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Object(s): Post Office Circular

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Post Office Circular

This Post Office Circular (No. 1384), dated Wednesday 5th March 1969, is part of a collection of documents and items from 'Rickingham Post Office with News', which closed in 2016 following the termination of Post Office services in the communities of Rickingham, Yaxley and Walsham Le Willows¹. The collection comprises a variety of objects, including: envelopes, forms, postcards, ledgers, and periodicals, all of which reveal the complexity and historical value of the British Postal Service. Throughout the centuries, this service has contributed to the growth of the British society; impacting on communication through the development of new and increasingly efficient ways to spread news across the United Kingdom. Post Office Circulars were mainly issued as a way of guiding staff in their duties, updating them on the postal activities, and providing specific instructions². Circulars contained a wide range of information: details of appointments and promotions; vacancies of senior workers; instructions on the use of postage stamps; during WWI and WWII circulars even listed those lost in action and those awarded medals. Circulars started to be published weekly around 1859 and remained in use until 1969³.

Rickingham Post Office with News

*"Unhappy is the village without a post office"*⁴

In rural communities such as Rickingham, a small village in Mid Suffolk⁵, sub-post offices were the hub of village life. Not only did villagers make use of all the postal services available (today's remaining rural post offices are still evidence of this)⁶, the post office also acted as a place for gathering and meeting people. The sub-postmaster was a well-known figure and had an important role in the

¹ Hamilton, W. *Stanton IP31 2BP - Information Letter*. Available from:

<https://www.postofficeviews.co.uk/national-consultation-team/stanton-ip31-2bp-087112/> [Accessed: 2019].

² Joyce, P. *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

³ The Postal Museum. *Sources for family history*. Available from:

<https://www.postalmuseum.org/collections/archive-collection/family-history/sources/> [Accessed: 2020].

⁴ Bennett, E. *The Post Office and its Story*. Seeley, London, 1912.

⁵ Access Cambridge Archaeology (ACA). *Rickingham and Botesdale*. Available from:

<https://www.access.arch.cam.ac.uk/reports/suffolk/rickingham-and-botesdale> [Accessed: 2020].

⁶ Barnett, A. *Rural Post Office Use*. Citizen Advice, October 2017.

community⁷. Their house was normally used as the 'post office', for lack of a specific dedicated building, and activities such as the receiving and sorting of mail was usually carried out in a back room.

The Rickinghall Post Office with News is an example of what village post offices were like in the late nineteenth century. It opened in 1895 in Wall Cottage⁸, an early 16th century building on the corner of Bury Road and Rectory Hill, which were connected to The Street – the main road along which the urban settlement had developed⁹. The cottage was likely to be used as a shop from at least the 18th century onward, and was later converted into a post office. The building probably maintained its original function, since rural post offices tended to also sell general provisions. The first sub-Postmaster was Henry Hayward and the post office kept operating as the hub of the village life until 2016, when it finally closed.

A historical overview of the Royal Mail

The 500-year history of the postal service reflects the tremendous change that has occurred in England from the 16th century – a time when only a small group of messengers would be at the service of the Monarch – to today, with a broad network connecting communities all over the country¹⁰. When, in 1516, Henry VIII knighted Sir Brian Tuke, the first Master of the Posts, the formal postal service was created, and key 'post towns' established. Originally accessible to the royal court only, Charles I opened the service to the public. In 1635, the first 'Post Office' opened in Bishopsgate Street, London. As a result of the extension of the postal network to Wales, Scotland and Ireland, Charles II founded The General Post Office (GPO) in 1660¹¹. Immediately after the GPO was formed, Postmaster Henry Bishop was appointed as its supervisor, and introduced the first postmark used on mail¹². Fixed rates relating to postage distance were also established and legislated, following the passing of the Postage Act of 1657. A significant event occurred in 1680, when William Dockwra went against the state system and established a private 'Penny Post' service within London. Dockwra's service proved so successful that he was taken to court and condemned for infringing the state monopoly. His service was closed, only to be reopened by the government soon after. State-owned penny posts were subsequently set up in numerous towns in the late 18th century, in response to urban growth and the extensive programme of road building¹³. During this period, mail delivery by horse-drawn coach became

⁷ West Northamptonshire Local History. *History Notes: The Village Post Office*. Kilsby Kronickle, 2017.

⁸ Redgrave Parish Magazine. *Exploring the Past Again*. October 2013, pp. 21-40.

⁹ Botesdale and Rickinghall Parish Councils. *Botesdale and Rickinghall. Neighbourhood Plan*. Historic Character Appraisal, November 2018.

¹⁰ Post&Parcel. *Royal Mail: 500 years of history celebrated in online gallery*. Available from: <https://postandparcel.info/70287/news/royal-mail-500-years-of-history-delivered-to-your-doorstep/> [Accessed: Jan 5, 2016].

¹¹ Clarke, J. *Purpose-built Post Offices: a rapid assessment and suggestions for future work*. English Heritage, Research Department Report Series 029-2008.

¹² The History Press. *A short history of the Post Office*. Available from: <https://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/a-short-history-of-the-post-office/> [Accessed: 2020].

¹³ Starmans, B. J. *Royal Mail History*. Available from: <https://www.thesocialhistorian.com/royal-mail-history/> [Accessed: 2018].

commonplace. The idea of speeding up the transportation of letters and improving the service's reliability was spearheaded by John Palmer, who helped revolutionise the postal service in terms of speed, frequency and security¹⁴.

The 19th century represented a period of enormous expansion for the postal system, as an increase in the population occurred alongside rising levels of adult literacy and expansion of the railway network¹⁵. The Post Office underwent the reforms in 1840, when Sir Rowland Hill revised postal arrangements by resetting rates across the country to a weight-based system. He also set about establishing rural post offices in almost every village, and introduced the world's first adhesive stamp: the famous 1d Penny Black featuring Queen Victoria's profile¹⁶. As the first stamp issued anywhere in the world for sending letters in a more affordable way, the Penny Black Stamp remains iconic to this day, and led to the introduction of the Post Office pillar box in 1852¹⁷. Pillar boxes first appeared in Saint Helier, Jersey, and allowed the public to deposit stamped mail anytime throughout the day. This change brought about the introduction of the Uniform Penny Post – a uniform postal rate which cut administrative costs and encouraged the use of the postal system and adhesive postage stamps (the more popular Penny Black was used for letters weighing up to half an ounce, whereas the less known Two Penny Blue¹⁸ could be used on letters up to a full ounce in weight). Initially the recipient of a letter had to pay the fee and had the right to refuse the delivery if they did not wish to pay. However, under this new and more simplified scheme the sender would be charged, thus avoiding any sort of inconvenience. The mail delivery doubled in the first year of the stamp's use, as the Penny Post became affordable to all social classes and enabled people to stay connected beyond the geographical boundaries¹⁹.

In the latter half of the 19th century, the Post Office saw a further expansion in new areas such as banking (this is well represented by the establishment of the Post Office Savings Bank)²⁰, telecommunications (the Post Office progressively took control of the new telegraph system and the

¹⁴ The Postal Museum. *Mail coaches*. Available from: <https://www.postalmuseum.org/collections/mail-coaches/> [Accessed: 2020].

¹⁵ The Postal Museum. *Mail Transport Experiments during Victorian Times*. Available from: <https://www.postalmuseum.org/blog/victorian-mail-transport/> [Accessed: 22 May 2019].

¹⁶ The Postal Museum. *Rowland Hill's postal reforms*. Available from: <https://www.postalmuseum.org/collections/rowland-hill-postal-reforms/> [Accessed: 2020].

¹⁷ BBC. *In pictures: 500 years of Royal Mail*. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-35225183> [Accessed: 5 January 2016].

¹⁸ Cheshire, G. *A History of Victorian Postage*. Amberley Pub Plc, 2017.

¹⁹ Victorian Era. *Victorian Era – Letter Writing and Post Offices*. Available from: <http://victorian-era.org/victorian-era-letter-writing-post-offices.html> [Accessed: March 2020].

²⁰ The British Postal Museum & Archive blog. *150 years of the Post Office Savings Bank*. Available from: <https://postalheritage.wordpress.com/2011/09/16/150-years-of-the-post-office-savings-bank/> [Accessed: 16 September 2011].



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telephone service)²¹ and parcel delivery (in this period the Travelling Post Office and the Railway Station Offices were set up to enhance the mail transportation)²².

The growth of the postal system continued in the 20th century when the GPO was gradually recognised as a commercial enterprise rather than just as a government revenue department. Both its social and economic influence became higher as demonstrated by the key-role played at the time of the First World War during which, despite the difficulties due to the great conflict, the Post Office kept providing all its services and was crucial to the Britain's communications²³. In the 1930s, the postal network progressively expanded by setting up eight provincial regions, each in charge of a Regional Director responsible for the supervision of all post services within the region. These regions were in turn divided into Head Postmasters' districts for the management of posts and telecommunications. In 1969, the GPO ceased to be a government department and officially became a public corporation. The savings bank offering of the Post Office was transferred to the treasury and re-branded to become National Savings. Five years later, in 1974, the postal distribution efficiency was significantly increased by the creation of the post codes and in 1981 the telecommunications business was privatised when the British Telecommunications Corporation was founded. The Post Office Ltd, which runs today's national network of post offices, came into existence in 2001, becoming independent of the Royal Mail Group in 2012 and evolving further in the following years.

²¹ Archives Hub. *Post Office and British Telecommunications Public Corporations*. Available from: <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/a985c70a-8be3-3dfb-83c4-e7f127537064> [Accessed: 2018].

²² Railway Philatelic Group. *Railway-related Postmarks (GB and Foreign)*. Available from: <http://railwayphilatelicgroup.co.uk/> [Accessed: 2020].

²³ The Postal Museum. *The Post Office and the First World War*. Available from: <https://www.postalmuseum.org/collections/ww1/> [Accessed: 2020].