

The Jolly Postman

Large Print Guide



Contents

'The Jolly Postman'	2
About The Ahlbergs.....	4
Inspired By Everyday Life.....	7
Spotting Small Details	15
Keeping Us Connected	23
Happily Ever After?	28
Working Together.....	37
A Book That Inspires	44
Acknowledgements	45

'The Jolly Postman'

Janet & Allan Ahlberg

Celebrating 40 Years

40 years of 'The Jolly Postman'

Once upon a bicycle,
So they say,
A Jolly Postman came one day
From over the hills
And far away...

With letters for...
The Three Bears,
The Wicked Witch,
The Giant,
And others too!

Now it's time for you
To explore, read and look,
Are you ready?
Off you go -
Step into the book!

Image caption: Final Cover Artwork

Illustrations and lettering hand-drawn in watercolour and pencil by Janet Ahlberg.

About The Ahlbergs

Janet Hall and Allan Ahlberg met while training to be teachers and married in 1969. Janet worked as a freelance illustrator, while Allan was a primary school teacher. Later, Janet encouraged Allan to try writing a picture book for her to illustrate. Together they created 37 books, including The Jolly Postman series.

Their final collaboration was 'The Jolly Pocket Postman', completed shortly before Janet died in Leicester in 1994. Allan continued writing and published more than 150 children's books. He died in Lewes in 2025.

With thanks to the Ahlberg family for items on loan.

Clip of Blue Peter Episode, BBC 1, 1992

This Blue Peter interview gives a glimpse inside the Ahlberg's home and workspaces – Janet's attic studio, and Allan's shed in the garden.

Can you guess how long it took to make 'The Jolly Postman'?

Credit: BBC Studios.

Display case - The Jolly Postman Books

The Jolly Postman series has sold over 7 million copies, and the books have been translated into 15 languages.

An early draft of 'The Jolly Postman' (1986) included a Christmas letter which gave the Ahlbergs the idea for 'The Jolly Christmas Postman' (1991).

Letters from schoolchildren asking for another Jolly Postman book sparked the idea for 'The Jolly Pocket Postman' (1995).

Object captions:

1. 'The Jolly Postman or Other People's Letters'
2. 'The Jolly Christmas Postman'
3. 'The Jolly Pocket Postman'

Inspired By Everyday Life

The Ahlbergs saw everyday life as a gold mine of ideas, which Allan wrote down with the pen and paper always in his pocket. They watched their daughter playing with the morning post at the kitchen table, which inspired them to make a book with envelopes and letters.

In 'The Jolly Postman', we see inside the homes and lives of famous fairytale characters – the Three Bears' kitchen, the Wicked Witch eating breakfast, and the Giant looking after his baby.

The book was made in the 1980s, but these familiar scenes of ordinary life have a timeless appeal.

Interactive exhibits:

Take a look!

Goldilocks broke Baby Bear's chair. Can you fix it?

Display case:

Dressed for the Job

Allan had many jobs before becoming a writer, even a short time working as a postman - though he remembered that he wasn't very jolly.

Janet's pencil sketches show her different ideas for the Jolly Postman. He has a real postal uniform, with a hat and badge from the JPO (Jolly Post Office).

Object captions:

1. Postman Toy, made by Janet's Mother, c.1988

2 - 4. Postman's Hat, Badges and Tie, c.1950s-1960s

2011-0109, 2010-0081/13, /09 & OB1994.249/01

The Postal Museum Collection

5. Sketches of the Jolly Postman

“I did used to be a postman a long time ago – but I did have to get up terribly early – and the weather was usually freezing or wet – and they didn’t pay me very well, so I don’t think I was actually all that ‘jolly’.”

- Allan

Whatever The Weather

Being a postie isn’t always an easy job. Allan imagined the different encounters the Jolly Postman might face on a typical delivery round.

Janet’s illustrations show the Jolly Postman fixing a flat tyre, wearing a cape to keep him dry in a rain shower and pedalling a few crooked miles on his red bicycle.

Object caption:

6. Three Watercolours of the Jolly Postman

Time for Tea

The book shows our affection for posties. The Jolly Postman is invited in for cups of tea – all different kinds!

Janet used this catalogue to find ideas for things the characters might have at home. Can you spot the inspiration for the Bears' tea set?

Object captions:

7. Watercolour of the Three Bears and The Jolly Postman

8. Watercolour of a Tea Service

9. Watercolour of the Three Bears

10. Army & Navy Catalogue, 1939-40

“In the days before computers, if Janet wanted to see what a jug or a mangle or a wringer looked like, she could check it out in here. She loved this book. She would get waylaid in it and sit for ages looking at bread bins and kettles.”

- Allan

“The Jolly Postman’ was definitely brought about by our daughter. When she was about two, she liked to see the postman come, and she loved to take things out of envelopes. She couldn't read, of course, but she liked taking letters out and putting them back.”

- Janet

Rural Landscapes

The Ahlbergs considered various fairy tale locations for the Jolly Postman’s delivery round. They settled on traditional English countryside with rolling hills and brick cottages - a landscape in which a palace, a beanstalk and a cow jumping over the moon look perfectly at home.

Interactive exhibits:

Press the buttons on the radio. What are the Bears listening to?

What's inside?

Try on the Three Bears' clothes, then give them a wash!

Just Right Recipes

Pour, mix, stir, heat – make porridge that’s just right!

Baby Bear’s Porij

1 spoon of oats

1 splash of milk

1 spoon of honey

Stir it round with a spoon

Stop when it looks just right

Mummy Bear’s Porij

2 spoons of Oats

3 splashes of Milk

1 spoon of Jam

Stir quickly to mix it up

Heat up slowly on the hob

Daddy Bear's Porij

4 spoons of Oats

5 splashes of Milk

1 Banana

Stir it up as fast as you can

Take a big breath in and out to cool it down

Letter:

Dear Mr and Mrs Bear and Baby Bear,

I am very sorry indeed that I came into your house and ate Baby Bears porij. Mummy says I am a bad girl. I hardly eat any porij when she cooks it she says. Daddy says he will mend the littel chair.

Love from,

Goldilocks

P. S. Baby Bear can come to my party if he likes. Ther will be 3 kinds of jelly and a conjoora.

Spotting Small Details

Janet and Allan's books are loved for their rich imaginary worlds and attention to detail. 'The Jolly Postman' is packed with humorous touches that invite us to explore each page.

The Ahlbergs looked closely at real envelopes, stamps and postmarks before they invented their own. Allan wrote playful postal phrases for the envelopes, beautifully illustrated by Janet.

Every letter was carefully crafted and unique. From Goldilocks' apology (with child's spelling) to a serious solicitor's letter for Mr Wolf on official headed notepaper.

Interactive exhibit:

Dare to peek?

Display case

Letter Details

Many children wrote letters to the Ahlbergs about 'The Jolly Postman', often sending their own ideas for new fairytale letters. These envelopes were sent by fans in America.

Real envelopes like these inspired Janet's designs. Playful postal details such as 'Please do not bend' appear on the envelopes.

Stamps and postmarks resemble real ones, like Cinderella's stamp commemorating her royal wedding to Prince Charming.

Object captions:

1 - 2. Envelopes addressed to the Ahlbergs

3. Watercolour of Stamps with Address Overlay

4. Watercolour of Cinderella Stamp with Address Overlay

Mail Order Magic

Before online shopping, circulars were delivered through the post to customers like the Witch. Allan played with witchy jokes and spooky slogans to create her catalogue.

Janet filled the Witch's house with funny details. There's a bat on the drying rack, a cat washing up, and have a look at the name on the newspaper.

Object captions:

5 - 7. Artwork of the Witch, Owl and Spider

8. Artwork of Hobgoblin Supplies

9. Watercolour of the Witch and the Jolly Postman

10. Papier-mâché Plate, made by Janet, c. 1990.

“When you look at envelopes you find lots of beautiful things. Not just the stamps, but postmarks and other little things which have been stuck on the envelope. That kind of graphic joke was the kind of thing Janet seized on when she did the book.”

- Allan

Hobgoblin Supplies Ltd

Everything for the modern witch. Delivered to your door or den. Covens catered for.

Deadly lampshades

Nice and gloomy.

Easy-clean non-stick Cauldron Set

With free recipe for Toad in the hole

150 year guarantee

Little Boy Pie Mix

For those unexpected visitors when the cupboard is bare.

Finest natural ingredients. No preservatives.

Witching Hour Glass – the ideal gift

Big Broom

For the larger witch

As seen on T.V.

Halloween Boot

Available in sizes 4-14

Choice of five lovely colours

1. Midnight Black
2. Coal Black
3. Jet Black
4. Crow Black
5. Bat Black

Looking for a new newt?

Bonus newt – the bigger newt.

10% bigger

Special offer – buy 4 get one free

Same low price

Half actual size

Cup and sorcerer tea service

It washes itself!

Rejuvenating pills

Wheeeee!

Feeling low? Take Witcho the perfect pick-me-up

The Little Demon

Spell-proof tent for your holiday

And for your holiday reading

The Complete Book of Foul Curses

“It’s Spell-Binding.” – The Mirror Mirror

Sky High goggles

Fits all sizes

Frog Powder

Just add water

croak

Money back if not completely satisfied.

For the wizard in your life

matching tie and sock set

These are just a few examples from our enchanting range.

For further details ring Freephone 13. No bad spells please.

What's been delivered to the Witch today?

Look all around – it's hidden away!

Wobble, slime, squeak, hiss! What kind of potion is this?

**Try on the Witch's hat and have a ride on her broom.
Can you make a spell?**

Keeping Us Connected

The Ahlbergs took the characters in 'The Jolly Postman' – apart from the postman himself – from well-known fairy tales. It was an ingenious idea.

With so many traditional tales to pick from, Allan began with a long list of 21 possible characters. He whittled it down to six, with many more characters making guest appearances on the Jolly Postman's delivery round.

'The Jolly Postman' was made before computers and smart phones - when everyone used the post to stay connected. Even in today's world of instant messages, there is something very special about receiving a letter or card.

Interactive exhibit:

Who's come to the party?

Display case

Everybody Loves A Letter

A Valentine's Day card didn't make it into 'The Jolly Postman', but in many ways the book is a love letter to the post. The characters are brought together by the postman delivering their letters and mostly enjoy reading the news they bring!

At the end of his busy day, the Jolly Postman goes home to read a letter of his own.

Object captions:

1. Watercolour of the Jolly Postman visiting Goldilocks
2. Jolly Postman Reading a Letter
3. Postcard of 'Jolly Postman' Characters

E18008/01

The Postal Museum Collection

Celebrating Together

Goldilocks celebrates her 8th birthday with friends from different fairy tales and nursery rhymes. Just like a real party, the Ahlbergs came up with a guest list. Janet's pencil sketches show ideas for the friends Goldilocks might invite, what they could wear, and what party food they could eat.

Janet's neat handwriting includes a reminder not to include characters from the rest of the book - except of course for Baby Bear.

Object captions:

4. Watercolour of Goldilocks's Party

5. Sketches of Party Guests

Birthday Greetings

Janet sketched early ideas for Goldilocks's birthday card. She looked at birthday cards to get ideas, like these from the 1980s. Goldilocks's birthday presents may have been inspired by toys the Ahlbergs had at home – and the banknote by real money.

Object captions:

6. £1 Banknote, 1981

On Loan from David Adamick

7. Artwork of Money

8. Watercolour of 8th Birthday Card

9. Two Birthday Cards, c.1980s

E18017/02 & /03

The Postal Museum Collection

10. Three Watercolours: Present, Goldilocks and Toy

11. Sketches of Birthday Cards

“We pick up odd things like music boxes and mechanical toys, but we aren't collectors of any one thing. Of course, the fact that they're around means that they may well find themselves in a story because we see them and think we could put that in.”

- Allan

“Adults too can find things in picture books that appear to be for the little child but can contain things for the parents, luckily because the parents may have to read the book to the child thirty times in a fortnight and be sick of it.”

- Allan

Interactive exhibit:

Set the table for a special celebration

What's inside the cake?

Happily Ever After?

Janet and Allan took well-known fairy tales and gave them a fresh twist. To spark new ideas, they read classic folk tales and nursery rhymes, searching for characters they could borrow and reinvent.

Allan looked to extend their stories in unexpected ways, trusting that readers already knew the characters well, so he could surprise them with what happened next.

The Ahlbergs wanted to make a book with humorous layers that would appeal to all ages, and they weren't afraid to include a few grown-up jokes in the letters.

Interactive exhibits:

What's inside?

Knock knock!

Who's there?

Oh Grandma, what big ears you've got!

Who's at home?

Display case

Big Bad Wolf

Extending this classic tale, the Ahlbergs imagined the Big Bad Wolf receiving a stern warning from Miss Riding-Hood and Messrs. The Little Pigs Ltd. The typed solicitor's letter playfully mimics legal language and is hand-signed by H. Meeny.

Janet's illustrations capture the Jolly Postman nervously sipping his tea as Mr Wolf reads on.

Object captions:

1. Watercolour of the Jolly Postman Visiting the Wolf

2. Watercolour of Grandma

3. Watercolour of the Wolf Reading his Letter

4. Solicitor's Letter

5. Envelope, Inscription 'First Class'

6. Overlay of Postal Markings

Cinderella Story

The story continues just after Cinderella and Prince Charming return from their honeymoon. The Ahlbergs imagined them moving into a new palace, surrounded by practical wedding presents.

Cinderella is also the star of her own little book, delivered with a letter from her publisher that includes a few clever publishing in-jokes.

Object captions:

7. Watercolour of Cinderella

8. Buckingham Palace Badge, c.1955

2010-0062/297

The Postal Museum Collection

9. Cinderella Story Book

10. Letter from Peter Piper

11. Watercolour of Cinderella, Prince Charming and the Jolly Postman

Cinderella's Little Book

Cinderella's book has a historical look reflecting the traditional versions of the story Janet had read. For comic contrast, her illustrations of the Ugly Sisters in ball gowns and the golden coach are set beside Allan's witty retelling, which includes modern phrases such as 'sausages on sticks'.

Object captions:

12 - 13. Cinderella Story Book Illustrations and Text Overlays

“Books are made up like sandcastles: you add stuff and knock it down and change it – and, in fact, you didn't even know you were building a castle at first, you thought you were building a garage.”

Allan

Image caption: Approaching the Palace

The Jolly Postman cycles to the Palace in a rain shower. The removal men carrying furniture into the Palace hint at what happened next in Cinderella's story.

Interactive exhibit:

Do you fit the royal crown and slipper?

Interactive exhibit - parcels

These postage labels got wet in the rain. Can you work out who sent each wedding present?

Special Delivery For The Palace

Senders:

The Three Bears

B.B. Wolf

The Witch

Goldilocks

The Giant

Parcel label 1 (apple shape):

To: The Happy Couple

From: The W--ch

A wickedly tasty gift for you. Take a bite!

Warning Toxic Material

Parcel label 2 (bottle shape):

To: Cinderella and Prince Charming

From: --ant

Fe Fi Fo Fum, the celebrations have begun!

P.S. It's only a little tippie

Glass. Handle With Care.

Parcel label 3 (cube):

To: The Just Perfect Pair

From: Th- T-r-- B—rs

We saw this and thought it was 'just right' for you!

Lots of love from all of us.

Perishable Goods

Please deliver as soon as possible

Parcel label 4 (large cuboid on floor):

To: Mr and Mrs Charming

From: G--d-l--ks

Hooray hooray married today!

I broke your wedding present but Daddy mended it.

I hop you like it!

This Way Up

Parcel label 5 (small cuboid box):

To: Princess Cinderella

From: B.B. W---

My dear what small feet you have! I asked Miss R. Hood to help me guess your size.

Small Parcel

Working Together

Janet and Allan worked as a team. Books usually began with an idea of Allan's which he would talk through with Janet. Allan drafted words in his notebook, then Janet drew some pencil sketches. They passed ideas back and forth, until their words and pictures turned into a book.

Allan's six notebooks trace how the book was made, from the idea for a book about 'letters' to a full draft of 'The Jolly Postman'.

Six years after they first had the idea, the book was eventually published by Heinemann and printed in Hong Kong. The Ahlbergs oversaw every step - from design to print.

Interactive exhibit:

Who lives here?

Post Card

Attach Stamp Here

Dear Giant Bigg,

Having a nice time – me, my mum and your hen what lays the golden eggs. (It's better than traveller's cheques.) Saw a bloke as we was flying down – he was bigger than you! I've took note of his address. Take care of yourself - and your talking harp – I'll be back for that one of these days, I shouldn't wonder.

Bye for now – your (very) little pal,

Jack

Our couriers are always at your service

Magic carpet tours

Interactive exhibit:

Fee Fi Fo Far Away!

Put the postcard together. Which fairy tale would you visit on holiday?

“Usually, Allan tells me of an idea, and we talk about it, and if we are agreed he proceeds with the writing. I read it, he hopes that I will like it and mostly I do, and we just knock ideas around from the very beginning.”

- Janet

Image caption: The Giant's Postcard

Jack’s postcard to the Giant is inspired by classic holiday postcards and shows the places he’s visited on his magic carpet tour.

Allan has added his final edits to the artwork on the note from the Giant's (very) little pal.

Display case

Plotting it Out

Allan carefully planned out the whole book. These pages of his notebook include a list of the characters, their homes and the letters they'll receive. In the case of the Giant and his baby, it's a postcard sent by airmail.

Janet's illustrations comically capture this scene with the Giant peering at a tiny postcard.

Object captions:

1. Janet's Watercolour Palette and Brushes
- 2 - 3. Watercolours of the Giant and the Jolly Postman
4. Watercolour of a Beanstalk
5. Allan's Notebook No.22

Planning a Postcard

Trying out ideas was an important part of Janet and Allan's creative process. The Giant's postcard began as a rough sketch in Allan's notebook which Janet developed into the final design.

Janet experimented with different layouts and holiday locations. On her early sketches she writes a reminder to look at classic postcards, perhaps like these two from the 1960s.

Object captions:

6. Sketch of Postcard Layouts

7. Sketches of Postcards

8. Two Postcards, 1969

2023-0115/10 & /11

The Postal Museum Collection

9. Allan's Notebooks

“I've always wanted justification for spending my life doing what I'm doing. We know we're not brain surgeons, or politicians. It is good to know that the struggle is worth it, that all the pestering and nit-picking we do is really for some good purpose.”

- Janet

Building a Bestseller

The inventive design of ‘The Jolly Postman’ brought some challenges. No one had published a book with envelopes containing pull-out letters before.

To prove to herself, Allan, and their publishers that the book would work, Janet drew the full layout and made a dummy book with real envelopes.

Janet also sketched four front cover designs. Look for Allan’s red tick next to his favourite – not knowing it would soon become a bestseller.

Object captions:

10. Front Cover Sketches

11. Layout of Book Pages

12. Jolly Postman Dummy Book

“We drove our publishers nuts - wanting the right paper, the right printing. I risk being pretentious, but just because a book is tiny and its readers are little doesn't mean it can't be perfect. On its own scale, it can be as good as Tolstoy or Jane Austen.”

- Allan

“You have to make the book. You can't just draw it on a layout. So, Janet would make something like this, and then we can see how the whole book would come together.”

- Allan

A Book That Inspires

(Exit corridor)

The Jolly Postman is a much-loved children's classic, sparking a love of stories in generations of young readers.

We invited schools across the UK to send us their own Fairy Tale Mail inspired by the book.

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Puffin

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This way to Café and Shop

