The Postal Museum Large Print Guide

Zone 3 - The Post Office in conflict

Contents

The Post Office in conflict

From battle orders to letters home, communications are vital during wartime.

Thousands of postal workers went abroad to fight in both World Wars. Yet the Post Office’s operations continued and even expanded with the ingenuity and energy of temporary workers.

The post simply had to get through.

Why would someone send themselves in the post?

Image caption:

Suffragettes controversially targeted the Post Office, and were mocked in postcards such as this.

Post Office and politics

Campaigners targeted the Post Office because it was a symbol of government power.

In February 1909, two suffragettes posted themselves to 10 Downing Street. They wanted to speak to the Prime Minister about women's votes – but he refused to meet them.

The struggle for Irish independence boiled over in the Easter Rising of 1916. Its leaders overran Dublin's General Post Office (GPO) and held it for nearly a week under a Republican flag, cutting many communications with Britain.

The Irish Times reported: 'fighting in all parts of Dublin. Great loss of life and destruction to property.'

Image captions:

Top: Suffragettes Miss Solomon and Miss McLellan posted themselves to 10 Downing Street by express mail.

Bottom: Irish Republicans cut links with Britain when they stormed the GPO in Dublin.

“terrific fighting in all parts of Dublin. Great loss of life and destruction to property.”

Interactive Exhibit – The Words of War

“Don’t worry about me as I have finished with the war” – Harry Brown

For the First World War, fought over 100 years ago, letters, diaries and poems are often our only connection to the thoughts and experiences of those in the centre of conflict. From Harry Brown’s letters and postcards, through Thomas May’s diary, to Leonard Eldridge’s battlefield will, step inside our telephone kiosk and back in time to listen to their words of war.

Pick up the phone, select a story from the phone book and dial in the number to hear the experiences of postal workers such as Frank Hunter and Garvin Kerr as they recall the impact conflict had on their work and lives.

Outside telephone – number 101 - Okay to touch

Kiosk telephone – number 102 - Okay to touch

Dial 120 for a special Christmas message

Dial one of the numbers below to hear the relevant extract.

201. Letter from German Soldier to Mrs Home Peel

Home Peel joined the Post Office in 1906. At the outbreak of war, in 1914, he joined the Post Office's own battalion, the Post Office Rifles. Having survived many battles, Peel was killed in action near Longueval on 24 March 1918 during the retreat from Cambrai. A German soldier found his body and was moved to write this letter.

202. Letter from William Cox to family

William Cox was a Post Office worker. During the First World War he posted an Oxo tin to his brother and sister containing a button from the tunic of a fellow worker who had died and also a piece of shrapnel. This is the letter he wrote to explain what these 'mementoes' meant to him.

203. Extracts from Thomas May's diary

Thomas William Ernest May joined the Post Office in 1910 as an Assistant Postman. In 1915, at the age of 20 he joined the Post Office Rifles and went to war. Like so many others Thomas was an ordinary man thrust into an extraordinary situation. These are extracts from the diary he kept whilst at the front, describing his experiences of the war.

204. Battlefield Will, Leonard Eldridge

Private Leonard Eldridge was a member of the Post Office Rifles. Like many soldiers in the First World War he was encouraged to write a battlefield will, in case the worst should happen. This is what he wrote.

205. The Letter by Wilfred Owen

Wilfred Owen is one of the most famous poets of the First World War. Here we hear his poem 'The Letter'. In it a soldier writes a letter to his wife back home but whilst writing it he is fatally shot. The poem switches between the contents of the letter and the events unfolding around him.

206. ‘It came by ship’ by Aldis Bajirak

Aldis took part in ‘Communicating Conflict’, a First World War Centenary project with Haverstock School in 2014. Pupils took inspiration from the wartime stories and objects in The Postal Museum collections to write their own letters from the Front Line. His poem captures the anticipation of waiting for a letter from home.

207. Roger Osborn

During the Second World War Roger Osborn had to deliver many fatality telegrams, bringing news of death to loved ones back home. Here he recalls his own, and a friend’s experience, and speaks about the devastating effect it could have on families.

208. Frank Hunter

Frank Hunter left school at 14 to start his first job as a Boy Messenger at North West District Office in London. During the Second World War Frank and colleagues sheltered from bombing in the Post Office Underground Railway at Mount Pleasant while working their night shifts.

209. Garvin Kerr

Garvin grew up in the Creggan area of Derry in a Catholic family of six children. Garvin worked for Royal Mail at the height of ‘The Troubles’. Here he remembers the frightening day when he was held up in his van and robbed at gunpoint.

Or try these:

102: Calls the K2 phone box to your right
103: Calls the first GPO 741 phone further on in the exhibition
104: Calls the second GPO 741 phone further on in the exhibition
105: Calls the K8 phone box further on in the exhibition

123: Dials the Speaking Clock
125: Calls the Royal Speaking Clock (Balmoral Exchange)
142 or 192: Directory Enquiries
151: For an engineering announcement
160: Calls ‘Dial a Disk’
170: For Post Office Children’s stories
191: Information about this phone system
01-837 4111: Example recording of “Lenny” – an anti-telemarketing recording from 2011

The Jolly Postman Trail:

“Many original telephone boxes are now listed buildings…

…just like Tower Bridge and the Houses of Parliament.”

To see transcribed text from the historic signs next to the telephones, please turn to the appendix at the back of this booklet.

First World War: 1914-1918

“I got three letters posted in Ireland on the 26th and in England on the 28th, this afternoon, so letters are reaching us as quickly as if there were no war. It’s really rather wonderful”

When war broke out in 1914, the Post Office was Britain’s biggest employer.

As men left to fight, tens of thousands of temporary workers came in to keep the mail moving, including thousands of women. For many, it was their first taste of jobs once reserved for men.

Wartime saw a huge rise in letters, postcards and parcels sent between the home front and loved ones abroad.

To cope with the increase, the Post Office built the Home Depot, an enormous wooden temporary sorting

office in Regent’s Park. At its peak it handled 12 million letters and a million parcels in a week.

Interactive exhibit – lantern slides

The colours of the First World War postal service come to life in these hand-painted lantern slides. They show the importance of mail during the war, both at home and on the front line.

Slide the magnifier along to view the original lantern slides.

Writing home

“Letters are reaching us as quickly as if there were no war. It’s really rather wonderful” wrote soldier Gerald Burgoyne in his 1914 diary.

The Army Post Office knew letters helped keep spirits high. Its staff kept mail flowing to France and Belgium, as well as East Africa and India, where some Empire troops had family members.

Of course, letters sometimes brought tragic tidings. The wife of Captain Home Peel learned of her husband’s death from a letter sent by a German soldier. He wrote that, having found Captain Home Peel’s body, and despite being from the opposing side, he felt “a human duty to communicate you these sad news.”

Image captions:

Top left: Newspapers were also sent by post, carrying vital news across the world. © IWM (Q 692)

Top right: In 1915, a newspaper in London printed a letter from a lonely soldier fighting on the Western Front. Within weeks he had received 3,000 letters from well-wishers along with dozens of parcels.

Bottom left: Women workers mended damaged parcels that were on their way to the soldiers on the front line.

The Jolly Postman Trail:

If a soldier wrote ‘On Active Service’ at the top of their letter, the Post Office delivered it for free.

Object case 1 - First World War: Journey of a letter

During the First World War postal communication was vital. Telephones were still new and the telegraph was reserved for urgent messages. It was important that letters and postcards were delivered as quickly as possible.

A complex network was established linking the large temporary sorting office, known as the Home Depot in London to British army and navy bases around the world.

The map and photographs above show the main routes mail took to reach the Western Front in France and Belgium.

Mail was sorted in London at the Home Depot in Regent’s Park and taken by train to the South Coast of England. From there it crossed the Channel to various

French ports, before following different routes to smaller field post offices.

1: Postal Routes Map, 1919

This map shows the latter stages of the journey of the wartime mail. The post would be sorted into smaller and smaller bundles before it reached the troops. The frontline is shown by the field post offices at the end of the routes. Letters were hand delivered to soldiers on the frontline.

POST 47/11

2: Dumb Cancellation, 1914-1918

These lines and series of x's is a 'dumb cancellation'. It was used on letters from ships at sea, instead of a mark containing the name of the closest port, to disguise the location of ships.

PH64I/48a

3: Passed by Censor Marking, 1915

This envelope carries postal markings showing it was sent via the Army Post Office. A handstamp impression

would have been used instead of a stamp as soldiers and sailors were entitled to free postage. It also has a red marking showing it had passed the censor.
PH32/32

4: Postcard, 1915

Postcards were a popular way for soldiers to send frequent short messages home. The postcards often featured photographs of the front line or local towns.
2022-0079/9

5: Embroidered Postcard, 1914-1918

Embroidered postcards were very popular in the First World War. Early examples were often handmade and designed specifically for the buyer. Later, they became a more commercial product.
OB1995.64/3

6: Field Service Postcards, 1915-1916

Field Service Postcards were introduced to allow soldiers to send quick messages to people at home. The sender simply crossed out a series of short statements

and signed the card. This message reassured friends and family in between sending longer letters.
PH32/23

7: ‘Honour’ Envelope, 1917

Controlling the information soldiers sent home was vital. A soldier at the frontline would have their letters censored by their superior officer. If a soldier wanted more privacy, they could use special green envelopes, known as honour envelopes.

If a soldier signed a declaration these letters would not be opened by a superior officer but could still be censored later. In this example the declaration has not been signed so the letter was opened and read.
PH32/28

8: Handstamps, 1914-1918

Handstamps used at a Field Post Office and Army Base Post Office were identified by numbers rather than locations, so as not to give away military positions.
2005-0119 and 2009-0442

9: Princess Mary Tin, 1914

Ahead of the first Christmas at war in 1914 the King's daughter, Princess Mary, launched an appeal to send small gift tins to all serving soldiers and sailors. These Princess Mary tins, as they became known, contained sweets or Tobacco, a Christmas card and a photo of Princess Mary.

2014-0074

Object case 2 - Honouring a hero

The Victoria Cross is Britain’s highest award for gallantry. Only one member of the Post Office Rifles received this honour – Sergeant Alfred Knight.

He joined the regiment as the First World War began, serving alongside fellow volunteers.

On 20 September 1917 at Ypres, he charged an enemy gun position under fire and captured it single-handedly. He saved many lives, while risking his own, and his devotion to duty earned him the Victoria Cross.

Knight said a book in his pocket was damaged by bullets, along with his helmet, and his survival was ‘a miracle’.

1: Sergeant Knight's Victoria Cross, 1918

Queen Victoria chose the words 'For Valour' to recognise exceptional bravery. All Victoria Crosses are cast from the metal of captured enemy cannons.
OB1997.211

2: Sergeant Knight's Medal Set, 1914-1953

Throughout his life Alfred Knight's dedication to the Post Office Rifles was recognised. This set includes his Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) awarded in 1951.
OB1997.211

"Bullets rattled on my steel helmet – there were several significant dents and one hole – part of a book was shot away in my pocket; a photograph case and cigarette case probably saved my life from one bullet which must have passed under my armpit."

Image credit:

Newspapers portrayed Alfred Knight as 'a man from whom the bullets bounced'.

Object wall - Plaque, 20th century

10,000 postal staff served in the Post Office Rifles, as this plaque commemorates. 2,000 of them never returned.

2003-0484

Post Office Rifles

“I thought” said the Divisional General on parade after an attack, “you were a lot of stamp lickers, but the way you fought…you went over like a lot of bloody savages”.

At the outbreak of the First World War, every male postal worker received a letter encouraging him to enlist. 73,000 men signed up, with some serving in the Post Office’s own battalion, the Post Office Rifles.

Postal workers had supported army communications in wartime since the 1700s, forming the Rifles in 1868. Now they entered the world’s first global conflict.

The Rifles served in France, seeing action in some of the fiercest battles. They won 145 awards for gallantry and one Victoria Cross.

Of 12,000 Post Office Rifles who went to war, 1,800 were killed and over 4,500 wounded.

Image captions:

Top: In 1915 Post Offices displayed this recruitment poster to encourage men to join their own regiment, the Post Office Rifles.

Bottom: Thomas May joined the Post Office Rifles in 1915. He survived the war.

Women in the Postal Service

The earliest known woman to work for the postal service was a postwoman in the 1830s. By the 1870s, women were working as clerks and telegraph operators. They moved into telephone work when the General Post Office (GPO) took over telephone services in 1912. These roles were some of the first office jobs for women in the UK.

As men were conscripted and forced to leave their jobs, the GPO became the country's largest employer of women during both world wars. They also worked as postwomen, sorters, postmistresses and cleaners, while teenagers trained as apprentices and delivered telegrams.

By the Second World War, women took on a wider range of roles, including driving mail vans, working in engineering and processing airgraphs. Throughout this

time, women campaigned for better pay, promotion opportunities and working conditions.

Object case 3 - Keeping Britain Connected: Women in Wartime Telecommunications

During the Second World War, more women than ever before filled jobs with the General Post Office (GPO). They worked as clerks, telegraphists and telephonists, among other roles. Their work was vital, but they faced unfair treatment and abuses due to gender inequality. Women had long campaigned for better labour rights, and as their numbers increased, this effort grew stronger. This led to lasting improvements for women's work and in public opinion of women's employment.

Women as War Workers

Women risked their lives to maintain telecommunications during the Second World War, with some receiving medals for their efforts. The press dubbed them ‘heroines of the switchboard’ and ‘stickit girls’ for staying at their posts regardless of danger.

The GPO also praised brave telephonists’ ‘sterling contribution’ to events such as the Battle of Britain. Some worked shifts of over 25 hours, but the strain led to exhaustion and stress-related illness.

Object captions and quotations (left):

Night Work

Night work was long banned for women due to safety concerns and domestic expectations – helping justify lower pay.

During the Second World War, the GPO needed women to work throughout the night and some even slept at the office. As men and women now did the same jobs, demands for equal pay grew stronger.

Acknowledgements: Dr. Helen Glew, Dr. Mark Crowley

1: UPW Letter and Badges, 1900s

Despite past reluctance to support women, the Union of Postal Workers (UPW) campaigned for gender pay equality at night. Part-time women clerks and telecommunications workers were the last to receive this.

POST 33/5696, 2024-0399/02 and OB1995.459/44

2: Handwritten Letter from Gladys Cahill, 1940s

Night work strengthened women's long-standing campaign for equal pay. Here, part-time sorting clerk Gladys Cahill requests extra pay for covering three full night shifts weekly.

POST 33/5696

3: Statement of Temporary Work, 1943

During the Second World War the GPO temporarily lifted bans on married women working, instead switching many to temporary contracts. Cheaper to employ, temporary staff like Vera Bucknell signed away job security and had limited access to pensions, promotions and sick pay.

2010-0406

4: Photograph of Women Telephonists with Helmets, 1939-45

Telephone exchange work during air raids was dangerous. Women sustained injuries from bombs or flying glass. By 1942, unions secured protective clothing, including steel helmets.

POST 56/14

5: Daily Express Newspaper Article, 1940

Content note: references to sexual violence.

Blackouts meant women often travelled home in darkness. Attacks on telephonists increased, including sexual assault. Worker representatives raised concerns with the Home Office, which responded by increasing police patrols around telephone exchanges.

POST 56/98, Facsimile

6: Postal Lamp, 1900s

During air raids, power cuts left exchanges with only emergency lighting. Without generators, women worked by postal lamps like this one, or used their own torches and candles.

OB1994.146/1

In 1941, the Union of Post Office Workers (UPW) began campaigning to increase wages for women working full-time between 8pm to 6am. Previously, women were paid approximately 20% less than men doing the same job. In 1943, the UPW requested the same for part-time women night workers.

UPW Letter, 1943

POST 33/5696

“I now learn that the last award of 9 shillings per week to the female night workers staff does not apply to me being a part time worker […] as I am working the three permanent nights every week, I feel I am entitled to the extra money like the remainder of the staff.”

Handwritten Letter from Gladys Cahill, 1940s

POST 33/5696

“Extra police were on duty last night at ten o’clock when girls left work at telephone headquarters, Faraday House, E.C. There have been complaints that girl workers have been molested in the black-out.”

Daily Express Newspaper Article, 1940

POST 56/98

Object captions (centre):

Women Telephonists and Telegraphists

Much wartime communication happened behind the scenes. Telephonists answered calls, directing them to the relevant numbers through a switchboard.

Telegraphists often transmitted messages in Morse code. Though their voices were heard, their work remained largely invisible. In mixed offices, they were often kept apart from men by screens.

7: Telegraphists in Training, 1940

Telegraphy was skilled work requiring a difficult entrance exam, meaning most GPO telegraphists came from educated backgrounds. Supervisors enforced strict rules, including bans on wearing makeup.

POST 56/111

8: Telephonist Recruitment Leaflet, c.1946

GPO publicity campaigns promoted telephony as a ‘career for girls’, often showing White women in advertisements. Though the GPO didn’t record workers’ ethnicity, this does not mean women of colour were absent.

E14003/11

9: Telephonist Headset and Microphone, 1900s

In manual telephone exchanges telephonists received calls through headsets, speaking into microphones hanging around their necks. They then inserted the plug into the relevant switchboard socket, matching calls to their destination.

2006-0190/076

10: Photograph of Worthing Telephone Exchange, 1940s-50s

Women telephonists had to speak English and either be a British subject or the child of a British subject. Applicants had to pass verbal tests prior to training on the job under strict supervision.

2024-0411/3

Object captions and quotations (right):

History of the Marriage Bar

The marriage bar, introduced in 1876, required women to leave their jobs at the GPO when they married. It was temporarily suspended for most of the Second World War.

The policy reinforced traditional gender roles, placing men at work and women in the home. It also discriminated against women whose marital status was ambiguous.

11: Letter to Head Postmaster, 1945

The marriage bar only allowed unmarried women to continue working. This discriminated against those who had experienced marital breakdown or divorce, reinforcing social taboos. Like the woman in this letter, those unable to divorce were forced to remain in temporary positions without full-time benefits.

POST 122/2371

12: Photograph of Telephonists at Switchboard, 1939-45

Telephonists operated switchboards, connecting calls with speed and precision. This required skills like nimbleness, multitasking and sitting for long hours, all stereotypically considered women's traits.

POST 56/111

13: Photograph of Girl Messenger, 1941

Unlike office work, telegram delivery was public facing. Girl messengers aged 14-15 years, often from working-class backgrounds, delivered messages, including difficult news.

POST 56/109

14: Girl Messenger Shoes, c.1944

Whereas office workers wore their own clothes, girl messengers delivering telegrams wore GPO uniform. This raised their profile, helping shift public opinions around equal pay.

E12144

“In view of the fact that I must continue to earn my own living and that I have rendered useful service prior to my resignation for marriage, and during the war period, it will be much appreciated if my application may receive favourable consideration.”

The woman’s application was denied.

Letter to Head Postmaster, 1945

POST 122/2371

The GPO instructed telephonists to use set phrases such as ‘number, please?’, ‘would you mind speaking up?’ and ‘please repeat’. It was important to pronounce words clearly and slowly, especially when repeating numbers, to avoid confusion.

Gender Stereotypes

Telecommunications roles were seen as women's work. Women telephonists were labelled 'hello girls' and trained to speak in an 'attractive voice'. These stereotypes sexualised women, casting them as feminine and youthful. They also had to be controlled, polite, tidy and accurate, as well as adaptable and humorous.

Post-War Progress

The large number of women who sustained communications during the Second World War proved that they were capable and efficient at their jobs. Prioritising post-war recovery, the GPO continued to employ many women to plug labour shortages.

After the war, discussions between the government and unions continued, leading to important changes in women's working rights. In 1946, the marriage bar was abolished. However, attitudes towards women's roles at work and home were slower to change.

In 1955, the GPO committed to increasing women's wages until they matched those of men working the same jobs. Fifteen years later, new laws made it illegal to pay men and women doing the same jobs different salaries. Despite these changes, the gender pay gap continues to exist.

Image text:

your Career in your Post Office

Post Office Clerks (Postal and Telegraph Officers) in Crown Offices

Object case 4 - A Family Affair: The Thames River Postman (1800 – 1952)

The Thames River Postman played a vital role connecting people who lived or worked on the river with the wider world. For nearly one hundred and fifty years, ships and houseboats lying in the Pool of London (between London Bridge to below Limehouse) had their mail delivered by a member of the same family. The story of the River Postman is a family legacy unlike any other.

“During war and peace, whatever the weather or state of tide, the Postman and his skiff went out delivering.”

1: The first River Postman

The River Postman's uniform changed over time. In 1800 he wore a frock coat and the Royal Arms Badge made of solid silver bearing the "Arms of Hanover". This was worn as protection against press gangs, who used physical force to recruit men into the Royal Navy.

2: A family tradition

The first three Evanses in the role followed a father-son trend until the brother of Samuel Evans Junior, George Thomas Evans, succeeded him in 1856. His son George Henry Evans (pictured) followed in 1885 and held the role for 29 years – for which he received the Imperial Service Medal.

3: The postal round

The River Postmen supplied their own boat (known as a skiff) and oars, with the Post Office covering the cost. The last River Postman Herbert L. Evans, pictured here in 1924, had his skiff built from a single oak tree. He followed the family tradition of naming it after his mother.

4: Illustrations

A small rowing boat offered little protection in the Thames. The river was full of ships, barges, and other vessels, and the weather often reduced visibility. The dangerous nature of the job, as illustrated in these images, makes the Evans family legacy even more remarkable.

5: The last River Postman

Herbert Lionel Evans held the role for 38 years, until the position ended for good in 1952 as a postman on the Thames was no longer deemed necessary. Like his father George, Herbert was awarded the Imperial Service Medal for his services.

Order of Service	Served
William Simpson Senior	1800 – 1806
William Simpson Junior	1806 – 1810
Samuel Evans Senior	1810 – 1832
Samuel Lowden Evans Junior	1832 – 1845
Samuel Evans Junior (son)	1845 – 1856
George Thomas Evans (brother)	1856 – 1885
George Henry Evans (son)	1885 – 1914
Herbert Lionel Evans (son)	1914 – 1952

1: The first River Postmen

River Postman's frock coat, 1861-1875

The River Postman had an official frock coat – scarlet red in colour, with black velvet collar and cuffs. Down the front there were 12 brass buttons, marked with the letters G. R.

2010-0476

Untitled painting of Postmen's uniforms, 1894

This painting from 1894 shows various forms of uniform worn by postmen, including the River Postman. This uniform would have been worn by George Henry Evans.
2004-0166, Facsimile

Warrant Notice for the arrest of William Simpson, August 1810

In 1800 the first River Postman William Simpson fell and died at work. His son William Simpson Junior stole letters and £20 from a Merchant in Whitechapel. The crime was a capital offence carrying the death penalty. He went into hiding but due to the £100 warrant, he was captured. His sentence was reduced, and instead he was transported to Australia for a lifetime of labour. His apprentice Samuel Evans succeeded him – thus beginning the Evans family legacy.
Lib 07/0218

River Postman's arm badge, 1810

The badge has 'Post Office' inscribed at the top and 'Ship Letter Carrier' at the bottom. It was worn by Samuel Evans Senior in 1810 – the first Evans to fill the role.

OB1999.9

2: A family tradition

G. H. Evans near Tower Bridge, c.1900

George Henry Evans's boat was called Jessie, named after his mother. Tower Bridge is just visible in this photograph. From his skiff George would have witnessed the bridge being built and used from 1894 onwards.

Lib 07/0218

E. D. O. group photo with G. H. Evans, c.1885

George Henry Evans (far left sat on the stool) pictured with his fellow postal workers from the Eastern District Office (E. D. O.). The River Postman collected his letters from the E. D. O. in Whitechapel, before delivering to the ships and boats moored on the Thames.

2023-0009/06, Facsimile

Imperial Service Medal, King George V, 1892

The Imperial Service Medal, presented upon retirement, was awarded to manual grade civil servants who completed 25 years of service with a good record.

OB1995.108

Evans family portrait, c.1885

This photograph includes three generations of River Postmen: Herbert L. Evans (bottom middle), G. T. Evans (middle row), and G. H. Evans (top right).

2023-0009/01, Facsimile

3: The postal round

Note by Herbert’s son, 1924

A note written on the back of a photograph by Herbert L. Evans’s son. Personal insights such as this are vital with family history research.

2023-0009/18, Facsimile

Herbert delivering a bundle of mail, 1924

Herbert served in France and Belgium in the Royal Engineers (Inland Water Transport) during the First World War. Whilst Herbert was away, his father George Henry Evans came out of retirement to don the River Postman’s uniform once again. This ensured the role stayed within the family.

2023-0009/15

Herbert delivering mail onboard a houseboat, 1924

The Thames was once packed with families living on house boats. According to Herbert's grandson Clifford: "The River Postman was known to bring food and provisions to some families, as well as their post". Clifford kindly donated the objects on display to The Postal Museum.

2023-0009/16

Herbert climbs over a line of moored barges to deliver letters, 1952

The physical nature of the job was manageable on a calm clear day. Strong winds or fog were reportedly the most unfavourable conditions. To be allowed to work on the Thames, River Postmen were bound to serve an apprenticeship of the Watermen & Lightermen's Company. This requirement still exists today.

2023-0009/22

4: Illustrations

River Post Postcard, c.1950

This postcard illustrates the River Postman's role perfectly – the small vulnerable skiff approaches a much larger ship with a view of Tower Bridge. With so many dangers, it is almost impossible to imagine this job existing today.

E17154

Cigarette card, c.1920

No. 26 in a series of 50 Will's cigarette cards produced with Royal Mail. It shows a River Postman at Loch Etive, Argyllshire, Scotland. The Thames River Postman is not the only Postman to have delivered mail in a small rowing boat.

2010-0383/23

Ellis Silas poster design, painting, 1946

This poster design, by Ellis Silas, shows the level of skill the Thames River Postman needed to deliver the post. The poster was sadly never produced.

POST 109/178, Facsimile

5: The last River Postman

Post Office Magazine, March 1951

Herbert Evans, towards the end of his time as River Postman, graces the cover of The Post Office Magazine (Vol. 12, No. 3, March 1951).

2023-0009/33

H. L. Evans last shift, steps, 1952

Herbert on his way home after his final round as River Postman. Much had changed during his 38 years in the role and there was no longer a need to have a dedicated postman in the Pool of London.

2023-0009/26

H. L. Evans, City of Ramsgate pub, 1952

H. L. Evans retired in 1952, aged 60, having served for 38 years as a River Postman. In recognition of his long service he was made a Freeman of the Watermen & Lightermen’s Company and awarded the Imperial Service Medal.

2023-0009/24

H. L. Evans doing the rounds, 1952

During his 38 years as the Thames River Postman, Herbert became a familiar face to many people who lived and worked on the river.

2023-0009/30

Second World War: 1939-1945

“I’m proud to say we’ve never yet failed to collect the mail – or at least some part of it – however bad the blitz. The fire bombs were our worst enemies – often the letters were charred beyond salvage.”
The Post Office handled all everyday communications at the start of the Second World War.

When a third of postal staff went away to fight, thousands of temporary workers, mainly women, took their places. They ran the mail, the telephone and the telegraph services. The Post Office also took on extra war duties, including helping distribute ration books, and food parcels to prisoners of war abroad.

Even though German air raids destroyed telephone exchanges, railways and sorting offices, communication systems had to keep running. The aim was that no area would be without posting facilities for more than 24 hours.

Object plinth - Telegram boys

This is one of the motorbikes the Post Office trialled for delivering telegrams in 1933.

Many of these motorbike riders were boys as young as 16. Officials made sure they underwent careful monitoring every six months to check for any health problems.

The Second World War saw the motorbike fleet triple in size to meet demand despite wartime petrol shortages. Messengers delivered vital intelligence and faced the unhappy task of bringing news of soldiers killed on the front line. They gained the nickname ‘Angels of Death’.
2009-0728/1

Please do not touch

Saving the mail

Deadly bombs fell on major cities during 76 terrible nights in 1940 and 1941. It was Hitler's attempt to break British morale.

Frederick Gurr was a postman in the City of London. Where bombs had damaged Post Offices or buried pillar boxes in rubble, he was determined to save the mail.

With few resources, he formed a salvage squad to try to recover letters from bomb sites.

He explained: "there was a feeling of satisfaction of something achieved that would mean a lot to many the letters belonged to, and in particular beating jerry at his work of destruction."

Image caption inside envelope:
The salvage squad excavating a bombed out safe at Moorgate Post Office.

The Jolly Postman Trail:

Let’s clear this and get the mail moving again!

Object plinth - George V Pillar Box, 1927-1935

During the Second World War, some pillar boxes were painted with white bands to avoid accidents during black-outs.

To help Air Raid Wardens detect gas during enemy raids some pillar boxes even had their caps painted with a special gas detector paint.
Unallocated-10022

Keeping lines open

“Girls we’ve got the British Empire Medal”.

With these words, Winifred Scanlan announced to her team the arrival of a letter officially recognising their war efforts.

Miss Scanlan was supervisor of the Post Office telephone exchange in the front-line town of Dover. During the Second World War, the town came under continual shelling and air raids, but Winifred led her all-woman team to stay at their posts and keep lines of communication open.

Image caption:
With hard hats at the ready, women telephonists ensured the telephone service continued, no matter what.

Object case 5 – The Post Office at home during the Second World War

1: Civil Defence Helmet, 1939-1945

Fifty thousand postal workers made up the Post Office Home Guard. If Britain was invaded they would defend telephone and telegraph systems. This helmet was issued for their protection.

E11539

2: Scrapbook, 1917-1945

Frederick Gurr kept scrapbooks charting his time in the Post Office, stuffed with letters, newspaper cuttings, photographs and handwritten notes.

2010-0013/01

3: Carbonised stamps, 29th-30th December 1940

Rescued from a safe inside the bombed out Moorgate Branch Office, these pages of stamps are completely charred and fused together but you can still see the perforations.

2010-0173

4: Shrapnel, 1940

A mail bag left Dover on 11 September 1940 during enemy bombardment. When the bag arrived in Reading, staff found this piece of shrapnel inside.

2002-0953

5: British Empire Medal, 1941

Awarded to Winifred Scanlan for maintaining in air raids “an efficient telephone service during periods of constant danger”. Her “courage and devotion to duty, set a fine example”.

2004-0024/01

6: Photograph album of bomb damage to Post Office buildings around the country, 1940-1941

Photographers needed a permit to record bomb sites. Not intended for public display, these images record the relentless destruction of telephone exchanges and Post Office buildings.

POST 56/44

Did the Blitz stop the mail?

Hell's corner

As Nazi bombings continued on Britain, industrial cities came under heavy attack.

Along with London, Birmingham and Manchester suffered badly. In Coventry, bombs hit factories and water, electricity and gas facilities. On one night in April 1941, 80 firebombs fell on the main Post Office and telephone exchange.

Dover, on Britain's south coast, was directly in the firing line too. Constantly bombarded, the area gained the name 'Hell's Corner' – but the town's postmaster, Arthur Mowbray, kept the postal service going with few delays.

Image captions:

Top: Targeted for its seafront location, this map shows bomb damage near Dover Post Office.

Middle: Mowbray was nicked ‘The Demon Postmaster’ after an American stamp-collector wrote to him at ‘Hell’s Corner’.

Bottom: Birmingham’s Victoria telephone exchange kept running despite structural damage from bombs on 22-23 November, 1940. © BT Heritage and Archives.

Hope in a letter

Prisoners of war faced all kinds of fears – but there was a civilised agreement between nations that their post would be carried free of charge.

Post Office Rifleman Samuel Trow wrote to his mother from a prisoner of war camp in 1916 after being captured by the Germans.

She had been told he was presumed killed in action in France. Now, he was very much alive and requesting: ‘a parcel of food every week, and put in jam, carbolic soap, butter, bread and you can fill it up with any sort of eatables and socks, handkerchiefs and as many cigs as you can afford.’

Image caption:
Mail van driver Fred Smith was a Prisoner of War in Japan during the Second World War.

Object case 6 - First World War Memorial Book, 1957

Handwritten memorial listing the names of all 8,858 postal workers killed in the First World War. This book was written by James Trezies and presented to the Post Office Fellowship of Remembrance in 1957.
2015-0094/1

Appendix – historic telephone signage text

Outside telephone:

Emergency calls

Do not insert any money, lift receiver and listen for dialling tone (a continuous purring sound).

Dial 999 ask operator for Fire, Police or Ambulance.

This telephone is at ____

For exchanges shown below: Lift receiver, insert four pennies. For _____ numbers, dial the number you want. For the following, dial the code, then the number you want.

Ashford (Mdx) – MX Betchworth – BE4 Biggin Hill – BN9	Hatfield – HL6 Hertford – HE3 Hoddesdon – HO3	Rickmansworth – RH9 Romford – RO Ruislip – RU4 St Albans – LN

Bowmansgreen – BM5 Byfleet – BY Caterham – CA4 Chertsey – ML5 Cobham (Sy) – CM6 Colnbrook – XM4 Crayford – CY Cuffley – CU4 Dartford – DA Denham – DE2 Egham – ET9 Epping – EP5 Erith – ET	Hornchurch – HX Ingrebourne – IL Kings Langley – KG4 Knockholt – KN2 Leatherhead – LE7 Limpsfield Chart – LP6 Lodge Hill – LO3 Mogador – MO4 Nazeing – NN7 Northwood – NL Nutfield Ridge – NT2 Orpington – MM	Slough- SL South Mimms – SM6 South Ockendon – SO0 Staines – SW Sunbury-on-Thames – SM8 Swakeleys – SK7 Swanley – SL5 Tadworth – TA3 Theydon Bois – TH9 Upper Warlingham – UA0 Uxbridge – UX Waltham Cross – WS

Esher – ES4 Farnborough (Kt) – FN Farningham – FA0 Garston – GR7 Gerrards Cross – GE4 Greenhithe – GR9 Harefield – HA0	Otford – TF0 Oxshott – XS0 Oxted – XT8 Park Street – PR6 Potters Bar – PR Purfleet – PX2 Radlett – RR9 Reigate – RE9	Walton-on-Thames – WT Watford – WA Welwyn Garden – WN West Drayton – WE3 Westerham – WS8 Weybridge – WR Woldingham – WO5

Insert four pennies, lift the receiver and wait for dialling tone. Dial the code shown against the exchange name followed by the number you require.

When your correspondent answers, press button ‘A’ before speaking.

For other exchanges, telegrams, information or assistance: do not insert coins, lift receiver, and dial 0.

CO22 (ND & UAX’s)

Frames Notice No. 30

Kiosk telephone:

Please be brief, as others may be waiting to use this call office.

To call a subscriber on _____ place four pennies in the slot, lift the receiver, wait for dialling tone (a continuous purring sound), and then dial the number you require. Do not press button ‘A’ yet.

The ringing tone (a tone of two beats repeated at regular intervals) means that the number is being rung.

When you hear your correspondent, press button ‘A’ and speak. Your correspondent cannot hear you until you have pressed button ‘A’. Do not depress the receiver rest, or you may be disconnected.

If there is no reply or if the line is engaged, or if the number is unobtainable press button ‘B’ and your money will be returned. A tone of one beat repeated at regular intervals means that the line is engaged. A continuous tone means that the number is unobtainable.

To call a subscriber on an exchange not shown above, or to telephone a telegram:

Do not insert coins, lift the receiver, wait for dialling tone, and then dial ‘O’.

When the operator answers ask for the exchange and number, or the service you require, and give the exchange and number of this telephone-

The operator will tell you when to insert coin s. Press button ‘A’ when your correspondent answers or when the operator asks you.

To recall the operator:

Move the receiver rest slowly down and up until the operator answers.

In case of difficulty, or for information:

If you have attempted to make a call, replace the receiver on the rest for a few seconds. If you have inserted coins, regain them by pressing button ‘B’. Do not insert coins, lift the receiver, wait for dialling tone, and dial ‘O’.

You can telephone your Greetings Telegrams from here

You may telephone them any day in advance – the Post Office will see that they are delivered early on the day you name.

2 words for 2 shillings – 1 ½ d for each additional word

Be prepared

Be thrifty

Save through the Post Office Savings Bank

Emergency Calls

Do not insert any money

Lift receiver and listen for dialling tone (a continuous purring sound)

Dial 999

Ask operator for Fire, Police or Ambulance. This telephone is at ____