

From the Origins of the Post to the First Issued Stamp

Philately, often commonly, and wrongly referred to as stamp collecting, is not simply the collection of postage stamps. It is a study of the history of communication, the study of technological innovation, the making of states, legislation and the history of taxation. It begins in the furthest history of human communication, not simply with the first postage stamp in 1840.

These pages might provide some idea of the scope of philatelic research, and of some of the things that are of interest to members of the Royal Philatelic Society London. Much of what follows is centred on Western Europe, but the Society's interests are worldwide and international.

1. The Posts in Ancient times

The institution, which we know so well today, was founded in the most ancient of civilisations. To begin with, it might be useful to discuss what we are writing about. The word “*post*” is to be found in various texts throughout the centuries. Amongst others, perhaps the best known is the account of Marco Polo's journey to China between 1275 and 1290 in which the word “*post*” refers to relays on the Chinese roads, each of which was 25 miles apart. The term is also found in the Visconti Archives in Milan, where a letter of 1388 includes the phrase “*Portentur festinantissimi per Caularius postarum quia frequentissime importante*”. However, an organised system for conveying information dates from a much earlier time.

Even in the least developed of ancient civilisations, the head of state always needed to keep in touch with the far reaches of his empire, regardless of its size. He would want to know for certain that his orders would reach his subjects reasonably quickly in any of his sovereign territories. He also needed to be rapidly informed of any threats posed by his neighbours, so that he could react in time. The systems created for the transmission of correspondence have changed through different civilisations and over the centuries. However, one constant factor can be noted - the speed with which information is passed depends on the individual person carrying it and how fast he can travel. The same person often would be assisted by a horse, which remained essential throughout and even beyond these early years.



(Source: British Museum, London)

This clay cylinder bears a proclamation, written in the cuneiform script, which was issued by King Cyrus after the Battle of Babylon in 539.

Authorities agree that King Cyrus of Persia was the first to set up a system of relays along the roads of his empire. He ordered one of his subjects to measure the distance that a horse could cover in a single day and had relay stations built where fresh horses were kept, so that mail could be carried by day or night across his empire. Herodotus tells us that it was during a campaign against the Scythians in the 6th Century BC that Cyrus ordered the construction of relay stations, so that he could be kept quickly informed of the military situation and at all times. Over the centuries, his successors perfected the system.

Herodotus also states that there were 111 of these relay stations or “*mansions*” between the Aegean and the Empire’s capital. He writes that Themistocles sent a runner to Persia to announce that he had defeated Xerxes at the naval battle of Salamis in 480BC. Men were stationed at staging posts and used horses to travel by day and night. More rapid methods were used to convey urgent news. For instance, beacons were lit to announce the capture of Troy by the Greeks.

The Romans copied and perfected this system by setting up relay stations where fresh horses were available at any time of day or night. Julius Caesar noted with astonishment in his Commentaries how the Gauls communicated with one another. He had no reason to feel envious, as the infrastructure and existing relays enabled him to send mail from Brittany to his friend Cicero, who was still in Rome, and which took only 26 days to arrive. As we will see, there was no question of private individuals being able to use these services until the end of the middle Ages. They simply had to make do. Some used pigeons to send short messages, while others used their own slaves to send news. In Rome, there were “*cursores*” (foot messengers) and horse messengers called “*tabellarii*” (letter carriers). The Romans were already tying their letters with linen thread and sealing them with wax.

During the reign of Emperor Augustus (63BC to 14AD), a new movement emerged from the need to link various distant parts of his vast Empire and the Emperor created what was truly a state postal system.

This is as Suetonius explained in his book “*The Twelve Caesars*”:

“So that he could be more immediately warned and informed about what was happening in the provinces, Augustus stationed young people, and later vehicles, at appropriate intervals along the military roads. This was a distinct advantage as it allowed those carrying mail to its destination to be questioned, if circumstances required. Emperor Augustus first used the image of a sphinx to seal certificates, dispatches and letters, followed by an image of Alexander the Great and later his own image engraved by Dioscurides, which was also used by subsequent emperors. All letters also bore an endorsement, showing the precise time of day or night when they were written.”



Mercury: patron god of messengers
(Source: *Dissertazione sulle Poste degli Antichi*, Firenze, 1746).



Augustus on the front and reverse: coin with effigy of Augustus and Sphinx on reverse.

(Source: Numismatik Lanz München)

Two types of postal employee existed during the reign of Emperor Augustus: “*stationarii*” were responsible for informing the Emperor about events within the areas covered by their relay stations, while the “*curiosi*” were in charge of the “*police*” and acted as informants if they witnessed any suspicious behaviour by members of the public, magistrates or Roman officials. This is not, however, how the political police originated.

In the daily workings of the postal system, young people known as “*juvenes*” were originally responsible for carrying mail between relay stations. Vehicles were soon used which made it possible to cover longer distances. This led to a far more developed organisation, with resting places and shelter for the courier, who would now be able to cover a particular route from start to finish. From this time on, two types of postal route existed: relay stations that were reasonably close to one another were called “*mutationes*” and held a minimum of twenty horses, while travellers could get rest and food at more important relay stations called “*mansiones*”. These included stables (“*stabulae*”), as well as public warehouses or granaries (“*horrea*”), where necessary supplies could be purchased. Part V of Book VIII of the Theodosian Code (*Codex Theodosianus*) from the early 4th Century includes a variety of regulations for the “*Cursus Publicus*”, which applied to the whole Empire, but with some local variations.



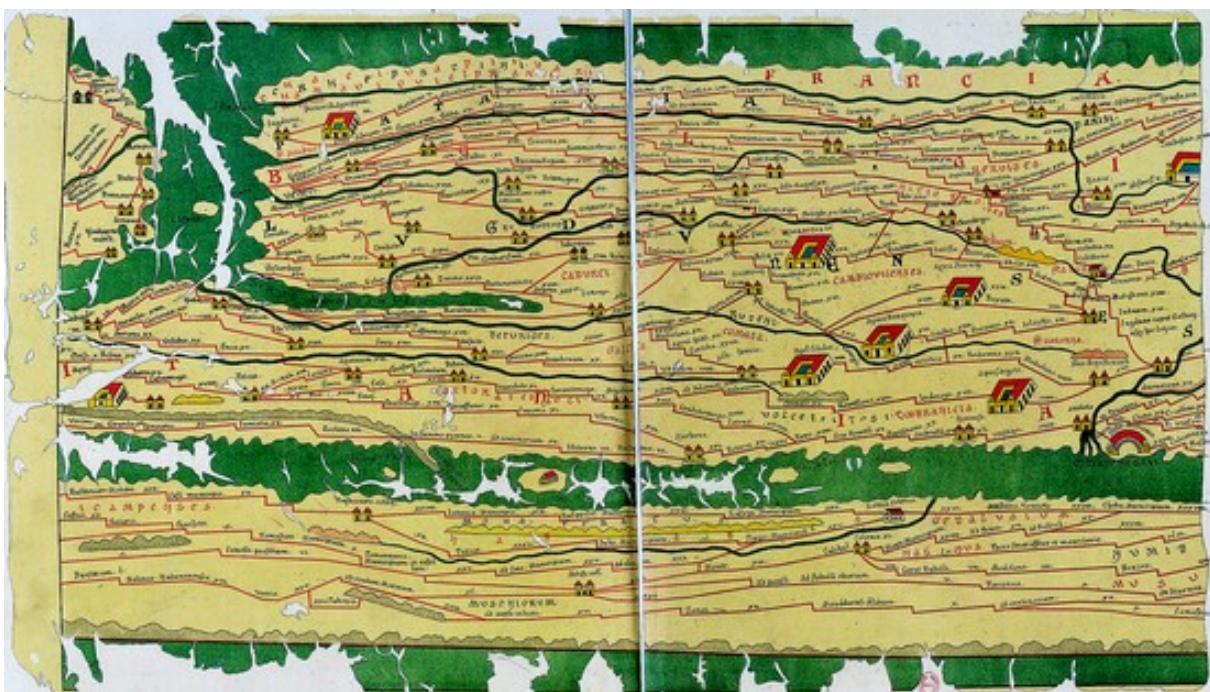
The Vicarello Vases (2nd Century BC).

(Source: National Roman Museum of "Palazzo Massimo").

Found in 1852, these silver vases provide rare physical evidence of the relay stations that existed along the road between Cadiz and Rome. They were sold to travellers who set out from Cadiz to take the waters at the Aquae Apollinare, north of Rome. Each vase shows the relay stations, with some variations, and the distance between them. They were probably ritual offerings to the gods of the springs, where they were later discovered by workmen.

The Emperor Hadrian (117-138 AD) appointed a “*manceps*” to run each relay station for a period of five years. Roman couriers carried a certificate which permitted them to travel along the routes without hindrance. This certificate gave them the right to use horses and vehicles belonging to the postal service at public expense.

Maintenance of the roads and entire organisation needed funding. From the reign of Augustus onwards, the provinces and individual towns were required to contribute, so that every Roman citizen had to pay in one way or another. On the other hand, private individuals had no access to this service, which was exclusively for the use of the Emperor. During the 3rd Century, Emperor Constantine, who ruled from 306 until 337 AD, reorganised the postal service, and the certificates were replaced by “*evectiones*”, which could no longer be used by a whole range of pro-consuls, judges and other powerful officials. In practice, the postal service was falling apart due to abuse, while increasing traffic started to hold up official dispatches. Only a single magistrate was permitted to send letters, as the Prefect of the Praetorium who was directly responsible to the Emperor and assisted by a secretary. These were the only two people that had the same right to use the “*cursus publicus*” as the Emperor himself. They had control over a number of senior officials, each of whom was entitled to a limited number of “certificates” each year. These documents had an expiry date and were of no value whatsoever after the death of the emperor that had authorised them.



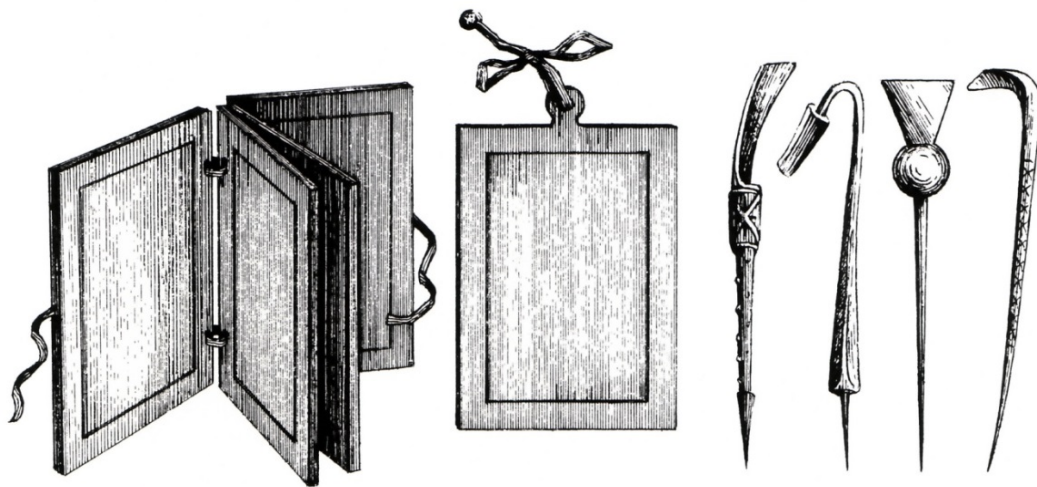
Extract from the “*Tabula Peutingeriana*”, showing the British Isles, Low Countries, Belgium, part of France and western Morocco.

(Source: Wikipedia)

One of the best pieces of evidence of Roman roads, it is an 18th Century copy of a map probably drawn during the 4th Century AD, and is 30cm wide and nearly 7m long. It is named after the German German antiquarian, diplomat, politician, and economist, Konrad Peutinger (1465-1547) who owned it. The original can be found in the National Library of Vienna.

The equipment that was used is described in the Theodosian Code, which mentions two-wheeled carriages called "*birotae*" or "*cisiae*", that were drawn by two or three horses for faster delivery. An official design existed and all carriage makers had to adhere to the dimensions. There were two speeds: "*velox cursus*" (fast service) and the "*claribus versus*". The latter, which was slower and intended to supply the Roman legions, eventually became part of the "*cursus publicus*". These carriages were much larger and drawn by draught animals and were therefore much slower.

The term "*veredaius*" is mentioned in the Theodosian Code, which was written in 364 AD, and referred to the person who was allowed to use postal horses or "*veredi*" and gradually replaced the "*tabellarius*" who was only responsible for delivering private instructions. This official, who was only at the call of the Emperor and his appointees, carried imperial orders. Private individuals could use any method in order to send mail. Messages could be handed to merchants who covered long distances, in the hope that they would find a relay where the message could be forwarded for delivery to the recipient. Exchanges between major towns also became more commonplace during the 4th and 5th centuries, so that it was easier to send messages with acquaintances or merchants.



Tablet and stylus from the Roman period.

(Source: Traugott Haefeli-Meylan, *L'origine du timbre-poste et son expansion dans le monde*, éditions Arted, Le mont/Lausanne, 1986)

At first, "letters" took the form of tablets, most of which were made of wood and set in a frame. Wax was poured onto the tablet, so that messages could be written onto the surface using a stylus. When the message arrived, the recipient only had to smooth out the wax again, in order to reuse the same tablet, and write his reply. This meant that the same tablet could be used many times. Papyrus was also used, as it was lighter and therefore easier to transport, despite it being far more fragile. Parchment was a lot more expensive, but had the advantage of being weather-resistant. It was by far the most widely used material in the Middle Ages. As the Roman Empire declined, the postal organisation was gradually scaled down due to barbarian incursions.

Initially, the barbarians maintained the organisation as far as they could, but the roads became less and less usable due to lack of maintenance. As a result, there was no longer a postal service worthy of the name for a number of centuries.

2. The Posts in the Middle Ages

It was not until the advent of Charlemagne and his domination of the lands stretching from Germany to parts of Spain and Italy, that another messenger network would be established throughout his territory. He created “*missi dominici*”, which were responsible for keeping him informed about events in his territories.



Charlemagne receiving a letter from a messenger.

(Source: *Das neue Buch von der Weltpost* ; von Schweiger-Lerchenfeld, A. Freiherr, Wien, 1901)



A messenger giving a letter.

(Source: Postal Museum, Paris)

After the death of Charlemagne and break-up of his empire, the network was abandoned. Increasingly powerful vassals put obstacles in the way of the free movement of goods and people across their lands. For example, the Kings of France did not use messengers regularly. They were allowed to requisition horses wherever they found them. As kings became more powerful, it became necessary for them to set up a network of couriers over a period of time, starting with foot messengers, who were later replaced by horsemen. The latter played an important role within the royal household. They were first mentioned in medieval manuscripts, where they can often be seen wearing the insignia of the sovereign, for whom they worked. They had to carry a certificate with them which authorised them to go about their work, together with a document that allowed them free passage in the sovereign's territories. Horsemen had the right of requisition when royal dispatches were sent. Even with this limitation, royal dispatches represented a considerable financial burden for the inhabitants of the lands that they crossed.

2.1 The Papal Posts

The Roman Curia had developed a unique communications system. The church was centralised and headed by the Pope, who needed to communicate with the whole of the Christian world. All types of messages could be sent, from the most secret to those that needed to be publicised on a large scale. But no lasting system existed for the delivery of mail until the 14th Century. Messengers would simply carry important documents whenever the need arose. The main aim was to carry mail cheaply, and letters were often bundled together. No opportunities would be missed to ask a clergyman or layman to carry mail to other people. Wherever possible mail would be sent free of charge, even if it took much longer. Papal couriers were paid a fixed fee and accorded a few privileges and rights.



Monks giving mail to the Pope round 1460.

(Source: PTT d'Alsace Museum, from Le Patrimoine de la Poste, Flohic, Charenton-le-Pont)

Given the costs incurred by the papal administration for this service, there were very few papal couriers. In addition, although it was a job for life, only young people were able to undertake long journeys. Away from the Curia, these Papal messengers were much more than letter carriers and often acted as the representatives and delegates of the Prelate. Couriers sent to deliver correspondence to the Pope would also leave bearing the latter's reply. They cost nothing as they were kept and paid by those who had sent them. Sometimes the papal reply would take several months to compose, so that messengers would have to wait patiently before returning to where they had come from. When the papacy was forced to move to Avignon, the number of people arriving and leaving was so high that the Curia made the most of this opportunity to place letters in the hands of trustworthy travellers. These travellers could be clergy members who were travelling to take up distant appointments or even merchants. This enabled at least some letters to be carried, but different arrangements were made for urgent or very important correspondence. Professional

couriers were used who were either travelling on business or paid by rich merchants. They were quite pleased to offer their services occasionally to the Papacy by “lending” them one of their couriers. When correspondence had to be sent to a war-torn area, the Pope would send correspondence in duplicate, in the hope that at least one of the two missives would reach its destination unhindered.

2.2 The Monastic Posts

Monasteries and convents also had a unique method of corresponding with one another. One of the most important pieces of information that would have to be communicated to other members of the same religious order was the death of another member, so that the whole order could pray for his soul. A message concerning the death would first be transcribed onto parchment and sent by messenger to the nearest congregation.



“Rotulus” announcing the death of the priest Vittal in 1122. (Source: Postal Museum, Paris)

The latter would acknowledge receipt, before adding a few lines called “titles”, which included the date of receipt and requests for prayers for its own deceased. As this “rotulus” was passed from one congregation to the next, new pages were sown on to the earlier pages, so that the document gradually increased in size. Before being transported, the rotulus was rolled up and enclosed in a cylindrical case. The oldest known example dates from the 9th Century. The journey back to the original monastery could thus take several months and, in some cases, even several years. One particular rotulus travelled around various religious orders in Normandy and crossed the Channel several times, before travelling around the south of England. This rotulus was written on both sides of the parchment and was 9.5 metres long. Eventually, the rotulus was placed in the archives of the originating community. The use of rotulae declined during the 15th Century with the development of communication and especially the invention of printing, which allowed faster exchange and the reproduction of multiple copies.

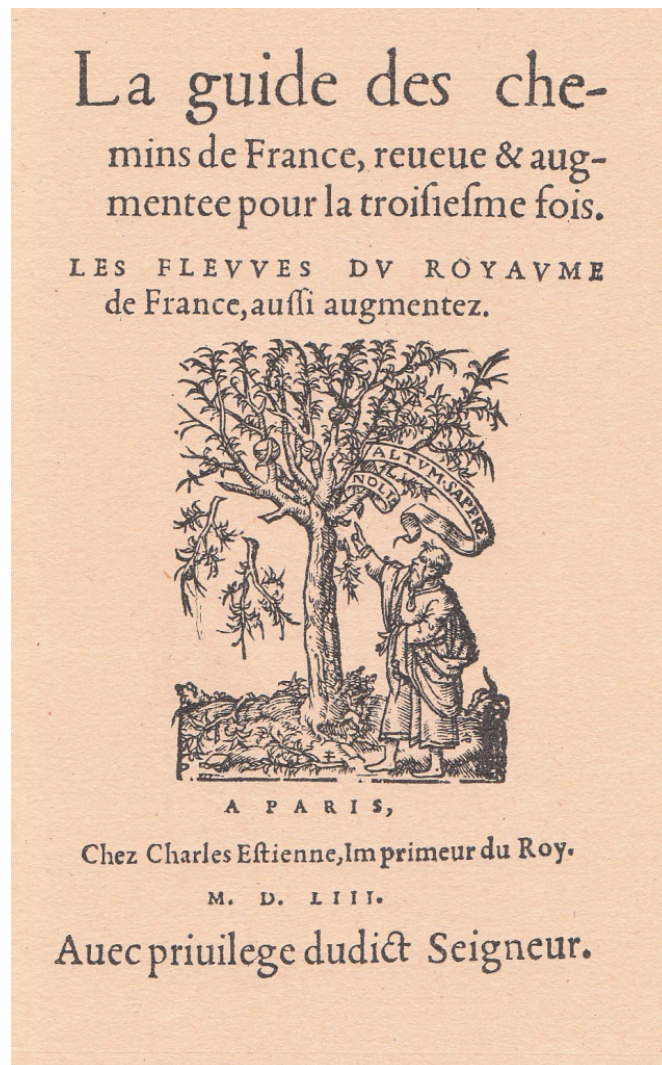
2.3 The University Posts

The Middle Ages saw the gradual emergence of universities across Europe. At the same time, the roads of Europe were very dangerous and a new service was provided by the early universities to collect new students, accompany them to their seat of learning, to act as an intermediary with their families and handle mail between them. This was the advent of university messengers. Various sovereigns, whilst still waging war, granted protection to students and their messengers. The latter were beneficiaries of privileges and immunities which made their jobs very attractive. For the first time, there was a postal service that enabled the public to make the most of this institution, while remaining safe, which until then had been the privilege of the sovereign. The messengers were obliged to live near the university and had to ensure that mail was safely delivered, together with any money that was entrusted to them and within a reasonable time-scale. Universities were centres of excellence and attracted students from all over Europe, which meant that messengers would often have to travel very long distances. This privilege assigned to the universities was to endure well after the state posts were established, which led to some competition between these two organisations.

2.4 Merchants' Messengers

Merchants' messengers were to increase in number and importance as towns and communities gradually developed and needed the services of specialists, who could carry money and mail. Merchant's messengers also carried official summons and could act as bailiffs. In some countries the butchers' guilds were considered to be responsible people who regularly had to travel to buy cattle. They were entrusted with mail, which was intended for the same destination as the butcher or at least at a nearby place. This was the case in Germany and to a lesser extent in Flanders, where the postal services provided by butchers were protected and thus grew in importance. The first proper merchant organisations were started in Italy, as part of the same guild, which led to the emergence of an international postal system. The members of this courier service benefited from the networks established by their organisation, which enabled them to communicate quickly with the main international trading towns. From the 14th Century onwards these corporations published regulations for the handling of mail between different trading houses. It was the custom to evaluate places of service during the previous year and to correct any problems which had occurred by making changes, which would improve the service. This organisation needed an infrastructure of inns and numerous horses, all at the corporation's expense. These inns often served as depots for goods travelling the same routes. At the end of the 16th Century, royal messengers were paid considerable sums for their work. Throughout the 17th Century they attempted to hold on to these enviable positions and even began to deliver private mail. They also did their best to try to corner the highly lucrative market for international mail. Their work was far from easy. The routes had all kinds of obstacles, due to weather conditions as well as the political conditions and wars of the period. It was not unknown for messengers to be held for ransom or stripped of their clothes, as they would have to cross territory belonging to an enemy of the person that had employed them. The interception of letters became an arm of government. Whenever a sovereign wanted to know who was plotting against him, he would attempt to intercept his enemies' mail by having the messengers stopped and inspected. They had little means of defending themselves. The wooden staff that is often shown being held by the messenger was not only used by the latter to protect himself against any animal that he might meet

on the way. In France, it was Henri IV that created the letter post. In the Austrian Empire, one family was rapidly to become more important than the others and would put an end to competition.



La guide des chemins de Frances by Charles Estienne, third edition published in 1553. The first guides to include postal routes appeared in the 16th Century, with the first edition being dated 1552. It was the first annotated itinerary of routes, which covered almost 25,000 km. (15,625 miles)

3. The Thurn und Taxis Posts

At the end of the 15th Century, most monarchs centralised government in varying degrees, across their territories. This re-establishment of control over state affairs by sovereigns would help revive the centralised postal systems established during the Roman period. Edward IV of England, Louis XI of France and Maximilian I were to reorganise their postal systems in their own ways. As has been noted, postal systems had developed over the previous centuries, but were used almost exclusively by the reigning monarch. As trade and towns developed, it became increasingly necessary to be able to communicate rapidly and on a regular basis with the rest of Europe. The first postal links were to emerge within the immense Habsburg Empire.

3.1 The First Postal Relationships



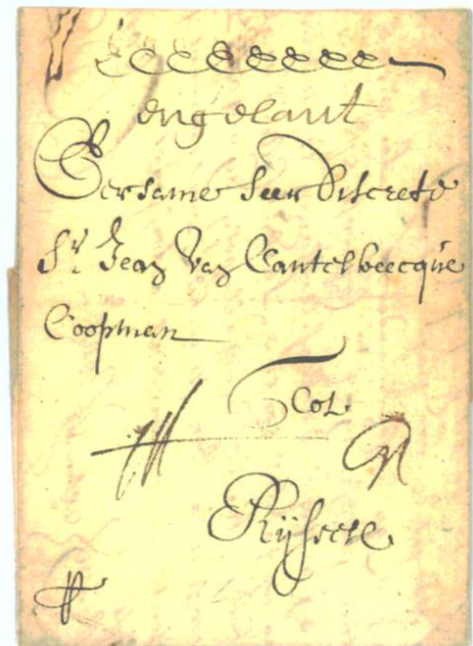
At the end of the 15th Century the first regular postal links were organised by a family of postmasters from Bergamo, who were appointed by Maximilian I (1459-1519) Holy Roman Emperor, to create this new service. As he frequently stayed at Innsbruck, he asked for the first postal link to be established between the Tyrolean town and the city of Malines, where Margaret of York (1446-1503), sister of Edward IV and Richard III resided. She was the wife of Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy and stepmother to Maximilian's wife. He entrusted the postal task to Janetto and François de Taxis, who were assisted by their nephew Jean-Baptiste de Taxis.

François de Taxis (1459-1517).

François de Taxis moved to Brussels and was appointed Master of the Posts in 1501 by Archduke Philip the Handsome, son of Maximilian I. We are largely indebted to him for the creation of an international postal network. He was able to modernise the postal service by adapting it to the circumstances of his time, from an economic as well as from a social point of view. Postal communications were therefore established with France, Italy, Spain and obviously the Habsburg Empire.

By treaty, the posts were entitled to royal protection. On the death of Philip the Handsome in 1506, his sister Margaret was appointed Governess of the Netherlands by Maximilian I, and she settled in Malines. Of course, she was followed by her court, which included François de Taxis and his nephew Jean-Baptiste.

*Letter from London 21st April 1665 to Rijssel (Lille), forwarded via Antwerp, where the manuscript **engelant** was noted. The rate was "15": 1 schelling = 6 stuiver. Lille, still under Spanish rule and Taxis Office noted "6p", (6 patars).*



(Source: J. Van der Linden collection, Battice)

After a second treaty was signed by Charles I of Spain and François de Taxis, the latter saw his postal network grow, especially in Italy. The sovereign paid him more consistently, on condition that he provided a more regular and, above all, a faster postal service. The Taxis family also had to provide transport for people by the same agreement, which was signed in 1516. A short while after the death of his uncle, Jean-Baptiste de Taxis was appointed Head of the Posts and Postmaster General by Emperor Charles V.

3.2 The Growth in Importance of the Family and their Success Internationally

The family business grew at an unprecedented rate for the times and the entire “clan” gradually established itself at strategic points all over Europe before gaining an effective monopoly of international postal services. The Brussels branch of the family ruled over the rest of the family. Apart from this economic success, members of the family also climbed socially to an impressive extent.

At the beginning of the 16th Century, eight family members had joined the ranks of the aristocracy of the German Empire. In 1595, one of the family, Léonard de Taxis, was named Postmaster General of Germany and the Netherlands, which was a hereditary appointment. At the end of the 17th Century the family became Princes of the Empire. The privilege of being able to raise revenue from the postal system was granted in a manner similar to the territorial fiefdoms granted to other Princes of the Empire. The amount of revenue generated was in direct proportion to the size and extent of the Empire. During the 18th Century the postal services, which had been associated with individual states



Prince Eugen Alexander of Thurn and Taxis.

that became “Länder”, became separate from the Empire and what is today philatelically known as the “Thurn und Taxis” family assumed a less important role. Other families divided up the postal “cake” all over Europe, such as the von Paar and Fischer families in Austria and Switzerland, respectively. Over the centuries, these different families clashed as they strove to lay their hands on the financial windfall represented by the revenue from international postal services.



Charles II of England, Scotland, and Ireland.

In April 1783, an agreement was signed by Eugène Alexandre de la Tour et Taxis and Charles II, as proprietor of the English, Scottish and Irish Posts, which ensured that mail could be exchanged. Each party had to bear the cost of letters being carried through their own territory. Nevertheless, Charles paid the sum of £500 Sterling to the post office in Brussels, which was responsible for the transport of mail from Great Britain to the Continent. Charles II was responsible for three ships that crossed the English Channel. Internally, agreements were signed between the Postmaster General of the English, Scottish and Irish Posts and Charles Anselme de la Tour et Taxis, including an agreement aimed at improving the transit time between the British and Taxis post offices.

Most commentators agree that the right to provide postal services is associated with the sovereign or the sovereignty of the state. The Thurn und Taxis family was therefore invested with this right which was confirmed by various sovereigns over the centuries. The main characteristic of this right is the monopoly of the carriage of letters. The various families derived considerable revenue by providing postal services.

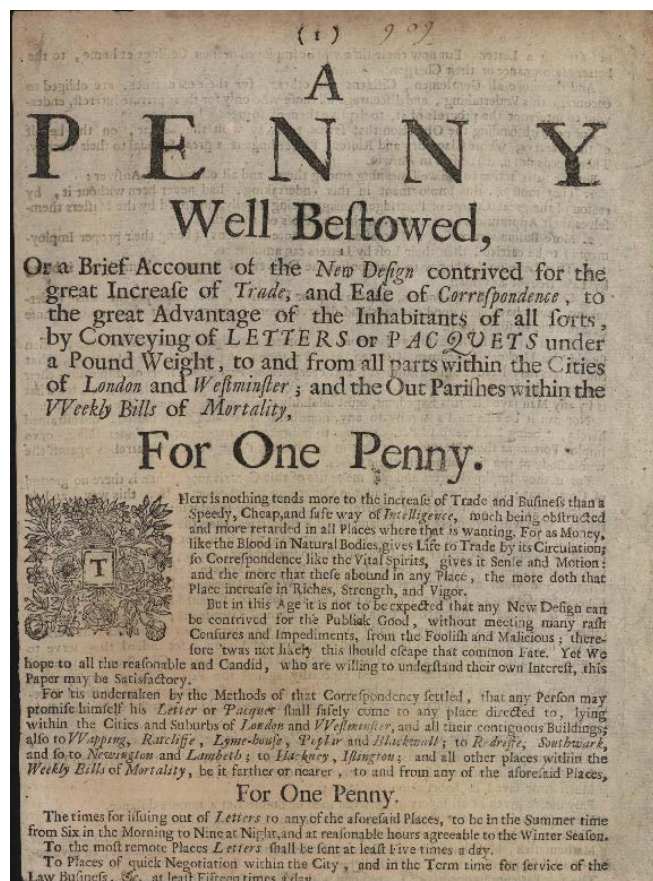
It made good business sense for each post office to pay as little as possible for the mail entrusted to it and force the office which had to receive and forward mail to its destination to pay as much as possible. This forms the basis of all business. It was up to the receiving office to recover all postal

charges for the entire journey, obviously without forgetting to add its own profit, and refund the proportion of the charges owed to the originating office. It was important that treaties existed between post offices in different countries, so that agreement could be reached on even the smallest detail. It is easy to see that complicated calculations were involved, especially for the end user, who would probably not understand them, given the complication of currencies and differing systems of weight.

The profound changes which led to the British postal reforms introduced in the 19th Century were simply the culmination of a large number of improvements and developments that had taken place during the previous century. New services were introduced, most of which resulted from pressure from a growing public that wished to make use of the postal system. Services such as registered mail, declared value letters, money orders or express mail were gradually added to basic mail services. The end result of these gradual changes would be the standard rate for internal letters which was reduced to a uniform penny rate. This was coupled with the introduction of postage stamps, which made it possible to pay in advance for letters to be delivered.

4. A New Way of Charging Postage

The first postal service to use a unified postal charge dates back to 1635. The existence of a post office is confirmed by a Parliamentary Decree of 1657: *“there shall be one General Post Office and one Officer styled the Postmaster General of England.”* John Hill published a brochure two years later called *“A Penny Post”*, in which he suggested the abolition of local private posts for which users had to pay a higher price. He proposed setting up a postal system based on a uniform 1d rate for sending letters anywhere in England. His ideas failed to amount to anything, however, as the government was fully aware how much revenue the carriage of mail could bring. It was a while before a new postal system would see the light of day in England.



William Dockwra (c. 1635–1716) first broadsheet to promote his ideas for Penny Postage.

(Source: Grosvenor auction, sale 45)

William Dockwra was born in Coleman Street, London. Aged 29, he assumed the post of junior customs clerk at the Port of London, where he worked for ten years until 1674, when he left to begin a new venture with Robert Murray. Murray was born in 1633 and worked in a variety of jobs before meeting Dockwra. Murray was financially very astute with original ideas. It was he who originated the basic principles of the first Penny Post, but it was Dockwra who put the idea into practice.

Dockwra, Murray and their partners divided the areas of London between Westminster and Blackwell and between Hackney and Lambeth into seven districts, each of which with its own sorting office. About 500 receiving houses were also established for the collection and delivery of mail throughout the London suburbs. It should be understood that this scheme was quite a venture and a huge gamble, which required considerable financial support. The scheme was helped in Parliament by interested parties. The whole idea had political implications and was backed by the Whigs. Several cases were brought against Dockwra in order to challenge the project, but strings seem to have been pulled and these cases came to nothing. So the Dockwra Penny Post was launched on 1st April 1680. Public notices were placed in several newspapers, while many advertisements and handbills were circulated.



*18th century postillion's boots.
(Source: Dilligence d'Alsace, nr 3, 1970).*

To show that letters had been pre-paid they were handstamped **PENNY POST PAID**, with a letter of the alphabet identifying the originating office.

Dockwra's business was taken over by the State, which continued with his original idea. However, during the following decades, the cost of sending a letter was gradually increased, partly in order to finance another improvement to the postal service, the introduction of post coaches by John Palmer in 1784.



A mail coach travelling between Bristol and London.

5. *Postal Reform*

Several key figures gradually helped to change this state of affairs. Robert Wallace (1773-1855) was the young Member of Parliament for Greenock who argued against the status quo within the postal system and particularly against the very high charges for the carriage of letters. In the end, he forced Parliament to listen. In turn, the government tackled the problem and set up a commission of enquiry under him.

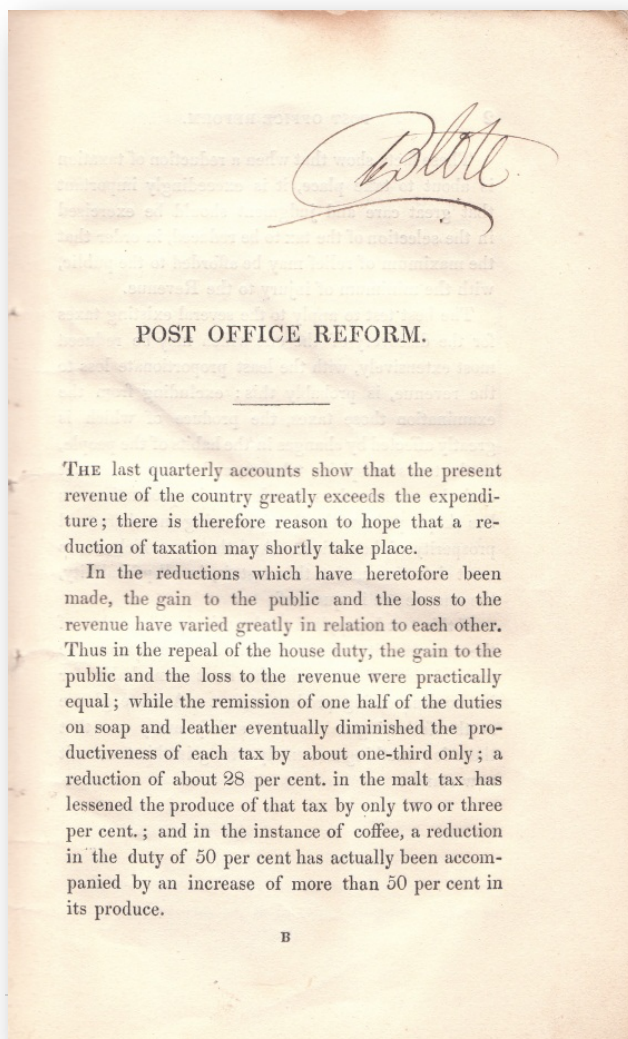
Another important person was Rowland Hill, who was then a young secretary at the Commission. Rowland Hill took an interest in Robert Wallace's proposed postal reforms in Parliament and contacted the latter, in order to grasp his understanding of the problems affecting postal services. In 1836, he began to publish several pamphlets proposing a uniform postal system for letters, which would significantly reduce costs.

In his different pamphlets, Rowland Hill pointed out faults in the current system, including the prohibitive postal charges and the many tricks used to avoid paying postage, such as the abusive use of the free-franking privilege, to which members of Parliament were entitled. He demonstrated that distance should not justify additional charges. Hill and Wallace were invited to present their reform to the members of the Postal Commission in February 1837.



Sir Rowland Hill (1795-1879).

(Source: frontispiece of "The Life of Sir Rowland Hill", 1880)



They proposed that the charge for letters should be standardised throughout the country and that the free-franking privilege for Members of Parliament should be abolished or at least reduced.

In terms of postal organisation, Rowland Hill's idea was to make the sender pay the postage, which would drastically reduce the time spent waiting at each door when postage had to be paid in cash.

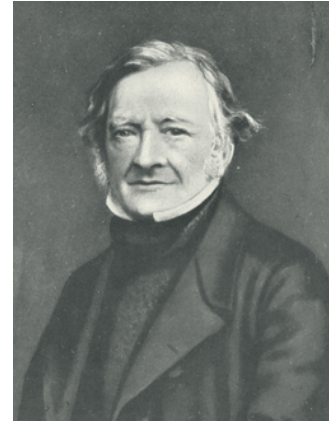
So that the recipient would no longer have to be disturbed, he proposed that every house should be provided with a letter box.

First page of Rowland Hill's pamphlet (2nd edition of February 1837).

(Source: private collection)

The postal authorities raised major concerns, as they believed that the Post Office would suffer a short-term deficit if postal charges were reduced in this way. Members of Parliament were not the last to express their discontent, as they saw the reforms as an attempt to abolish their privilege to free-franking. Many petitions were also presented by businesses that were very much in favour of such reforms.

The first reform came into effect in December 1839, with the introduction of a 4d charge per half-ounce for letters. Faced with pressure from the public who wanted even lower postal charges, the Government finally reduced the charge to 1d on 10th January 1840. After this initial step, there was still no question of introducing a stamp showing that postage had been paid by the sender, as Rowland Hill had suggested, as this was thought to be impractical. Hill was in charge of the practical aspects of implementing the reforms. It was Hill that visited the well-known artist of the time William Mulready, and asked him to design an envelope bearing an allegorical illustration.



*William Mulready
(1786-1863).
(Source: libraryireland.com)*

Mulready's design was approved and engraved by John Thompson, who took four months to complete his work. Clowes and Sons were responsible for printing the envelopes. The pre-paid envelope was first issued on 6th May 1840. The public did not approve and was for the most part negative towards the design, as is indicated by the large number of caricatures which appeared as soon as the official envelopes were seen by the public. Paying postal charges in advance was an entirely different matter.

6. The Creation of an Adhesive Label

James Chalmers, a printer, bookseller and editor from Dundee, had put forward designs for adhesive labels as early as 1834, as he had also become interested in the postal reforms that were then being discussed. In 1837 he sent samples to the commission chaired by Robert Wallace, but Wallace did not take up the proposals, to the great disappointment of the designer.

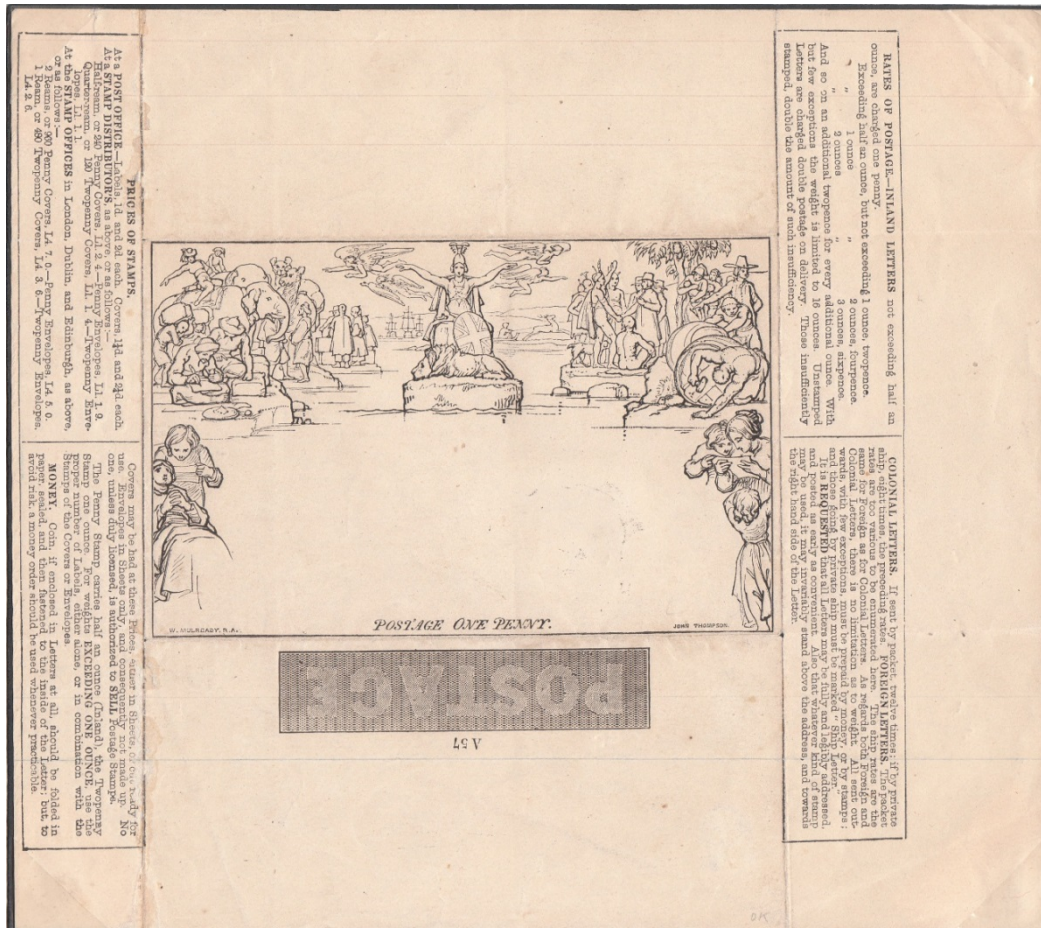


The Penny Black.

In order to resolve the practical problem of pre-paid postage, the Lords of the Treasury launched a competition, which was open to all artists, with the aim of designing a prepaid envelope and adhesive stamps. It was also opened up to foreign countries, so that the most elegant solution could be found. James Chalmers came to the forefront by offering new designs but he was ignored again. One of the prize winners, Benjamin Cheverton, proposed a design showing Queen Victoria, which was finally approved by Hill. The company, Perkins, Bacon and Petch was chosen to print the labels, which had to be difficult to forge. The inspired final design of the Queen's profile was produced by the engraver Charles Heath. It took many months before a quality product would emerge. Printing

started on 11th April 1840, so that the stamps could be officially sold on the 6th May 1840, on the same day as the Mulready envelopes.

The simultaneous sale on the 6th May 1840 of the first postage stamp and the first stamped envelope, the so called “Mulready”, created within months what became known as the “stamp mania”, which would eventually become a stamp collecting passion, and later true philately.



Mulready lettersheet for sale officially on 6th May 1840.

From the early days some people started to collect stamps, even though they still remained very similar in design to each other for a decade or so after the issue of the Penny Black, as the world's first postage stamp was known.

It was not until the 1850s that this craze, which initially interested women, and later schoolchildren, became a widespread hobby and thus began to interest more serious collectors who generally were quite happy just to try to collect as many different stamps as possible.

It was not for another decade that trading in stamps was to start for the first time when there was the realisation that trading in stamps could properly be a business. The publication in Paris in 1861 of the first stamp catalogue was swiftly followed by others, with each stamp dealer wanting to produce their own catalogue and price list.

The publication of stamp albums at about the same time was to give impetus to this separate collecting craze, and the hobby was to remain fashionable for the rest of the 19th Century and beyond.

The first societies for collectors wanting to learn more about their own collections began in the 1860s, amongst them the Philatelic Society, London, which held its first meeting on 10th April 1869 during which it was proposed to start a philatelic society, and rules and regulations were agreed by the members who were present.

Philately, as it was to become known, was entering a new era. People were no longer satisfied with simply collecting more and more stamps. They were beginning to sort them into groups, to study them, and to compare their research with that of others. Little by little, certain philatelists moved from just studying stamps to studying everything involving them, that is their usage on letters, thus opening up the field of history to postal history. By the beginning of the twentieth century it was known as "*The Hobby of Kings and the King of Hobbies*", and today worldwide there are said to be more than 50 million people involved in philately.

Philately moved on to encompass revenue and telegraph stamps, and their usage, local stamps, military campaigns and an increasingly wide range of historical, commercial, political and associated subjects. These came to include shipping routes, postal contracts, bilateral, multilateral and international agreements and treaties, and a wide range of other activities relating to the social aspects of communications.

Added to these are the study of the technologies involved in the design and production of stamps and other associated postal labels; historic and current printing techniques, and the equipment supporting the mechanisation of the postal services. The literature of philately is a separate field of study, and the Royal Philatelic Society London maintains an extensive library including worldwide legislation, and commentary.

Philately has created a literature supporting the study with periodicals published in English and foreign languages which are held in nearly complete or complete runs in a comprehensive collection of the world's general and specialist publications which would be impossible to assemble today. The Society receives copies of up to 300 periodicals each year with 2,400 titles held, with the earliest dating from 1861. Interestingly, Stamp Collecting Magazine of 1863 includes articles from the first female philatelic journalist, and first female member of the Society.

The Society library has over 10,000 volumes, plus more than 2,250 stamp catalogues available for research beginning with Alfred Potiquet's 1861 catalogue, which was the first in the world.

From commercial history the RPSL holds over 11,000 sales catalogues, including named and general sales from more than 250 auction houses. The strength lies in the period from the 1930s but some date back to 1872, with not only British sales but also European and North American auction houses.

In addition the Society holds collections of stamps for reference, including some on behalf of Her Majesty's Government left in lieu of death duties, a library of over 200,000 photographs built up by its expert committee over the past 120 years, and the records of Perkins Bacon and Co., the security printers who printed the first postage stamp from its inception in 1819 to its bankruptcy in 1935.

Finally, the museum and archive holds a plethora of documents on the history of philately, on the Society's own history, and many items relating to the printing and production of postage stamps. 41 Devonshire Place is a repository unique in the world of philately, unparalleled in the breadth of its membership and the depth of the research material in its trust.