

# **A Hundred Years by Post**

**A JUBILEE RETROSPECT**

**BY**

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**TO**  
**THE RIGHT HONOURABLE**  
**HENRY CECIL RAIKES, M.P.**  
**HER MAJESTY'S POSTMASTER-GENERAL,**  
**THE FOLLOWING PAGES ARE,**  
**BY PERMISSION,**  
**RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED.**

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## **PREFACE.**

The following pages give some particulars of the changes that have taken place in the Post Office service during the past hundred years; and the matter may prove interesting, not only on account of the changes themselves, but in respect of the influence which the growing usefulness of the Postal Service must necessarily have upon almost every relation of political, educational, social, and commercial life. More especially may the subject be found attractive at the close of the present year, when the country has been celebrating the Jubilee of the Penny Post.

EDINBURGH,  
*December 1890.*

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[Frontispiece.]

**MAIL-COACH IN THUNDERSTORM.**  
(From a print, 1827.)

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[Pg 1]

## **A HUNDRED YEARS BY POST.**

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Were a former inhabitant of this country who had quitted the stage of life towards the close of last century to reappear in our midst, he could not fail to be struck with the wonderful changes which have taken place in the aspect of things; in the methods of performing the tasks of daily life; and in the character of our social system generally. Nor is it too much to say that he would see himself surrounded by a world full of enchantment, and that his senses of wonder and admiration would rival the feelings excited in youthful minds under the spell of books like Jules Verne's *Journey to the Moon*, or the ever-entertaining stories of the *Arabian Nights*. It is true that he would find the operations of nature going on as before. The dewdrop and the blade of grass,[Pg 2] sunshine and shower, the movements of the tides, and the revolutions of the heavenly bodies; these would still appear to be the same. But almost everything to which man had been wont to put his hand would appear to bear the impress of

some other hand; and a hundred avenues of thought opening to his bewildered sense would consign his inward man to the education of a second childhood.

So fruitful has been the nineteenth century in discovery and invention, and so astounding the advancement made, that it is only by stopping in our madding haste and looking back that we can realise how different the present is from the past. Yet to our imaginary friend's astonished perception, nothing, we venture to think, would come with greater force than the contrast between the means available for keeping up communications in his day and in our own. We are used to see trains coursing on the iron way at a speed of fifty or sixty miles an hour; steamships moving on every sea, defiant of tide and wind, at the rate of fifteen or [Pg 3] twenty miles an hour; and the electric telegraph outstripping all else, and practically annihilating time and space.

But how different was the state of things at the close of the eighteenth century! The only means then available for home communications—that is for letters, etc.—were the Foot Messenger, the Horse Express, and the Mail Coach; and for communication with places beyond the sea, sailing-ships.

The condition of things as then existing, and as reflected upon society, is thus summed up by Mackenzie in his *History of the Nineteenth Century*: "Men had scarcely the means to go from home beyond such trivial distance as they were able to accomplish on foot. Human society was composed of a multitude of little communities, dwelling apart, mutually ignorant, and therefore cherishing mutual antipathies."

And when persons did venture away from home, in the capacity of travellers, the entertainment they received in the hostelries, even in some of the larger towns, seems now rather remarkable. If anything [Pg 4] surprises the traveller of these latter days, in regard to hotel accommodation, when business or pleasure takes him from the bosom of his family, it is the sumptuous character of the palaces in all the principal towns of all civilised countries wherein he may be received, and where he may make his temporary abode. To persons used to such comforts, the accommodation of the last century would excite surprise in quite another direction. Here is a description of the inn accommodation of Edinburgh, furnished by Captain Topham, who visited Edinburgh in 1774: "On my first arrival, my companion and self, after the fatigue of a long day's journey, were landed at one of these stable-keepers (for they have modesty enough to give themselves no higher denomination) in a part of the town called the Pleasance; and, on entering the house, we were conducted by a poor devil of a girl, without shoes or stockings, and with only a single linsey-woolsey petticoat which just reached half-way to her ankles, into a room where about twenty Scotch [Pg 5] drovers had been regaling themselves with whisky and potatoes. You may guess our amazement when we were informed that this was the best inn in the metropolis—that we could have no beds unless we had an inclination to sleep together, and in the same room with the company which a stage-coach had that moment discharged."

Before proceeding further, let us look at some of the circumstances which were characteristic of the period with which we are dealing. Liberty of the subject and public opinion are inseparably wedded together, and this seems inevitable in every country whose government partakes largely of the representative system. For in such States, unlike the conditions which obtain under despotic governments, the laws are formulated and amended in accordance with the views held for the time being by *the people*, the Government merely acting as the agency through which the people's will is declared. And this being so, what is called the Liberty of the subject must be that limited and circumscribed freedom allowed [Pg 6] by the people collectively, as expressed in the term "public opinion," to the individual man. In despotic



States the circumstances are necessarily different, and such States may be excluded from the present consideration.

Wherever there is wanting a quick and universal exchange of thought there can be no sound public opinion. Where hindrances are placed upon the free exchange of views, either by heavy duties on newspapers, by dear postage, or by slow communications, public opinion must be a plant of low vitality and slow growth. Consequently, in the age preceding that of steam, so far as applied to locomotion, and to the telegraph, which age extended well into the present century, there was no rapid exchange of thought; new ideas were of slow propagation; there was little of that intellectual friction so productive of intellectual light among the masses. In these circumstances it is not surprising to read of things existing within the last hundred years which to-day could have no place in our national existence. Lord Cockburn, in the *Memorials of his Time*, [Pg 7] gives the following instance. "I knew a case, several years after 1800," says he, "where the seat-holders of a town church applied to Government, which was the patron, for the promotion of the second clergyman, who had been giving great satisfaction for many years, and now, on the death of the first minister, it was wished that he should get the vacant place. The answer, written by a Member of the Cabinet, was that the single fact of the people having interfered so far as to express a wish was conclusive against what they desired; and another appointment was instantly made." Going back a little more than a hundred years, the following are specimens of the abuses then in full vigour. They are referred to in Trevelyan's *Early History of Charles James Fox*, the period in question being about 1750-60: "One nobleman had eight thousand a year in sinecures, and the colonelcies of three regiments. Another, an Auditor of the Exchequer, inside which he never looked, had £8000 in years of peace, and £20,000 in years of war. A third, with nothing to [Pg 8] recommend him except his outward graces, bowed and whispered himself into four great employments, from which thirteen to fourteen hundred British guineas flowed month by month into the lap of his Parisian mistress."... "George Selwyn, who returned two members, and had something to say in the election of a third, was at one and the same time Surveyor-General of Crown Lands, which he never surveyed, Registrar in Chancery at Barbadoes, which he never visited, and Surveyor of the Meltings and Clerk of the Irons in the Mint, where he showed himself once a week in order to eat a dinner which he ordered, but for which the nation paid."

The shameful waste of the public money in the shape of hereditary pensions was still in vigour within the period we are dealing with; one small party in the State "calling the tune," and the great mass of the people, practically unrepresented, being left "to pay the piper." During the reign of George III., who occupied the throne from 1760 to 1820, the following hereditary pensions were [Pg 9] granted:—To Trustees for the use of William Penn, and his heirs and descendants for ever, in consideration of his meritorious services and family losses from the American war £4000. To Lord Rodney, and every the heirs-male to whom the title of Lord Rodney shall descend, £2000. To Earl Morley and John Campbell, Esq., and their heirs and assignees for ever, upon trust for the representatives of Jeffrey Earl Amherst, £3000. To Viscount Exmouth and the heirs-male to whom the title shall descend £2000. To Earl Nelson and the heirs-male to whom the title of Earl Nelson shall descend, with power of settling jointures out of the annuity, at no time exceeding £3000 a year, £5000. In addition to this pension of £5000, Parliament also granted to trustees on behalf of Earl Nelson a sum of £90,000 for the purchase of an estate and mansion-house to be settled and entailed to the same persons as the annuity of £5000.

Within the Post Office too very strange things happened in connection with money paid to certain persons supposed to be in its [Pg 10] service. Here is a case, in the form of a



remonstrance, referring to the period close upon the end of last century, which explains itself. "Mr. Bushe observes that the Government wished to reward his father, Gervas Parker Bushe (who was one of the Commissioners), for his services, and particularly for having increased the revenue £20,000 per annum; but that he preferred a place for his son to any emolument for himself, in consequence of which he was appointed Resident Surveyor. He expressed his astonishment to find in the Patent (which he never looked into before) that it is there mentioned 'during good behaviour,' and not for life, upon which condition alone his father would have accepted it. He adds that it was given to him as totally and absolutely a sinecure, and that his appointment took place at so early a period of life that it would be impossible for him to do any duty."

Again, the following evidence was given before a Commission on oath in 1791, by Mr. Johnson, a letter-carrier in London:[Pg 11] "He receives at present a salary as a letter-carrier of 14s. per week, making £36, 19s. per annum; he likewise receives certain perquisites, arising from such pence as are collected in the evening by letters delivered to him after the Receiving Houses are shut, amounting in 1784 to £38, 11s., also from acknowledgments from the public for sending letters by another letter-carrier not immediately within his walk, amounting in the same year to £5. He likewise receives in Christmas boxes £20,—the above sums, making together £100, was the whole of his receipts of every kind whatever by virtue of his office in 1784 (312 candles and a limited allowance of stationery excepted), out of which he pays a person for executing his duty as a letter-carrier, at the rate of 8s. a week, being £20, 16s. per annum, and retains the remainder for his own use entirely."

In a report made by a Commission which inquired into the state of the Post Office in 1788, the following statement appears respecting abuses existing in the [Pg 12]department; and in reflecting upon that period the Post Office servants of to-day might almost entertain feelings of regret that they did not live in the happy days of feasts, coals, and candles. Here is the statement of the Commissioners: "The custom of giving certain annual feasts to the officers and clerks of this office (London) at the public expense ought to be abolished; as also what is called the feast and drink money; and, as the Inland Office now shuts at an early hour, the allowances of lodging money to some of the officers, and of apartments to others, ought to be discontinued." But of all allowances, those of coals and candles are the most enormous; for, besides those consumed in the official apartments, there are allowed to sundry officers for their private use in town or country above three hundred chaldrons of coals, and twenty thousand pounds of candles, which several of them commute with the tradesmen for money or other articles; the amount of the sums paid for these two articles in the year 1784 was £4418, 4s. 1d.

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In the year 1792 a payment was being made of £26 a year to a Mrs. Collier, who was servant to the Bye and Cross Road Office in the London Post Office; but she did not do the work herself. She employed a servant to whom she paid £6, putting £20 into her own pocket.

What a splendid field this would have been for the Comptroller and Auditor General, and for questioners in the Houses of Parliament!

An abuse that had its origin no doubt in the fact that the nation was not represented at large,<sup>[1]</sup> but by Members of Parliament who were returned by a very limited class, and who could not understand or reflect the views of the masses, was that of the franking privilege.

The privilege of franking letters enjoyed by Members of Parliament was a sad burden upon the Revenue of the Post Office, and it continued in vigour down to the establishment of the

Penny Post. Some idea of the magnitude of this arrangement, which would [Pg 14] now be called a gross abuse, will be gathered from the state of things existing in the first quarter of the present century. Looking at the regulations of 1823, we find that each Member of Parliament was permitted to receive as many as fifteen and to send as many as ten letters in each day, such letters not exceeding one ounce in weight. At the then rates of postage this was a most handsome privilege. In the year 1827 the Peers enjoying this extent of free postage numbered over four hundred, and the Commons over six hundred and fifty. In addition to these, certain Members of the Government and other high officials had the privilege of sending free any number of letters without restriction as to weight. These persons were, in 1828, nearly a hundred in number.

How the privilege was turned to commercial account is explained in Mackenzie's, *Reminiscences of Glasgow*. Referring to the Ship Bank of that city, which had its existence in the first quarter of our century, and to one of the partners, Mr. John Buchanan of Ardoch, who was also Member of [Pg 15] Parliament for Dumbartonshire, the author makes the following statement: "From his position as Member of Parliament, he enjoyed the privilege of franking the letters of the bank to the extent of fourteen per diem. This was a great boon; it saved the bank some hundreds of pounds per annum for postages. It was, moreover, regarded as a mighty honour."

Great abuses were perpetrated even upon the abuse itself. Franks were given away freely to other persons for their use, they were even sold, and, moreover, they were forged. Senex, in his notes on *Glasgow Past and Present*, describes how this was managed in Ireland. "I remember," says he, "about sixty years ago, an old Irish lady told me that she seldom paid any postage for letters, and that her correspondence never cost her friends anything. I inquired how she managed that. 'Oh,' said she, 'I just wrote "Free, J. Suttie," in the corner of the cover of the letter, and then, sure, nothing more was charged for it.' I said, 'Were you not afraid of being hanged for forgery?' 'Oh, dear me, no,' she replied; [Pg 16] 'nobody ever heard of a lady being hanged in Ireland, and troth, I just did what everybody else did.'" But the spirit of inquiry was beginning to assert itself in the first half of the century, and the franking privilege disappeared with the dawn of cheap postage.

Public opinion had as yet no active existence throughout our Commonwealth, nor had the light spread so as to show up all the abuses. And how true is Buckle's observation in his *History of Civilisation* that all recent legislation is the undoing of bad laws made in the interest of certain classes. How could there be an active public opinion in the conditions of the times? Everybody was shut off from everybody else. Hear further what Mackenzie says in his *History of the Nineteenth Century*, referring to the end of last century: "The seclusion resulting from the absence of roads rendered it necessary that every little community, in some measure every family, should produce all that it required to consume. The peasant raised his own food; he grew his own flax or wool; his [Pg 17] wife or daughter spun it; and a neighbour wove it into cloth. He learned to extract dyes from plants which grew near his cottage. He required to be independent of the external world from which he was effectively shut out. Commerce was impossible until men could find the means of transferring commodities from the place where they were produced to the place where there were people willing to make use of them." So much for the difficulty of exchanging ordinary produce. The exchange of thought suffered in a like fashion.

In the first half of the present century severe restrictions were placed upon the spread of news, not only by the heavy postage for letter correspondence, but by the equally heavy newspaper tax. Referring to this latter hindrance to the spread of light Mackenzie says: "The newspaper

is the natural enemy of despotic government, and was treated as such in England. Down to 1765 the duty imposed was only one penny, but as newspapers grew in influence the restraining tax was increased from time to [Pg 18] time, until in 1815 it reached the maximum of fourpence." At this figure the tax seems to have continued many years, for under the year 1836 Mackenzie refers to it as such, and remarks, "that this rendered the newspaper a very occasional luxury to the working man; that the annual circulation of newspapers in the United Kingdom was no more than thirty-six million copies, and that these had only three hundred thousand readers."

At the present time the combined annual circulation of a couple of the leading newspapers in Scotland would equal the entire newspaper circulation of the kingdom little more than fifty years ago. In the year 1799, which is less than a hundred years ago, the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* and the *Glasgow Courier*, two very small newspapers, were sold at sixpence a copy, each bearing a Government stamp of the value of threehalf-pence. Is it surprising, under these conditions, that few newspapers should circulate, and that news should travel slowly throughout the country?

[Pg 19]

But the growth of newspapers to their present magnificent proportions is a thing of quite recent times, for even so lately as 1857 the *Scotsman*, then sold unstamped for a penny, weighed only about three-quarters of an ounce, while to-day the same paper, which continues to be sold for a penny, weighs fully four and a half ounces. And other newspapers throughout the country have no doubt swelled their columns to a somewhat similar degree.

A very good instance of the small amount of personal travelling indulged in by the people a century ago is given by Cleland in his *Annals of Glasgow*. Writing in the year 1816, he says: "It has been calculated that, previous to the erection of steamboats, not more than fifty persons passed and repassed from Glasgow to Greenock in one day, whereas it is now supposed that there are from four to five hundred passes and repasses in the same period." In the present day a single steamboat sailing from the Broomielaw, Glasgow, will often carry far more passengers to Greenock, or beyond [Pg 20] Greenock, than the whole passengers travelling between the towns named in one day in 1816. For example, the tourist steamer *Columba* is certificated to carry some 1800 passengers.

In 1792 the principal mails to and from London were carried by mail-coaches, which were then running between the Metropolis and some score of the chief towns in the country at the speed of seven or eight miles an hour; and so far as direct mails were concerned the towns in question kept up relations with London under the conditions of speed just described. But the cross post service—that is, the service between places not lying in the main routes out of London—was not yet developed, and these cross post towns were beyond the reach of anything like early information of what was going on, not, let us say, in the world at large, but in their own country. The people in these towns had to patiently await the laggard arrival of news from the greater centres of activity; and when it did arrive it probably came to hand in a very imperfect [Pg 21] form, or so late as to be useless for any purpose of combined action or criticism.

Dr. James Russell, in his *Reminiscences of Yarrow*, describes how tardy and uncertain the mail service by post was in the early years of the present century; and what he says is a severe contrast to the service of the present time, which provides for the delivery of letters, generally daily, in every hamlet in the country. Dr. Russell writes:—



"Since I remember (unless there was a chance hand on a Wednesday) our letters reached us only once a week, along with our bread and butcher meat, by the weekly carrier, Robbie Hogg. His arrival used to be a great event, the letter-bag being turned out, and a rummage made for our own. Afterwards the Moffat carriers gave more frequent opportunities of getting letters; but they were apt to carry them on to Moffat and bring them back the following week."

Another instance of the slow communications is given in a letter written from Brodick Castle, Arran, by Lord Archibald Campbell, on the 25th September 1820.

[Pg 22]

The letter was addressed to a correspondent in Glasgow, and proceeds thus: "Your letter of the 18th did not reach me till this morning, as, in consequence of the rough state of the weather, there has been no postal communication with this island for several days." The time consumed in getting this letter forward from Glasgow to Brodick was exactly a week, and when so much time was required in the case of an island lying in the Firth of Clyde, what time would be necessary to make communication with the Outer Hebrides?

Even between considerable towns, as representing important centres in the country, the amount of correspondence by letter was small. Thus the mail from Inverness to Edinburgh of the 5th October 1808 contained no more than 30 letters. The total postage on these was £2, 9s. 6d., the charges ranging from 11d. to 14s. 8d. per letter. At the present time the letters from Inverness to Edinburgh are probably nearly a thousand a day; but this is no fair comparison, because many letters that would [Pg 25] formerly pass through Edinburgh now reach their destinations in direct bags—London itself being an instance.



**ANALYSIS OF THE LONDON TO EDINBURGH MAIL OF THE 2<sup>d</sup> MARCH 1838.**  
*(After a print lent by Lady Cole from the collection of the late Sir Henry Cole, K.C.B.)*

But coming down to a much later date, and looking at what was going on between London and Edinburgh, the capital towns of Great Britain, what do we find? An analysis of the London to Edinburgh mail of the 2<sup>d</sup> March 1838 gives the following figures; and let it not be forgotten that in these days the Edinburgh mail contained the correspondence for a large part of Scotland:—

2296 Newspapers, weighing 273 lbs., and going free.

484 Franked Letters, weighing 47 lbs., and going free.

Parcels of stamps going free.

1555 Letters, weighing 34 lbs., and bearing postage to the value of £93.

These figures represent the exchange of thought between the two capitals fifty years ago. These were truly the days of darkness, when abuses were kept out of sight and were rampant.

[Pg 26]

Down to much later times the bonds of privilege remained untied. In the Civil Service itself what changes have taken place! The doors have been thrown open to competition and to capacity and worth, and probably they will never be closed again. The author of these lines had an experience in 1867—not very long ago—which may be worthy of note. He had been then several years in the Post Office service, and desired to obtain a nomination to compete for a higher position—a clerkship in the Secretary's office. He took the usual step through the good offices of a Member of Parliament, and the following rebuff emanated from headquarters. It shall be its own monument, and may form a shot in the historical web of our time:—

"I wrote to —— (the Postmaster-General) about the Mr. J. W. Hyde, who desires to be permitted to compete for a clerkship in the London Post Office, described as a cousin of ——.

"(The Postmaster-General) has to-day replied that nominations to the Secretary's[Pg 27] office are not now given except to candidates who are actually gentlemen, that is, sons of officers, clergymen, or the like. If I cannot satisfy (the Postmaster-General) on this point, I fear Mr. Hyde's candidature will go to the wall."<sup>[2]</sup>

Now one of the chief obstacles in the way of rapid communication in our own country was the very unsatisfactory state of the roads. Down to the time of the introduction of mail-coaches, just about a hundred years ago, the roads were in a deplorable state, and travellers have left upon record some rather strong language on the subject. It was only about that time that road-making came to be understood; but the obvious need for smooth roads to increase the speed of the mail gave an impetus to the subject, and by degrees matters were greatly improved. It is not our purpose to pursue the inquiry as to roads, though the subject might be attractive, and we must be content with the general assertion as to their condition.

But not only were the roads bad, but[Pg 28] they were unsafe. Travellers could hardly trust themselves to go about unarmed, and even the mail-coaches, in which (besides the driver and guard) some passengers generally journeyed, had to carry weapons of defence placed in the hands of the guard. Many instances of highway robbery by highwaymen who made a profession of robbery might be given; but one or two cases may repay their perusal. On the

4th March 1793 the Under-Sheriff of Northampton was robbed at eight o'clock in the evening near Holloway turnpike by two highwaymen, who carried off a trunk containing the Sheriff's commission for opening the assizes at Northampton.

In the Autobiography of Mary Hewitt the following encounter is recorded, referring to the period between 1758-96: "Catherine (Martin), wife of a purser in the navy, and conspicuous for her beauty and impulsive, violent temper, having quarrelled with her excellent sister, Dorothea Fryer, at whose house in Staffordshire she was staying, suddenly set off to London on a visit to her great-uncle, the Rev. John[Pg 29] Plymley, prebend of the Collegiate Church at Wolverhampton, and Chaplain of Morden College, Blackheath. She journeyed by the ordinary conveyance, the Gee-Ho, a large stage-waggon drawn by a team of six horses, and which, driven merely by day, took a week from Wolverhampton to the Cock and Bell, Smithfield.

"Arrived in London, Catherine proceeded on foot to Blackheath. There, night having come on, and losing her way, she was suddenly accosted by a horseman with, 'Now, my pretty girl, where are you going?' Pleased by his gallant address, she begged him to direct her to Morden College. He assured her that she was fortunate in having met with him instead of one of his company, and inducing her to mount before him, rode across the heath to the pile of buildings which had been erected by Sir Christopher Wren for decayed merchants, the recipients of Sir John Morden's bounty. Assisting her to alight, he rang the bell, then remounted his steed and galloped away, but not before the alarmed official, who had[Pg 30] answered the summons, had exclaimed, 'Heavens! Dick Turpin on Black Bess!' My mother always said 'Dick Turpin.' Another version in the family runs 'Captain Smith.'"

The *Annual Register* of the 3d October 1792 records the following case of highway robbery:—

"The daily messenger, despatched from the Secretary of State's office with letters to His Majesty at Windsor, was stopped near Langley Broom by three footpads, who took from him the box containing the despatches, and his money, etc. The same men afterwards robbed a gentleman in a postchaise of a hundred guineas, a gold watch, etc. Some light dragoons, who received information of the robberies, went in pursuit of the thieves, but were not successful. They found, however, a quantity of the papers scattered about the heath."

We will quote one more instance, as showing the frequency of these robberies on the road. It is mentioned in the *Annual Register* of the 28th March 1793.

"Martin (the mail robber), condemned at[Pg 31] Exeter Assizes, was executed on Haldown, near the spot where the robbery was committed. He had been well educated, and had visited most European countries. At the end of the year 1791 he was at Paris, and continued there till the end of August 1792. He said he was very active in the bloody affair of the 10th August, at the Palace of the Tuilleries, when the Swiss Guards were slaughtered, and Louis XVI. and his family fled to the National Assembly for shelter. He said he did not enter with this bloody contest as a volunteer, but, happening to be in that part of the city of Paris, he was hurried on by the mob to take part in that sanguinary business. Not speaking good French, he said he was suspected to be a Swiss, and on that account, finding his life often in danger, he left Paris, and, embarking for England at Havre de Grace, arrived at Weymouth in September last, and then came to Exeter. He said that being in great distress in October he committed the mail robbery."

A rather good anecdote is told of an [Pg 32]encounter between a poor tailor and one of these knights of the road. The tailor, on being overtaken by the highwayman, was at once called



upon to stand and deliver, the salutation being accompanied by the presentation of two pistols at the pedestrian's head. "I'll do that with pleasure," was the meek reply; and forthwith the poor victim transferred to the outstretched hands of the robber all the money he possessed. This done, the tailor proceeded to ask a favour. "My friends would laugh at me," said he, "were I to go home and tell them I was robbed with as much patience as a lamb. Suppose you fire your two bull-dogs right through the crown of my hat; it will look something like a show of resistance." Taken with the fancy, the robber good-naturedly complied with the request; but hardly had the smoke from the weapons cleared away, when the tailor pulled out a rusty old horse pistol, and in turn politely requested the highwayman to shell out everything of value about him—his pistols not excepted. So the highwayman had the worst of the meeting on[Pg 33] that occasion. The incident will perhaps help to dispel the sad reproach of the craft, that a tailor is but the ninth part of a man.

It should not be forgotten that these perils of the road had their effect in preventing intercourse between different parts of the country.

In such outlying districts as were blessed with postal communication a hundred years ago, the service was kept up by foot messengers, who often travelled long distances in the performance of their duty. Thus in 1799 a post-runner travelled from Inverness to Loch Carron—a distance across country, as the crow flies, of about fifty miles—making the journey once a week, for which he was paid 5s. Another messenger at the same period made the journey from Inverness to Dunvegan in Skye—a much greater distance—also once a week, and for this service he received 7s. 6d. The rate at which the messengers travelled seems not to have been very great, if we may judge from the performances of the post from Dumbarton to Inveraray. In the year 1805 the Surveyor[Pg 34] of the district thus describes it: "I have sometimes observed these mails at leaving Dumbarton about three stones or 48 lbs. weight, and they are generally above two stones. During the course of last winter horses were obliged to be occasionally employed; and it is often the case that a strong highlander, with so great a weight upon him, cannot travel more than two miles an hour, which greatly retards the general correspondence of this extensive district of country."

These humble servants of the post office, travelling over considerable tracts of country, would naturally become the means of conveying local gossip from stage to stage, and of spreading hearsay news as they went along. In this way, and as being the bearers of welcome letters, they were no doubt as gladly received at the doors of our forefathers as are the postmen at our own doors to-day. Indeed, complaint was made of the delays that took place on the route, probably from this very cause. Here is an instance referring to the year 1800. "I found," wrote the Surveyor, "that it had been the general[Pg 35] practice for the post from Bonaw to Appin to lodge regularly all night at or near the house of Ardchattan, and did not cross Shien till the following morning, losing twelve hours to the Appin, Strontian, and Fort-William districts of country; and I consider it an improvement of itself to remove such private lodgings or accommodations out of the way of posts, which, as I have been informed, is sometimes done for the sake of perusing newspapers as well as answering or writing letters."

Exposed to the buffetings of the tempest, to the rigours of wintry weather, and considering the rough unkept roads of the time, it is easy to imagine how seductive would be the fireside of the country house; and bearing in mind the desire on the part of the inmates to learn the latest news, it is not surprising that the poor post-runner occasionally departed from the strict line of duty.

But immediately prior to the introduction of mail-coaches, and for a long time before that, the mails over the longer distances[Pg 36] were conveyed on horseback, the riders being known as



"post-boys." These were sometimes boys of fourteen or sixteen years of age, and sometimes old men. Mr. Palmer, at whose instance mail-coaches were first put upon the road, writing in 1783, thus describes the post-boy service. The picture is not a very creditable one to the Post Office. "The post at present," says he, "instead of being the swiftest, is almost the slowest conveyance in the country; and though, from the great improvement in our roads, other carriers have proportionably mended their speed, the post is as slow as ever. It is likewise very unsafe. The mails are generally intrusted to some idle boy without character, and mounted on a worn-out hack, and who, so far from being able to defend himself or escape from a robber, is much more likely to be in league with him." There is perhaps room for suspicion that Mr. Palmer was painting the post-boy service as black as possible, for he was then advocating another method of conveying the mails; but he was not alone in his adverse criticism.[Pg 37] An official in Scotland thus described the service in 1799: "It is impossible to obtain any other contractors to ride the mails at 3d. out, or 1½ d. per mile each way. On this account we are so much distressed with mail riders that we have often to submit to the mails being conveyed by mules and such species of horses as are a disgrace to any service." This is evidence from within the Post Office itself. While young boys were suited for the work in some respects, they were thoughtless and unpunctual; yet when older men were employed they frequently got into liquor, and thus endangered the mails. The records of the service are full of the troubles arising from the conduct of these servants. The public were doubtless much to blame for this. For the post-boys were, as we may suppose, ever welcome at the house and ball, where refreshment, in the shape of strong drink, would be offered to them, and they thus fell into trouble through a too common instance of mistaken kindness.

In the year 1763 the mail leaving London[Pg 38] on Tuesday night (in the winter season) was not in the hands of the people of Edinburgh until the afternoon of Sunday. This does not betoken a very rapid rate of progression; but it appears that in many cases the post-boy's speed did not rise above three or four miles an hour. The Post Office took severe measures with these messengers, through parliamentary powers granted; and even the public were called upon to keep an eye upon their behaviour, and to report any misconduct to the authorities.

Mention has already been made of the unsafety of the roads for ordinary travellers; but the roads were in no way safer for the post-boys. In 1798 a post-boy carrying certain Selby mails was robbed near that place, being threatened with his life, and the mail-pouch which he then carried was recovered under very strange circumstances in 1876.

But to come nearer home. On the early morning of the 1st of August 1802 the mail from Glasgow for Edinburgh was robbed by two men at a place near Linlithgow, when a[Pg 39] sum of £1300 or £1400 was stolen. The robbers had previously been soldiers. They hurried into Edinburgh with their booty, got drunk, were discovered, and, when subsequently tried, were sentenced to be executed. The law was severe in those days; and the Post Office has the distinction of having obtained judgment against a robber who was the last criminal hung in chains in Scotland. According to Rogers, in his *Social Life of Scotland*, this was one Leal, who, in 1773, was found guilty of robbing the mail near Elgin. A curious fact came out in connection with the trial of this man Leal, showing what may be termed the momentum of evil. It happened that some time previously Leal and a companion had been to see the execution of a man for robbing the mail, and, on returning, they had to pass through a dark and narrow part of the road. At this point Leal observed to his companion that the situation was one well suited for a robbery. And it was here that he afterwards carried the suggestion then made into effect.

When such robberies took place the post-boys sometimes came off without serious mishap, but at other times they were badly injured. On Wednesday the 23d October 1816, a post-boy near Exeter was assaulted (as the report says) in "a most desperate and inhuman manner," when his skull was fractured, and he shortly afterwards died.

The post-boys were exposed to all the inclemency of the weather both by day and night. Sometimes they were overtaken by snow-storms, when they would have to struggle on for their lives. Sometimes, after riding a stage in severe frost, they would have to be lifted from their saddles benumbed with cold and unable to dismount. At other times accidents of a different kind happened to them, and, as has been shown, they sometimes lost their lives.

Mail-coaches were first put upon the road on the 8th of August 1784. The term of about sixty years, during which they were the means of conveying the principal mails throughout the country, must ever seem to [Pg 43] us a period of romantic interest. There is something stirring even in the picture of a mail-coach bounding along at the heels of four well-bred horses; and we know by experience how exhilarating it is to be carried along the highway at a rapid rate in a well-appointed coach.



**THE MAIL, 1803.**  
*(From a contemporary print.)*



We cannot well separate the service given to the Post Office by mail-coaches from the passengers who made use of that means of conveyance, and we may linger a little to endeavour to realise what a journey was like from accounts left us by travellers. The charm of day travelling could no doubt be conjured up even now by any one who would take time to reflect upon the subject. But other phases of the matter could hardly be so dealt with.

De Quincey, in his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, gives a pleasing description of the easy motion and soothing influence of a well-equipped mail-coach running upon an even and kindly road. The period he refers to was about 1803, and the coach was that carrying the Bristol mail—which[Pg 44] enjoyed unusual advantages owing to the superior character of the road, and an extra allowance for expenses subscribed by the Bristol merchants. He thus describes his feelings: "It was past eight o'clock when I reached the Gloucester Coffee-House, and, the Bristol mail being on the point of going off, I mounted on the outside. The fine fluent motion of the mail soon laid me asleep. It is somewhat remarkable that the first easy or refreshing sleep which I had enjoyed for some months was on the outside of a mail-coach....

"For the first four or five miles from London I annoyed my fellow-passenger on the roof by occasionally falling against him when the coach gave a lurch to his side; and, indeed, if the road had been less smooth and level than it is I should have fallen off from weakness. Of this annoyance he complained heavily, as, perhaps, in the same circumstances, most people would.... When I next woke for a minute from the noise and lights of Hounslow (for in spite of my wishes and efforts I had fallen asleep again within two[Pg 45] minutes from the time I had spoken to him), I found that he had put his arm round me to protect me from falling off; and for the rest of my journey he behaved to me with the gentleness of a woman, so that, at length, I almost lay in his arms.... So genial and refreshing was my sleep that the next time, after leaving Hounslow, that I fully awoke was upon the pulling up of the mail (possibly at a post-office), and, on inquiry, I found that we had reached Maidenhead—six or seven miles, I think, ahead of Salthill. Here I alighted, and for the half-minute that the mail stopped I was entreated by my friendly companion (who, from the transient glimpse I had had of him in Piccadilly, seemed to me to be a gentleman's butler, or person of that rank) to go to bed without delay."

Night journeys might be very well, in a way, during the balmy days of summer, when light airs and sweet exhalations from flower and leaf gave pleasing features to the scenes, but in the cold nights of winter, in lashing rain, in storms of wind and snow,[Pg 46] the unfortunate passengers and the guard and coachman must have had terrible times of it. It is said of the guards and coachmen that they had sometimes, when passing over the Fells, to be strapped to their seats, in order to keep their places against the fierce assaults of the mountain blast.

The winter experience of travelling by mail-coach in one of its phases is thus described by a writer in connection with a severe snow-storm which occurred in March 1827: "The night mail from Edinburgh to Glasgow left Edinburgh in the afternoon, but was stopped before reaching Kirkliston. The guard with the mail-bags set forward on horseback, and the driver rode back to Edinburgh with a view, it was understood, to get fresh horses. The passengers, four in number, entreated him to use all diligence, and meanwhile were compelled to wait in the coach, which had stuck at a very solitary part of the road. There they remained through a dark and stormy night, with a broken pane of glass, through which the wind blew bitterly cold. It was nine o'clock next[Pg 49] morning when the driver came, bringing with him another man and a pair of horses. Having taken away some articles, he jestingly asked the passengers what they meant to do, and was leaving them to shift for themselves, but was persuaded at length to aid one who was faint, and unable to struggle through the snow. He was allowed to mount

behind one of the riders; the other passengers were left to extricate themselves as best they could."



**THE MAIL, 1824.**  
*(From a contemporary print.)*

Many instances might be given of the stoppage of the coaches on account of snow, and of the efforts made by the guards to push on the mails. In 1836 a memorable snow-storm took place which disorganised the service, and the occasion is one on which the guards and coachmen distinguished themselves. The strain thrown upon the horses in a like situation is well described by Cowper, if we change one word in his lines, which are as follows:—

"The *coach* goes heavily, impeded sore  
By congregated loads adhering close  
To the clogg'd wheels; and in its sluggish pace  
Noiseless appears a moving hill of snow.

[Pg 50]

The toiling steeds expand the nostril wide,  
While every breath, by respiration strong  
Forced downward, is consolidated soon  
Upon their jutting chests."

A melancholy result followed upon a worthy endeavour to carry the mails through the snow on the 1st February 1831. The Dumfries coach had reached Moffat, where it became snowed up. The driver and guard procured saddle-horses, and proceeded; but they had not gone far when they found the roads impracticable for horses, and these were sent back to Moffat. The two men then continued on foot; but they did not get beyond a few miles on the road when they succumbed, and some days afterwards their dead bodies were found on the high ground

near the "Deil's Beef-Tub," the bags being found attached to a post at the roadside, and not far from where the men fell. They perished in a noble attempt to perform their humble duties. The incident recalls the lines of Thomson:—

"And down he sinks  
Beneath the shelter of the shapeless drift,  
Thinking o'er all the bitterness of death,  
[Pg 51]  
Mix'd with the tender anguish nature shoots  
Through the wrung bosom of the dying man.  
His wife, his children, and his friends unseen.  
On every nerve  
The deadly winter seizes; shuts up sense;  
And o'er his inmost vitals creeping cold  
Lays him along the snows, a stiffened corse,  
Stretched out, and bleaching in the northern blast."

We have little conception of the labour that had to be expended, during periods of snow, in the endeavour to keep the roads open. In places the snow would be found lying thirty or forty feet deep, and the road trustees were obliged to spend large sums of money in clearing it away. Hundreds of the military were called out in certain places to assist, and snow-ploughs were set to work in order to force a passage.

The inconvenience to the country caused by such interruptions is well described in the *Annual Register* of the 15th February 1795: "My letter of two days ago is still here; for, though I have made an effort twice, I have been obliged to return, not having reached half the first stage. Two mails are due from London, three from Glasgow, and four from Edinburgh. Neither the last guard that [Pg 52] went hence for Glasgow on Thursday, nor he that went on Wednesday, have since been heard of; this country was never so completely blocked up in the memory of the oldest person, or that they ever heard of. I understand the road is ten feet deep with snow from this to Hamilton. I have had it cut through once, but this third fall makes an attempt impossible. Heaven only knows when the road will be open, nothing but a thaw can do it—it is now an intense frost."

But the guards and coachmen were put upon their mettle on other occasions than when snow made further progress impossible.

The following incident, showing the courage and devotion to duty of a mail guard and coachman, is related by Sir Thomas Dick Lauder, Bart., in his account of the floods which devastated the province of Moray in August 1829. Referring to the state of things in the town of Banff, Sir Thomas proceeds: "The mail-coach had found it impracticable to proceed south in the morning by its usual route, and had gone round by the Bridge of Alva. It was therefore [Pg 53] supposed that the mail for Inverness, which reaches Banff in the afternoon, would take the same road. But what was the astonishment of the assembled population when the coach appeared, within a few minutes of the usual time, at the further end of the Bridge of Banff. The people who were standing there urged both the guard and coachman not to attempt to pass where their danger was so certain. On hearing this the passengers left the coach; but the guard and coachman, scouting the idea of danger in the very streets of Banff, disregarded the advice they received, and drove straight along the bridge. As they turned the corner of the butcher-market, signals were made, and loud cries were uttered from the nearest houses to warn them of the danger of advancing; yet still they kept urging the horses onwards. But no sooner had they reached the place where the wall had burst, than coach and horses



were at once borne away together by the raging current, and the vehicle was dashed violently against the corner of Gillan's Inn. The whole four horses immediately [Pg 54]disappeared, but rose and plunged again, and dashed and struggled hard for their lives. Loud were the shrieks of those who witnessed this spectacle. A boat came almost instantaneously to the spot, but as the rowers pushed up to try to disengage the horses, the poor animals, as they alternately reached the surface, made desperate exertions to get into the boat, so that extreme caution was necessary in approaching them. They did succeed in liberating one of them, which immediately swam along the streets, amidst the cheering of the population; but the other three sank to rise no more. By this time the coach, with the coachman and guard, had been thrown on the pavement, where the depth of water was less; and there the guard was seen clinging to the top, and the coachman hanging by his hands to a lamp-post, with his toes occasionally touching the box. In this perilous state they remained till another boat came and relieved them, when the guard and the mails were landed in safety. Great indignation was displayed against the obstinacy which had produced[Pg 55] this accident. But much is to be said in defence of the servants of the Royal Mail, who are expected to persevere in their endeavours to forward the public post in defiance of risk, though in this case their zeal was unfortunately proved to have been mistaken."<sup>[3]</sup>

Although, as already stated, robberies were frequent from the mail-coaches, and the guard carried formidable weapons of defence, it does not appear that the coaches were often openly attacked. At any rate there do not seem to be many records of such incidents referring to the later days of the mail-coach service.

An old guard, now retired, but still or quite recently living in Carlisle, relates that only on one occasion did he require to draw his arms for actual defence. This happened at a hamlet called Chance Inn, in the county of Forfar, where the coach had stopped as usual. Both the inside and outside places were occupied by passengers, and no additional travellers could be taken. A number of sailors, however, who were proceeding to join their ship at a seaport,[Pg 56] wished to get upon the coach; and though they were told that they could not travel by this means, they plainly showed by their looks and demeanour that they were determined to do so. One of them was overheard to say that, when the proper moment arrived, they would make short work of the guard, who, as it happened, was a youngish man. The passengers too were alarmed at the appearances, and appealed to the guard to keep a sharp eye upon the sailors. Under these conditions the guard directed the coachman, the moment the word was given, to put the horses to a gallop, so as to leave the seamen behind and avoid attack. The start was signalled as arranged, the guard sprang into his place and faced round to the sailors, one of whom was now in the act of preparing to throw a huge stone at his head with both hands. Instantly the guard drew one of his pistols and covered the ringleader, who thereupon dropped on his knees imploring pardon, while his companions, previously so aggressive, scampered off in all directions like a set of scared rabbits.

[Pg 57]

The apparatus by which in the present day bags of letters are dropped from and taken up by the travelling post-office while the trains are running at high speed had its prototype in the days of the mail-coaches. In the one case as in the other the object was to get rid of stoppages, and so to save time. In the coaching days the apparatus was of a most primitive kind, consisting of a pointed stick rather less than four feet long, whose sharpened end was put in behind the string around the neck of the mail-bag, and on the end of the stick the bag was held up to be clutched by the mail guard as the coach went hurriedly by. We are indebted to the sub-postmaster of Liberton, a village a few miles out of Edinburgh, for a description of the arrangement. He describes how the guards, some fifty years ago, would playfully deal

with the youngsters who worked the "apparatus," by not only seizing the bag but also the stick, and causing the young people to run long distances after the coach in order to recover it. The fun was all very well, says the sub-postmaster, in the[Pg 58] genial nights of summer; "but when the cold nights of winter came round, it was our turn to play a trick upon the guard, when both he and the driver were numbed with cold and fast asleep, and the four horses going at full speed. It was not easy to arouse the guard to take the bag; and just fancy the rare gift of Christian charity that caused us youngsters to run and roar after the fast-running mail-coach to get quit of the bag. It used to be a weary business waiting the mail-coach coming along from the south when the roads were stormed up with snow or otherwise delayed. It required some tact to hold up the bag, as the glare of the lamps prevented us from seeing the guard as he came up with his red coat and blowing a long tin horn."

Some curious notions were prevalent of the effect of travelling by mail-coach—the rate being about eight or ten miles an hour. Lord Campbell was frequently warned against the danger of journeying this way, and instances were cited to him of passengers dying of apoplexy induced by the[Pg 61] rapidity with which the vehicles travelled. In 1791 the Postmaster-General gave directions that the public should be warned against sending any cash by post, partly, as he stated, "from the prejudice it does to the coin by the friction it occasions from the great expedition with which it is conveyed." After all, speed is merely a relative thing.





**MODERN MAIL "APPARATUS" FOR EXCHANGE OF MAIL-BAGS: SETTING  
THE POUCH—EARLY MORNING.**

Although, as previously stated, open attacks were not often made upon the coaches, robberies of the bags conveyed by them were quite common—chiefly at night—and we may assume that they were made possible through the carelessness of the guards. It would be a long story to go fully into this matter. Let a couple of instances suffice. On the last day of February 1810, in the evening, a mail-coach at Barnet was robbed of sixteen bags for provincial towns by the wrenching off the lock while the horses were changing. And on the 19th November of the same year seven bags for London were stolen from the coach at Bedford about nine o'clock in the evening.

The authorities had a good deal of trouble[Pg 62] with the mail guards and coachmen, and the records of the period are full of warnings against their irregularities. Now they are admonished for stopping at ale-houses to drink; now the guards are threatened for sleeping upon duty. Then they are cautioned against conveying fish, poultry, etc., on their own account. A guard is fined £5 for suffering a man to ride on the roof of the coach; a driver is fined £5 for losing time; another driver, for intoxication and impertinence to passengers, is fined £10 and costs. The guards are entreated to be attentive to their arms, to see that they are clean, well loaded, and hung handy; they are forbidden to blow their horns when passing through the streets during the hours of divine service on Sundays; they are enjoined to keep a watch upon French prisoners of war attempting to break their parole; and to sum up, an Inspector despairingly writes that "half his time is employed in receiving and answering letters of complaint from passengers respecting the improper conduct and impertinent language of guards." A[Pg 63] story is told of a passenger who, being drenched inside a coach by water coming through an opening in the roof, complained of the fact to the guard, but the only answer he got was, "Ay, mony a ane has complained o' that hole," and the guard quietly passed on to other duties.

Railway travellers are familiar with an official at the principal through stations whose duty it seems to be to ring a bell and loudly call out "Take your seats!" the moment hungry passengers enter the refreshment-rooms. How far his zeal engenders dyspepsia and heart disease it is impossible to say.

In the mail-coach days similar pressure was put upon passengers; for every effort was made to hurry forward the mails. In a family letter written by Mendelssohn in 1829, he describes a mail-coach journey from Glasgow to Liverpool. Among other things he mentions that the changing of horses was done in about forty seconds. This was not the language of mere hyperbole, for where the stoppage was one for the purpose of[Pg 64] changing horses only the official time allowed was one minute.

It is perhaps a pity that we have not fuller records of the scenes enacted at the stopping-places; they would doubtless afford us some amusement. There is the old story of the knowing passenger who, unobserved, placed all the silver spoons in the coffee-pot in order to cool the coffee and delay the coach, while the other passengers, already in their places, were being searched.

There is another story which may be worth repeating. A hungry passenger had just commenced to taste the quality of a stewed fowl when he was peremptorily ordered by the guard to take his place. Unwilling to lose either his meal or his passage, he hastily rolled the fowl in his handkerchief, and mounted the coach. But the landlord, unused to such liberties, was soon after him with the ravished dish. The coach was already on the move, and the only revenge left to the landlord was to call out jeeringly to the passenger, "Won't you have the gravy, sir?" The other passengers[Pg 65] had a laugh at the expense of their companion; but we know that a hungry man is a tenacious man, and a man with a full stomach can afford to laugh. At any rate the proverb says, "Who laughs last laughs best."

The differences arising between passengers and the landlords at the stopping-places were sometimes, however, of a much more prosaic and solemn character. Charles Lamb has given us such a scene. "I was travelling," he says, "in a stage-coach with three male Quakers, buttoned up in the straitest nonconformity of their sect. We stopped to bait at Andover, where a meal, partly tea apparatus, partly supper, was set before us. My friends confined themselves to the tea-table. I in my way took supper. When the landlady brought in the bill, the eldest of my companions discovered that she had charged for both meals. This was resisted. Mine

hostess was very clamorous and positive. Some mild arguments were used on the part of the Quakers, for which the heated mind of the good lady seemed by no means [Pg 66] a fit recipient. The guard came in with his usual peremptory notice. The Quakers pulled out their money and formally tendered it—so much for tea—I, in humble situation, tendering mine, for the supper which I had taken. She would not relax in her demand. So they all three quietly put up their silver, as did myself, and marched out of the room, the eldest and gravest going first, with myself closing up the rear, who thought I could not do better than follow the example of such grave and warrantable personages. We got in. The steps went up. The coach drove off. The murmurs of mine hostess, not very indistinctly or ambiguously pronounced, became after a time inaudible, and now my conscience, which the whimsical scene had for a while suspended, beginning to give some twitches, I waited, in the hope that some justification would be offered by these serious persons for the seeming injustice of their conduct. To my surprise, not a syllable was dropped on the subject. They sat as mute as at a meeting. At length the eldest of them broke silence by [Pg 67] inquiring of his next neighbour, 'Hast thee heard how indigos go at the India House?' and the question operated as a soporific on my moral feelings as far as Exeter."

A Frenchman was once a traveller by mail-coach, who, although he knew the English language fairly well, was not familiar with the finer shades of meaning attached to set expressions when applied in particular situations. An Englishman, who was his companion inside the coach, had occasion to direct his attention to some object in the passing landscape, and requested him to "look out." This the Frenchman promptly did, putting his head and shoulders out of the window, and the view obtained proved highly pleasing to the stranger. A stage further on in the journey, when the coach was approaching a narrow part of the road bordered and overhung by dense foliage, the driver, as was his custom, called out to the company, "Look out!" to which the Frenchman again quickly responded by thrusting head and shoulders [Pg 68] out of the window; but this time with the result that his hat was brushed off, and his face badly scratched from contact with the neighbouring branches. This curious contradiction in the use of the very same words enraged the Frenchman, who said hard things of our language; for he had discovered that when told to "look out" he was to look out, and that again when told to "look out" he was to be careful not to look out.

Mackenzie graphically describes the part mail-coaches took in the distribution of news over the country in the early years of the century. Referring to the news of the battle of Waterloo, he says: "By day and night these coaches rolled along at their pace of seven or eight miles an hour. At all cross roads messengers were waiting to get a newspaper or a word of tidings from the guard. In every little town, as the hour approached for the arrival of the mail, the citizens hovered about their streets waiting restlessly for the expected news. In due time the coach rattled into the [Pg 69] market-place, hung with branches, the now familiar token that a great battle had been fought and a victory won. Eager groups gathered. The guard, as he handed out his mail-bags, told of the decisive victory which had crowned and completed our efforts. And then the coachman cracked his whip, the guard's horn gave forth once more its notes of triumph, and the coach rolled away, bearing the thrilling news into other districts."

The writer of the interesting work called *Glasgow, Past and Present*, gives the following realistic account of the arrival of the London mail in Glasgow in war-time:—

"During the time of the French war it was quite exhilarating to observe the arrival of the London mail-coach in Glasgow, when carrying the first intelligence of a great victory, like the battle of the Nile, or the battle of Waterloo. The mail-coach horses were then decorated with laurels, and a red flag floated on the roof of the coach. The guard, dressed in his best



scarlet coat and gold ornamented hat, came galloping at a [Pg 70]thundering pace along the stones of the Gallowgate, sounding his bugle amidst the echoings of the streets; and when he arrived at the foot of Nelson Street he discharged his blunderbuss in the air. On these occasions a general run was made to the Tontine Coffee-room to hear the great news, and long before the newspapers were delivered the public were advertised by the guard of the particulars of the great victory, which fled from mouth to mouth like wildfire."

The mail-guards, and also the coachmen, were a race of men by themselves, modelled and fashioned by the circumstances of their employment—in fact, receiving character, like all other sets of people, from their peculiar environment. There are now very few of them remaining, and these very old men. These officers of the Post Office mixed with all sorts of people, learned a great deal from the passengers, and were full of romance and anecdote. We remember one guard whose conversation and accounts of funny things were so continuous that his hearers were kept in a constant state of ecstasy whenever [Pg 71] he was set agoing. His fund of story seemed inexhaustible, and we can imagine how hilariously would pass away the hours on the outside of a mail-coach with such a companion. The guard of whom we are speaking was a north countryman, possessed of a stalwart frame and iron constitution, a man with whom a highwayman would rather avoid getting into grips. He used to tell of an occasion on which the driver, being drunk, fell from his box, and the horses bolted. He himself was seated in his place at the rear of the coach. The state of things was serious. He however scrambled over the top of the coach, let himself down between the wheelers, stole along the pole of the coach, recovered the reins, and saved the mail from wreck and the passengers from impending death. For this he received a special letter of thanks from the Postmaster-General.

It was the custom of this guard, as no doubt of others of his class, to take charge of parcels of value for conveyance between places on his road. On one occasion he had charge of a parcel of £1500 in [Pg 72] bank notes, which was in course of transmission to a bank at headquarters. It happened that the driver had been indulging rather freely, and at one of the stopping-places the coachman started off with the coach leaving the guard behind. The latter did not discover this till the coach was out of sight, and realising the responsibility he was under in respect of the money, which for safety he had placed in a holster below one of his pistols, he was in a great fright. There was nothing for it but to start on foot and endeavour to overtake the coach; but this he did not succeed in doing till he had run a whole stage, at the end of which the perspiration was oozing through his scarlet coat. At the completion of the journey he sponged himself all over with whisky, and did not then feel any ill effects from the great strain he had placed himself under, though later in life he believed his heart had suffered damage from the exertions of that memorable day.

Before leaving this branch of our subject it may be well to note that while the mail [Pg 73] guards received but nominal pay—ten and sixpence a week—they earned considerable sums in gratuities from passengers, and for executing small commissions for the public. In certain cases as much as £300 a year was thus received; and the heavy fines that were inflicted upon them were therefore not so severe as might at first sight seem. Unhappily these men were given to take drink, if not wisely, at any rate too often. The weaknesses of the mail guard are very cleverly portrayed in some verses on the *Mail-Coach Guard*, quoted in Larwood and Hotten's work on the *History of Signboards*; and while these frailties are the burden of the song, it will be observed how cleverly the names of inns or alehouses are introduced into the song:—

"At each inn on the road I a welcome could find;

At the Fleece I'd my skin full of ale;  
The Two Jolly Brewers were just to my mind;  
At the Dolphin I drank like a whale.  
Tom Tun at the Hogshead sold pretty good stuff;  
They'd capital flip at the Boar;  
And when at the Angel I'd tippled enough,  
I went to the Devil for more.

[Pg 74]

Then I'd always a sweetheart so snug at the Car;  
At the Rose I'd a lily so white;  
Few planets could equal sweet Nan at the Star;  
No eyes ever twinkled so bright.  
I've had many a hug at the sign of the Bear;  
In the Sun courted morning and noon;  
And when night put an end to my happiness there,  
I'd a sweet little girl in the Moon.  
To sweethearts and ale I at length bid adieu,  
Of wedlock to set up the Sign;  
Hand-in-Hand the Good-Woman I look for in you,  
And the Horns I hope ne'er will be mine.  
Once guard to the mail, I'm now guard to the fair,  
But though my commission's laid down,  
Yet while the King's Arms I'm permitted to bear,  
Like a Lion I'll fight for the Crown."

A good loyal subject to the last.

One of the changes that time and circumstances have brought into the postal service is this, that the country post-offices have passed out of the hands of innkeepers, and into those of more desirable persons. In former times, and down to the period of the mail-coaches, the post-offices in many of the provincial towns were established at the inn of the place. In those days the conveyance of the mails being to a large extent by horse, it was convenient to have the office established where the relays of horses were maintained; and the term [Pg 77] "postmaster" then applied in a double sense—to the person intrusted with the receipt and despatch of letters, and with the providing of horses to convey the mails. The two duties are now no longer combined, and the word "postmaster" has consequently become applicable to two totally different classes of persons. The innkeepers were not very assiduous in matters pertaining to the post, and the duty of receiving and despatching letters, being frequently left to waiters and chambermaids, was very badly done. Often there was no separate room provided for the transaction of post-office business, and visitors at the inn and others had opportunities for scrutinising the correspondence that ought not to have existed. The postmaster was assisted by his ostler, as chief adviser in the postal work, which, however, was neglected; the worst horses, instead of the best, were hired out for the mails; and for riders the service was graced with the dregs of the stable-yard. At the same time the innkeepers were alive to their own interests, for they sometimes attracted travellers to their [Pg 78] houses by granting them franks for the free transmission of their letters. The salaries of the postmasters were not cast in a liberal mould, and what they did receive was subject to the charge of providing candles, wax, string, etc., necessary for making up the mails.



### **THE MAIL-COACH GUARD.**

The following are examples of the salaries of postmasters about a hundred years ago:—

|                               |     |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| Paisley, 1790 to 1800,        | £33 |
| Dundee, 1800,                 | 50  |
| Arbroath, 1763 to 1794,       | 20  |
| Aberdeen, 1763 to 1793, about | 90  |

Constant appeals reached headquarters for "an augmentation," which was the term then applied to an increase of salary, and in the circumstances it is not surprising that the post-office work was indifferently done. Attendance had to be given to the public during the day, and when the mail passed through a town in the dead hours of night some one had to be up to despatch or receive the mail. Sometimes the postmaster, when awoke by the post-boy's horn, would get up [Pg 79] and drop the mail-bag by a hook and line from his bedroom window. An instance of such a proceeding is given by Williams in his history of Watford, where the destinies of the post were at the time presided over by a postmistress. "In response," says he, "to the thundering knock of the conductor, the old lady left her couch, and thrusting her head, covered with a wide-bordered night-cap, out of the bedroom window, let down the mail-bag by a string, and quickly returned to her bed again." Coming thus nightly to the open window must have been a risky duty as regards health for a postmistress.

A hundred years ago the chief post-office in London was situated in Lombard Street. The scene, if we may judge by a print of the period, would appear to have been one of quietude and waiting for something to turn up. In 1829 the General Post Office was transferred to St. Martin's le Grand, and the departure of the evening mails (when mail-coaches were in full swing) became one of the sights of London.

[Pg 80]

Living in an age of cheap postage as we do, we look back upon the rates charged a century ago with something akin to amazement. In the following table will be seen some of the inland and foreign postage charges which were current in the period from 1797 to 1815:—

| ENGLAND, 1797.                             | Single letter | Double letter | Treble letter | 1 oz.        |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| Distance not exceeding in Miles—           |               |               |               |              |
|  | <i>s. d.</i>  | <i>s. d.</i>  | <i>s. d.</i>  | <i>s. d.</i> |
| 15,  | 0 3           | 0 6           | 0 9           | 1 0          |
| 15 to 30,                                  | 0 4           | 0 8           | 1 0           | 1 4          |
| 30 " 60,                                   | 0 5           | 0 10          | 1 3           | 1 8          |
| 60 " 100,                                  | 0 6           | 1 0           | 1 6           | 2 0          |
| 100 " 150,                                 | 0 7           | 1 2           | 1 9           | 2 4          |
| 150 and upwards,                           | 0 8           | 1 4           | 2 0           | 2 8          |
| For Scotland these rates were increased by | 0 1           | 0 2           | 0 3           | 0 4          |
| FOREIGN.                                   |               |               |               |              |



|  |     |      |      |      |
|--|-----|------|------|------|
| From any part in Great Britain to any part in— |     |      |      |      |
| Portugal,                                      | 1 0 | 2 0  | 3 0  | 4 0  |
| British Dominions in America,                  | 1 0 | 2 0  | 3 0  | 4 0  |
| 1806.  |     |      |      |      |
| From any part in Great Britain to—             |     |      |      |      |
| Gibraltar,                                     | 1 9 | 3 6  | 5 3  | 7 0  |
| Malta,   | 2 1 | 4 2  | 6 3  | 8 4  |
| 1808.  |     |      |      |      |
| From any part in Great Britain to—             |     |      |      |      |
| Madeira,                                       | 1 6 | 3 0  | 4 6  | 6 0  |
| South America, Portuguese Possessions,         | 2 5 | 4 10 | 7 3  | 9 8  |
| 1815.  |     |      |      |      |
| From any part in Great Britain to—             |     |      |      |      |
| Cape of Good Hope, Mauritius, East Indies,     | 3 6 | 7 0  | 10 6 | 14 0 |

[Pg 81]

Over and above these foreign rates, the full inland postage in England and Scotland, according to the distance the letters had to be conveyed to the port of despatch, was levied.

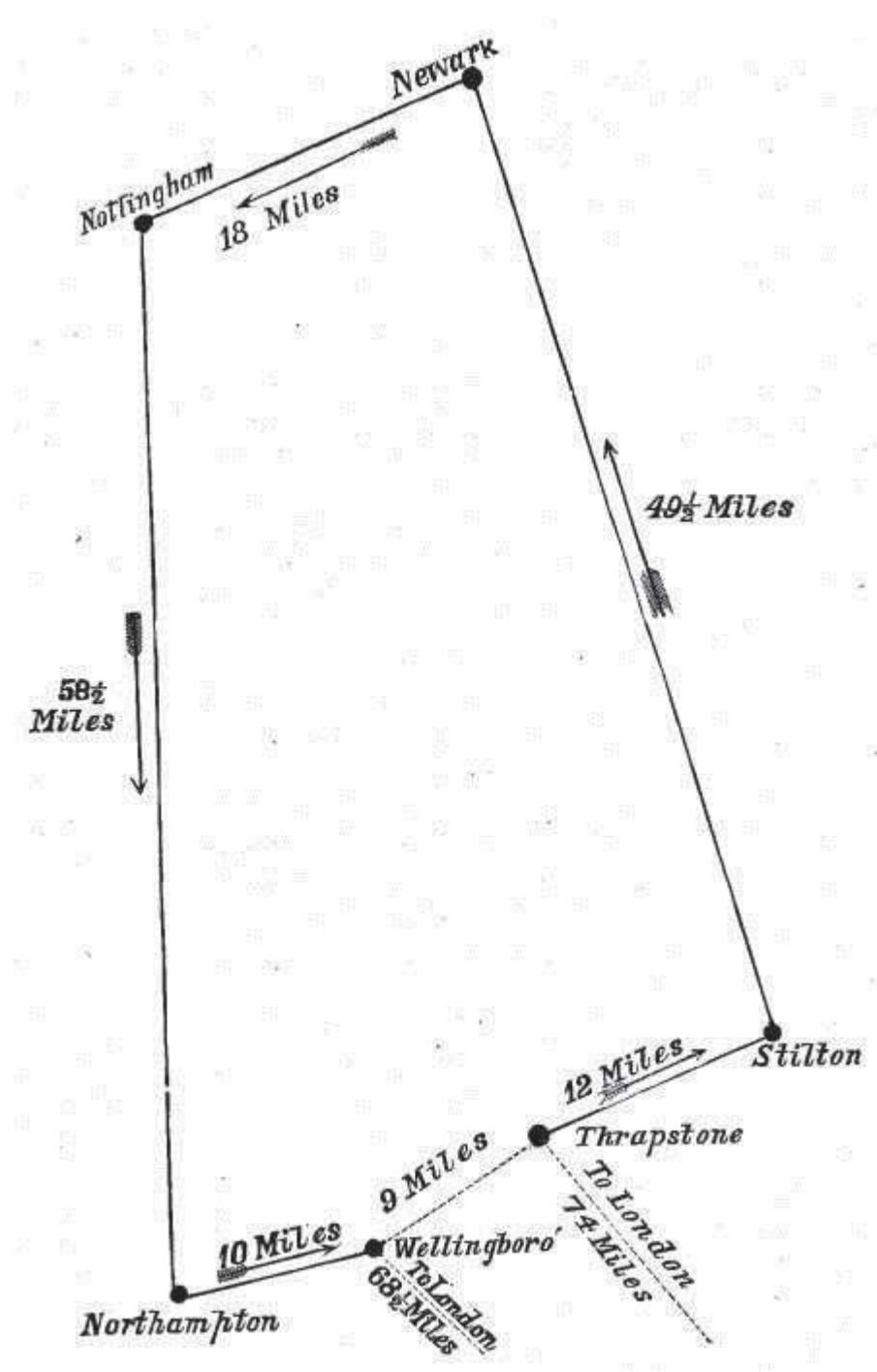
Many persons remember how old-fashioned letters were made up—a single sheet of paper folded first at the top and bottom, then one side slipped inside the folds of the other, then a

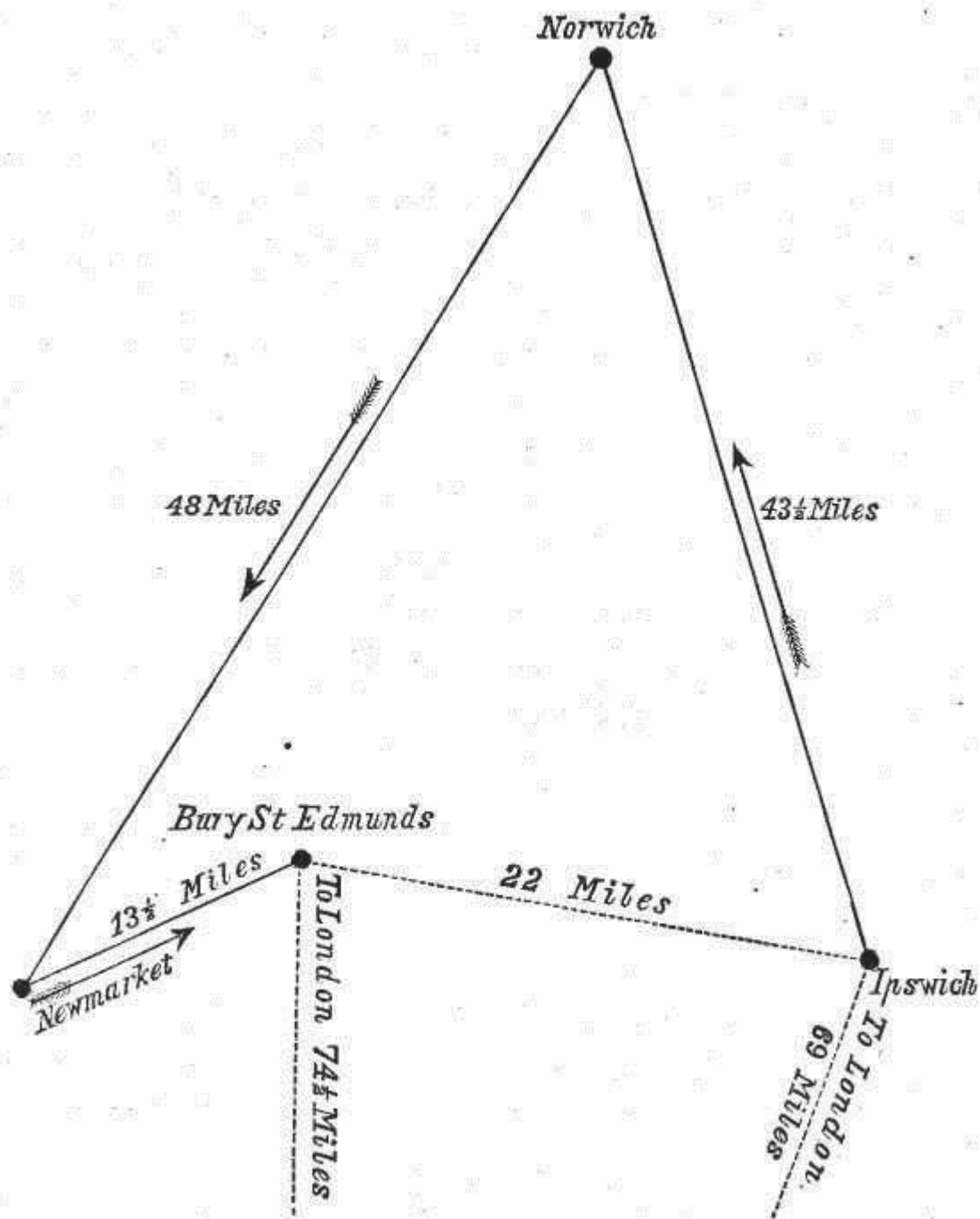
wafer or seal applied, and the address written on the back. That was a *single* letter. If a cheque, bank-bill, or other document were enclosed, the letter became a double letter. Two enclosures[Pg 82] made the letter a treble letter. The officers of the Post Office examined the letters in the interest of the Revenue, the letters being submitted to the test of a strong light, and the officers, peeping in at the end, used the feather end of a quill to separate the folds of the letter for better inspection. Envelopes were not then used.

These high rates of postage gave rise to frequent attempts to defraud the Revenue, and many plans were adopted to circumvent the Post Office in this matter. Sometimes a series of words in the print of a newspaper were pricked with a pin, and thus conveyed a message to the person for whom the newspaper was intended. Sometimes milk was used as an invisible ink upon a newspaper, the receiver reading the message sent by holding the paper to the fire. At other times soldiers took the letters of their friends, and sent them under franks written by their officers. Letters were conveyed by public carriers, against the statute, sometimes tied up in brown paper, to disguise them as parcels. The carriers seem to have been conspicuous offenders, for one of them[Pg 83] was convicted at Warwick in 1794, when penalties amounting to £1500 were incurred, though only £10 and costs were actually exacted. The Post Office maintained a staff of men called "Apprehenders of Letter Carriers," whose business it was to hunt down persons illegally carrying letters.

Nor must we omit to mention how far short of perfection were the means afforded for cross-post communication between one town and another. While along the main lines of road radiating from London there might be a fairly good service according to the ideas of the times, the cross-country connections were bad and inadequate. Here are one or two instances:—

In 1792 there was no direct post between Thrapstone and Wellingborough, though they lay only nine miles apart. Letters could circulate between these towns by way of Stilton, Newark, Nottingham, and Northampton, performing a circuit of 148 miles, or they could be sent by way of London, 74 up and 68½ down,—in which latter case they reached their destination one day sooner than by the northern route.





[Pg 86]

Again, from Ipswich to Bury St. Edmunds, two important towns of about 11,000 and 7000 inhabitants respectively, and distant from each other only twenty-two miles, there was no direct post. Letters had to be forwarded either through Norwich and Newmarket, or by way of London, the distance to be covered in the one case being 105 miles, and in the other 143 1/2 miles. According to a time-table of the period, a letter posted at Ipswich for Bury St. Edmunds on Monday would be despatched to Norwich at 5.30 A.M. on Tuesday. Reaching

this place six hours thereafter, it would be forwarded thence at 4 P.M. to Newmarket, where it was due at 11 P.M. At Newmarket it would lie all night and the greater part of next day, and would only arrive at Bury at 5.40 P.M. on Wednesday. Thus three days were consumed in the journey of a letter from Ipswich to Bury by the nearest postal route, and nothing was to be gained by adopting the alternative route *viâ* London.

In 1781 the postal staff in Edinburgh was composed of twenty-three persons, of whom [Pg 87] six were letter-carriers. The indoor staff of the Glasgow Post Office in 1789 consisted of the postmaster and one clerk, and as ten years later there were only four postmen employed, the outdoor force in 1789 was probably only four men.

Liverpool, in the year 1792, when its population stood at something like 60,000, had only three postmen, whose wages were 7s. a week each. One of the men, however, was assisted by his wife, and for this service the Post Office allowed her from £10 to £12 a year. Their duties seem to have been carried out in an easy-going, deliberate fashion. The men arranged the letters for distribution in the early morning, then they partook of breakfast, and started on their rounds about 9 A.M., completing their delivery about the middle of the afternoon. It would thus seem that a hundred years ago there was but one delivery daily in Liverpool.

During the same period there were only three letter-carriers employed at Manchester, four at Bristol, and three or four at Birmingham. In our own times the number of [Pg 88] postmen serving these large towns may be counted by the hundreds, or, I might almost say, thousands.

The delivery of letters in former times was necessarily a slow affair, for two reasons, namely:—that prepayment was not compulsory, and the senders of letters thoughtfully left the receivers to pay for them, when the postmen would often be kept waiting for the money. And secondly, streets were not named and numbered systematically as they now are, and concise addresses were impossible.

It is no doubt the case that order and method in laying out the streets and in regulating generally the buildings of towns are things of quite modern growth. In old-fashioned towns we find the streets running at all angles to one another, and describing all sorts of curves, without any regard whatever to general harmony. And will it be believed that the numbering of the houses in streets is comparatively a modern arrangement! Walter Thornbury tells us in his *Haunted London* that "names were first put on doors in 1760 [Pg 89] (some years before the street signs were removed). In 1764 houses were first numbered, the numbering commencing in New Burleigh Street, and Lincoln's-Inn-Fields being the second place numbered." While in our own time the addresses of letters are generally brief and direct, it is not to be wondered at that, under the conditions above stated, the superscriptions were often such as now seem to us curious. Here is one given in a printed notice issued at Edinburgh in 1714:—

"The Stamp office at Edinburgh  
in Mr. William Law, Jeweller,  
his hands, off the Parliament close,  
down the market stairs, opposite  
to the Excise office."

Here is another old-fashioned address, in which one must admit the spirit of filial regard with which it is inspired:—

"These for his honoured Mother,  
Mrs. Hester Stryp, widow,  
dwelling in Petticoat Lane, over

against the Five Inkhorns,  
without Bishopgate,  
in London."

Yet one more specimen, referring to the year 1702:—

[Pg 90]

"For  
Mr. Archibald Dunbarr  
of Thunderstoune, to be  
left at Capt. Dunbar's  
writing chamber at the  
Iron Revell, third storie  
below the cross, north end  
of the close at Edinburgh."

Under the circumstances of the time it was necessary thus to define at length where letters should be delivered; and the same circumstances were no doubt the *raison-d'être* of the corps of caddies in Edinburgh, whose business it was to execute commissions of all sorts, and in whom the paramount qualification was to know everybody in the town, and where everybody lived.

All this is changed in our degenerate days, and it is now possible for any one to find any other person with the simple key of street and number.

The irregular way in which towns grew up in former times is brought out in an anecdote about Kilmarnock. Early in the present century the streets of that town were narrow, winding, and intricate. An English commercial traveller, having completed some[Pg 91] business there, mounted his horse, and set out for another town. He was making for the outskirts of Kilmarnock, and reflecting upon its apparent size and importance, when he suddenly found himself back at the cross. In the surprise of the moment he was heard to exclaim that surely his "sable eminence" must have had a hand in the building of it, for it was a town very easily got into, but there was no getting out of it.

A duty that the changed circumstances of the times now renders unnecessary was formerly imposed upon postmasters, of which there is hardly a recollection remaining among the officials carrying on the work of the post to-day. The duty is mentioned in an order of May 1824, to the following effect: "An old instruction was renewed in 1812, that all postmasters should transmit to me (the Secretary), for the information of His Majesty's Postmaster-General, an immediate account of all remarkable occurrences within their districts, that the same may be communicated, if necessary, to His Majesty's principal Secretaries of State. This has not[Pg 92] been invariably attended to, and I am commanded by His Lordship to say, that henceforward it will be expected of every Deputy." This gathering of news from all quarters is now adequately provided for by the *Daily Press*, and no incident of any importance occurs which is not immediately distributed through that channel, or flashed by the telegraph, to every corner of the kingdom.

A custom, which would now be looked upon as a curiosity, and the origin of which would have to be sought for in the remote past, was in operation in the larger towns of the kingdom until about the year 1859. The custom was that of ringing the town for letters to be despatched; certain of the postmen being authorised to go over apportioned districts, after the ordinary collections of letters from the receiving offices had been made, to gather in late

letters for the mail. Until the year above mentioned the arrangement was thus carried out in Dublin. The letter-box at the chief office, and those at the receiving offices, closed two hours before the despatch of the night mail. Half an hour[Pg 95] after this closing eleven postmen started to scour the town, collecting on their way letters and newspapers. Each man carried a locked leather wallet, into which, through an opening, letters and other articles were placed, the postmen receiving a fee of a penny on every letter, and a halfpenny on every newspaper. This was a personal fee to the men over and above the ordinary postage. To warn the public of the postman's approach each man carried a large bell, which he rang vigorously as he went his rounds. These men, besides taking up letters for the public, called also at the receiving offices for any letters left for them upon which the special fee had been paid, and the "ringers" had to reach the chief office one hour before the despatch of the night mail. This custom seems to have yielded considerable emolument to the men concerned, for when it was abolished compensation was given for the loss of fees, the annual payments ranging from £10 8s., to £36 8s. Increased posting facilities, and the infusion of greater activity into the performance of post-office work, were no[Pg 96] doubt the things which "rang the parting knell" of these useful servants of the period.





### **THE BELLMAN COLLECTING LETTERS FOR DESPATCH.**

The slow and infrequent conveyance of mails by the ordinary post in former times gave rise to the necessity for "Expresses." By this term is meant the despatch of a single letter by man and horse, to be passed on from stage to stage without delay to its destination. In an official instruction of 1824 the speed to be observed was thus described: "It is expected that all Expresses shall be conveyed at the rate of seven miles, at least, within the hour." The charge made was 11d. per mile, arising as follows, viz.:—7½d. per mile for the horse, 2d. per mile for the rider, and 1½d. per mile for the post-horse duty. The postmaster who despatched the Express, and the postmaster who received it for delivery, were each entitled to 2s. 6d. for their trouble.

It will perhaps be convenient to look at the packet service apart from the land service, though progress is as remarkable in the one as in the other. During the wars of the latter half of the last century, the packets,[Pg 97] small as they were, were armed packets. But we almost smile in recording the armaments carried. Here is an account of the arms of the *Roebuck* packet as inventoried in 1791:—

- 2 Carriage guns.
- 4 Muskets and bayonets.
- 4 Brass Blunderbusses.
- 4 Cutlasses.
- 4 Pair of Pistols.
- 3 old Cartouch-boxes.

In our own estuaries and seas the packets were not free from molestation, and were in danger of being taken. In 1779 the Carron Company were running vessels from the Forth to London, and the following notice was issued by them as an inducement to persons travelling between these places:—

"The Carron vessels are fitted out in the most complete manner for defence, at a very considerable expense, and are well provided with small arms. All mariners, recruiting parties, soldiers upon furlow, and all other steerage passengers who have been accustomed to the use of firearms, and who will engage to assist in defending themselves, will be accommodated with their passage to and[Pg 98] from London upon satisfying the masters for their provisions, which in no instance shall exceed 10s. 6d. sterling." This was the year in which Paul Jones visited the Firth of Forth, and was spreading terror all round the coasts. The following was the service of the packets in the year 1780. Five packets were employed between Dover and Ostend and Calais, the despatches being made on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Between Harwich and Holland three were employed, the sailings in this case also taking place on Wednesdays and Saturdays. For New York and the West India Service twelve packets were engaged, sailing from Falmouth on the first Wednesday of every month. Four packets performed the duty between Falmouth and Lisbon, sailing every Saturday; and five packets kept up the Irish communication, sailing daily between Holyhead and Dublin. In the year 1798, a mail service seems to have been kept up by packets sailing from Yarmouth to Cuxhaven, at the mouth of the Elbe, respecting which the following particulars may be interesting.[Pg 99] They are taken from an old letter-book. "The passage-money to the office is 12s. 6d. for whole passengers, and 6s. 6d. for half passengers, either to or from England; 6d. of which is to be paid to the Captain for small beer, which both the whole and half passengers are to be informed of their being entitled to when they embark.

"1s. 6d. is allowed as a perquisite on each whole passenger, 1s. of which to the agent at Cuxhaven for every whole passenger embarking for England, and the other 6d. to the agent at Yarmouth; and in like manner 1s. to the agent at Yarmouth on every whole passenger embarking for the Continent, and 6d. to the agent at Cuxhaven; but no fee whatever is to be taken on half passengers, so that 10s. 6d. must be accounted for to the Revenue on each whole passenger, and 6s. on each half passenger."

Half passengers were servants, young children, or persons in low circumstances.

While touching upon passage-money, it may be noted that in 1811 the fare from Weymouth to Jersey or Guernsey, for cabin[Pg 100] passengers, was, to the captain, 15s. 6d. and to the office 10s. 6d.—or £1, 6s. in all.

The mail packets performing the service between England and Ireland in the first quarter of the present century were not much to boast of. According to a survey taken at Holyhead in July 1821, the vessels employed to carry the mails between that port and Dublin were of very small tonnage, as will be seen by the following table:—

|                        |          |
|------------------------|----------|
| Uxbridge,              | 93 tons. |
| Pelham,                | 98 "     |
| Duke of Montrose,      | 98 "     |
| Chichester,            | 102 "    |
| Union,                 | 104 "    |
| Countess of Liverpool, | 114 "    |

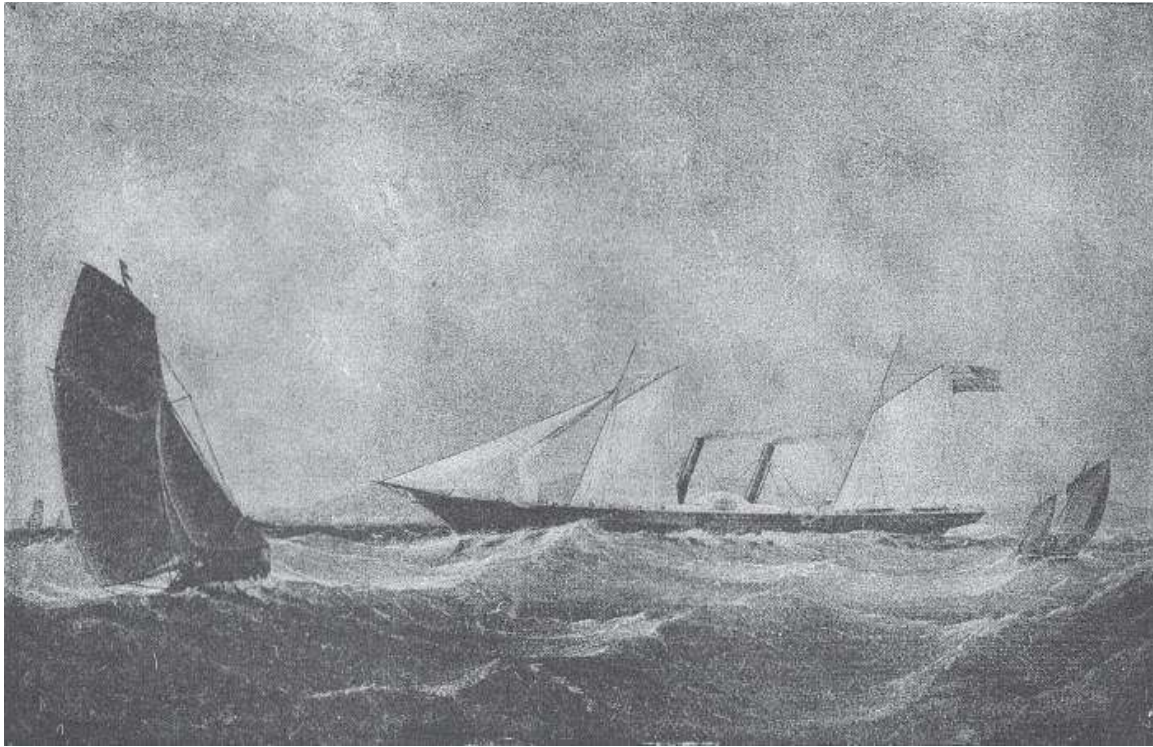
The valuation of these crafts, including rigging, furniture, and fitting, ranged from £1600 to £2400.

The failures or delays in making the passage across the Channel are thus described by Cleland in his *Annals of Glasgow*: "It frequently happens," says he, "that the mail packet is windbound at the mouth of the Liffey for several days together"; and we have seen it stated in a newspaper article[Pg 101] that the packets crossing to Ireland by the Portpatrick route were sometimes delayed a couple of weeks by contrary winds.

A few years previously an attempt had been made to introduce steam-packets for the Holyhead and Dublin service; but this improved service was not at that time adopted. Referring to the year 1816, Cleland writes: "The success of steamboats on the Clyde induced some gentlemen in Dublin to order two vessels to be made to ply as packets in the Channel between Dublin and Holyhead, with a view of ultimately carrying the mail. The dimensions are as follows:—viz., keel 65 feet, beam 18 feet, with 9 feet draught of water—have engines of 20 horse-power, and are named the 'Britannia' and 'Hibernia.'" These were the modest ideas then held as to the power of steam to develop and expedite the packet service. In the period from 1850-60, when steam had been adopted upon the Holyhead and Dublin route, one of the first contract vessels was the *Prince Arthur*, having a gross tonnage of 400, and whose[Pg 102] speed was thirteen or fourteen knots an hour. The latest addition to this line of packets is the *Ireland* a magnificent ship of 2095 tons gross, and of 7000 horse-power. Its rate of speed is twenty-two knots an hour.

As regards the American packet service perhaps greater strides than these even have been achieved. Prior to 1840 the vessels carrying the mails across the Atlantic were derisively called "coffin brigs," whose tonnage was probably about 400. At any rate, as will be seen later on, a packet in which Harriet Martineau crossed the Atlantic in 1836 was one of only 417 tons. On the 4th July 1840, a company, which is now the Cunard Company, started a contract service for the mails to America, the steamers employed having a tonnage burden of 1154 and indicated horse-power of 740. Their average speed was 8½ knots. In 1853 the packets had attained to greater proportions and higher speed, the average length of passage from Liverpool to New York being twelve days one hour fourteen minutes. As years rolled on competition and the exigencies of[Pg 105] the times called for still more rapid transit, and at the present day the several companies performing the American Mail Service have afloat palatial ships of 7000 to 10,000 tons, bringing America within a week's touch of Great Britain.





**HOLYHEAD AND KINGSTOWN MAIL PACKET "PRINCE ARTHUR"—400  
TONS—PERIOD 1850-60.**

*(From a painting, the property of the City of Dublin Steam Packet Company.)*

Going back a little more than a hundred years, it is of interest to see how irregular were the communications to and from foreign ports by mail packet. Benjamin Franklin, writing of the period 1757, mentions the following circumstances connected with a voyage he made from New York to Europe in that year. The packets were at the disposition of General Lord Loudon, then in charge of the army in America; and Franklin had to travel from Philadelphia to New York to join the packet, Lord Loudon having preceded him to the port of despatch. The General told Franklin confidentially, that though it had been given out that the packet would sail on Saturday next, still it would not sail till Monday. He was, however, advised not to delay longer. "By some accidental hindrance at a ferry," writes[Pg 106] Franklin, "it was Monday noon before I arrived, and I was much afraid she might have sailed, as the wind was fair; but I was soon made easy by the information that she was still in the harbour, and would not leave till the next day. One would imagine that I was now on the very point of departing for Europe. I thought so; but I was not then so well acquainted with his Lordship's character, of which indecision was one of the strongest features. It was about the beginning of April that I came to New York, and it was near the end of June before we sailed. There were then two of the packet-boats which had long been in port, but were detained for the General's letters, which were always to be ready *to-morrow*. Another packet arrived; she, too, was detained; and, before we sailed, a fourth was expected. Ours was the first to be despatched, as having been there longest. Passengers were engaged in all, and some extremely impatient to be gone, and the merchants uneasy about their letters, and the orders they had given for insurance (it[Pg 107] being war-time) for fall goods; but their anxiety availed nothing; his Lordship's letters were not ready; and yet, whoever waited on him found him always at his desk, pen in hand, and concluded he must needs write abundantly."



Apart from the manifest inconvenience of postal service conducted in the way described, one cannot wonder that the affairs of the American Colonies should get into a bad way when conducted under a policy of so manifest vacillation and indecision.

But the irregular transmission of mails between America and Europe was not a thing referring merely to the year 1757, for Franklin, writing from Passy, near Paris, in the year 1782, again dwells upon the uncertainty of the communication. "We are far from the sea-ports," he says, "and not well informed, and often misinformed, about the sailing of the vessels. Frequently we are told they are to sail in a week or two, and often they lie in the ports for months after with our letters on board, either[Pg 108] waiting for convoy or for other reasons. The post-office here is an unsafe conveyance; many of the letters we receive by it have evidently been opened, and doubtless the same happens to those we send; and, at this time particularly, there is so violent a curiosity in all kinds of people to know something relating to the negotiations, and whether peace may be expected, or a continuance of the war, that there are few private hands or travellers that we can trust with carrying our despatches to the sea-coast; and I imagine that they may sometimes be opened and destroyed, because they cannot be well sealed."

Harriet Martineau gives an insight into the way in which mails were treated on board American packets in the year 1836, which may be held to be almost in recent times; yet the treatment is such that a Postmaster-General of to-day would be roused to indignation at the outrage perpetrated upon them. She thus writes: "I could not leave such a sight, even for the amusement of hauling over the letter-bags. Mr. Ely[Pg 109] put on his spectacles; Mrs. Ely drew a chair; others lay along on deck to examine the superscriptions of the letters from Irish emigrants to their friends. It is wonderful how some of these epistles reach their destinations; the following, for instance, begun at the top left-hand corner, and elaborately prolonged to the bottom right one:—Mrs. A. B. ile of Man douglas wits sped England. The letter-bags are opened for the purpose of sorting out those which are for delivery in port from the rest. A fine day is always chosen, generally towards the end of the voyage, when amusements become scarce and the passengers are growing weary. It is pleasant to sit on the rail and see the passengers gather round the heap of letters, and to hear the shouts of merriment when any exceedingly original superscription comes under notice." Such liberties with the mails in the present day would excite consternation in the headquarters of the Post Office Department. Nor is this all. Miss Martineau makes the further remark—"The two Miss O'Briens appeared to-day on deck,[Pg 110] speaking to nobody, sitting on the same seats, with their feet *on the same letter-bag*, reading two volumes of the same book, and dressed alike," etc. The mail-bags turned into footstools, forsooth! It is interesting to note the size of the packet in which this lady crossed the Atlantic. It was the *Orpheus*, Captain Bursley, a vessel of 417 tons. In looking back on these times, and knowing what dreadful storms our huge steamers encounter between Europe and America, we cannot but admire the courage which must have inspired men and women to embark for distant ports in crafts so frail.<sup>[4]</sup> It is well also to note that the transit from New York occupied the period from the 1st to the 26th August, the better part of four weeks.

Reference has been made to the fact that a century ago the little packets, to which the mails and passengers were consigned, were built for fighting purposes. It was no uncommon thing for them to fall into the hands of an enemy; but they did[Pg 111] not always succumb without doing battle, and sometimes they had the honours of the day. In 1793 the *Antelope* packet fought a privateer off the coast of Cuba and captured it, after 49 of the 65 men the privateer carried had been killed or disabled. The *Antelope* had only two killed and three wounded—one mortally. In 1803 the *Lady Hobart*, a vessel of 200 tons, sailing from Nova Scotia for

England, fell in with and captured a French schooner; but the *Lady Hobart* a few days later ran into an iceberg, receiving such damage that she shortly thereafter foundered. The mails were loaded with iron and thrown overboard, and the crew and passengers, taking to the boats, made for Newfoundland, which they reached after enduring great hardships.

The introduction of the uniform Penny Postage, under the scheme with which Sir Rowland Hill's name is so intimately associated, and the Jubilee of which occurs in the present year, marks an important epoch in the review which is now under consideration. To enter into a history of the Penny Postage [Pg 112] agitation would be beyond the scope of these pages. Like all great schemes, the idea propounded was fought against inch by inch, and the battle, so far as the objectors are concerned, remains a memorial of the incapacity of a great portion of mankind to think out any scheme on its merits. Whatever is new is sure to be opposed, apparently on no other ground than that of novelty, and in this bearing men are often not unlike some of the lower creatures in the scale of animated nature, that start and fly from things which they have not seen before, though they may have no more substance than that of a shadow. However this may be, the Penny Postage measure has produced stupendous results. In 1839, the year before the reduction of postage, the letters passing through the post in the United Kingdom were 82,500,000. In 1840, under the Penny Postage Scheme, the number immediately rose to nearly 169,000,000. That is to say, the letters were doubled in number. Ten years later the number rose to 347,000,000, and in last [Pg 115] year (1889) the total number of letters passing through the Post Office in this country was 1,558,000,000. In addition to the letters, however, the following articles passed through the post last year—Book Packets and Circulars, 412,000,000; Newspapers 152,000,000; Post Cards 201,000,000.

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*Form of Petition used in agitation for the Uniform Penny Postage.*

## **UNIFORM PENNY POSTAGE.**

### **(FORM OF A PETITION.)**

TO THE HONOURABLE THE LORDS SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL [*or, THE COMMONS, as the case may be*] IN PARLIAMENT ASSEMBLED:—

The humble Petition of the Undersigned [*to be filled up with the name of Place, Corporation, &c.*]

SHEWETH,

That your Petitioners earnestly desire an Uniform Penny Post, payable in advance, as proposed by Rowland Hill, and recommended by the Report of the Select Committee of the House of Commons.

That your Petitioners intreat your Honourable House to give speedy effect to this Report. And your Petitioners will ever pray.

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MOTHERS AND FATHERS that wish to hear from their absent children!

FRIENDS who are parted, that wish to write to each other!

EMIGRANTS that do not forget their native homes!

FARMERS that wish to know the best Markets!

MERCHANTS AND TRADESMEN that wish to receive Orders and Money quickly and cheaply!

MECHANICS AND LABOURERS that wish to learn where good work and high wages are to be had! *support* the Report of the House of Commons with your Petitions for an UNIFORM PENNY POST. Let every City and Town and Village, every Corporation, every Religious Society and Congregation, petition, and let every one in the kingdom sign a Petition with his name or his mark.

THIS IS NO QUESTION OF PARTY POLITICS.

Lord Ashburton, a Conservative, and one of the richest Noblemen in the country, spoke these impressive words before the House of Commons Committee—"Postage is one of the worst of our Taxes; it is, in fact, taxing the conversation of people who live at a distance from each other. The communication of letters by persons living at a distance is the same as a communication by word of mouth between persons living in the same town."

"Sixpence," says Mr. Brewin, "is the third of a poor man's income; if a gentleman, who had 1,000*l.* a year, or 3*l.* a day, had to pay one-third of his daily income, a sovereign, for a letter, how often would he write letters of friendship! Let a gentleman put that to himself, and then he will be able to see how the poor man cannot be able to pay Sixpence for his Letter."

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READER!

If you can get any Signatures to a Petition, make two Copies of the above on two half sheets of paper; get them signed as numerous as possible; fold each up separately; put a slip of paper around, leaving the ends open; direct one to a Member of the House of Lords, the other to a Member of the House of Commons, LONDON, and put them into the Post Office.

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*Reproduced from a handbill in the collection of the late  
Sir Henry Cole, K.C.B. By permission of Lady Cole.*

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Should any reader desire to inform himself with some degree of fulness of the stages through which the Penny Postage agitation passed, he cannot do better than peruse Sir Henry Cole's *Fifty Years of Public Work*.

The Postmaster-General, speaking at the Jubilee Meeting at the London Guildhall, on the 16th May last, thus contrasted the work of 1839 with that of 1889: "Although I would not tonight weary an assemblage like this with tedious and tiresome figures, it may be at least permitted to me to remind you that, whereas in the year immediately preceding the establishment of the Penny Postage the number of letters delivered in the United Kingdom amounted to<sup>[5]</sup> 76,000,000, the number of letters[Pg 116] delivered in this country last year was nearly 1,600,000,000—twenty times the number of letters which passed through the post fifty years ago. To these letters must be added the 652,000,000 of post-cards and other communications by the halfpenny post, and the enormous number of newspapers, which bring the total number of communications passing through the post to considerably above two billions. I venture to say that this is the most stupendous result of any administrative change which the world has witnessed. If you estimate the effect of that upon our daily life; if you pause for a moment to consider how trade and business have been facilitated and developed; how family relations have been maintained and kept together; if you for a moment allow your mind to dwell upon the change which is implied in that great fact to which I have called attention, I think you will see that the establishment of the penny post has done more to change—and change for the better—the face of Old England than almost any other political or social[Pg 117] project which has received the sanction of Legislature within our history."

Among the Penny Postage literature issued in the year 1840 there are several songs. One of these was published at Leith, and is given below. It is entitled "Hurrah for the Postman, the great Roland Hill." The leaflet is remarkable for this, that it is headed by a picture of postmen rushing through the streets delivering letters on roller skates. It is generally believed that roller skates are quite a modern invention, and in the absence of proof to the contrary it may be fair to assume that the author of the song anticipated the inventor in this mode of progression. So there really seems to be nothing new under the sun!

#### **HURRAH FOR THE POSTMAN, THE GREAT ROLAND HILL.**<sup>[6]</sup>

"Come, send round the liquor, and fill to the brim  
A bumper to Railroads, the Press, Gas, and Steam;  
To rags, bags, and nutgalls, ink, paper, and quill,  
The Post, and the Postman, the gude Roland Hill!  
By steam we noo travel mair quick than the eagle,  
A sixty mile trip for the price o' a sang!  
[Pg 118]  
A prin it has powntit—th' Atlantic surmountit,  
We'll compass the globe in a fortnight or lang.  
The gas bleezes brightly, you witness it nightly,  
Our ancestors lived unca lang in the dark;  
Their wisdom was folly, their sense melancholy  
When compared wi' sic wonderfu' modern wark.  
Neist o' rags, bags, and size then, let no one despise them,  
Without them whar wad a' our paper come frae?  
The dark flood o' ink too, I'm given to think too,  
Could as ill be wanted at this time o' day.  
The Quill is a queer thing, a cheap and a dear thing,  
A weak-lookin' object, but gude kens how strang,  
Sometimes it is ceevil, sometimes it's the deevil.  
Tak tent when you touch it, you haudna it wrang.  
The Press I'll next mention, a noble invention,  
The great mental cook with resources so vast;



It spreads on bright pages the knowledge o' ages,  
And tells to the future the things of the past.  
Hech, sirs! but its awfu' (but ne'er mind it's lawfu')  
To saddle the Postman wi' sic meikle bags;  
Wi' epistles and sonnets, love billets and groan-ets,  
Ye'll tear the poor Postie to shivers and rags.  
Noo Jock sends to Jenny, it costs but ae penny,  
A screed that has near broke the Dictionar's back,  
Fu' o' dove-in and dear-in, and *thoughts* on the shearin'!!  
Nae need noo o' whisp'rin' ayont a wheat stack.  
Auld drivers were lazy, their mail-coaches crazy,  
At ilk public-house they stopt for a gill;  
But noo at the gallop, cheap mail-bags maun wallop.  
Hurrah for our Postman, the great Roland Hill.  
"Then send round the liquor," etc.

The advantages resulting from a rapid and cheap carriage of letters must readily occur to any ordinary mind; but perhaps the following would hardly suggest itself as one of [Pg 119] those advantages. Dean Alford thus wrote about the usefulness of post-cards, introduced on the 1st October 1870: "You will also find a new era in postage begun. The halfpenny cards have become a great institution. Some of us make large use of them to write short Latin epistles on, and are brushing up our Cicero and Pliny for that purpose."

Unlike some of the branches of post-office work, other than the distribution of news, either by letter or newspaper, the money order system dates from long before the introduction of penny postage—namely from the year 1792.

It was set on foot by some of the post-office clerks on their own account; but it was not till 1838 that it became a recognised business of the Department. Owing to high rates of commission, and to high postage, little business was done in the earlier years. In 1839 less than 190,000 orders were issued of the value of £313,000, while last year the total number of transactions within the United Kingdom was 9,228,183, representing a sum of nearly £23,000,000 sterling.

[Pg 120]

In the year 1861 the Post Office entered upon the business of banking by the establishment of the Post Office Savings Banks. At the present time there are upwards of 9000 offices within the kingdom at which Post Office Savings Bank business is transacted. The number of persons having accounts with these banks is now 4,220,927, and the annual deposits represent a gross sum of over £19,000,000.

In order of time the next additional business taken up by the Department was that of the telegraphs. Before 1870 the telegraph work for the public was carried on by several commercial companies and by the railway companies; but in that year this business became a monopoly, like the transmission of letters, in the hands of the Post Office. The work of taking over these various telegraphs, and, consolidating them into a harmonious whole, was one of gigantic proportions, requiring indomitable courage and unwearying energy, as well as consummate ability; and when the history of this enterprise comes to be written, it will [Pg 121] perhaps be found that the undertaking, in magnitude and importance, comes in no measure short of the Penny Postage scheme of Sir Rowland Hill.

In the first year of the control of the telegraphs by the Post Office the number of messages sent was nearly 9,472,000, excluding 700,000 press messages. At that time the minimum charge was 1s. per message. In 1885 the minimum was reduced to 6d., and under this rate the number of messages rose last year to 62,368,000.

The most recent addition of importance to the varied work of the Post Office is that of the Parcel Post. This business was started in 1883. In the first year of its operation the number of inland parcels transmitted was upwards of 22,900,000. Last year the number, including a proportion of foreign and colonial parcels, rose to 39,500,000, earning a gross postage of over £878,547. The uniform rates in respect of distance, the vast number of offices where parcels are received and delivered, and the extensive machinery at the command of the Post[Pg 122] Office for the work, render this business one of extreme accommodation to the public. Not only is the Parcel Post taken advantage of for the transmission of ordinary business or domestic parcels, but it is made the channel for the exchange of all manner of out-of-the-way articles. The following are some instances of the latter class observed at Edinburgh: Scotch oatmeal going to Paris, Naples, and Berlin; bagpipes for the Lower Congo, and for native regiments in the Punjaub; Scotch haggis for Ontario, Canada, and for Caebur, India; smoked haddocks for Rome; the great puzzle "Pigs in Clover" for Bavaria, and for Wellington, New Zealand, and so on. At home, too, curious arrangements come under notice. A family, for example, in London find it to their advantage to have a roast of beef sent to them by parcel post twice a week from a town in Fife. And a gentleman of property, having his permanent residence in Devonshire, finds it convenient, when enjoying the shooting season in the far north-west of Scotland, to have his vegetables forwarded[Pg 123] by parcel post from his home garden in Devonshire to his shooting lodge in Scotland. The postage on these latter consignments sometimes amounts to about fifteen shillings a day, a couple of post-office parcel hampers being required for their conveyance.

And we should not omit to mention here the number of persons employed in the Post by whom this vast amount of most diverse business is carried on for the nation. Of head and sub-postmasters and letter receivers, each of whom has a post-office under his care, there are 17,770. The other established offices of the Post Office number over 40,500, and there are, besides, persons employed in unestablished positions to the number of over 50,000. Thus there is a great army of no less than 108,000 persons serving the public in the various domains of the postal service.

A century ago, and indeed down to a period only fifty years ago, the world, looked at from the present vantage-ground, must appear to have been in a dull, lethargic state, with hardly any pulse and a low[Pg 124] circulation. As for nerve system it had none. The changes which the Post Office has wrought in the world, but more particularly in our own country, are only to be fully perceived and appreciated by the thoughtful. Now the heart of the nation throbs strongly at the centre, while the current of activity flows quickly and freely to the remotest corners of the state. The telegraph provides a nervous system unknown before. By its means every portion of the country is placed in immediate contact with every other part; the thrill of joy and the moan of desolation are no longer things of locality; they are shared fully and immediately by the whole; and the interest of brotherhood, extending to parts of the country which, under other conditions, must have remained unknown and uncared for, makes us realise that all men are but members of one and the same family.

The freedom and independence now enjoyed by the individual, as a result of the vast influence exercised by society through the rapid exchange of thought, is certainly a[Pg 125] thing of which the people of our own country may well be proud. Right can now assert itself

in a way which was entirely beyond the reach of our predecessors of a hundred years ago; and wrong receives summary judgment at the hands of a whole people. Yet there is a growing danger that this great liberty of the individual may become, in one direction, a spurious liberty, and that the elements of physical force, exerting themselves under the ægis of uncurbed freedom, may enter into conspiracy against intellect, individual effort, and thrift in such a way as to produce a tyranny worse than that existing in the most despotic states.

The introduction of the telegraph, and the greater facilities afforded by the press for the general distribution of news, have greatly changed the nature of commercial speculation. Formerly, when news came from abroad at wide intervals, it was of the utmost consequence to obtain early command of prices and information as to movements in the markets, and whoever gained the news first had the first place in the race. Nowadays[Pg 126] the telegraph, and the newspapers by the help of the telegraph, give all an equal start, and the whole world knows at once what is going on in every capital of the globe. The thirst for the first possession of news in commercial life is happily described in *Glasgow Past and Present*, wherein the author gives an account of a practice prevailing in the Tontine Reading Rooms at the end of last century. "Immediately on receiving the bag of papers from the post-office," says the writer, "the waiter locked himself up in the bar, and after he had sorted the different papers and had made them up in a heap, he unlocked the door of the bar, and making a sudden rush into the middle of the room, he then tossed up the whole lot of newspapers as high as the ceiling of the room. Now came the grand rush and scramble of the subscribers, every one darting forward to lay hold of a falling newspaper. Sometimes a lucky fellow got hold of five or six newspapers and ran off with them to a corner, in order to select his favourite paper; but he was always hotly pursued by some half-dozen[Pg 129] of the disappointed scramblers, who, without ceremony, pulled from his hands the first paper they could lay hold of, regardless of its being torn in the contest. On these occasions I have often seen a heap of gentlemen sprawling on the floor of the room and riding upon one another's backs like a parcel of boys. It happened, however, unfortunately, that a gentleman in one of these scrambles got two of his teeth knocked out of his head, and this ultimately brought about a change in the manner of delivering the newspapers."





**THE TONTINE READING-ROOMS, GLASGOW—ARRIVAL OF THE MAIL—  
PERIOD: END OF LAST CENTURY.  
(After an old print.)**

Another instance of the anxiety for early news is exhibited in a practice which prevailed in Glasgow about fifty years ago. The Glasgow merchants were deeply interested in shipping and other news coming from Liverpool. The mail at that period arrived in Glasgow some time in the afternoon during business hours. A letter containing quotations from Liverpool for the Royal Exchange was due in the mail daily. This letter was enclosed in a conspicuously bright red cover, and it was the business of the post-office clerk, immediately he opened the Liverpool bag, to seize[Pg 130] this letter and hand it to a messenger from the Royal Exchange who was in attendance at the Post Office to receive it. This messenger hastened to the Exchange, rang a bell to announce the arrival of the news, and forthwith the contents of the letter were posted up in the Exchange. The merchants who had offices within sound of the bell were then seen hurrying to the Exchange buildings, to be cheered or depressed as the case might be by the information which the mail had brought them.

A clever instance of how the possession of early news could be turned to profitable account in the younger days of the century is recorded of Mr. John Rennie, a nephew of his namesake the great engineer, and an extensive dealer in corn and cattle. His headquarters at the time were at East Linton, near Dunbar. "At one period of his career Mr. Rennie habitually visited London either for business or pleasure, or both combined. One day, when present at the grain market, in Mark Lane, sudden war news arrived, in consequence of which[Pg 131] the price of wheat immediately bounded up 20s., 25s., and even 30s. per quarter. At once he saw his opportunity and left for Scotland by the next mail. He knew, of course, that the mail carried the startling war news to Edinburgh, but he trusted to his wit to outdo it by reaching the northern capital first. As the coach passed the farm of Skateraw, some distance east of



Dunbar, it was met by the farmer, old Harry Lee, on horseback. Rennie, who was an outside passenger, no sooner recognised Lee than he sprang from his seat on the coach to the ground. Coming up to Lee, Rennie hurriedly whispered something to him, and induced him to lend his horse to carry Rennie on to East Linton. Rennie, who was an astonishingly active man, vaulted into the saddle, and immediately rode off at full gallop westwards. The day was a Wednesday, and, as it was already 11 o'clock forenoon, he knew that he had no time to lose; but he was not the stamp of man to allow the grass to grow under his feet on such an important occasion. Ere he reached Dunbar the mail[Pg 132] was many hundred yards behind. At his own place at East Linton he drew up, mounted his favourite horse "Silvertail," which for speed and endurance had no rival in the county, and again proceeded at the gallop. When he reached the Grassmarket, Edinburgh—a full hour before the mail,—the grain-selling was just starting, and before the alarming war news had got time to spread Rennie had every peck of wheat in the market bought up. He must have coined an enormous profit by this smart transaction; but to him it seemed to matter nothing at all. He was one of the most careless of the harum-scarum sons of Adam, and if he made money easily, so in a like manner did he let it slip his grip."

The two following instances of the expedients to which merchants resorted, before the introduction of the telegraph, in cases of urgency, and when the letter post would not serve them, are given by the author of *Glasgow Past and Present*, to whose work reference has already been made:—

"During the French War the premiums of[Pg 133] insurance upon running ships (ships sailing without convoy) were very high, in consequence of which several of our Glasgow ship-owners who possessed quick-sailing vessels were in the practice of allowing the expected time of arrival of their ships closely to approach before they effected insurance upon them, thus taking the chance of a quick passage being made, and if the ships arrived safe the insurance was saved.

"Mr. Archibald Campbell, about this time an extensive Glasgow merchant, had allowed one of his ships to remain uninsured till within a short period of her expected arrival; at last, getting alarmed, he attempted to effect insurance in Glasgow, but found the premium demanded so high that he resolved to get his ship and cargo insured in London. Accordingly, he wrote a letter to his broker in London, instructing him to get the requisite insurance made on the best terms possible, but, at all events, to get the said insurance effected. This letter was despatched through the post-office in the ordinary manner, the mail at that time[Pg 134] leaving Glasgow at two o'clock p.m. At seven o'clock the same night Mr. Campbell received an express from Greenock announcing the safe arrival of his ship. Mr. Campbell, on receiving this intelligence, instantly despatched his head clerk in pursuit of the mail, directing him to proceed by postchaises-and-four with the utmost speed until he overtook it, and then to get into it; or, if he could not overtake it, he was directed to proceed to London, and to deliver a letter to the broker countermanding the instructions about insurance. The clerk, notwithstanding of extra payment to the postilions, and every exertion to accelerate his journey, was unable to overtake the mail; but he arrived in London on the third morning shortly after the mail, and immediately proceeded to the residence of the broker, whom he found preparing to take his breakfast, and before delivery of the London letters. The order for insurance written for was then countermanded, and the clerk had the pleasure of taking a comfortable breakfast with the broker. The expenses of this express[Pg 135] amounted to £100; but it was said that the premium of insurance, if it had been effected, would have amounted to £1500, so that Mr. Campbell was reported to have saved £1400 by his promptitude."

"At the period in question a rise had taken place in the cotton-market, and there was a general expectancy among the cotton-dealers that there would be a continued and steady advance of prices in every description of cotton. Acting upon this belief Messrs. James Finlay & Co. had sent out orders by post to their agent in India to make extensive purchases of cotton on their account, to be shipped by the first vessels for England. It so happened, however, shortly after these orders had been despatched, that cotton fell in price, and a still greater fall was expected to take place. Under these circumstances Messrs. Finlay & Co. despatched an overland express to India countermanding their orders to purchase cotton. This was the first, and, I believe, the only overland express despatched from Glasgow to India by a private party on commercial purposes."

[Pg 136]

One of the greatest achievements of our own time, yet too often overlooked, is the marvellously rapid diffusion of parliamentary news throughout the country. Important debates are frequently protracted in the House of Commons into the early hours of the morning. The speeches are instantly reported by the shorthand writers in the gallery, who dog the lips of the speakers and commit their every word to paper. Thus seized in the fleet lines of stenography, the words and phrases are then transcribed into long-hand. Relays of messengers carry the copy to the telegraph office, where the words are punched in the form of a mysterious language on slips of paper like tape, which are run through the Wheatstone telegraph transmitter, the electric current carrying the news to distant stations at the rate of several hundred words a minute. At these stations the receiving-machine pours out at an equal rate, another tape, bearing a record in a different character, from which relays of clerks, attending the oracle, convert the weighty sayings again into ordinary [Pg 137]language. The news thus received is carried forthwith by a succession of messengers to the newspaper office; the compositors set the matter up in type; it is reviewed and edited by the men appointed to the duty; the columns are stereotyped, and in that form are placed in the printing-machines. The machines are set in motion at astonishing speed, turning out the newspapers cut and folded and ready for the reader. A staff is in attendance to place under cover the copies of subscribers for despatch by the early mails. These are carried to the post-office, and so transmitted to their destinations. Taking Edinburgh as a point for special consideration, all that has been stated applies to this city. For the first despatches to the north, the *Scotsman* and *Leader* newspapers are conveyed to certain trains as early as 4 A.M.; and by the breakfast-hour, or early in the forenoon, the parliamentary debates of the previous night are being discussed over the greater part of Scotland. And all this hurry and intellectual activity is going on while the nation at large is [Pg 138] wrapped in sleep, and probably not one person in a hundred ever thinks or concerns himself to know how it is done.

The frequency and rapidity of communication between different parts of the world seems to have brought the whole globe into a very small focus, for obscure places, which would be unknown, one would think, beyond their own immediate neighbourhoods, are frequently well within the cognisance of persons living in far-distant quarters. An instance of this is given by the postmaster of Epworth, a village near to Doncaster. "We have," says the postmaster, "an odd place in this parish known as Nineveh Farm. Some years ago a letter was received here which had been posted somewhere in the United States of America, and was addressed merely

Mr. ———  
NINEVEH.

I have always regarded its delivery to the proper person as little less than a miracle, but it happened."

It is impossible to say how far the [Pg 139]influence of this great revolution in the mail service on land and sea may extend. That the change has been, on the whole, to the advantage of mankind goes without saying. One contrast is here given, and the reader can draw his own conclusions in other directions. The peace of 1782, which followed the American War of Independence, was only arrived at after negotiations extending over more than two years. Prussia and Austria were at war in 1866. The campaign occupied seven days; and from the declaration of war to the formal conclusion of peace only seven weeks elapsed. Is it to be doubted that the difference in the two cases was, in large measure, due to the fact that news travelled slowly in the one case and fast in the other?

We may look back on the past with very mixed feelings,—dreaming of the easy-going methods of our forefathers, which gave them leisure for study and reflection, or esteeming their age as an age of lethargy, of lumbering and slumbering.

We are proud of our own era, as one full[Pg 140] of life and activity, full of hurry and bustle, and as existing under the spell of high electrical tension. But too many of us know to our cost that this present whirl of daily life has one most serious drawback, summed up in the commonplace, but not the less true, saying,—

"It's the pace that kills."

Yet one more thought remains. Will the pace be kept up in the next hundred years? There is no reason to suppose it will not, and the world is hardly likely to go to sleep. Our successors who live a hundred years hence will doubtless learn much that man has not yet dreamt of. Time will produce many changes and reveal deep secrets; but as to what these shall be, let him prophesy who knows.

## FOOTNOTES:

[1] See [Note A](#) in Appendix.

[2] See [Note D](#) in Appendix.

[3] See [Note B](#) in Appendix.

[4] See [Note C](#) in Appendix.

[5] Exclusive of franked letters.

[6] From the collection of the late Sir Henry Cole in the Edinburgh International Exhibition, 1890.

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[Pg 141]

## APPENDIX.

## A.

As to the representation in Parliament, the freeholders in the whole of the Counties of Scotland, who had the power of returning the County Members, were, in 1823, for example, just under three thousand in number. These were mostly gentlemen of position living on their estates, with a sprinkling of professional men; the former being, from their want of business training, ill suited, one would suppose, for conducting the business of a nation. The Town Councils were self-elective—hotbeds of corruption; and the members of these Town Councils were intrusted with the power of returning the Members for the boroughs. The people at large were not directly represented, if in strictness represented at all.

## B.

Francis, afterwards Lord Jeffrey, in a letter of the 20th September 1799, describes the discomfort of a journey by mail from Perth to Edinburgh, when the coach had broken down, and he was carried forward by the guard by special conveyance. His graphic description is as follows:—"I was roused carefully half an hour before four yesterday morning, and passed two delightful hours in the kitchen waiting for the mail. There was an enormous fire, and a whole household of smoke. The waiter was snoring with great vehemency upon one of the dressers, and the deep regular intonation had a very solemn effect, I can assure you, in the obscurity of that Tartarean region, and the melancholy silence of the morning. An innumerable number of rats were trotting and gibbering in [Pg 142] one end of the place, and the rain clattered freshly on the windows. The dawn heavily in clouds brought on the day, but not, alas! the mail; and it was long past five when the guard came galloping into the yard, upon a smoking horse, with all the wet bags lumbering beside him (like Scylla's water-dogs), roaring out that the coach was broken down somewhere near Dundee, and commanding another steed to be got ready for his transportation. The noise he made brought out the other two sleepy wretches that had been waiting like myself for places, and we at length persuaded the heroic champion to order a postchaise instead of a horse, into which we crammed ourselves all four, with a whole mountain of leather bags that clung about our legs like the entrails of a fat cow all the rest of the journey. At Kinross, as the morning was very fine, we prevailed with the guard to go on the outside to dry himself, and got on to the ferry about eleven, after encountering various perils and vexations, in the loss of horse-shoes and wheel-pins, and in a great gap in the road, over which we had to lead the horses, and haul the carriage separately. At this place we supplicated our agitator for leave to eat a little breakfast; but he would not stop an instant, and we were obliged to snatch up a roll or two apiece and gnaw the dry crusts during our passage to keep soul and body together. We got in soon after one, and I have spent my time in eating, drinking, sleeping, and other recreations, down to the present hour."

On going north from Edinburgh, on the same tour apparently, Jeffrey had previous experience of the difficulties of travel, as described in a letter from Montrose, date 26th August 1799.

"We stopped," says he, "for two days at Perth, hoping for places in the mail, and then set forward on foot in despair. We have trudged it now for fifty miles, and came here this morning very weary, sweaty, and filthy. Our baggage, which was to have left Perth the same day that we did, has not yet made its appearance, and we have received the comfortable information that it is often a week before there is room in the mail to bring such a parcel forward."



Writing from Kendal, in 1841, Jeffrey refers to a journey he[Pg 143] made fifty years before—that is, about 1791—when he slept a night in the town. His description of the circumstances is as follows:—

"And an admirable dinner we have had in the Ancient King's Arms, with great oaken staircases, uneven floors, and very thin oak panels, plaster-filled outer walls, but capital new furniture, and the brightest glass, linen, spoons, and china you ever saw. It is the same house in which I once slept about fifty years ago, with the whole company of an ancient stage-coach, which bedded its passengers on the way from Edinburgh to London, and called them up by the waiter at six o'clock in the morning to go five slow stages, and then have an hour to breakfast and wash. It is the only vestige I remember of those old ways, and I have not slept in the house since."

### C.

The discomfort of a long voyage in a vessel of this class is well set forth in the correspondence of Jeffrey. In 1813 he crossed to New York in search of a wife; and in describing the miseries of the situation on board, he gives a long list of his woes, the last being followed by this declaration: "I think I shall make a covenant with myself, that if I get back safe to my own place from this expedition, I shall never willingly go out of sight of land again in my life."

### D.

A notable instance of an attempt to shut the door in the face of an able man is recorded in the Life of Sir James Simpson, who has made all the world his debtors through the discovery and application of chloroform for surgical operations. Plain Dr. Simpson was a candidate for a professorship in the University of Edinburgh, and had his supporters for the honour; but there was among the men with whom rested the selection a considerable party opposed to him, whose ground of opposition was that, on account of[Pg 144] his parents being merely tradespeople, Dr. Simpson would be unable to maintain the dignity of the chair. To their eternal discredit, the persons referred to did not look to the quality and ring of the "gowd," but were guided by the superficial "guinea stamp." The spread of public opinion is gradually putting such distinctions, which have their root and being in privilege and selfishness, out of court.

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