The Postal Museum Large Print Guide

Zone 2 - Mail for everyone

Contents

Mail for everyone

When Victoria became Queen in 1837, the whole country was changing.

From trains to telegrams, new inventions were making it easier to travel and communicate.

Within a few decades the postal system we recognise today was created, with stamps, pillar boxes, parcel post and mail trains.

Supported by Garfield Weston Foundation

Unfair and inefficient

Mail was free for Members of Parliament in the 1830s.

For most others, the post was expensive and confusing. Costs depended on the number of pages sent, and the distance they travelled. Several taxes and charges also applied.

So, some people would write cross-ways several times on the same page – harder to read, but cheaper to send.

And because you paid to receive a letter rather than send it, the writer might hide a message on the cover. You could see the message, then hand the letter back without paying. These tricks cost the Post Office a lot of money.

Image caption:

Ordinary people’s post could cost the equivalent of twelve loaves of bread. Parliamentary post travelled free.

Henry Cole cartoon, appeared in the Post Circular magazine, 1839.

Object case 1 – postal reform

1: Cross Written Letter, 31 October 1837

Before 1840, the cost of sending a letter was complicated and expensive, partly based on how many sheets of paper were used. To get round this, frugal letter writers wrote over the same sheet of paper in several directions. Can you read the message?

2017-0042

2: Letter Carrier with dog, Silhouette, early 19th century

This letter carrier's tall hat can be clearly seen in this silhouette. The uniform was introduced partly to deter staff from loitering in ale houses.

2004-0182

3: Letter sent free, 24 August 1835

Stamped with the red Free mark, this letter sent to Edward Herbert would have been carried free of charge. This special treatment for official mail was ended by Rowland Hill's postal reforms.

PH151/9a

4: Treasury Competition Entry, 19 September 1839

The Treasury received 2,600 competition entries offering ideas for improving the postal service. This entry by Mr R. Prosser proposed to have two labels, so one could be given to the sender as a form of receipt.

PH(L)4/14

5: Letter with uniform 4d marking, 18 December 1839

Uniform postage cost four pence when introduced on 5 December 1839, but was soon reduced to a penny. This letter was sent from Glasgow to Edinburgh, with a handstruck ‘4’ indicating that the postage rate has been paid.

PH(L)4/27b

6: Letter with Uniform Penny Postage, 28 January 1840

The first day of Uniform Penny Postage was on 10 January 1840. This first day cover shows a handstruck 1d in red ink, indicating that the postage rate has been paid.

PH(L)04/40a

Object wall – campaign posters

Posters issued by the Mercantile Committee campaigning for postal reform, 1839

Merchants demanded cheaper postal rates – and wrote to Parliament with petitions. These posters advertise meetings to promote the campaign.

MP/01, MP/03 and MP/04

The world’s first stamp

“January 10, 1840:

Penny Postage extended to the whole kingdom this day!”

Rowland Hill, writing in his diary.

The Post Office launched the Penny Black stamp in 1840. Suddenly mail was cheap and easy to send.

You now paid a penny to send a letter weighing up to half an ounce (just over 14g) anywhere in the country. For heavier letters, there was a stamp that became known as the Twopenny Blue.

There was no more free postage for officials – even Queen Victoria used stamps, which featured her portrait.

Penny postage was a huge success. Everyone started sending letters and even had letter boxes installed in their front doors.

Image caption:

Printers produced the first Penny Black on 11 April 1840, and soon printed 600,000 daily.

Image caption inside envelope:

A very young Queen Victoria appeared on the Penny Black, and on stamps throughout her reign.

Penny Black and the Penny Black Stamp Image are registered trade marks of Royal Mail Group Ltd.

The Jolly Postman Trail: The World's First Stamp

Even Queen Victoria used the Penny Black stamp. She said she wanted the post to help everyone in the community.

Object case 2 – the Penny Black and early stamps

1: First Penny Black Registration Sheet, 31 July 1840

This is one of the few remaining sheets of the famous Penny Black stamp, printed by Perkins Bacon. Each row and column had a different letter in the corner to help prevent forgery. These were punched in by hand.

QV/VR/05/10

2: Medal, William Wyon, 1838

Does this image of Queen Victoria look familiar? It was this silver medal, commemorating the Queen's visit to the City of London, that inspired the Penny Black stamp portrait.

R. M. Phillips Collection – 2016-0003

3: ‘Old Original’ master die, Charles and Frederick Heath, March 1840

From this die, the printing plates for all Penny Black and many later Penny Red stamps were created. Corner letters were punched into the plates by hand.

OB1998.391

4: Penny Red and Twopenny Blue proof Stamps, 1840-1845

The Penny Red replaced the Penny Black. The black cancellation mark used at the time was not very visible on the black stamp and could easily be removed. The change to a red stamp in 1841 solved this problem. The Twopenny Blue was used for heavier letters of more than one ounce (14g).

Phillips XIV/17 (1d red)

Phillips XVIII/I (2d blue)

Can you imagine posting your very first letter?

Pop it in the post

Penny postage meant everyone except the very poorest could send letters and cards.

In 1850, a decade after the introduction of the Penny Black, British people sent 347 million letters.

People who lived in Victorian times saw the beginning of the postal service we know today. They could keep in touch with friends, send Christmas greetings and Valentine cards.

Later came postcards which cost only a halfpenny to send. Initially postcards had no pictures – they just saved time for business people who didn't want to open envelopes.

Image captions:

Top left: Letter carriers (later called postmen) were a lifeline to many. However, not everyone trusted them.

Top right: ‘Vinegar Valentines’ carried unkind messages - and before postal reform, recipients paid to receive these insults.

Bottom left: The craze for sending Christmas cards took off in the 1880s and we still send them today.

Bottom right: Valentine cards covered in decorations came in all shapes and sizes – even as colouring books.

Object case 3 - Penning the Perfect Letter

Did you know that Victorians took good manners very seriously?

After the 1840 introduction of the Penny Post, sending mail became more affordable to the lower classes, increasing the number of letters sent. Strict rules instructed people on how to write their letters, from the correct ink colour to the type of paper.

Here we explore these instructions and the equipment used by fashionable Victorians to pen the perfect letter.

“Use good quality writing paper.”

“When in mourning, use paper and envelopes with a black edge.”

“Whatever the contents of a letter, it must be prepaid.”

Poaching animals for their horns to create products like this seal press has led to the near extinction of multiple species. Despite bans on poaching and dealing ivory, illegal trade continues today.

1: First Commercial Christmas Card, 1843

Henry Cole had these cards designed in 1843, to save himself time writing to loved ones during the festive season. Known as the first commercially produced Christmas card, Cole sold any spare ones, starting the global Christmas card tradition.

2003-0476

2: Mourning Stationery and Card, 1800-1900

The black edge on this envelope and card indicates that the sender was mourning the death of a loved one. The border signalled to postal workers that the letter was of high importance, meaning they would take extra care when delivering the mail.

OB1996.513/3, OB1996.468

3: John Templeton Lucas, ‘The Letter Writer’, 1877

This painting is unusual as it portrays a working class woman writing in a domestic setting. Can you see the Penny Red stamp on her envelope?

Painting kindly loaned by York Museums Trust (York Art Gallery). YORAG:141

4: Love Letters, 1845-1847

These letters from Robert Abbot to his ‘beloved’ sweetheart Mary follow typical rules of Victorian letter writing: Robert writes on good quality illustrated writing paper, in neat handwriting and black ink.

OB1995.441/1-2

5: Wonderland Postage Stamp case, 1890

Lewis Carroll created this illustrated stamp booklet to promote his ‘Alice in Wonderland’ book series. The cover features illustrations by the artist John Tenniel. It was also accompanied by a short letter writing manual, written by Carroll himself.

OB1995.416/2-3 and Facsimile

6: Embossed Envelope, around 1870

Addressed to ‘Miss J Boileau’, this envelope has been sent using a Penny Red stamp and sealed with red wax. The envelope has been embossed, creating a raised pattern on the surface.

OB1995.295/3 and Facsimile

7: Ivory and Brass Seal, 1800s

This ivory seal press was used to stick wax on an envelope to keep it closed. The press has been engraved with the owner's initial, 'W', which would imprint into the melted wax, adding a personal touch to any letter.

OB1997.61

8: Stamp Boxes, early 1900s

Decorative postal products became popular with the rise in letter writing. These stamps boxes provided both a fashionable and convenient way to store stamps.

OB1996.367, OB1996.597

9: Metal and Amber Pen Holders, 1880-1920

Before the invention of biros, these pens were dipped in ink repeatedly by letter writers. They were produced in a variety of colours and materials, to suit individual style.

OB1997.53, OB1996.618

10: Wooden writing box, around 1850

This writing box holds everything needed to write the perfect letter. It includes two inkwells, as well as a space to store pens, letter openers, paper and stamps.

OB1997.63

11: Etiquette Guide, 1880-1890

‘Beeton’s Complete Letter Writer’ was a popular writing guide during the Victorian era. This manual contains different letter templates on a wide range of topics, including love, marriage, employment and school.

2024-0235

Could a little piece of paper change the world?

Rowland Hill

Penny postage for all was the brilliant idea of Rowland Hill, a teacher and inventor. In 1837 he proposed a fixed, prepaid charge for sending a letter.

It made postage cheaper and fairer – but how could you show you had paid? The answer was the Penny Black, the world's first stamp launched in 1840.

Now everyone could buy a stamp and stick it on a letter to show they had paid postage. The postman no longer had to spend time collecting money for deliveries.

The new, efficient postal service became the number one communication method for businesses and families alike.

Find out more: Visit our Discovery Room

Image caption:

Rowland Hill’s prepaid stamps meant letter carriers could deliver 25 times more letters in an hour.

Pillar box red

Red pillar boxes are one of Britain’s best-loved sights. But did you know they were once green?

The Post Office first installed roadside posting boxes in the Channel Islands in 1852.

After this trial run proved successful, pillar boxes appeared all over the country.

The boxes were tall and cast iron, and took their name from the pillar shape. Initially, most were painted green and the mail slot could be vertical or horizontal.

In the countryside, some people thought green pillar boxes were dreary and hard to see, so in 1874 red became the preferred colour.

Image caption:

Author and Post Office employee Anthony Trollope suggested using roadside collection boxes so people could post letters near home.

Object - Collection plate from one of the first London pillar boxes, 1855

There’s a busy schedule of collections and deliveries listed on this plate. But positioned low to the ground, it would soon have been splashed with mud and hard to read.

2009-0060/02

Image captions:

Top left: Residents of Jersey learned how to use pillar boxes via this 1852 advertisement

Bottom left: Pillar boxes popped up all over the country, making letter-writing more convenient than ever. © Ben Maile.

Right: Before pillar boxes, there were very few places from which you could send a letter.

The Jolly Postman Trail (inside letterbox):

Before the postal service began, people didn’t have letterboxes in their front doors.

Object plinth - Channel Islands Pillar Box, 1852-53

Can you see the initials VR on this pillar box? They stand for ‘Victoria Regina’ – Queen Victoria in Latin. A pillar box generally carries this royal cipher to show who was the monarch at the time it was installed.

OB1996.653

What to wear?

Postal workers had to look smart when they knocked on the door to deliver the mail.

As early as 1793, letter carriers in London received a free uniform with a bright red coat, blue waistcoat and top hat. The eye-catching colours also made it easier for bosses to spot any workers idling in the pub.

In 1855, for the first time, free trousers were included in the uniform – but only for staff in towns. In the countryside, letter carriers had to wear their own clothes until 1872.

The few women postal workers first had a uniform in 1894, with a skirt and waterproof cape.

Image captions:

Top: Rural letter carrier delivering in Windsor in the 1850s.

Bottom: Women eagerly await any letters in this painting of The Postman by Thomas Liddall Armitage.

Object case 4 - uniforms

1: Doorkeeper’s Frockcoat, 1895

Postmaster General’s Doorkeeper’s double breasted frockcoat, made of red wool cloth with three brass ‘GPO’ buttons. Doorkeepers acted as security and were required to look the part when welcoming important visitors.

2010-0478

2: Portrait of a Doorkeeper, c.1890

The Doorkeeper is pictured in his double breasted coat and blue peaked cap with a gold coloured band.

2004-0181

Postal uniform dressing up

Have you got what it takes to deliver the mail?

Mail Coach Guard

Your job is to guard the mail and deliver it on time. It is so important the Post Office has given you a uniform – bright red and gold so everyone can recognise you.

Try it on, and don’t forget to blast your horn to let people know the mail is coming.

First World War Postwoman

The men have gone to fight in the war, now thousands of women have joined the Post Office.

For the first time women can sort the post, deliver letters in cities and wear a postal uniform. The straw hat was suggested by a woman too – try it on for size.

Edwardian Postman

Your blue and red uniform is a familiar sight to people as you deliver letters and parcels.

This uniform keeps you warm in winter and the peak at the back of the hat protects your neck from wind and rain.

Telegram Messenger Boy

As the youngest employees of the Post Office you carry telegrams in this leather pouch, delivering news good or bad across the country.

You must keep your hair short and neatly cut and wear your cap smartly pointing to the front, not the back or side.

Experiment and change

From quirky five-wheeled cycles to an air-propelled mail train, the Post Office constantly developed new ideas, some of which are now part of everyday life.

From 1838, the Post Office began offering a service to send money securely using documents we know today as postal orders. It also opened a Savings Bank in 1861 which still exists today as National Savings and Investments (NS&I).

By 1870, telegrams were organised by the Post Office. In 1883 it began a parcel delivery service.

Then in 1912 the Post Office took over much of the telephone service, launching the classic red phone box in 1924.

Image captions:

Bottom left: Hard at work: women formed the core of the Post Office's telephone and telegraph operators.

Top left: Letter carriers became known as ‘postmen’ after Post Office parcel delivery began in 1883.

Top right: This cartoon from an 1882 edition of Punch shows Henry Fawcett, who was Postmaster General at the time and started the parcel post.

Object case 5 – postal innovations

1: Gower Bell Loud Speaking Telephone, 1881

From 1881 customers could make calls from some telegraph offices using telephones like this one, by holding the tubes to both ears and speaking into the small, white funnel.

Donated from the BT Connected Earth Collection. 2003-0522/05

2: Home safe, 1933-1945

Introduced in 1911, lockable home safes provided a secure and discreet way to save money at home before transferring the amount to a Post Office Savings account. The Post Office Savings Bank kept the keys.

OB1996.681/1

3: Trial postal order design, 1878

Postal orders were a convenient, safe and cheap way of sending small payments through the post. The service was introduced in 1881 and you can still send them today.

PO 01/01/07

4: Post Office Savings Bank book, 1895-1913

Ideal for saving small amounts, the Post Office Savings Bank allowed people to pay money into any branch. Transactions were recorded in books like this.

2006-0301/1

5: Needle telegraph, around 1870

This simple needle telegraph has no alphabet on its dial, instead the needle’s movements left and right would spell out each letter of the telegram.

Donated from the BT Connected Earth Collection. 2003-0522/02

6: Model T Ford Van model, 1978

In the 1920s the Post Office favoured an all-motorised fleet over horse-drawn vehicles. Fords were robust and reliable but the Post Office faced criticism for choosing American vans.

2009-0081/773

7: Salter Postal Parcel Balance, 1906-1915

The introduction of the Parcel Post in 1883 changed workers' job titles from letter carrier to postmen. Victorian parcel senders were reportedly inexperienced in effective wrapping and sent many unusual items including half a ham, a coffin shaped package from a Polar undertaker and a pet snake 'who had been on a visit.' Parcel posting costs were determined by weight, using scales like these.

OB1994.289/11

8: Postal ruler, 1885

Postal Rulers gave helpful information about different postal services – here highlighting an increased charge for telegrams. They also made practical souvenirs.

2015-0073

9: ‘RAILWAY BORNE’ Handstamp, around 1900

The Post Office paid the railways over 50% of the postage received for parcels carried by rail. This handstamp showed parcels which had travelled by train.

2005-0077

Image caption:

‘Henry Fawcett’, H Rathbone, 1884

Henry Fawcett was Postmaster General from 1880-1884. He helped introduce many of the new services represented here.

Object plinth - Pentacycle

Are new ideas always better?

“On a perfectly smooth and level surface, the ‘Centre-Cycle’ may be everything that can be desired – but for ordinary travelling, it is said to be an impractical machine”

Feedback from a Mr. Phillipston on the Hen and Chicks Pentacycle, 1882.

Five-wheeled cycles

Could you imagine having this many stabilisers on your bike?

The Post Office trialled the Hen and Chicks pentacycle for delivering mail in 1882.

Although postal workers had used bicycles for years, a new parcel delivery service meant staff needed to carry much bulkier loads. It also saw their job title changed from letter carriers to postmen for the first time.

The pentacycle had huge baskets and five wheels, and looked like a lot of fun to ride.

However, its popularity never extended beyond the town of Horsham, in West Sussex, where its inventor lived.

OB1995.357

Please do not touch.

Interactive exhibit – lantern slides

The Post Office had its own collection of lantern slides, here showing mail transport via sea, air and land. Lantern slides are black-and-white photographs printed on glass and then projected.

Slide the magnifier along to view the original lantern slides.

Trains to planes

Passengers loved the new railways that spread across Britain from the 1830s.

Soon, the mail also moved to the rail network. Workers sorted the letters on board, and would throw mailbags from the moving train to the platform and collect them with the help of a long pole. Later an automated bag-exchange mechanism made the process safer.

At Post Office HQ, technology never stood still, and by 1927, the electric Post Office (London) Railway (later known as Mail Rail) helped move mailbags efficiently around the capital.

Boats, trains and eventually planes formed a seamless postal system reaching all over the world.

Image caption:

Postal workers saved time by sorting the mail on board Travelling Post Office carriages.

The ‘Titanic’ tragedy

By the early 1900s, commercial liners carried overseas mail under the title Royal Mail Ship.

RMS ‘Titanic’ was one such vessel. She had over 3,000 mail sacks aboard on the day she struck an iceberg in 1912.

When postal workers realised the mail room was flooding, they started moving the mail to upper decks.

A steward later recalled:
“I urged them to leave. They shook their heads and continued at their work. It might have been an inrush of water later that cut off their escape, or it may have been the explosion. I saw them no more.”

Image captions:

Top left: The world’s first scheduled air mail service took place between Hendon and Windsor in September 1911.

Top right: Five postal workers were lost on ‘Titanic’. Early telegrams wrongly claimed all had been saved.

Bottom left: Jack Phillips sent many of ‘Titanic’s distress signals by telegraph. He died in the tragedy.

Image reproduced with permission from Godalming Town Council, Godalming Museum Collection.

Interactive exhibit - Telegrams and Telegraphs

Faster than any mail train or plane, a telegram could travel almost instantly along a telegraph wire. At the other end, your message was hand-written or later printed for delivery.

Telegraph wires criss-crossed Britain in the 1840s. In 1870, the system came under Post Office control and nearly 10 million telegrams chattered across the network. You could even post your message in a pillar box, with a stamp, for the Post Office to send on.

By 1900, Britain was sending more telegrams than any other country. Like Instant Messaging today, people loved its convenience and speed.

The Morse Code Alphabet

A. · -	J. · - - -	S. · · ·	1. · - - - -
B. - · · ·	K. - · -	T. -	2. · · - - -
C. - · - ·	L. · - · ·	U. · · -	3. · · · - -
D. - · ·	M. - -	V. · · · -	4. · · · · -
E. ·	N. - ·	W. · - -	5. · · · · ·
F. · · - ·	O. - - -	X. - · · -	6. - · · · ·
G. - - ·	P. · - - ·	Y. - · - -	7. - - · · ·
H. · · · ·	Q. - - · -	Z. - - · ·	8. - - - · ·
I. · ·	R. · - ·	0. - - - - -	9. - - - - ·

Post Office Telegraphs

This form must accompany any inquiry respecting this Telegram.

If the Receiver of an Inland Telegram doubts its accuracy, he may have it repeated on payment of half the amount originally paid for its transmission. Special conditions are applicable to the repetition of Foreign Telegrams.

Office of Origin and Services Instructions.

Wave your hand in front of one of the three sensors at the back of the exhibit to listen to a message sent in Morse Code

Wave again to hear the message as many times as you need to decipher it.

Use the chart above to try and translate the message. Write your answer down on the paper provided.

When you’re ready, wave your hand over the sensor in front to reveal the answer.

Interactive exhibit - Pneumatic Systems

Did you know there was once a forty-mile network of pneumatic tubes under London?

They connected the Central Telegraph Office near St Paul’s Cathedral directly with Parliament, the Stock Exchange, and other important places.

Messages travelled by air pressure to their destination – try out the system here.

Pneumatic Tubes
Write a message on the paper provided.
Roll it up and place it into one of the canisters.
Open the flap at the base and put the canister inside.
Shut the flap and watch your message whizz across the gallery!

Busy

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Do not use when busy lamp is illuminated.

Left: Receive/out

Right: Send/in

Do not insert paper

Please use a canister to send your message.