



## When Postage was only a Penny

Today we take the humble postage stamp very much for granted: we just lick the sticky side and slap those small pieces of coloured paper onto our envelopes without even thinking about what we are doing. It is therefore difficult to believe that 200 years ago postage stamps were unknown, envelopes were considered a rare luxury, and no-one had ever dreamed of providing street-corner pillar-boxes or making slits in their front doors. The postman, who now calls as regularly as clockwork, was then a rare visitor whose knock at the door was regarded by some as more of a menace than a blessing. All this changed exactly 150 years ago as a result of the reforms of the remarkable inventor Sir Rowland Hill (1795-1879).

The purpose of the postal service in 1830 was much the same as when the system had first been designed in 1635: it was there to yield the highest possible revenues for the Crown, not to provide a cheap and convenient service for the public. Various improvements had taken place during the 18th century to speed up the carriage of mails, but these had done little to reduce the costs of postage for the ordinary person, for letters were still charged according to distance, method of transport, and number of sheets of paper.

One of the leading critics of the Post Office was Charles Knight, Superintendent of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, an organisation aiming to educate the labouring classes.

Knight produced several newspapers, and it irritated him that although these were carried free by the Post Office, taxes had to be paid both on the newspapers themselves and on the paper on which they were printed. In 1834 he put forward the suggestion that "this odious tax on knowledge" could be abolished by using penny-stamp wrappers on newspapers as a way of prepaying postage.

As protests continued, other faults of the system emerged. It was considered bad manners to pay in advance for the sending of letters, so the burden of payment rested on the recipient. This not only meant that the postman had to waste his

▽ Sir Rowland Hill, whose ideas revolutionised the postal service in England and throughout the rest of the world.

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time knocking on doors and collecting money, but also that he became a target for footpads and robbers. The price of postage for a single sheet of paper — 4d for up to 15 miles, and 8d for up to 80 miles — discouraged the writing of letters at a time when many workmen earned no more than 7s 6d a week, and those who were forced to use the post would often resort to writing in every margin and corner of the paper to avoid having to use extra sheets. Envelopes were used only by the rich as they were charged the same as a separate piece of paper.

Great peculiarities existed; a letter sent from London to Edinburgh, for example, cost 1s 1½d if sent by road, but only 8d if sent by coastal steamer. One of the worst abuses of all was that Members of Parliament could send letters free of charge by "franking" them with their signatures. As a result, they were frequently given free shares and other benefits by companies hoping to make use of this privilege.

All of these abuses were highlighted in January 1837 by the publication of an important pamphlet, *Post Office Reform: its Importance and Practicability*. The author was the 41-year-old schoolmaster and inventor Rowland Hill, who was promptly summoned to give evidence before one of the several Commissions of Inquiry appointed to look into the management of the Post Office. It was there that he first proposed the use of printed stationery to extend Charles Knight's scheme of prepaying postage to all mail, and not just newspapers.

Hill's suggested method of prepayment was startlingly simple: all letters would be charged, irrespective of distance, one penny for each half ounce in weight. His detailed and revolutionary proposals for a uniform nationwide system of cheap postal charges took the country by storm, and by August 1839, in spite of the protests by the Post Office Secretary, Colonel Maberley, public pressure had resulted in steps being taken in Parliament to pave the way for reform.

Among the methods of proof of prepayment suggested by Hill was the use of "small stamps . . . to be attached to the letter . . . by means of a glutinous wash at the back" — in other words, the postage stamps so familiar to us today. Whilst there is now little doubt that the original idea was Hill's, the honour of having first put it into practice must go to James Chalmers, a Dundee bookseller who also invented the modern postmark, bearing the date and name of the town in which a letter is posted. Chalmers realised that postmarks were necessary to cancel postage stamps and to prevent their re-use. His "essays", or trial stamps, were among the 2,600 entries in a competition launched by the Treasury to find the best method of proving prepayment of postage. Whilst none of the entries were considered entirely suitable, Hill believed it would be





◁ This 1909 photograph was taken in Evesham, a quiet market town on the banks of the River Avon in Worcestershire. The bronze cannon was one of several captured at Sevastopol during the Crimean War. It is metal from these cannons that is used to make the Victoria Cross medals. The two children — one tiny tot balanced precariously on the huge gun, the other standing hands clasped in rigid pose — watch the camera, blissfully unaware of the havoc once wreaked by such a gun.



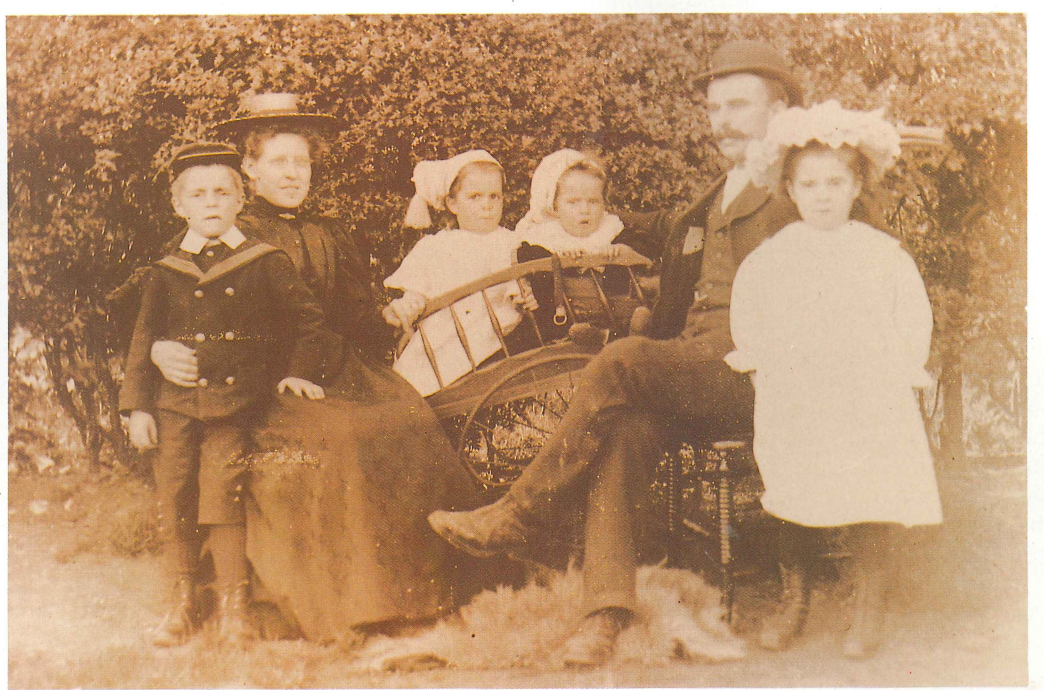
△ Harvest time at North Walsham in Norfolk, and an elegant Edwardian lady rests a while by a stook of freshly cut wheat. Although it must have been a joy to cycle along the quiet country roads in those far-off days before the invasion of the motor-car, it could not have been easy wearing an ankle-length skirt.

▷ Mr. John Chidlow and his family in 1894. All wore hats and were dressed in their Sunday best for the all-important family photograph. The youngest little girl went to live in Canada after the First World War and for the family she left in England this and similar family snapshots became treasured possessions.

Photographs kindly sent in by readers, Miss M. Foulkes of Shawbury, Shropshire; Mrs A. Swayle of Worthing, Sussex; Mrs A. Rollason of Selly Oak, Birmingham; Miss D.M. Croft of Basingstoke, Hampshire and Mr. R. Jarvis of Worcester.



△ Indian clubs and skipping ropes are clutched proudly by these eager young members of a gymnastics class as they surround their equally proud teacher. Indian clubs were weighted wooden exercise aids and once formed an Olympic discipline. They have now virtually disappeared, due possibly to the potential hazard to bystanders when used by the unskilled gymnast!





possible to combine some of the brightest ideas to produce a perfect solution.

In the meantime, public demand for the introduction of Uniform Penny Postage and the abolition of "franking" had forced the Government to put these measures into effect on 10th January 1840 — before the method of stamping had been properly worked out. The temporary system of paying over the post office counter for each individual letter was slow and unsatisfactory, but the young Queen Victoria set a fine example by declaring that from henceforth she would pay postage on all her letters.

It is surprising to us today that the main solution chosen by Hill was that of the printed envelope, and that the postage stamp was merely a secondary measure for use when the supply of these "covers" ran low. The task of producing a design suitable for the envelopes went to Sir William Mulready of the Royal Academy who chose a symbolic picture representing the glories of the British Empire and the advantages of the new postal system. These "Mulready Covers" were issued on 1st May 1840. Although some people appreciated Hill's efforts enough to hand-colour the figures and animals on the envelopes, *The Times* newspaper attacked the design as too fanciful. The most serious disadvantages of the "stamped covers", however, were that they were sold by town booksellers at a profit, that they were very difficult to obtain in small communities, and that they often added to the weight and therefore the cost of postage.

▽How a London Letter Carrier would have looked during the period from 1793 to 1855. His uniform comprised a beaver hat, scarlet coat and blue cloth waistcoat. POST OFFICE COPYRIGHT



△Four of the famous Penny Black stamps depicting Queen Victoria's head.

▷A pillar-box from the Victorian period, now preserved at Beamish Open Air Museum, County Durham.

MICHAEL JACKSON



In the end all the "Mulreadies" had to be withdrawn.

It was in this way that the "adhesive postage label", or our own familiar postage stamp, came into its own. The first person to think of putting Queen Victoria's head on a stamp had been William Wyon, Chief Engraver to the Royal Mint, who had designed a medal bearing such a head for the Queen's Coronation visit to the City of London in 1838. Hill decided to make use of this feature on his postage stamps, and he also incorporated other ideas, including watermarked paper and an embossed or engraved background as security against forgery.

So it was that the famous "Penny Black" stamp was born. Hill decided to produce sheets of 240 stamps, so that each sheet of 1d stamps would be worth £1. The finished stamps were ready for sale on 1st May 1840.

The Penny Black postage stamps were immediately popular, 600,000 being sold on the first day. They were not valid for postage until May 6th, but everyone was eager to be the first to send a letter stamped with a Penny Black.

Soon a serious problem emerged: clever members of the public were beginning to find ways of re-using stamps by removing the Post Office cancellations. Rowland Hill spent much time trying to find a cancellation which could not be removed without damaging the stamp underneath,

and in the end he discovered that the answer was black printer's ink. This was perfectly suitable for the "Twopence Blue", but no use at all for the "Penny Black". So, in 1841, the world's most famous stamp was replaced by the new "Penny Red".

A year later a change of Government resulted in Hill being dismissed from the Post Office without any reward for his services. The outcry was intense, and in June 1846 he was presented with a testimonial of £13,000 collected by public subscription. Another change in Government resulted in him becoming first Secretary, and then Chief Secretary, to the Postmaster General.

He remained in office until 1864, and in the meantime brought about many other reforms, including the introduction in 1849 of the roadside pillar-boxes and front-door letter-boxes so essential to today's postal system. In return, Hill was showered with honours, including a Fellowship of the Royal Society in 1857 and a knighthood in 1860. Perhaps his greatest reward, however, was the fact that by the time of his death in 1879, over 30 countries throughout the world were making use of postage stamps, and nowadays it is impossible to imagine life without them. So, next time you lick a postage stamp or put a letter in a pillar-box, think of the untiring work of Sir Rowland Hill who made it all possible!

NICHOLAS BARRETT





*Parlour Poetry* is a regular feature appearing in alternate issues of the magazine (Spring and Autumn) in which readers respond to your requests for further details of half-forgotten, half-remembered verse.

If you can answer the appeals please write direct to the readers concerned, for which reason we publish their full names and addresses. *This England* just likes to be kept informed of successful answers so that we can publish the missing poems, occasionally, for the delight of all our readers.

#### THE VALUE OF SLEEP

Margaret Jenvey of Tunbridge Wells, Kent, received a most generous and speedy response to her request under this heading (Spring 1989). She plans to write to all 24 people who kindly sent her the poem (except for the one with no address). Most readers agreed with Mrs. W. Browne of Albury, Surrey, that the poem was by Charles Mackay and went:

#### A SUMMING UP

I have lived and I have loved;  
I have waked and I have slept;  
I have sung and I have danced;  
I have smiled and I have wept;  
I have won and wasted treasure;  
I have had my fill of pleasure;  
And all these things were weariness,  
And some of them were dreariness,  
And all these things, but two things,  
Were emptiness and pain:  
And Love — it was the best of them;  
And Sleep — worth all the rest of them.

#### SCARLET POPPIES

A reader from South Africa has been able to help Charles Orme of Axminster, Devon, in his search for a poem that he had learnt at school in the 1920s (Autumn 1988). He was delighted to receive the complete words and he has sent them to us, so that other readers can share in his pleasure.

#### ON THE YORKSHIRE COAST

I sat by the scarlet poppies,  
Near the sands on the sunken shore,  
The hedges rustled above me,  
As the warm wind wandered o'er.

It passed from the brimming river  
To the waves that died at my feet,  
O'er the fields of bearded barley,  
Deep meadow and yellow wheat.

I heard it speak to the corn fields,  
I heard it speak to the sea,  
Had it no message I wondered,  
Nothing to whisper to me?

Tell me, oh bending corn fields,  
What did the soft wind say?  
The wheat and the poppies answered,  
Whispered of sunny mirth,  
Of the wealth of the coming harvest,  
And the gifts of the goodly earth.

Its breath was the blended odour  
Of fruit and flowers and corn,  
Pure as the noon-day heaven,  
Fresh as the early morn.

But the great blue sea gave answer,  
It came from the laughing land,  
It breathed of joy as it hurried  
Over the glistening sand.

But its gladness grew to yearning,  
As it sank on my boundless breast,  
And it wandered away for ever,  
And could not find its rest.

It could not find its haven  
It drooped and it yearned to die,  
The voice of its noon-day laughter  
Was hushed in a weary sigh.

It sighed — oh joy and sunshine,  
I fathomed your deepest deep,  
And depths were still beneath it,  
It sighed and fell asleep.

#### THE GOOSEY BRIDE

So far no-one has been able to remember the words to a poem, requested by Mrs. E.M. Hill of Chorleywood, Hertfordshire (Spring 1989), about a new bride who plucked a goose while it was still alive. Mrs. Mary Johnson from Fairford, Gloucestershire, tells us that it reminds her of a similar poem that her mother recited in the late 1890s. Mrs. Johnson can now only remember snatches of the words, but in this



poem the geese appeared to be dead when they were plucked, but were really intoxicated after drinking cherry brandy thrown out of the kitchen window by the cook! Luckily, they woke up in the nick of time and "waddled off one by one". Kind folk took pity on them and "set to work with care and made them pattens (clogs)" to put on their feet "to keep them out of the wet" and "bonnets to put on their heads, for the sun's like summer yet". She thinks they were given cloaks too — and must have looked just like a flock of Jemima Puddle-ducks!

#### MUSICAL MEMORIES

SIR: I enjoy reading *This England* and "Parlour Poetry" brings back memories of long ago. I am 83 now and when a young man, before the days of radio and TV, I belonged to a concert party and spent many happy hours round the piano on Sunday evenings after church. My special part was to give musical recitations and I have through the years given a fair number by different composers. The concert party I am sorry to say, owing to the change time brings, is now finished — but what happy memories it leaves. One of the monologues I used to perform was called "The Eleventh Hour" by Herbert Swallowfield, and the music was by Frederick Mullen — E.L. REEVE, KETTERING, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE.

#### THE ELEVENTH HOUR

Have you still got your tin hat with you,  
Old pal, who has gone before?  
Do you still wear the dear old uniform,  
That I knew in the days of war?  
What is it like there across the border,  
Now you have taken the long, long trail?  
Do you wake to the call of "Reveille",  
And still hear "Retreat's" last wail?

Grand, grand was your smile at our parting,  
And the look in your fading eyes,  
As you signed your transfer papers,  
For the Army beyond the skies,  
I would have liked to have seen your greeting  
At the Heavenly Barrack Gate,  
When the Great White Chief with outstretched  
hand,  
Says, "Welcome and well done, mate".

Old pal, we miss you badly,  
You were always a real good sort,  
And we gather together once a year,  
Just to think of you, old sport,  
And we are wondering very sadly,  
If you are thinking of us that way,  
As the clock booms out the eleventh hour,  
Of the eleventh month and day.

Goodbye old boy, I must leave you,  
Things are not too good down here,  
But we are playing the game as you did,  
For the sake of memory dear,  
And perchance at the last "Reveille",  
When the Great Chief calls His men,  
I too shall be there beside you,  
With my hand in yours again.