

Archive Information Sheet

Royal Mail Transport: Key dates

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1720

Ralph Allen takes charge of the By and Cross road letters. This network of Cross-Posts sets up for the first time direct links between major towns.

1784 – 2 August

First Mail Coach service runs between Bristol and London via Bath, organised by theatre manager and entrepreneur, John Palmer. First postal employees to receive an official uniform are mail coach guards (the only post office employee on a mail coach.)

1786

London to Edinburgh Mail Coach service is established, taking 60 hours.

1788

London to Glasgow Mail Coach is established, taking four days

1821

Two steam driven Packet Boats contracted to carry the Holyhead and Irish mails, these were the 'Meteor' and the 'Lightning'.

1830

Letters are first carried by rail on the newly opened Manchester and Liverpool railway.

1838 – 4 January

Patent for bag exchange apparatus for moving trains granted to Nathaniel Wordsell.

1838 – 20 January

rail journey during which mail is sorted takes place, this utilised staff working within a converted horsebox.

1838 – 22 May

Mail Coaches for Holyhead, Manchester, Liverpool and Carlisle will now be carried on the rail trucks on the Euston-Birmingham Railway.

1838 – 28 May

Post Office rejects Wordsells' price for his bag exchange apparatus as being too expensive.

1838 – 30 May

John Ramsey demonstrates his bag exchange apparatus but it is too flimsy for everyday use.

1846 – January

Last London-based mail coach leaves for Norwich.

1848 – 15 April

Post Office Inspector Dicker demonstrates his bag exchange apparatus for use on railways, legal problems result in a delay in acceptance, and he is eventually paid £500 by the Post Office for his invention in 1852.

1855

Underground transport of mail in London first envisaged by Secretary to the Post Office, Rowland Hill.

1863

Post Office inspects a new pneumatic railway, built by the Pneumatic Despatch Company and running between Euston Station and Eversholt Street. Iron cars, which ran on rails, were sucked through the length of the tube. In 1873 the line was extended to carry mail to the GPO building in St Martins-le-Grand. Trials continued but the Post Office declined to enter a permanent arrangement with the company and mail was carried for the final time in October 1874, the Postmaster having declared that the Post Office had "no intention of using the tunnel". The company never recovered and was wound up in 1876.

1880

First use of tricycles by the Post Office to deliver mail; in Coventry, postmen riders were paid a weekly allowance to cover the purchase and maintenance of their machine.

1882

'Centre-cycle' (a five wheeled cycle) used in Horsham district with some success, but objections from the realisation that "the rate of deterioration of certain material portions of postmen's trousers had become

the use of this design was not extended.

1887

Long distance horse drawn mail coaches are re-introduced to carry parcels to reduce payments to railway companies. All road borne parcel postage went to the Post Office.

1888

Parcel mail coaches are motorised.

1897 – 16 December

An experimental steam motor-van was operated between London's Mount Peasant and Redhill, Surrey. A distance of 23 ¼ miles, at one time the van exceeded the speed limit of 12 miles an hour and the driver was ordered to proceed "at the ordinary pace".

1897 – 24 January

An electric vehicle was used between St-Martins-Le-Grand and the Paddington district office.

1904

Post Office Stores Department hires a Wallis & Stevens traction engine for four weeks.

1905

Post Office Stores Department purchases its first vehicle, a second-hand Wallis & Stevens traction engine for £450.

1907

Post Office purchases its first lorry, a Maudslay for £727, this is used by the Stores Department. It covered 300,000 miles over the next 23 years and was then returned to Maudslay for publicity purposes.

1911 – 9 September

The first scheduled air mail service, from Hendon to Windsor began on 9 September 1911 as part of the celebrations for the Coronation of King George V. It was planned to run until 15 September, with a single trip in the reverse direction on 16 September. However, bad weather caused a backlog of commemorative cards and envelopes, the only mail being carried, which was not cleared until 26 September.

1912 – 14 April

White Star R.M.S. (Royal Mail Steamer) Titanic sinks after striking an iceberg on its maiden voyage. More than 1,500 people lost their lives, including two

British and three American Sea Post Clerks who worked in the on-board Post Office.

1914

First trials of motorised transport as a replacement for mounted postmen, six Douglas, ten New Hudson and four Rover motorcycle combinations were put into service, another Rover combination was added a year later together with two Autocarrier and two Warwick Tricars.

1914

Work begins on the construction of an underground tunnel system for the transport of mail in London, work was held up in 1917 with the onset of World War I, during this time, the tunnels were used for the storage of art treasures from the Tate and National Portrait Galleries.

1914 – 29 September

Railway Post Office Carriages redefined as Railway Sorting Carriages.

1919 – 14 June

John Alcock and Arthur Whitten-Brown completed the first non-stop flight across the Atlantic, carrying with them 196 ordinary letters and one letter packet.

1919 – 12 November

Ross and Keith Smith carried the first air mail from England to Australia from 12 November to 10 December 1919.

1919 – 11 November

The first public air mail service began, flying between London and Paris. The service was extended to Holland, Belgium and Morocco the following year.

1920 – February

Two ex-War Department Fords and a secondhand GWK van purchased for use as postal vans. This trial was deemed so successful that the Post Office purchased 50 new GWK vans in June and October of the same year. Another five vans joined them soon after, but the make was deemed unsuitable and they were replaced by Fords.

1925

First purchase of solo motorcycles by the Post Office.

1927 – December

The Post Office Underground Railway opens, running from east to west beneath London.

1928

Railway Sorting Carriages redefined as Travelling Post Offices.

1929 – 30 March

The first through service to India departed from Croydon. Carried by Imperial Airways, the route had extended to Jodhpur and Delhi by December of 1929

1931- 28 February

A regular London to Tanganyika (now Tanzania) airmail service began.

1932- 20 January

Regular airmail flights to Cape Town started.

1933

London to Karachi airmail service extended to Calcutta and later Singapore

1934 – 6 June

First experimental flight carrying mail by rocket was made over the Sussex downs. After this successful experiment with more than 1,000 letters, another trial took place in the Western Isles on July 1934.

1934 – 28 July

German inventor Gerhard Zucker again carried out a trial carrying mail by rocket. The 4,800 letters failed to cross the Sound of Scarp between Scarp Island and the Isle of Harris when the rocket exploded soon after take off. A second unsuccessful test took place three days later; the experiment was abandoned soon after.

1934 – 20 August

Having experimented with certain routes; inland airmail began with the town-to-town service. This served 13 UK major towns such as London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Cardiff, Belfast and Glasgow. It was initially an experimental service, but it lasted until World War Two.

1934 – September

It was announced that permission had been granted by the Air Ministry for an experimental flight of an Autogyro to and from the Mount Pleasant sorting office in Central London, air-mails were to be transported from the roof there to Croydon. Despite a six-week trial at Hanworth Aerodome, Middlesex and a sole flight at less than 100 feet over Mount Pleasant, it was decided not to go ahead with the project due to the limited roof space.

1934- 8 December

A regular London to Brisbane airmail service began. The journey of 12,700 miles was the world's longest air route and took some 12 days.

1936 – 7 October

First use of the Mobile Post Office; 'GPO 1' appears at Marden and District Commercial Fruit Show.

1937 – 28 June

The Empire Air Mail Scheme began on this day when the flying boat 'Centurian' flew from Southampton to South Africa. The idea was conceived in 1933. It aimed to carry all first class mail through the British Empire at a rate of one-and-a-half pence per ounce, with a charge of one penny for postcards. The second stage, to India and Malaya, began in February 1938 and the third stage to Australia in July 1938. The Empire Air Mail Service was intended to last for 15 years, but was halted by the war and was formally ended on 31 March 1947. Imperial Airways were merged with British Airways in 1940 to form the British Overseas Airways Corporation.

1948 – June to September

Following experiments in 1947, 'live' mail is carried as a day service between Peterborough and Great Yarmouth.

1949

The last horse drawn mailvan in London withdrawn.

1949 – October to 15 April 1950

Night return helicopter service between Peterborough and Norwich.

1954

Pedestrian operated Electric Delivery Trucks enter into service.

1963 – 8 August

'The Great Train Robbery' – the night mail TPO from Euston to Glasgow was stopped and robbed of more than £2 million. The carriage of bullion on TPOs was stopped soon afterward.

1967 – 20 February

First Postbus route opens between Llangarig and Llanidloes in Powys, Mid-Wales.

1970 – March

Datapost is launched, a courier-style delivery service.

Royal Mail Transport: Key dates (contd.)

1979 – July 2

Inland night airmail network, Skynet, begins, based at Liverpool's Speke airport.

1981 – 9 February

Hovertravel awarded contract for carriage of mail by Hovercraft between Ryde (Isle of Wight) and Southsea.

1980 to 1982

Replacement stock was installed in the Post Office Underground Railway (London) replacing most of those last built in 1930 and 1936.

1987

Sixty years after opening, The Post Office Underground Railway is renamed MailRail.

1990

Post Office begins trials with a fleet of environmentally sensitive vehicles (Concept Vehicles.)

1993

The computer control centralisation of Mailrail (formerly known as the Post Office Underground Railway) was completed, replacing the electro-mechanical system installed in 1927. In its heyday, this service carried four million letters a day.

1995 – 12 July

Royal Mail announces that it is to commence trials of Ford's 'Ecostar' electric van for deliveries in the Oxford area. This is to form part of Ford's worldwide evaluation of the vehicles.

1997 – April

The Post Office announces the trial of four-wheeled cycles (called the Brox) to deliver mail in some areas of south west England.

1997

A new road and rail hub officially opens in North West London (Willesden.)

2000 – 16 February

Royal Mail announces that after a successful test run in Oxford, trials are to begin in London of a specialised electric delivery truck. Called the Carryall, manufactured by Bradshaws of Peterborough, the vans have a top speed of 18mph and can carry 550lb.

2002 – March

Consignia (the name for Royal Mail at that time)

announces that the sorting of mail on Travelling Post Offices is to be phased out over the following 12 months.

2002 November

Royal Mail announces that due to a fall in postage use in London and changes in how mail is distributed, MailRail is no longer financially viable and will close unless an alternative use can be found.

2002 November

Extracted from 'Courier' November 2002, the latest position on cycles helmets is that helmets are to be issued to every postman and postwoman who use a bicycle in the course of their work.

As well as helmets, each delivery cyclist will also receive a spare set of fitting pads, a thermal skull cap (for cold protection) and a waterproof helmet cover for wet weather use. The helmets are made by the Scandinavian manufacturer 'Etto' which works closely with the Swedish standards institution. They feature 16 ducts for maximum ventilation, a self locking adjustable restraint system – available in two sizes, liner pads made from anti bacterial fabric, an insect screen and a reflective safety strip. Roll-out of the helmets is due to start in December and is expected to be complete by spring 2003.

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

Freeling House	T +44 (0)20 7239 2570
Phoenix Place	F +44 (0)20 7239 2576
LONDON	Minicom +44 (0)20 7239 2572
WC1X 0DL	info@postalheritage.org.uk