ROWLAND HILL AND POSTAL REFORM

READY FOR CHANGE

Before 1840, sending a letter was very expensive, partly because the government used postage as a way to raise taxes. The cost was based on the distance a letter travelled and the number of pages it contained. Unlike today, the person who received the letter usually paid for it.

> Before 1840, sending a letter cost 12 times more than a loaf of bread!

An unfair system

Many poor people couldn't afford to receive letters. But MPs and other officials could send and receive a number of letters each day without charge and newspapers could be sent for free. The mixture of paid, unpaid and free items was confusing, and there were additional local charges in other parts of the country. And there were many ways to cheat the system.

ACTIVITY ALERT

Power POINT

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This cartoon by Henry Cole illustrates the confusing charges

Unable to keep in touch

At this time, many people in England were unable to read or write because until 1870 there was no law requiring children to go to school. This was a serious problem because Britain was becoming a major industrialised nation and many people were moving from the countryside to towns and cities to work in factories and mills. It was difficult for families living far apart to communicate with each other, since postage used up a big part of the weekly wage.

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Rowland Hill (1795-1879)

Like many people in Victorian times, Rowland Hill was interested in improving the lives of ordinary people.

In 1837, he wrote a leaflet called Post Office Reform. In it he said that postage should be reduced to one old penny and based on weight not the distance it travelled, and it should be prepaid by the sender.

Rowland thought that if more people could afford to send letters to friends and family, it would greatly improve their lives.

A much loved story

A story tells how Rowland was inspired to improve the postal system when he saw a young woman too poor to pay to receive a letter from her boyfriend.

*P*ortrait of Sir Rowland Hill c.1836

*P*ost Office Reform leaflet

TOP 10 FACTS

Rowland Hill

1 **1795** *Born in Kidderminster, one of six children*

2 **1807** *A student teacher in his father's school in Birmingham*

3 **1827** *Headmaster of Bruce Castle School, in London*

4 **1833 -1839** *Secretary of the South Australian Colonization Commission which established a settlement without convicts (now called Adelaide)*

5 **1835** *Developed a Rotary Printing Press with his brother*

6 **1839** *Appointed to the Treasury to oversee his reforms to the postal system*

7 **1843-46** *Director and later Chairman of the London and Brighton Railway*

8 **1846** *Secretary to the Postmaster General and then Secretary to the Post Office*

9 **1860** *Knighted by Queen Victoria*

10 **1879** *Buried in Westminster Abbey.*

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Opposition to postal reform

There was a lot of support for Rowland's ideas but not everyone agreed with him. At first, the government was worried about the loss of profits. Some people who had the privilege of free postage were reluctant to pay for it.

Luckily most people agree with me

*T*he profile of Queen Victoria was based on a drawing made when she was 15 and later used for this medal.

Sir Francis Freeling (1764-1836), Secretary to the Post Office, was opposed to cheap postage.

'Cheap Postage! What is this men are talking about? Can it be that all my life I have been in error? ... Is it not within the last six months that the present Chancellor of the Exchequer has charged me not to let the revenue go down? What! You, Freeling, brought up and educated as you have been, are you going to lend yourselves to these extravagant schemes? You with your four-horse mail coaches, too!'

A national competition

In 1839, a law was passed to introduce Rowland's changes to the postal system. Later that year, the government announced a competition for people to suggest the best way to show postage had been paid by the sender.

Good ideas

There were 2,600 competition entries including envelopes, seals and adhesive labels. The government was worried about forgery and losing money. James Chalmers of Dundee suggested the idea of labels that could be cancelled to show payment.

The world's first postage stamp

Rowland decided that self-adhesive labels were the best idea. He thought the labels should be 'as beautiful a specimen of fine art as can be obtained'. It was decided that a portrait of Queen Victoria would be the best design.

*T*he label was called the Penny Black stamp. It was the world's first postage stamp

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ACTIVITY 1: MAKE A SEALED LETTER

Overview of the lesson:

This activity is linked to **D&T**, **History** and **Literacy**. It focuses on how letters were sent before the introduction of the Penny Black stamp in 1840. Pupils write a letter in homemade ink, fold and seal a letter.

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*E*arly letters were written on paper, folded and sealed

Before undertaking this activity, pupils are likely to have:

◆ Talked about the postal system pre 1840 (letters usually paid for by recipients; free postage for MPs and officials, cost based on distance letters travelled and number of sheets of paper
◆ Discussed how many people could not read or write (children were not compelled to go to school before the 1870 Education Act)
◆ Discovered how people in England wrote with quills and ink on sheets of paper cut from large pieces, folded and sealed
◆ Thought about how we communicate today (mobile phones, emails, texts, social media).

Extension activities could include:

◆ **D&T:** Looking at other ways to seal a letter/document e.g. by making thumb prints; making paper
◆ **History:** Researching other forms of writing and communication in early/ other cultures (e.g. Egyptian hieroglyphics, Australian 'Dreamtime' paintings, Chinese calligraphy); sending messages by Morse code and pigeon post (see The Postal Museum LAST POST Teacher's Resource www.postalheritage.org.uk/fwwlearning)
◆ **Geography:** Exploring the use of signs and symbols which convey messages without text in everyday life (road signs, traffic lights, sign posts, badges, uniforms)
◆ **Art & Design:** Looking at text in art (e.g. the work of artist David Shrigley; comics and cartoons)
◆ **Literacy:** Finding out about different types of letters e.g. letters of safe conduct, letters of credit; references to letter-writing in speech e.g. red letter days; debating or writing a letter making the case for or against postal reform; writing letters as Rowland Hill expressing ideas for postal reform or as Francis Freeling opposing postal reform.

Success criteria

By the end of the project:
◆ All pupils will know how letters were sent pre 1840
◆ All will know that the postal system changed after 1840
◆ Some will want to find out more about Rowland Hill.

Key terms

◆ Seal
◆ 1870 Education Act
◆ Quill
◆ Communication

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5

RECIPE FOR INK

You will need:

- A punnet of blackberries (or other berries, but blackberries work best)
- Sieves
- Small bowls/basins
- Something to push berries through the sieve – balls of crumpled foil work well or the back of a teaspoon
- Salt
- White vinegar
- Teaspoons
- Small containers for ink

WRITING A LETTER

You will need:

- A4 sheets of cartridge paper (pre-soaked in weak tea if possible, to make them look old)
- modelling clay or Plasticine

Note: quills were made from goose feathers. The nib, made from the end of the quill, required careful cutting with a sharp 'penknife'. This procedure would be unsuitable for young children so it can be substituted by for writing implements such as:

- Twigs
- Feathers
- Kebab sticks.

MAKING A SEAL

You will need:

- Modelling clay or Plasticine
- Items to press into the clay to make a pattern e.g. buttons or to carve initials with e.g. end of a slim paint brush, a pencil
- Glue to attach seal to letter

Note: you may wish to use sealing wax (available from art shops or online) melted over candles.

RECIPE FOR INK

175 years ago, people made their own ink. They wrote with a quill made from a goose feather and used a 'penknife' to cut the nib.

To do:
1 Put a sieve over a bowl
2 Use a ball of crumpled foil to push a few berries through the sieve
3 Add half a teaspoon of salt and half a teaspoon of vinegar to the juice and stir.
4 Pour into a container. This is your ink.

WRITING WITH HOMEMADE INK

Now make your own tool to write with. Using your homemade ink write a letter on paper with as many different tools as you can find.

Try:
1 A twig
2 A feather
3 A kebab skewer

Dear Elizabeth

FOLDING YOUR LETTER

Before the introduction of the Penny Black stamp, people folded letters and sealed them. If the seal was broken they knew someone had read it!

To do:
1 Fold your letter so that no one can see what you have written
2 Write your address on the front and include the words POSTE HASTE (French for 'as fast a possible')
**3** Then seal it with your special seal.

Miss E Jones
The Red House
The Hill
POSTE HASTE
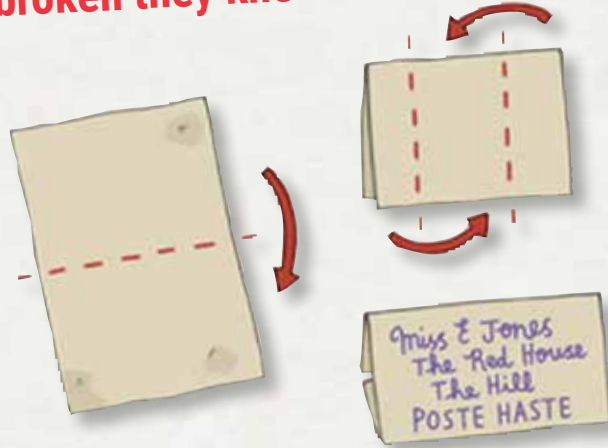
MAKE A SEAL

People have used seals since earliest times.

To do:
1 Make a seal by pulling off a small piece of modelling clay or Plasticine
2 Roll it into a ball and press it flat (but not too flat)
3 Press a button into the clay to make a pattern
4 When it has hardened glue it to your letter so that the letter can't be opened unless the seal is broken.
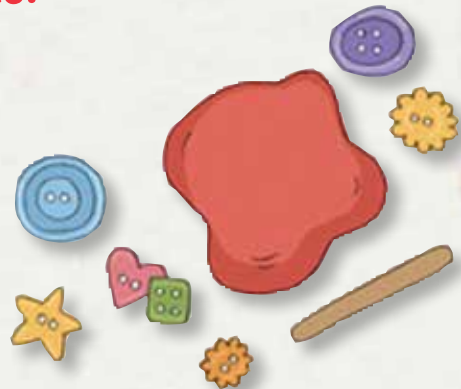
©The Illustrated London News v.8b (1851.6.21) Reprint (1997)

FOLDING MACHINE.

Did you know?

…that when the cost of sending a letter no longer depended on how many sheets of paper it contained, people wrote longer letters. Envelopes to contain all the pages became very popular.

Rowland Hill's brother Edwin was one of the inventors of a machine to fold envelopes

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ACTIVITY 2: CROSS-WRITTEN LETTERS

Overview of the lesson:

This activity focuses on **Literacy** and looks at cross-written letters.

Some people were too poor to receive a letter and returned it unopened. Others cut down on the number of sheets (additional pages cost more) by using every available space: this is called 'cross-writing'. Some developed codes to write on the front of the letter so that the recipient could find out important news without having to pay for it.

*T*his is a detail from a cross-written letter written in 1824

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Before undertaking this activity, pupils are likely to have:

◆ Looked at a cross-written letter and tried to read it
◆ Discussed the purpose of cross-writing
◆ Thought about the advantages and disadvantages of a cross-written letter.

Extension activities could include:

◆ **History, Literacy:** Researching other forms of writing and communication in early/other cultures (e.g. Egyptian hieroglyphics, Australian 'Dreamtime' paintings, Chinese calligraphy)
◆ **D&T:** Looking at and devising codes to conceal messages (see The Postal Museum LAST POST Teachers' Resource www.postalmuseum.org)
◆ **Literacy:** Looking at the transcript of cross-written letter (page 9) and discussing how language has changed since Victorian times; rewriting the letter for a modern reader.

To do:

You will need: photocopies of a cross-written letter, paper, pens.

Success criteria

By the end of the project:
◆ All pupils will be familiar with the purpose and nature of cross-written letters
◆ Some pupils will want to investigate codes further.

Key terms

◆ Cross-written
◆ Code

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9

10

Mount Annan, 14th July 1827

My Dear Anne

I had the pleasure of receiving your long letter yesterday and now take up my pen to answer it. I am sorry that we have so little chance of meeting you but I think you many still cast up at Buxton. We cannot go round by Chester as Papa has promised to pay a visit at Claremont.

Later in the letter, the writer continues:

Does Chester answer your expectations? I suppose you have walked around the City Walls. I mentioned to Tina that you would like to hear from them when they are in Ireland. Poor Herbert Scott died last week — he has had a long illness — his friends are in great distress. Did you see the Brooks at Southampton? I hear they are there just now. As I have several letters to write I think I must bring this to a conclusion.

Papa and Mama write with me an affectionate dear regards to Mrs Robertson and best compliments to your aunt and with love to yourself.

Believe me, my dear Anne,

your affect. friend,

Leonora

Before 1840, it was very expensive to send a letter. The more sheets of paper it contained, the more it cost. So people used every inch of space by cross-writing.
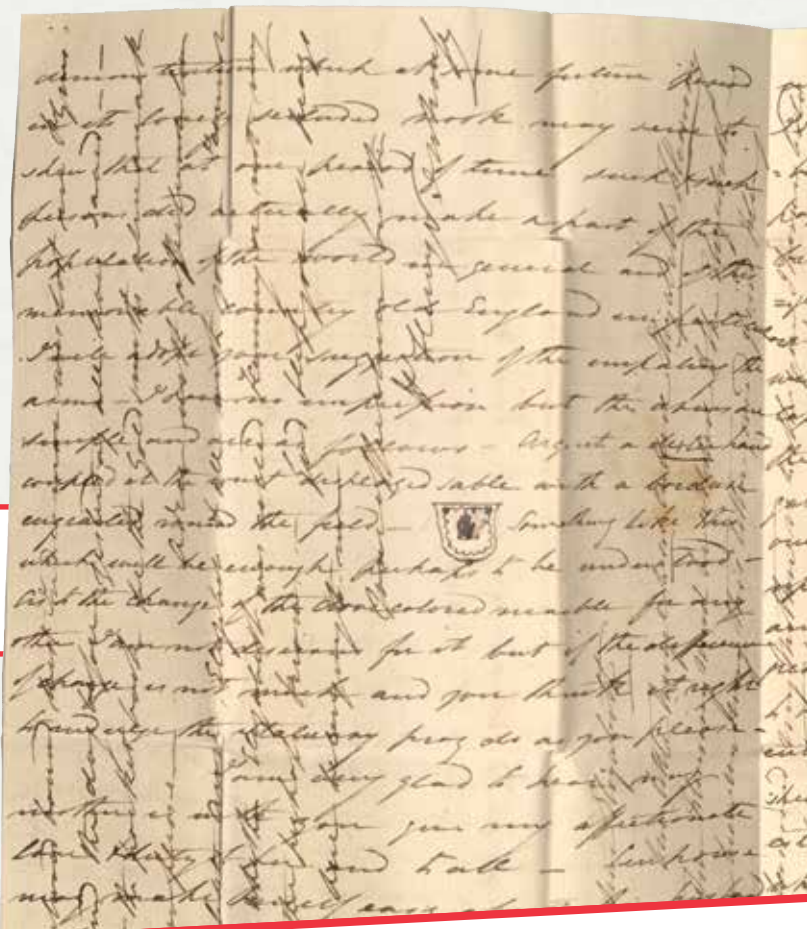
Look carefully at the cross-written letter. Your task is to write a cross-written letter.

Things to think about:
◆ Are you rich or poor?
◆ Where do you live?
◆ What will you write about?
Ideas could include your mum/dad/brother/sister has gone away to work in another town, or a trip to the seaside.

*T*his letter was written in 1824.

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Evaluate
◆ Can your partner read it?
....

◆ Can you think of a better way to save space?
....

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