

The Post Office, which brings out stamps to celebrate all manner of events, is this year commemorating an important date in its own history, for 1979 is the centenary of the death of Rowland Hill, the founder of the "penny post". And at a time when it costs two shillings in old money to send a letter by first class post, we may look back with understandable longing to the days of the Victorian "Penny Black".

Yet it is not only a time for nostalgia, but for realising just how great a change Rowland Hill made in peoples lives by, what seems to us, such a simple innovation. Before his time it was much more expensive in real terms to send a letter than it is today, and many people who were forced to move away from home to find work could not afford the high cost of keeping in touch with their families.

The main reason for the high charges was the existence of about forty different postage rates, and the cumbersome procedure of collecting money. Postage was decided not only by weight but by *distance*, so that letters from London to Ireland or from the south of England to Scotland were charged very high rates indeed.

A peculiarity of the old system was that the *recipient* and not the sender paid the charge on the letter when it arrived on his door-step. Rowland Hill, who came of a poor family, recalled that his mother often dreaded receiving letters when money was short. And many a time the postman was forced to take away letters from families who were longing for news, but could not raise the postal charge!

This odd method of collecting postage charges also greatly added to the Post Office's costs, for the postman was obliged to knock on every door and wait for an answer. His morning round would take three or four times as long as that of the modern postman, who only has to put his letters and packets through the letter boxes. In fact until the latter part of the 19th century, most front doors had no letter boxes at all.

Up to the 18th century streets and houses respectively bore neither names nor numbers and it was left to the ingenuity of letter writers to describe destinations. Here is one such address:

"Tis fur old Mr. Willy wot brinds de Baber in Lang Kaster ware te gal is. Gist rede him assume it cums to ti Pushtufus."

A fair translation of the above would be: "It is for old Mr. Willy who prints the paper in Lancaster where the gaol is. Just read it to him as soon as it comes to the Post Office."

Another direction to a letter carrier reads:

"To my sister Jean. Up the Canon-gate. Down a close. Edinburgh. She has a wooden leg."



△ Sir Rowland Hill, who died 100 years ago, once said: "My mother was afraid the postman might bring a letter while she had no money to pay the postage." He changed all that in 1840 by founding the "Penny Post".

SIR ROWLAND HILL: FOUNDER OF THE 'PENNY POST'



Before the days of envelopes, letter sheets were just folded into a rectangle, doubled over, pierced with a knife and through the holes strands of silk were passed which were wound round and secured on the side opposite to the address with a wax seal.

From the perilous days of travel extending right into the early 19th century, postboys carried their letters in a mail or leather bag strapped behind the saddle. They were given a horn to blow when they met anyone on the road, in addition to which they were legally compelled to blow it four times in every mile. A swinging posthorn was an official and familiar sign outside every posthouse in those days.

In 1792 a public notice was issued by the Post Office instructing postboys not to give lifts on their horse or carriage to any strangers, not to loiter by the wayside or "wilfully misspend their time" with a punishment on conviction of "Committal to the House of Correction and confined to hard Labour for one Month".

One man named John Palmer wrote at the time of such postboys, who were often no older than children: "The mail was entrusted to some idle boy without character, mounted on a worn-out hack who so far from being able to defend himself against a robber was more likely to be in league with one."

This same John Palmer, a theatre owner

Kent — its very name conjures up a land of bluebells and blossom in the spring, laden cherry trees and strawberries in summer, and the faintly mystical cult of the hops dominant in the autumn air.

Yet it is in winter that the bare bones and the elegant structure of Kent's countryside come to view. Trim fields lie square and ordered, tidied against winter weather. Forests are neatly knitted into the landscape, bare and brown or lapped in coniferous green.

Features of the Kentish land include the great houses, built, owned and maintained by county families who planted magnificent trees in their parks that we can still enjoy today. Indigenous oaks still flourish, although sadly diminished in numbers. Their huge winter-bare trunks and spreading branches, uncluttered by foliage, silhouette their fine shapes against the sky.

The colours of winter are more subtle and varied than the overall greenness of summer. The brown of a newly ploughed field, the gentle green of winter wheat, the russet gold of fallen leaves and withered beech hedge, the deep green of yew and holly contrast with the red tiled roofs of the villages.

When the snow falls the picture is transformed. The boundaries of coppice, hedge and river outline the patchwork of the fields. On Christmas Day last year the Beneden woods might have been a forest in Bavaria. Inches of snow lay crisp on every pine branch, sparkling in the diamond air. The sky was a deep theatrical blue, the only sound to disturb the stillness was the twittering of goldcrests high up in the tree-tops.

Cottage gardens are pretty and scented in summer, but when the flowers die away in winter the lovely old cottages and village streets of Kent come into their own. How did the old craftsmen build with such an intuitive appreciation of the beauty of form and space and satisfaction to the eye? We no longer build with beauty but erect straight rows of uniform boxes for living in that must be "landscaped" to make them bearable. Our ancestors created individual houses following the contours of the land and the winding of the lanes. Whether cruck or cob, boarding or brick, almost every cottage is a gem of pleasing proportion.

The Kentish sea shore is a lonely world of its own in winter, no children playing by the water's edge or browning bodies on the sand. Only a loneliness of sea and sky and the understated pastel colours of the pebbles underfoot.

Romney Marsh broods under its most mysterious mood in winter. On clear days, without heat haze, one can see miles over the flat land with the huge arc of the sky

◁Snow hangs like a mantle of purity over the parish church at Lower Hardres near Canterbury in Kent.

T.K. ROGERS



△A chill winter's day... but draw up a chair and enjoy the hospitality of jovial friends in a Kentish pub... like the "Ramblers Rest" at Chislehurst Common.

ALAN HUTCHINSON

and ever-changing cloud-scapes overhead.

There is no shelter from the wind here. It sweeps over the land uninterrupted by hills or trees. It blows stark and clean, and the grass bends before it. Fog comes up over this plain in the damp of winter. No summer day can equal the sight of Romney Marsh, lying under a soft white mist like a layer of cotton wool. Only the upraised head of a queuing sheep or a distant church tower rises out of the uniform whiteness. It has a mystical quality found nowhere else.

Bird watchers find Kent the happiest of winter hunting grounds. Armed with binoculars on a fine clear day in mid-winter, the enthusiast can almost be guaranteed a splendid "haul" of birds, native and visiting. All along the coast from Dungeness eastwards to Dover, north, up past Pegwell Bay to the Thames estuary, migrating birds drop down for rest and refreshment. It is a wintering ground for many breeds of ducks, geese and gulls and a temporary resting-place for passage migrants.

For the general naturalist, the forest footpaths and bridle-ways hold much of interest in winter. They are easily navigable, loosened from the stranglehold of blackberries. Bright holly berries light up the hedgerows, and before the coming of the snow, many brilliantly coloured fungi grow underfoot, some almost hidden by fallen leaves and seldom seen by human eye.

Should it rain when you are exploring this wonderful winterland, should cold winds blow, Kent still has the answer. Surely no other county has a comparable

wealth of welcoming and attractive inns to cosset you. Can anything be more pleasant on a chill winter's day than to draw up a chair before a roaring fire, in good company, and watch the flames glint upon your glass?

Let the trippers flock here in summer if they must, but comes you to Kent in winter for a real taste of English goodness.

D.M. ADAMS

In Praise of Trees

Without the oak
No beam in ship or hall;
Without the pine
No stately mast at all;
Without the elm
No barns to store the hay;
Without the chestnut
No conker games to play;
Without the walnut
No furniture of note;
Without the ash
No oars to row the boat;
Without the trees
No place to build a home
For nesting birds
When early spring is come;
Without the trees
No blossom time to bring
From year to year
The promises of Spring;
Without the trees
No shade in summer heat;
Without the trees
No juicy fruits to eat.
We all need trees,
Protect them, please.

VERA SINCLAIR

in Bath, not content with his outburst against postboys, made public his ideas for an improved form of State mail service aimed at driving the best privately-owned and unofficial letter-carrying coaches out of business. With the eventual backing of Prime Minister William Pitt, the first specially constructed Royal Mail coach ran from Bristol to London on August 2nd, 1784, at an average speed of 7 miles per hour.

So successful was the scheme that six years later the Palmer-inspired Royal Mail coaches were operating all over England. John Macadam found the incentive for better surfaced roads — and the great era of the stage coach had begun. Later at Palmer's suggestion armed guards eventually put an end to highway robberies, even if passing livestock was sometimes the target of trigger-happy coachmen.

The Royal Mail coaches on the new turnpike roads ran with such speed and regularity that villagers set their clocks by their passing. The delivery and collection of postbags whilst the coaches were in motion at speed anticipated the later travelling post offices, although it is recorded that on one occasion the sleepy wife of a wayside postmaster flung her husband's trousers aboard the speeding coach in mistake for the mail!

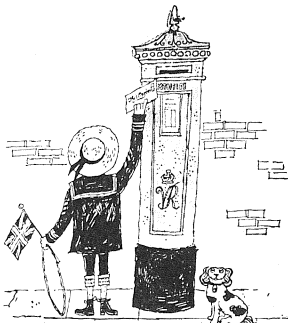
Each year Christmas cards still continue to remind us of the immaculate turn-out of the Royal Mail coach teams with the guard resplendent in scarlet cloth coat, blue lapels, linings and waistcoat, and hat with a gold band.

At the beginning of the 19th century the paths of the Post Office were still far from smooth. It was still difficult to send a letter abroad due to problems of routes and foreign tariffs and letters might even be refused by local post offices.

Then in 1840 came the high-water mark in the story of the post when Rowland Hill completely revolutionised the British postal system with the introduction of a fixed charge for a letter for any distance pre-paid by an adhesive stamp. First and foremost Hill was imbued with the desire to help the poor who had for so long been denied the opportunity of writing letters owing to the high charges, and it was his idea at first to sell pre-paid wrappers, later to be known as envelopes.

Realising that these wrappers might prove to be a stumbling block to the illiterate he then, quite unaware of the epoch-making step he was about to make, made the following suggestion: "Perhaps this difficulty might be obviated by using a bit of paper just large enough to bear the ink stamp and covered at the back with a glutinous wash which the sender might, by the application of a little moisture, attach to the back of a letter." And so these "government sticking plasters", as they were then nicknamed, not only ushered in the modern international big-business of

Rowland Hill — inventor, artist, architect, mathematician, teacher, human dynamo, and reformer extraordinaire — was born in this humble cottage at Kidderminster, Worcestershire, on December 3rd, 1795. He was the third son of Thomas Wright Hill, an advocate of Free Trade and a dedicated opponent of all things conventional who instilled in his six sons a hatred of injustice in all its forms. Rowland's mother, too, was a remarkable, hard-working woman who had all the practical commonsense that her husband lacked. With such parents the Hill children became, in time, an exceptionally brilliant and united family, making their mark in a century of remarkable men.



philately but, more important, facilitated the founding of the first step in communication between the ordinary peoples of the world.

On the first day of the new post the London Post Office was besieged by thousands of people anxious to post letters stamped with what were later to become known as the famous "Penny Blacks". At the end of that first hectic day the London Post Office had dealt with 112,000 letters, and date-stamped May 2, 1840 (four days before the official day of issue). The first ever stamp in the world was posted on a letter from Bath to Peckham. A year later the Post Office handled treble the number of letters of the first year and five times that number in 1852. The emancipating effect upon the people of England was a momentous one.

One amusing story is told at the time of a prosperous farmer who on asking the local village postmaster if the new system was likely to last, and being assured it was, replied: "You'd better let me have three stamps, then."

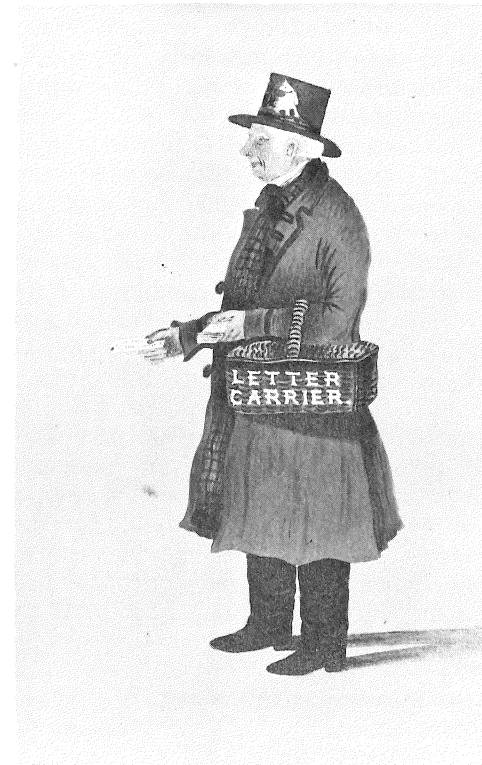
Other people had thought of postage schemes long before the middle of the last century, but no-one had succeeded in drawing up an acceptable plan which could be operated nationally. The surprising thing was that Rowland Hill was not a Post Office official at all but a private individual who had been a schoolmaster, and he now turned his attention to a variety of reform movements and inventions, such as a rotary printing press.

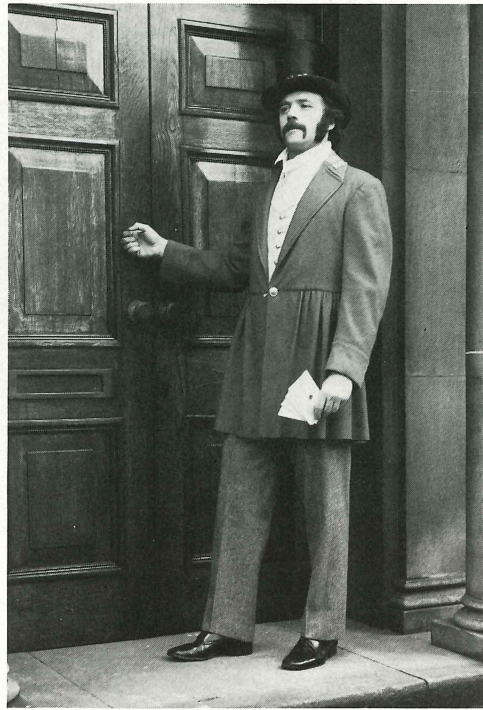
Aware of the pressing need both of private individuals and industry to have a cheap postage service, he made great efforts to obtain permission to study the

workings of the Post Office from the inside. His efforts were frustrated at every step and he was forced to rely entirely on the study of Post Office "blue books". From these and his own observations he came to the tremendous discovery that by introducing a uniform postage rate independent of distance, and pre-payment on letters, he could make the postal service much more profitable.

All his efforts and plans for change were ridiculed by both governments and civil

▽A letter carrier of 1843, the forerunner of today's postman.





△ Postmen through the ages... at the beginning of the last century London letter carriers (left) wore beaver hat, scarlet coat and brass buttons, and by 1859 this uniform had changed to glazed felt hat (centre) with identifying numbers on the coat lapels; by the end of the century the blue uniform with the peaked "shako" cap was standard issue throughout England, as worn by this Hurstpierpoint, Sussex, postman pictured in 1897.

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service and it was about five years before he succeeded in getting his scheme for the penny post introduced. It was evident from the great public support he received that his ideas were regarded, not just as a much-needed administrative reform, but as providing enormous benefit to ordinary people as well as the whole business world.

The "Penny Black" was the forerunner of similar postage services all over the world. If we look at our British stamps today we will see that, unlike all other countries, there is no mention of the country of origin. They were recognised everywhere as the first in the field.

With the improved postal service came other reforms, most which we take for granted today, and for which Rowland Hill could also claim some of the credit. Before the middle of the 19th century, senders of letters had either to walk miles to deliver them to a Post Office or, in some urban areas, catch the bellmen who paraded the streets ringing their handbells before the departure of the mail coach.

These bellmen were virtually walking pillar boxes, and they carried locked bags with slits in them so that people could post their letters for a charge. The system was very inconvenient, as it was often difficult to find a bellman, and it also made administrative costs higher than ever. A stationary pillar box was the obvious solution, although one which was a long time in coming. Both Rowland Hill and the novelist Anthony Trollope claimed to have thought of the idea but, whoever had the inspiration, the first road-side pillar boxes were coming on to the streets by 1852.

Also Rowland Hill encouraged householders to make a slit in their front doors, so that letters could be left without the

postman knocking every time. Speed of delivery was, however, frustrated by the lingering custom of paying the postman a half-penny delivery charge at the house, and completely free deliveries did not come in until the end of the century.

The postman's knock, dreaded a hundred years earlier when poor recipients of letters could ill-afford to pay the charges, was now regularly heard and welcomed down the poorest streets in every town not only in England but later, following her example, all over the world.

In 1861 Rowland Hill issued letter carriers with a new uniform comprising

▽ Postwomen were a common sight in England during the First World War, to replace men called up to the Colours. They carried satchels, and wore waterproof, brimmed hats.

WILFRED BOYLE



blue frock coat and trousers with red facings and pipings and a *shako*, or peaked cap. In 1883 the first parcel post was inaugurated and about this time the term "letter-carrier" was officially changed to "Man of the Post" — or Postman. The Travelling Post Office was already in service two years before Hill's new system commenced, and the very first T.P.O. consisted of an adapted horse-box and ran on the Grand Junction Railway between Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool.

Sir Rowland Hill retired with many honours conferred upon him and at his death in 1869 he was buried in Westminster Abbey beside the tomb of a man whose engineering inventions in the realm of steam assured that Hill's Penny Post should reach its destination with speed — James Watt.

Today the Post Office handles more than a thousand million letters and parcels a year. Though the present-day world may be filled with political rifts, wars and national calamities, it should be a sobering and consoling thought for us all that as we consign our written thoughts to another into a metal container standing in conspicuous isolation at the end of our street or village lane, for our ten new pence, we command international air, sea and land services to overcome national and geographical barriers of the world, confident that our message will reach journey's end. And it will reach journey's end, still in the tradition of those first ancient messengers of whom Herodotus wrote:

Neither rain nor sun nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from their appointed rounds.

NORMAN BALDWIN and PAMELA GILBERT