

2017

A Penny For Your Thoughts... The Evolution of the British Postal System

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Original Publication Citation

Cahill, A.-T. (2017). A penny for your thoughts... The evolution of the British postal system. *Nineteenth Century*, 37(1), 47. <http://victoriansociety.org/upload/NC-37-1.pdf>

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Milestones

A Penny for Your Thoughts

Anne-Taylor Cahill

How much would you pay to receive a letter by post? In the U.K. prior to 1840 it involved an exorbitant fee. Oddly, the sender of the letter did not pay the postage; the recipient paid. To pre-pay a letter was considered a social slur on the receiver. The implication being that one was too poor to pay. Thus to receive a letter required some financial wherewithal. If the receiver could not pay the letter was returned to the sender. Sadly, this was all too common.

For the working classes, postage often cost a full day's pay. There were stories of mothers sending children to the local pawn broker to sell a few items of clothing to obtain sufficient funds to pay for receiving a letter. Often the word 'dread' was used in relation to receiving mail. This was not only because of high postage fees but also because people usually did not send mail for frivolous reasons. Illness, death or some other tragedy were the usual reasons to send mail making "no news is good news" a popular expression.

On the other hand, various methods of postal fee evasions were developed. Clever young romantics sending a love letter could make various designs such as hearts and sunshine on the cover of a letters so that the beloved would know that he/she was well and still loved the receiver. With peace of mind, the receiver could refuse the letter yet still get the message.

Another method of avoiding postage was the use of franking. Franking was simply the use of one's signature on a letter cover to pay the postage. Only the Queen and members of Parliament were allowed this privilege. Yet often people would write the name of any MP on their envelope and their letter was promptly delivered free of charge. Eventually, the General Post Office caught on and kept copies of all MP signatures so that franked letters could be verified.

Sad tales, such as pawning clothes and other similar stories began to create a clamor for cheaper postage. Perhaps the saddest story is that of a woman whose husband was in jail. He sent his wife a letter; she could not pay. The postmaster accepted her silver teaspoon as payment. It was her only silver



L to R: The Penny Black stamp, postal reformer Sir Rowland Hill.

teaspoon and its value in pawn could have kept her family fed for two months. Pamphlets and posters demanding cheaper postage rates began to circulate. Emotions ran high. Reformers went so far as to declare the postal system "wicked" because it kept apart families separated by distance. Postal fees were a threat to the family and thus to the Empire itself! Happily, reformers like Sir Rowland Hill, pushed through a reform agenda in Parliament and in 1840 the Penny Post was born. Now for just a penny a letter of half an ounce could go anywhere. The family and the Empire were saved! With the new rules letters were to be prepaid using the Penny Black

adhesive stamp. The Penny Black was an elegant black stamp with the bust of the young Queen Victoria. This stamp was introduced May 1840, the month of Queen Victoria's 21st birthday.

The new system was a smashing success. The volume of mail increased 120% in just 3 months. Moreover, a new industry of "postal accoutrements" sprang up. Stamp boxes, letter holders, lap desks, and myriad books on how to write a proper letter

became the rage. So pleased with themselves about their new endeavor, the English included all of their "postal accoutrements" in the Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace.



For further reading:

Catherine J. Golden
Posting It (2009).

Douglas M. Muir
Postal Reform and the Penny Black (1990).

Eleanor C. Smyth
Sir Rowland Hill, the Tory of a Great Reformer (1907).

Note: Eleanor Smyth was Sir Rowland's daughter