

# Post Office Underground Railway (*Mail Rail*)

### Early schemes

In 1855, Rowland Hill, then Secretary to the Post Office, submitted a report to the Postmaster General on a system for conveying mail in underground tubes using air as the propelling force. He envisaged it being used in London, originally connecting the Post Office Headquarters and another Post Office building in, or near, Queen's Street, Holborn and ultimately eight outer or branch offices as well. The experts reported that the scheme would work, but the costs involved meant that it never progressed any further.

In 1863, the Post Office inspected a new pneumatic railway, built by the Pneumatic Despatch Company, which ran nine feet below ground between Euston Station and Eversholt Street. The wrought iron cars, which ran on rails, were sucked through the length of the tube in about a minute. Trials continued until 1866 when the Company terminated its arrangement with the Post Office due to financial difficulties. The Company later recovered, and by December 1873 had extended the line to carry mail through to the GPO building in St Martins-le-Grand, via a central point in Holborn. However, the Post Office declined to enter into a permanent arrangement with the Company and mail was carried for the final time in October 1874. The Company never recovered and was wound up in 1876.

### The birth of the Underground Railway

By the turn of the 20th century, congested streets and fog meant that mail transported between the main Post Offices and railway stations in London was severely delayed. A Departmental Committee was set up in 1909 to study the use of underground pneumatic and electric railways and in February 1911 recommended construction of an electric railway with driverless trains. Their recommendations were accepted and in 1913 the Post Office (London) Railway Bill was passed by a Select Committee of the House of Lords.

The new railway was to consist of 6½ miles of tunnels at an average of 70 feet below ground. It would connect the West and East ends of London, with eight stations situated at Paddington District Office (connected to the railway station by chute); Western Parcels Office, Baker Street; Western District Office, Wimpole Street; Western Central District Office, High Holborn; Mount Pleasant; King Edward Building; Liverpool Street railway station and Eastern District Office, and Whitechapel.

Construction of the tunnels began in 1914 and at the same time a short experimental track, complete with one car, was erected on Plumstead Marshes. The tunnelling work was completed in 1917, but the Treasury would not allow the Post Office to order or install the operating equipment during wartime. The high price of materials after the War meant that work on the railway did not resume until 1923.

The railway was finally opened on 5 December 1927 with parcels traffic running between Mount Pleasant and Paddington. Mount Pleasant to Liverpool Street opened for Christmas parcels from 19 to 24 December and then for a full parcels service from 28 December. Liverpool Street to Eastern District Office opened for parcels on 2 January 1928. Letter traffic began on 13 February with the opening of West Central District Office station, followed by Western District Office on 12 March.

### Trains and tunnels

The trains run in a single tunnel, 9ft in diameter, which has a double track with 2ft gauge. At the station approaches, the main tunnel divides into two 7ft tunnels, each with a single track. Although the trains are much smaller than on London's passenger underground, the stations look much the same, with grand circular walls and the familiar sound of approaching trains. The tunnels were used during the First World War to store and protect art treasures belonging to the National Portrait Gallery and the

# Post Office Underground Railway (*Mail Rail*) (contd.)

Tate Gallery.

The original rolling stock of 90 trains had to be scrapped within three years because of a design fault. They were not articulated and excessive wear had been suffered by both the trains and the track. New trains were introduced in 1930, with each 27-foot long single-car train able to carry four mail bag containers. Every container held an average 15 bags of letters or six bags of parcels. The trains were still going strong in 1981 when they were supplemented by 34 new trains in a £1 million development programme.

## Changes to the Underground Railway

The stations at Western Parcels Office and Western District Office closed in 1965. They were replaced by a station at the new Western District Office in Rathbone Place, opened on a new deviated section of track on 3 August 1965.

To mark its 60th anniversary in 1987, the Post Office Underground Railway changed its name to 'Mail Rail' and three of the trains were rebuilt with streamlined castings. Another recent modification to the train control equipment meant that trains could be diverted, so that the rare hold-ups caused by the occasional break-down became a thing of the past.

## Mail Rail in the 1990s

A new centralised computer-controlled system was introduced in 1993, enabling the entire railway to be controlled from a single point instead of through separate control rooms at each station. 34 trains ran 18 hours a day along 23 miles of track, only stopping at Paddington, Western Delivery Office, Mount Pleasant, and East London. More than six million bags of mail were carried below ground each year – that's four million letters every day. It was unique as the world's only underground mail transport system. Similar systems were developed and used in West Germany and the US, but the German railway closed long ago and the American version now carries only rubbish after being incorporated into Chicago's waste disposal system.

## Sources

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

**POST 122:** Minuted Papers (1955- )

Portfolio collection

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*Engineering* January to March 1928.

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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](mailto:info@postalheritage.org.uk)