

POSTWOMEN

Recruiting women

Before the First World War, women had been employed by the General Post Office working mainly as clerical staff, operators and counter staff. After war broke out, many

more women were recruited and transferred to men's jobs. Unlike today postwomen did not receive equal pay and the understanding was that they were only there until the war was over.



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▲ **Sorting broken parcels, a job previously confined to men in case women saw 'indecent material' in opened parcels**

'We postwomen are a curiously assorted army.... having at least two things in common, the desire to do some necessary work and the physical strength for negotiating endless steps and stairs and for carrying bulky burdens'

Mary Hughes, postwomen



► **Postwomen were issued with heavy, rigid boots that many found painful to wear, tarpaulin capes and hat coverings for bad weather**

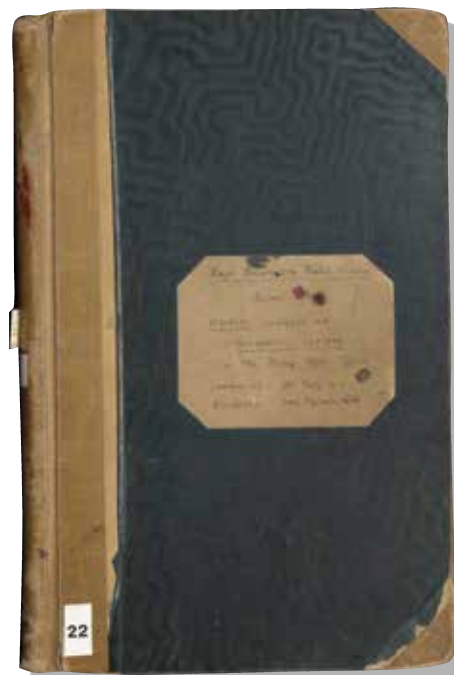


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On the rounds

'This rising so early is an unwonted experience for some of us. There are sorting duties to be done before setting out on the rounds of delivery, which necessitate attendance at the office at 6 or sometimes 5 a.m..... In the early morning, when the only other people in the streets are stray policemen, milkmen, and road-sweepers, there is a quality of freshness and cleanness in the air that strikes one with wonder, and seems reward enough for having to be astir at an unaccustomed hour, at any rate in summertime. In winter the experience, if more mysterious, is less enticing!'

Mary Hughes, postwoman



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▲ This record of women employed in the Royal Engineers Postal Section (REPS) as temporary sorters from 26 July 1915 to 11 March 1916, holds personal details, accidents, incidents on duty and attitudes to work

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Clarke, Lilian Heathcote

Date of Birth: 4 February 1885

Condition: Single

Address: 17 Birchwood Meadows, Muswell Hill, N

Date of Appointment: 25 August 1915

Wages: 2/6 2/6 3/6 3/6 3/6

Office: 1/6 2/6 3/6 4/6

Was Bonus: 3. 17

Increment: 1/6

23rd June 17

Record of Conduct etc. Received.

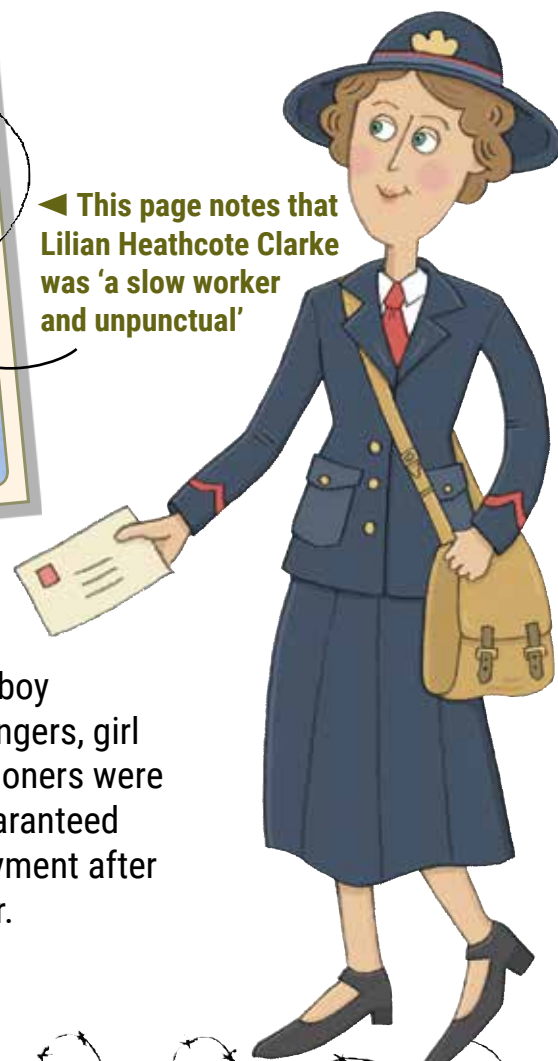
She was a very slow worker, and unpunctual. Late absences having been recorded since January this year (Sd) S. H. Koolman

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ACTIVITY ALERT

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◀ This page notes that Lilian Heathcote Clarke was 'a slow worker and unpunctual'



Girl probationers

One postwoman recruited as a Girl Probationer (messenger) when she was 15, knew when a telegram contained news of a son, father or husband being missing or killed in action. She felt strongly that as a teenager,

'she was required to do something that no young person should have to do.'

Unlike boy messengers, girl probationers were not guaranteed employment after the war.



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First World War attitudes to postwomen

There were many examples of positive but patronising reactions to postwomen as in this poem published in St Martin's Le Grand, the General Post Office staff magazine.



▼ A cartoon published by St Martin's Le Grand, illustrating a fictional representation of postwomen

The War Maiden at Home
 When the soldier's tramp is o'er the land
 And "Civvies" do not count,
 When Luxury's severely banned
 And prices upward mount,
 When each man over forty-one is put upon the shelf
 The thoughtful maiden sits up straight and says unto herself:

"Now where's the place where I come in?
 How can I lend a hand?
 I'll knit and sew, but can't I take
 A still more useful stand?"
 While all around the soldiers gay in every house were billeted:
 The people hardly knew their homes, but said the place was filleted.

There! These conditions do provide
 The maiden's useful part –
 To do the undistinguished jobs
 With all her willing heart.
 She won't get the Victoria Cross – no, not by any means!
 But the fighting man can't fight without the help behind the scenes.



SUPT.—"Now then, you musn't sort Liverpool letters to Manchester because they have blue envelopes."
 SISTER SUSIE (late expert at coloured wool work).—"Oh, you're too fussy."

Remembered

Several female General Post Office workers were honoured for bravery during the First World War. Mabel Eleanor Clarke, a telephonist,

'(came) on duty on every possible occasion of emergency through bombardment and gunfire.'



©Royal Mail Group Ltd 2014, courtesy of The Postal Museum, illustration from St Martin's Le Grand 1918, POST 92

Overview of the lesson:

This activity links to KS3 Citizenship, uses archival material to develop enquiry skills and encourage questioning, understanding and empathy towards the role of female postal workers in the First World War.

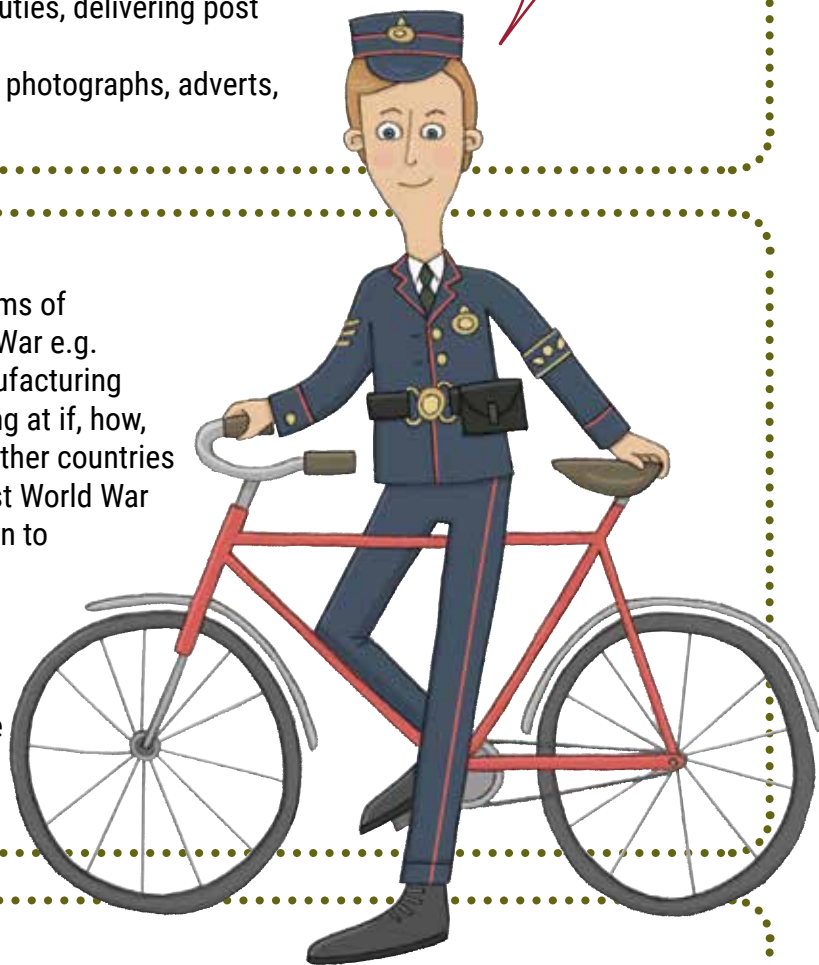
Pupils use drama to explore attitudes to female postal workers in the First World War.

Before undertaking this activity, pupils are likely to have:

- ◆ Researched the type of work female postal workers were employed to do during the First World War (censoring letters, sorting broken parcels, packing parcels for PoWs, counter and office duties, delivering post and telegrams)
- ◆ Studied a range of archival material such as photographs, adverts, cartoons, poems, official records and diaries

Extension activities could include:

- ◆ **History, Citizenship:** Investigating other forms of employment for women during the First World War e.g. in the Services, nursing, work on the land, manufacturing and engineering industries, teaching etc; looking at if, how, and to what extent, women were employed in other countries such as France, Russia and Germany in the First World War
- ◆ **D&T:** Designing posters to encourage women to work for the General Post Office in the First World War
- ◆ **English:** Developing drama and role play around women at work in the First World War
- ◆ **KS2 History, PHSE:** Hot seating, conscience alleles, story telling or freeze frames can all be adapted for Upper KS2

**To do:**

- ◆ **You will need:** printouts of original archival material including adverts, poems, cartoons, diaries and the extract from the Code of Conduct book. See The Home Front Powerpoint

Key terms

Protagonist
Archive
Censorship

Success criteria**By the end of the project**

- ◆ All pupils will understand more about attitudes to working women at the beginning of the 20th century
- ◆ All pupils will be aware of the wealth of archival material relating to the First World War held in The Postal Museum collections
- ◆ Some pupils will want to explore this topic further

ACTIVITY

3

WOMEN'S WORK?

When the men went off to fight, women were called upon to take their place. Although women had been employed by the General Post Office before the First World War, their jobs were mainly restricted to clerical tasks. During the war they were required to do jobs previously only done by men.

Look carefully at a range of material from The Postal Museum such as poems, cartoons, adverts and diaries.

Things to think about:

Do you think women were welcomed in the General Post Office? In all jobs? In certain jobs? Or not at all? Back your answers up with evidence.

How would you describe the type of work available to female postal workers?

Can you think why some people were threatened by the idea of female postal workers? Give reasons for your answer.

Were female postal workers unfairly treated? And if so, how?

What happened after the war was over? Were women encouraged to carry on working? Back your answers up with evidence.

Your task:

◆ **Hot seating:** using the Rowntrees advert for cocoa, one of your group is appointed as a male advertising executive. He/she is responsible for portraying women in adverts for his company. You question him/her about his attitudes to working women in the First World War.

◆ **Conscience alley:** organise your group/class into two lines. One person takes the role of protagonist and walks between the two lines as each member of the group gives their advice.

◆ **Story telling:** use the archival sources as inspiration to write a story about one woman's experience of postal work during the First World War.

Power POINT



▲ An advert for Rowntree's cocoa using a postwoman



A HELPING HAND

Help for families

The General Post Office was a major benefactor during the First World War. It set up a relief fund in 1914 to help the elderly relatives, widows and orphans of General Post Office staff who had gone off to fight. It funded hospitals and convalescent homes, food parcels were sent to prisoners of war and employment was provided for widows.

'We have now going on in the Post Office....one of the most wonderful cooperative efforts ever made for the benefit of suffering colleagues and their dependents'
R W Hatswell, St Martin's Le Grand, 1915

► Concerts were held to raise money for the relief fund. Performers offered their services free

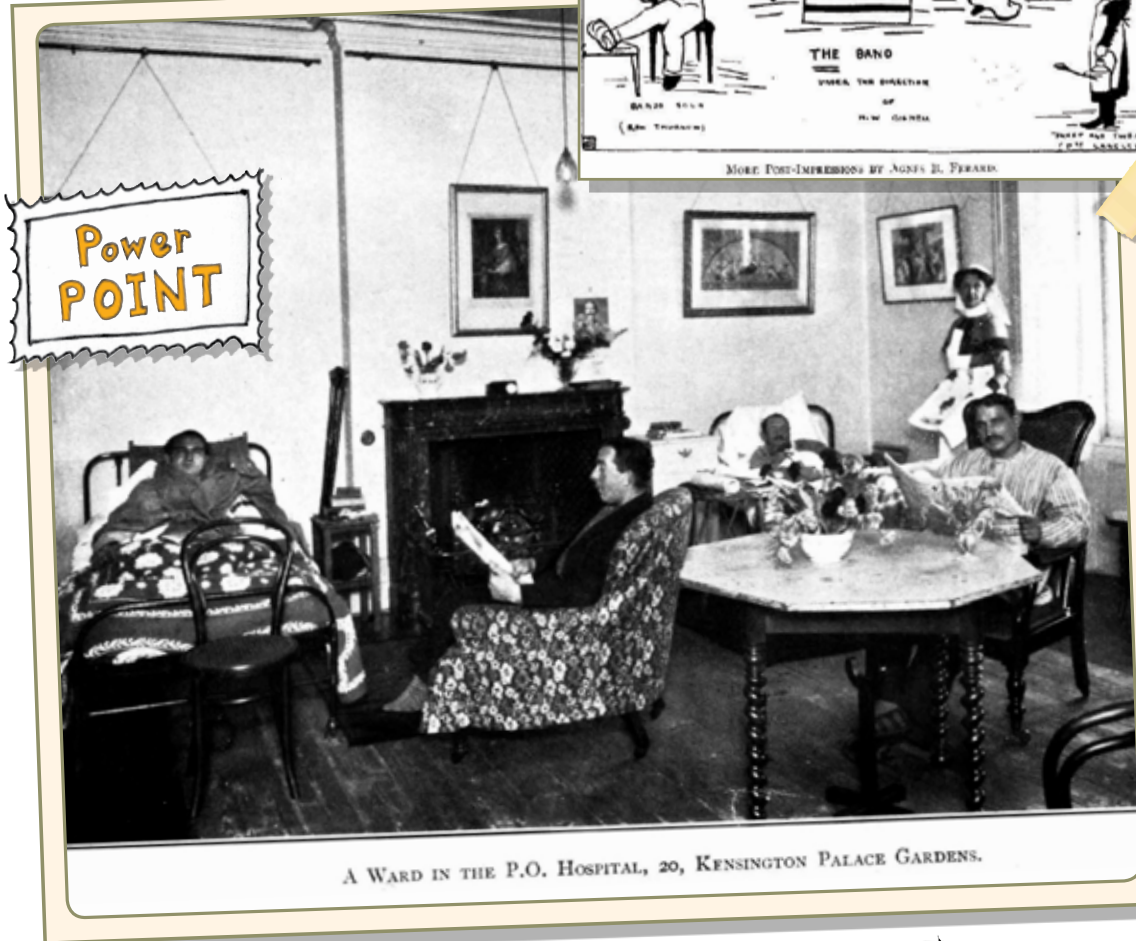


▼ This hospital in 20 Kensington Gardens, London was funded by the General Post Office

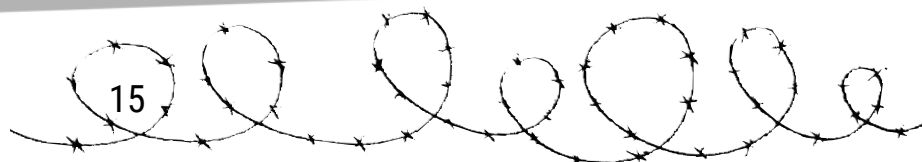


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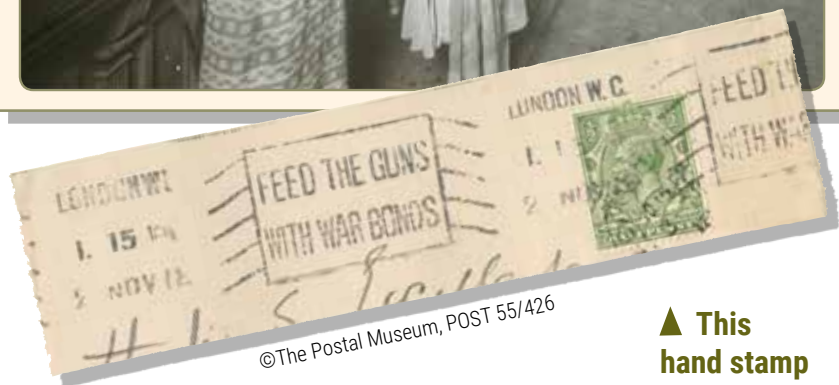
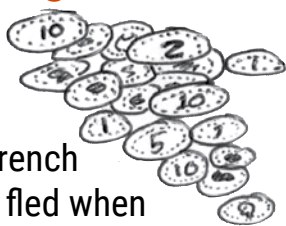
Separation allowances

The General Post Office was responsible for making sure that Separation Allowances reached the wives of men in the armed forces. These were state funded payments for millions of women whose source of income disappeared when their men left to fight.

► The General Post Office also distributed ration books

Help for refugees

Postal staff could donate to a fund for Belgian and French postmen who fled when the German army invaded. Refugees were given work in London postal and telegraph services and some General Post Office staff offered their houses for somewhere to stay.



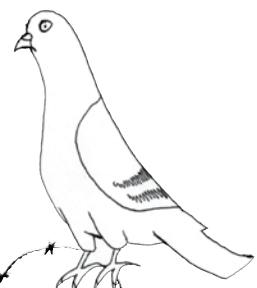
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▲ This hand stamp for letters encourages the purchase of war bonds

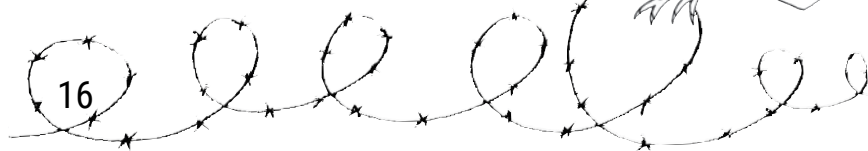
◀ Belgian postal refugees arriving in Ilford, Essex



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HELPING TO FINANCE THE WAR

Investing in the war

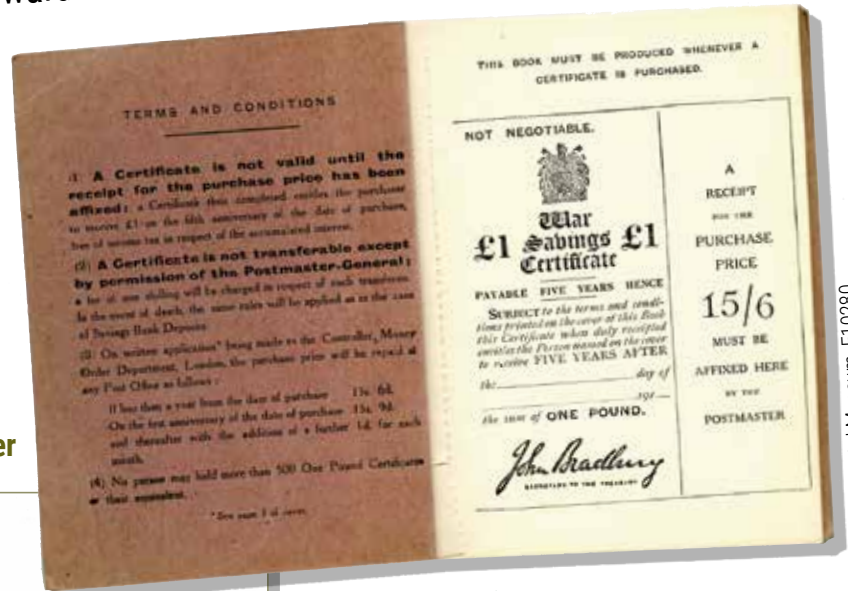
The General Post Office was used in a number of ways to help finance the war. It established a war time savings scheme and encouraged the public to buy War Bonds and War Savings Certificates.

► War Savings Certificates were designed to raise money at short notice



▼ A cartoon published in *Punch* portraying the General Post Office as a wartime profiteer

'...the Post Office is daily besieged by applicants who are for the first time in their lives interested in these problems. They write"Is it safe?" "Is it true we won't see our money until 1925?" "If the Germans invade us will the War Loan help them or us?" "Should I insure my certificate against an air raid?"
Edward Bennett, Savings Bank department employee, 1915



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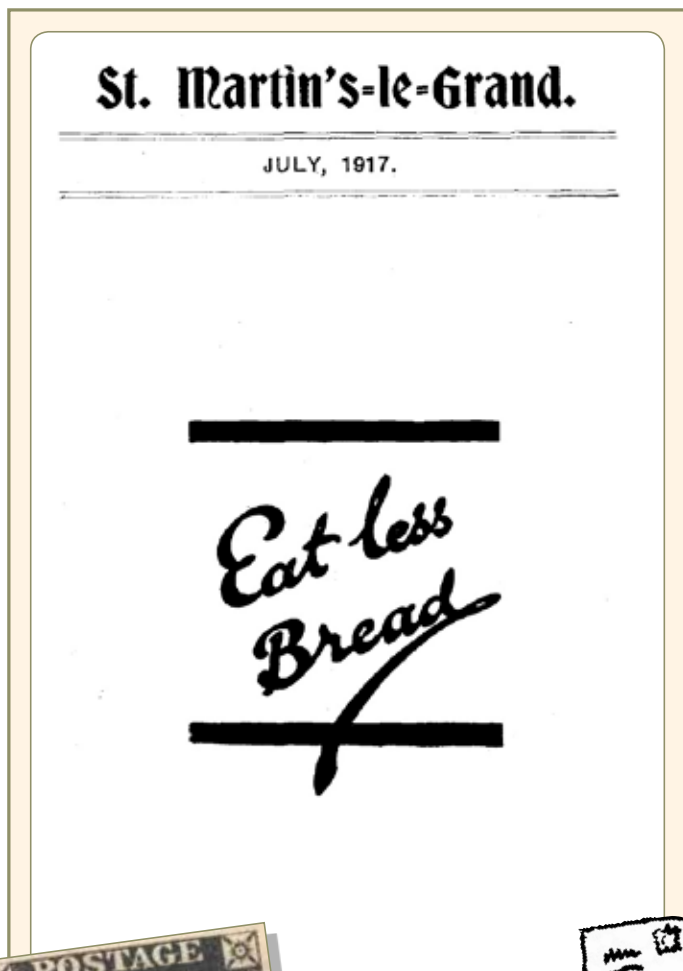
ANOTHER WAR-PROFITEER.
From *Punch*.



Making do

When the war began, the General Post Office offered its entire stock of cloth to the War Office to make army uniforms. The result was all postmen and messenger boys had to make their uniform last for an extra year. It also caused offence by asking for the return of uniforms of men who had left to fight.

'It can only be characterised as brutal and callous, for in several cases wives collapsed on being asked to return the uniform, the dominant thought being that they would not be worn again'
J. Homewood, Catwood Sorting Office employee, 1914



Eat less

In 1917, the General Post Office delivered letters throughout Britain, addressed 'To the head of the household' urging everyone to be economic with food.

◀ The cover of St Martin's Le Grand, General Post Office staff magazine, 1917, urging readers to be more frugal



▲ The Penny Black introduced in 1840, was the world's first pre-paid postage stamp

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▲ This stamp, with the head of George V, was introduced in 1918



The price of postage

By 1918, the War Office needed to raise revenue for the war, so the (old) penny rate for postage was raised by half a penny. It was the end of 'the penny post' that had been maintained for 75 years.



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