Royal Mail
The Real Network

Key dates
in Post Office history

1635, July 31
Proclamation of King Charles I allows the public to use his Royal Mail.

1642
Civil War disrupts the service as ownership of the Post Office becomes hotly disputed between the Earl of Warwick and Edmund Prideaux.

1653
Post Office management is 'farmed out' (or franchised) to the highest bidder.

1654
An Ordinance issued by the Government of Oliver Cromwell states that the Office of Postage is to be the only carrier of letters in England, Scotland and Ireland.

1657
An Act of Parliament fixes rates for sending letters and establishes the system for the British Isles.

1660
Upon King Charles II's restoration, an Act of Parliament re-establishes the General Post Office, legalising the provisions of the 1657 Act.

1661, January 16
Henry Bishop is appointed first Postmaster General. First date stamps 'Bishop marks' are used on a letter.

1677
'Farming' is discontinued. The Duke of York, aided by Colonel Roger Whitley, takes over the management of The Post Office.

1680
A London Penny Post is set up by merchant William Dockwra.

1682
Dockwra post is closed for infringement of the Royal Post monopoly. Re-opens two weeks later (November) as an official Post Office service.

1715
A team of Post Office surveyors is appointed to discover the recent evasion of postage.

1720
Ralph Allen takes charge of the By- and cross-road letters. This network of cross posts sets up for the first time direct links between major towns.

1765
An Act of Parliament permits local Penny Posts in major towns outside London (but not implemented until 1773).

1784, August 2
First mail coach service runs between Bristol and London via Bath, organised by theatre manager and entrepreneur John Palmer.

1790
The first system of recording and numbering papers was introduced by the Post Office Headquarters. Indexes to these papers survive in the archives, providing information about the principal activities of The Post Office nationwide.

1793
London's General Post letter carriers are issued with a uniform.

1808
First British Army Base Post Office manned by staff from the GPO, set up in Lisbon during the Peninsular War.

1830
Letters are first carried by rail on the newly opened Manchester & Liverpool railway.

1832
Letter carrier John Barrett is the last Post Office employee to be hanged for stealing mail.

1837
First publication of Rowland Hill's pamphlet on Post Office Reform.

1838, January 20
The Travelling Post Office makes its first journey on which mail is sorted.

1839, December 5
Uniform 4d postage introduced.

1840, January 10
Uniform penny postage is introduced, establishing national minimum price of one penny. Postage rates now based on weight regardless of distance.

1840, May 6
The Penny Black, the world's first adhesive postage stamp, becomes valid.

1841, January 6
Registered letters are introduced for a fee of one shilling.

The Penny Black is replaced by Penny Red stamp.

1846, January
Last London-based mail coach leaves for Norwich.

Book post starts. All books, newspapers and other printed paper in open covers can be sent at a special lower rate.

1852
The first British road-side pillar boxes are erected in St. Helier, Jersey.

1853
First pillar boxes are set up on mainland Britain.

1854
Rowland Hill is appointed Secretary to The Post Office.

1858
London is divided into ten separate postal districts based on the points of a compass, eg. N, SE, etc.

1861, September 16
The Post Office Savings Bank opens.

1870
The Post Office is given control of the telegraph service.

The Post Office introduces prepaid postcards costing ½d.

1880
For the first time, in Coventry, The Post Office uses cycles to deliver mail.

1881
Postal Orders are introduced.

1882, July 22
Queen Victoria authorises an 'Army Post Office Corps' – formed as a company of the 24th Battalion, The Middlesex Volunteers (The Post Office Rifles).

1883, August 1
Parcel post service is introduced. Letter carriers are re-titled postmen as a result.

1887
Long-distance horse-drawn mail coaches are re-introduced to carry parcels.

1894
The Post Office allows privately printed (illustrated) postcards to be posted.

1897
Free mail delivery is extended to every household in United Kingdom to mark Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

Experiments in motorised transport start with a steam-driven mail van between London and Redhill.

1905
Parcel mail coaches are motorised.

1911, September
World's first scheduled air mail service, between Hendon and Windsor, marks the coronation of George V.

1912
The Post Office takes over the National Telephone Co. providing a unified telephone system throughout most of Britain.

1917
The sub-districts of London are numbered (eg. E3, N18).

1919
The world's first public overseas airmail service begins between London and Paris.

The Post Office purchases its own fleet of motorised vehicles.

1924
First British commemorative stamp is issued. Marks the opening of the British Empire Exhibition.

1927, December 3
The Post Office Underground Railway opens, running east-west beneath London.

1933
GPO Film Unit is established.

1935

Greetings Telegram service starts.

Two mechanical letter sorting machines, Transormas, are installed at Brighton.

1937

Empire Airmail Scheme is introduced to carry first class mail through the British Empire at a standard rate per half ounce.

1942

Airgraph service is extended to the public until July 1945.

1948

Helicopter trials begin following experiments in 1947. 'Live' mail is carried between Peterborough and Great Yarmouth.

1957

First sorting and cancelling of mail by Automatic Letter Facing machine at Southampton.

1959

Postcode trials begin in Norwich.

1959/60

First stamps with phosphor banding are produced to aid mechanical sorting.

1960

First coding of mail with phosphor dots takes place at Luton.

1966

Post coding of the UK begins at Croydon using an improved format evolved from the Norwich experiment.

1967

First postbus route opens between Llangarig and Llanidloes in Powys, mid-Wales.

1968, September 16

British Post Office is first in world to introduce first and second class letter service.

1968, October 18

The Post Office's new banking service, National Giro (later called Girobank) opens.

1969, October 1

The Post Office ceases to be a Government department and becomes a nationalised industry.

1970, March

Datapost is launched, a courier-style delivery service.

1974

Postcoding of all addresses in the UK is completed with the re-coding of Norwich.

1979, July 2

Inland airmail network, Skynet, begins, based at Liverpool's Speke airport.

1980, June 17

Intelpost (the first public electronic mail service) is launched with a letter sent via satellite from London to Toronto.

1981

The British Telecommunications Act 1981 transfers telecommunications services to a new corporation (British Telecom) and redefines responsibilities of The Post Office.

1986

Post Office functions are organised into three separate businesses – Royal Mail Letters, Royal Mail Parcels and Post Office Counters – under a corporate Group Centre.

1987

Post Office Counters becomes a limited company – Post Office Counters Limited, a wholly-owned subsidiary of The Post Office.

1990

Parcelforce is launched as an independent division with full control of its operation.

Girobank is sold to the Alliance & Leicester Building Society.

Sunday collections are re-introduced nationwide after a gap of 14 years.

1997

A new road and rail hub officially opens in North West London.

1999

The Government issues a White Paper on Post Office Reform allowing the Post Office greater commercial freedom.

2000, January

Postal Service Bill is published, providing The Post Office with new commercial freedoms and plc status, whilst giving a commitment to a universal postal service.

2001, March 26

The Post Office becomes a plc, but the business brand names stay the same – Royal Mail, Parcelforce Worldwide and Post Office for the network of high street Post Office branches.

How to proceed with your research

Unfortunately, we are unable to conduct research for you and customers are advised that they will need to visit the archives themselves (or arrange for someone to come in their place). If this is impractical a list of independent record agents can be obtained from:

> The Joint Secretaries & Treasurers
> Association of Genealogists & Record Agents
> 29 Badgers Close
> HORSHAM
> RH12 5RU

Our public search room has photocopying facilities and microfilm reader printers. Trained staff are available to assist visitors.

The search room is open from 9am to 4.15pm Monday to Friday.

No appointment is necessary, but proof of identity is required.

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