The Postal Museum Large-print Guide

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Introduction

Family Trail Pick-up Point

Can you help The Jolly Postman answer peculiar postie puzzles?

See if you can spot the stamps as his bicycle whizzes through the museum.

For all ages, most suitable for families with younger posties-in-training (ages 3-7)

Pick up a pencil and choose a trail

Show your completed trail to our Visitor Hosts at the Welcome Desk to receive your reward!

No food or drink in the exhibitions. Thank you.

The Postal Museum audio guide stop 1

What Does the Postal Service Mean to you Today?

Happy birthday! I love you. Having a great time! Sorry for your sad news.

For hundreds of years, the postal service has kept people in touch, allowing friendships to grow, businesses to flourish and empires to expand and evolve. Now, we often use digital networks to stay connected – but a parcel or letter can still deliver a smile.

Image credits:

Top: Image Peter Dazeley. Getty Images.

Middle: Images with kind permission of Home and Royal Mail.

Bottom: Image Anatolii Babii. Alamy Stock Photo.

The Jolly Postman Trail:

Look out for me!

Join the Jolly Postman as he finds out all about how people’s letters help them stay in touch.

Object plinth - Queen Victoria ‘London Ornate’ Pillar Box, 1857-59

Beautiful and useful – this ornate early pillar box, with festoons of flowers and lions’ heads, was designed by the leading artist Richard Redgrave.

OB1994.27

Please do not touch.

Help protect our objects

Please do not eat or drink in the gallery.

Crumbs and spillages can attract pests that can damage the collection.

Help us preserve these objects for future generations to enjoy too.

Look out for these symbols around the gallery.

Please do not touch.

Okay to touch.

What Did the Postal Service Mean in the Past?

Send help. Your visa is enclosed. We'd like to offer you the job. It's twins!

Imagine a world with no cables, satellites or wifi. How would you send a vital message? Explore the ways the postal service revolutionised communication across Britain and the world, bringing everyone within reach through a stamp or phone call.

Image credit (portrait of Henry VIII):

Zone 1 - The ‘Royal’ Mail

The postal system began five hundred years ago, when life could be very unfair.

Royalty and the rich lived in a first-class world, sending letters as far as Italy, Germany and France to run their estates.

Most ordinary people couldn’t afford to travel, or even to send a letter.

Image credit: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Who first delivered the post in Britain?

Carrying The King’s mail

Which king first delivered the post in Britain?

In the early days of the post, it only served one person.

Henry VIII founded a mail system five hundred years ago, to help keep a closer eye on his kingdom. Each town had to have three horses available for transporting royal letters, sending out orders and bringing back news. The stables keeping the horses were known as posts, and the King appointed a Master of the Posts to run the system.

The new mail service had gained the name we still use today – the post.

Image captions:

Top left: The post was valuable, and post-boys risked life and limb to deliver it.

Bottom left: Post-boys faced severe punishment for delaying the post, or wasting time by ‘loitering’.

The Postal Museum audio guide stop 2

Post-boy

“The Post-boy bringing the western mail to town was stopp’d on Bagshot Heath by two highwaymen, who carried off the mail and two horses; one the boy rode on, and the other he drove;

They tied him neck and heels, in which posture he remained four hours before he was released.”

The Monthly Chronicle, Friday 4 April 1740

Imagine you’re a 14-year-old post delivery boy.

You carry mail for miles on the back of a tired horse.

You may be armed to protect yourself against robbers, but it’s no defence against the weather.

Your pay is pitiful, so you make extra money by delivering private letters. Later, this becomes part of your official job, and you blow a post horn to let people know you’re coming.

Business is booming as more people are starting to read and write – but not you.

Your gruesome warning not to steal is a hanged man drawn on the letters.

The Jolly Postman Trail:

This piece of post is over 300 years old!

Have you kept any letters or cards since you were little?

Object case 1 – Early Mail (left)

1: Early example of mail, 12 September 1636

Letter sent through the post concerning the counterpart of a legal property deed. In this period of early modern English, spelling was not standardised and handwriting and the literary style was elaborate. See if you can read the text.

DB08(L)/02

Object case 2 – Early Mail (right)

1: Letter from London to Paris, 6 April 1636

This was sent in the second year that the postal service was open to the public. The high rate marking shows it was very costly to post.

PH(L)10/17

2: Letter with Bishop Mark ‘AV/9’ struck in black, 9 August 1674

The world’s first postmark showed the day and month of posting. The Postmaster General Henry Bishop introduced it in 1661, in order to stop delays in delivering letters.

PH141/32

3: Letter to Bartholomew Corsini, 1586

Before the Royal Mail opened to the public, businessmen and merchants had private postal services. This letter arrived in London from Cologne but nothing indicates how long the journey took.

PH34/23a

4: Dockwra Penny Post letter, 1681
William Dockwra set up the first Penny Post in London in 1680. The government closed it down as illegal - then reopened it almost immediately as part of their own service.
PHL(3)/07 Facsimile

5: Pistol, 1834-1843
The Post Office was reluctant to give weapons to young post-boys, but provided older messengers with pistols for guarding valuable mail carried at night on risky roads.
2009-0060/01

6: Treasury Letters, 1600s
As a Government department the Post Office had to request authority from the Treasury to spend money. This volume contains letters between the Post Office and the Treasury for expenditure.
POST 1

Early Organisation

Even for a king, a personal postal system was expensive. In 1635 Charles I appointed Thomas Witherings to expand the postal service to carry private mail for a fee.

But letters didn’t always remain private. Witherings set up the first General Post Office in London, officially to speed delivery. In fact, staff there spied on the mail for the King.

By 1670, six national post roads carried mail in and out of London. Within the City, merchants used a private Penny Post system set up in 1680, which would hand deliver letters to recipients at home, at work, or in the coffee house.

Image captions:

Top: In 1635, King Charles I opened the postal system up to paying customers.

Bottom left: Six main post roads carried the mail. Letters reached London from Edinburgh in five days.

Bottom right: Merchants loved the convenient Penny Post service in London, originally a private enterprise. Image with kind permission of Alan Holyoake.

Object case 3 – Mail Coaches

1: ‘The Mail Coach’, c.1850

A train carrying passengers sits outside a station building while a ‘South London Royal Mail’ coach with a mail guard unloads mail. Mail coaches ran on a strict schedule, stopping only to change horses and deliver mail.

2009-0071

2: Mail Coach Guard Timepiece, Around 1820

In the mail coach era, time was not standardised across the country. To accurately record journey times every guard carried a clock set to London time. Any unexpected additional minutes spent on a journey had to be explained.

2009-0060/14

3: Letter to Scotland with additional charge, 1836

From 1813 all letters in Scotland carried by mail coaches through a toll had an additional halfpenny charge.

PH61/7b

4: Palmer Mail Coach Half Pennies, 1790-1797

You could spend coins like these in a coaching inn. They were minted by a group of Bath businessmen, eager to recognise John Palmer’s role in establishing the mail coaches.

2009-0500/4 and 2016-0001

5: Blunderbuss, 1788-1816

Loaded with shot made by the guard, the blunderbuss was specially designed to make it easier to load and shoot on a moving coach.

OB1995.344

6: Post Horn, 1800s

The mail coach had priority over all other road users. The post horn’s blast warned others to move out of the way.

OB1996.180

7: Mail Guard Frockcoat, 1861-1875

Exposed to all weathers, climbing on and off the coach, and heaving leather mail bags about, mail guards needed their uniforms replacing annually.

2010-0475

8: Flintlock Pistols, around 1805

“The person who conveys the mail should be equal to the protection of it.”

Mail coach guards carried weapons to protect the post. However, stories suggest that guards more often used their weapons against small animals, boosting their personal income through private sales.

OB1994.105 and OB1995.73

Moses Nobbs, Mail Coach Guard

Moses Nobbs worked for the Post Office for 55 years, joining as a mail coach guard in June 1836. His top hat and braided coat would have been familiar to the earliest guards of the 1790s.

Guards like Moses would travel up to 150 miles at a time on the coach, perched high on a rear seat called the dicky. With their smart uniforms and transport they were part of a faster new postal system.

Although guns were intended to protect the mail, shocking stories spread of guards shooting local dogs or sheep – or even escaped prisoners during England’s wars with France.

Connecting Britain

The new mail coach network had huge benefits. Robberies fell, and reliability improved. Timetables cleverly coordinated the coaches with the cross-post deliveries to destinations off the main post roads.

By the early 1800s, new road-building techniques made mail delivery even swifter.

The postal system helped businesses to grow, and the industrial revolution to spread. Daily newspapers brought word from the wider world, and for the first time, you could guarantee a reply to a letter by return of post.

The postal service had connected Britain’s towns and cities in an entirely new way.

Image caption:

Coaches kept to a fixed schedule and the guard recorded the timing of every stop along the way.

Object case 4 – Mail Coaches (continued)

1: Notice listing Royal Mail Coaches that leave a coaching inn each evening, Late 19th century

‘The Swan with Two Necks’ was a coaching inn during the 19th century. Coaching Inns provided respite for the horses and food and a rest for passengers and staff on long journeys.

2005-0081/4

2: Illustrated Timetable, 19th century

An illustrated timetable displayed at the Plough Hotel Coach Office in Cheltenham for the Cheltenham to Southampton mail coach route. Guests at the hotel who wished to travel by mail coach could use the timetable to plan their journey.

OB1995.436

3: Coaching Inn Tokens, 1790-1797

Coaching inns provided a place for travellers to eat, drink, and rest, as well as stables for horses. Due to currency shortages and to encourage spending, popular inns issued their own half pennies. These two coins are from London inns. Can you work out their names?

2009-0500/1 and 2009-0500/3

Image captions:

Top left: Mail coaches carried paying passengers with the mail, which helped spread new ideas and inventions.

Top right: Thomas Hasker organised mail coach operations until 1817, improving the quality of horses and roads.

Bottom left: Speed was vital – sometimes the Postmaster would simply pass the post out of the window to the moving mail coach so it didn’t have to stop.

Bottom right: The mail coach became a popular subject for songs, such as this one from 1821.

Object plinth - Mail coach, around 1800

Can you spot the high seat for the guard – and the lockable mail box at his feet? Swift-moving mail coaches were designed especially for the Post Office.

2006-0246

Supported by NFSP (The National Federation of Subpostmasters)

Please do not touch.

“You remember you are to go down with the coach to Weymouth, and come up with the last Tuesday afternoon. Take care that they do not drive fast, make long stops or get drunk. I have told you this all before.”

Instructions to a guard, given in 1796.

The Postal Museum audio guide stop 3

Speeding up the Service

Torrents of letters flowed along the post roads in the 1700s. But there were two problems – speed and security.

Post-boys who carried the mail were slow and often unreliable. Outside in all weathers, they were also an easy target for highwaymen, despite the threat of execution for thieves.

Theatre owner John Palmer regularly travelled overnight to London by stagecoach from Bath. He couldn’t believe that it took two days to carry mail the same distance.

At Palmer’s suggestion in 1784, smart new mail coaches replaced post-boys along key routes. This idea transformed mail delivery.

Image captions:

Top left: In wet and muddy conditions, passengers often had to get out and push the mail coach.

Top right: John Palmer’s proposals saw brightly-painted Royal Mail coaches carrying mail throughout the day and night.

Bottom left: Threat of the death penalty for mail theft from 1767 did not always deter highwaymen.

Bottom right: Banknotes carry serial numbers on both ends because people once sent halves separately through the post to foil thieves.

Interactive exhibit - Mail Coach Challenge

Guards needed!

Are you ready to battle through danger and delays to deliver the mail on time?

Interactive exhibit - Telling tails

How did a Lioness delay the post?

Here’s a true traveller’s tale people loved to tell.

On 20th October 1816, A Royal Mail coach nicknamed Quicksilver was on its way from Exeter to London. As night fell, an escaped lioness from a travelling zoo was on the prowl.

Touch this button to hear the different tunes the Guard would play on the post horn.

Reach inside to discover what’s hiding under the granary building.

Object wall - paintings

(On wall behind telling tails)

Top: ‘Bath Mail Coach, Old Coaching Lines’

John Charles Maggs, 19th century

Mail coaches were expected to carry mail and passengers whatever the weather. The mail coach guard, driver and passengers carried on through all conditions, including heavy snow.

OB2001.41

Bottom: ‘General Post Office, Early Morning’

S. J. E. Jones, 19th century

The General Post Office headquarters in London bustled with activity in the early morning. Mail coaches departed from here, carrying mail and passengers around the country.

2004-0159

Would you die to save the mail?

Fighting pirates

“You must run where you can.

You must fight when you can no longer run,

And when you can fight no more

You must sink the mail.”

These were the orders given to packets, the sailing ships that carried the mail between Britain’s global outposts. Their precious cargoes of military orders and battle plans put them at constant risk of attack from pirates and enemy nations.

Packets were attacked so often that there was a generous compensation scheme for death or injury - £8 for a sailor’s arm or leg, £4 for an eye. Everyone feared death or capture. But they still defended the mail.

Image caption:

The captain of the packet ship ‘Windsor Castle’ heroically boards the French vessel ‘Jeune Richard’ which had repeatedly attacked them.

Against the odds, the small crew fought off the privateers and defended the mail.

Image caption inside envelope:

As well as mail, Packet Ships carried gold and silver bullion, private goods and passengers.

The Jolly Postman Trail (inside envelope):

Gold, jewels… and mail?

Pirates stole letters from ships because they might have precious national secrets inside.

Interactive exhibit – Packet Ships

The captains and crew of the Post Office packet ships risked life and limb to carry mail overseas. Peek in the portholes below to see three famous scenes from packet ship history…

Map key

Orange: ‘Antelope’. Falmouth, England to Cuba.

Blue: ‘Lady Hobart’. Halifax, Novia Scotia to Falmouth, England.

White: ‘Windsor Castle’. Falmouth, England to just off the coast of Barbados.

Image caption:

Warships attacked the ‘Antelope’ off Cuba in 1793. Outgunned, the ship’s captain and senior crew were killed, but eventually the attackers surrendered, and the mail was saved.

Left porthole: The ‘Antelope’

‘Antelope’ and ‘Atlante’ – 1793

On 1 December 1793 the British packet ship ‘Antelope’ fought off an attack by two French vessels off the coast of Cuba. Outnumbered and outgunned the crew of the ‘Antelope’ overcame the odds and even forced the surrender of one of the enemy ships, the ‘Atlante’.

Middle porthole: The ‘Windsor Castle’

‘Windsor Castle’ and ‘Jeune Richard’ – 1807

In 1807, during the Napoleonic Wars, the Post Office packet ‘Windsor Castle’ engaged in a fierce battle with the French privateer ‘Jeune Richard’. Under the command of acting-captain William Rogers the ‘Windsor’ not only defended repeated attacks from the French vessel, but boarded her, overpowered the much larger crew, and forced them below decks – taking the privateer as their prize.

Right porthole: The ‘Lady Hobart’

‘Lady Hobart’ and an iceberg – 1803

On 28 June 1803, in fog off the coast of Novia Scotia, the packet ship ‘Lady Hobart’ hit an ‘island of ice’ at speed and rapidly sank. All those on board, including women passengers and the captain’s wife, took to the smaller boats carried on-board and survived eight days adrift before being picked up by another ship that took them to Newfoundland.

The Postal Museum audio guide stop 4

Object case 5 - SS ‘Great Western’

This oak-hulled paddle steamship was designed by the great Victorian civil engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel (1806 – 1859). It was the first steamship purposely built for Atlantic crossings, carrying cargo, passengers and mail.

Between 1837 and 1839 it was the largest passenger ship in the world at 212 feet long and was built to replace sail power on the Atlantic packet boat service. The ship received the Blue Riband for the fastest transatlantic crossing twice in each direction.

Launched on 19 July 1837 Brunel’s vision was to link London and New York via Bristol. Passengers could travel from London to Bristol on Brunel’s Great Western Railway (GWR) and then onto New York by steamship. The Great Western Steamship Company was founded for this purpose and was made possible by Brunel’s friend Thomas Guppy, a Bristol engineer and Director of GWR.

In 1847 the SS ‘Great Western’ was sold to the recently formed Royal Mail Steam Packet Company having completed 45 round trips across the Atlantic. She went on to operate between Southampton and the West Indies for the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company (later Cunard) before finally being scrapped in 1857.

1: SS ‘Great Western’ oil painting on canvas, c.1843

Painted by Bristol artist Joseph Walter who gained attention for his numerous portrayals of Brunel’s steamships.

2004-0134

2: Stamp Artwork for the 2004 ‘Ocean Liner’ stamp issue, 2004

The format of the design, which features Joseph Walter’s painting of the ‘Great Western’ is typical of how artwork is submitted to the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) for selection.

2004/06/02

3: Sheet of the issued 68p ‘Great Western’ stamp, 2004

Straight from the printing press, these stamps reveal the final stage in the production process, based on Walter’s original painting and the accepted design.

2004/06

4: Letter from Isambard Kingdom Brunel to Engineer Thomas Guppy, December 1839

In this letter Brunel discusses the designs of a steamship: ‘I strongly advise that the paddle for the new vessel [SS ‘Great Britain’] should not be gone on with until the GW [‘Great Western’] has gone a voyage with these paddles at 2ft…’

Courtesy of the Brunel Institute – a collaboration of the SS Great Britain Trust and the University of Bristol (facsimile).

5: Photograph of Brunel by Robert Howlett, 1857

Iconic image of Brunel with his stovepipe hat, cigar and muddy trousers stood by the giant launching chains of his later steamship, the SS ‘Great Eastern’ (1859 – 1889).

Courtesy of the Brunel Institute – a collaboration of the SS Great Britain Trust and the University of Bristol.

6: Entire Letter carried on the ‘Great Western’ steamship, 5 July 1839

Letter sent to Boston via New York aboard the ‘Great Western’, with New York and London ship letter marks.

FS03/11b

7: Tariff of Passage, Freight and Postage notice, 10 April 1839

For the Transatlantic Steam Ship Company’s ships, from New York to Liverpool.

FS03/09

8: Entire Letter carried on the ‘Great Western’ steamship, 1 July 1840

Letter sent to London via Bristol on the ‘Great Western’, featuring a Bristol Ship Letter mark.

STAFF/03/34b

9: The ‘Great Western’

Line engraving depicting the ‘Great Western’s return from New York. By cutting the travel time across the Atlantic to just 15 days, this ship helped to revolutionise transatlantic travel forever.

FS03/11a