

The Postal Museum

Archive Collections Access Policy



1. Definition of community/aims for access

As the leading expert on postal heritage and its impact on society, we showcase stories and collections in an engaging, interactive, educational, accessible and fun way. We deliver this in a range of ways; through our exhibitions, Mail Rail, learning programmes, social media, our website and through our staff. Our collections and stories resonate with everyone. We have all experienced the power of communication; enabled and inspired by the postal service, its ideas and inventions (from The Postal Museum's wider Access Policy).

The Postal Museum's archive team will endeavour to engage with as wide a community as possible. It currently serves a disparate and diverse community ranging from local historians to international academics. Here is a breakdown of some of our user communities:

- The workforce of the postal businesses and their relatives. In the main, this community engages with The Postal Museum as family historians, using records in The Royal Mail Archive to track down information about themselves or their ancestors;
- Specialists interested in an aspect of postal history as a leisure pursuit. This could be stamp collectors/philatelists, letter box enthusiasts or those interested in postal vehicles over the years;
- Those with an academic interest in the contents of the archive, whether studying a subject that the Archive illustrates in detail (airmail, uniforms), one where the Royal Mail Archive provides a useful case study (the development of public relations, the employment of women) or one where the large quantity of data can contribute to a study (average age of retirement, causes of time off work, etc.);
- Creatives including those interested in the history of design who study examples from the stamp, poster collections, etc.;
- Those (architects, structural engineers) who require knowledge of Post Office historical infrastructure to inform current projects;
- Media, including news outlets for fact checking and period dramas seeking historical accuracy.

We will also encourage engagement with our core stakeholders, the two current businesses Royal Mail Group and Post Office Ltd. There are very good reasons for them to value their history and Archive and they have used material in it and stories from it when promoting new products or making their workforce aware of the long history of their organisations (e.g. the Royal Mail 500 campaign in 2016). These companies are aware of their responsibilities as owners of the Archive which is why they have agreed to fund its storage and management until 2040. Other important

stakeholders are The National Archives and the wider Postal Museum (including its volunteers) which houses the Archive and employs the people who look after it.

Access to and outreach for the archive collections and services will be developed both through wider Postal Museum audience planning work and more specific work on understanding and analysing the needs of our archive community.

2. Customer care

The Postal Museum (including its archive team) is dedicated to maximising access and ensuring that everyone can benefit from this offer regardless of age, gender, faith, sexual orientation, cultural or social background and ability. This is evidenced in the Museum Access Policy which has been signed off by our Board of Trustees.

In our Discovery Room we endeavour to reach high standards of customer care (aiming to achieve an 85% positive experience of using the room), greeting visitors in a friendly, polite and respectful manner and offering to assist them with their research should they require it. We have a target to answer written and telephone enquiries about the Archive within ten working days, acknowledging (and very often answering) within 48 hours.

We have visitor feedback forms always available and prominently displayed in the Discovery Room and will take the comments given in them seriously and act on them as appropriate.

3. Relevant legislation and ethical codes in relation to access

The key piece of legislation affecting access to the vast majority of The Postal Museum's archive collections (The Royal Mail Archive) is the Freedom of Information Act (Fol) which superseded the access provisions of the Public Records Acts 1958 and 1967. Fol and subject access requests under the Data Protection Act will be directed in the first instance to Royal Mail/ POL.

The Postal Museum will continue to identify legislation through following professional information exchange means and engaging with those bodies who comment on and disseminate new and amendments to legislation – The National Archives, the Archives and Records Association, the Information Commissioner's Office and the Intellectual Property Office among others – via communication, training courses, listservs, etc. As a designated Place of Deposit responsible for holding public record material The Postal Museum will liaise closely with colleagues at The National Archives. As part of our Archive Services Agreement with Royal Mail and Post Office Ltd we meet with those responsible for managing their records four times a year and will discuss access legislation with them.

All staff are committed to complying with the Archives and Records Association Code of Ethics, approved 9 May 2018.

4. Restrictions and responsibilities surrounding the use of archives

The vast majority of archive material is open to all researchers. Any restrictions on access to material in the Archive will be:

- standard Public Record closure under the 20-year rule transition timetable (records eventually being opened when they are 20 years old; the rule is being introduced over the course of ten years i.e. two years' worth of records will fall under the '20-year rule' each year until the rule become business as usual. Therefore, in 2018, for example, records from 1992 and 1993 have been released);
- extended closure for Freedom of Information personal information exemptions or other agreed extended closure reasons with the reasoning being communicated on the online catalogue - if we notice personal data within a file then we will consider the best way of making this material available without compromising data protection legislation (redaction, closing specific documents or in rare cases the whole file); we will follow best practice including submitting potential closures to the Advisory Council on National Records and Archives for approval;
- in circumstances where material is in such poor physical condition as to restrict access. In these circumstances we will endeavour still to provide some kind of access – via a surrogate copy or in the presence of a conservator;
- where the material is completely uncatalogued (while it may not always be possible we will still do our best to provide access in many circumstances);
- where material is in a format that we cannot enable access to (e.g. audio-visual/digital media; for this reason we have transferred Royal Mail Archive moving image material to the British Film Institute where it can be properly housed and viewed).

We will engage with our community through a number of means, via changes and explanations on our online catalogue indicating how long material in the Archive might be closed for or blogs discussing what material has become open at the start of a year.

Researchers can request privileged access for material that is closed under the 20-year rule transition timetable. For this they need to put in a request to see specific files to Royal Mail or Post Office Ltd.

More detailed guidance on the specifics of requesting access to closed material can be found in a separate set of guidelines for Access to Records (attached as appendix).

Any new users of The Royal Mail Archive are required to watch a short video on handling archives to introduce or remind them of appropriate care when using

archive material. This is also emphasised in our public access research area, the Discovery Room, where a set of rules is displayed prominently.

The Postal Museum allows users to make copies of the records using their own equipment (provided they do not use flash photography or risk damage to the material) or they can request the Museum makes copies at a charge. In doing so they will be required to follow relevant copyright legislation.

5. Means of access

Discovery Room

We will provide physical access to the material in The Royal Archive in an open, friendly and straight forward manner. While there is a ticket charge for visiting the galleries of The Postal Museum and riding on Mail Rail, the Discovery Room, where people can research and consult The Royal Mail Archive, is free for all to use.

Access to the Discovery Room is step free (using a lift) and wheelchair users can use any desk in the room. All staff have received Disability Awareness Training.

The Discovery Room is designed to enable two levels of access depending on the needs of our varied users. The open access space allows drop-in access to explore secondary sources such as our reference library, surrogates of our most frequently used/ visually appealing collections, and online research tools (many of our most popular family history resources are available in these ways). This is a welcoming, barrier free space intended to encourage those less familiar with visiting archives to explore and discover. The more secure part of the room enables a level of security appropriate for research using unique, irreplaceable, original archival material.

To fulfil The Postal Museum's intention to provide user friendly and convenient access, the Discovery Room is open every Tuesday to Saturday, 10-5pm (excluding bank holidays).

In the Discovery Room visitors can:

- Browse our reference library;
- View microfilm copies of archival material;
- Look at staff magazines, Post Office Circulars, photograph and poster albums;
- Search our catalogue and other digital resources (currently on three terminals);
- Explore their family history using our records and Ancestry online (digitised appointment books);
- View high quality digital copies of photographs and a stamp collection from our collections using a touch table which enables visitors to focus in on the detail in this material;
- Attend talks and look at displays of material from The Postal Museum's collections;

- Study original material from The Royal Mail Archive in the Archive Reading Room.

New users of original material will be required to fill in a User Card registration form and provide two forms of identification (one with their signature and one with their address) on their first visit.

To look at original material on a Saturday requires an appointment due to the limited number of archive team staff on site that day. We also encourage all those intending to look at original material to book a desk in case we are particularly busy that day or if the material they want to look at will take up more than one desk (plans, maps, etc.).

We will also host regular tours of the Archive for Museum visitors and various groups.

Remote enquiry/research service/reprographics

We will also engage with our user communities remotely, answering many kinds of external enquiries. We will inform the enquirer of the information we hold that may answer, or help to answer, their enquiry and how they can access this information but we will generally not carry out detailed research. The exception is a paid Family History Research Service which we can undertake. Users can also request remote copying of archive material.

Website/online catalogue

The Archive and its online catalogue have detailed sections dedicated to them on The Postal Museum's website.

We have long had a very healthy percentage of catalogue entries for The Royal Mail Archive accessible on our online catalogue and we will continue to add material and tags designed to assist its searchability. As well as information on the material held by The Postal Museum, the catalogue also includes digitised copies of many photographs, posters, maps, etc.

Those who want to access original material can do a certain amount pre-visit using the Reader Order Module function of our online catalogue. This allows them to mark records as favourites, create wish-lists of potentially useful records and order up to six items in advance of their visit, meaning that these are ready for them when they arrive at the Discovery Room.

We will keep The Postal Museum's directory entry in The National Archives' Discovery catalogue (discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk) up to date and provide TNA with other summaries (known as series level descriptions) about the collections within our Archive.

Publications/guides

As well as the information on the website The Postal Museum will continue to make available (in the Discovery Room) hard copy guides such as an overview of the

Archive, conducting family history research, using our microfilm records, as well as selected hard copy catalogue listings.

6. Forms of access to archives

In addition to access via the Discovery Room, the main means by which we provide access to the Archive, we will also contribute to the Museum's wider outreach activities.

Wider outreach will include but is not limited to publications of research, outreach to groups (both on site and externally, including with schools and various communities), promotion on The Postal Museum's blog and via its social media channels, appearances in exhibitions internally and externally (on occasion, and subject to fulfilment of loan conditions, wider access is facilitated by exhibition loans to other institutions) and support for institutional fundraising.

7. Implementation and Review

This policy (approved by the Archive Advisory Board in October 2018) will be communicated to The Postal Museum staff, and to external agencies and others with an interest on demand. It will be reviewed every two years.

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