on the mice for the remainder of their emoluments and if the mice be not reduced in number in six months a further portion of the allowance must be stopped".

A further minute to the Secretary later in the month reads, "These directions have been communicated to the resident porter who will no doubt find means to inform the cats upon what terms they are to be employed... it is hoped the cat movement will be successful".

Employing cats in Leicester apparently came to an abrupt end with the refurbishment of the Mechanised Letter Office a few years ago. By all accounts the resident feline made an abrupt exit and was not seen again - to the delight of the wagtails, which nest upon the roof. This part of Royal Mail was at one time designated a site of ornithological interest and more than being invaded by mice was besieged in winter months by ardent, binocular bearing birdwatchers.