

Mail by Rail

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by Martin J. Daunton

The British Travelling Post Offices

The British Post Office was remarkably prompt in using the railways for the conveyance of mail. In 1830, Sir Francis Freeling, the Secretary, informed the Postmaster General that the new railway between Manchester and Liverpool must "demand our serious consideration, whether we ought not to avail ourselves of this mode of communication.... The Post Office seems to be bound to keep pace with the wonderful improvements with which the present age abounds." In November 1830, within two months of its official opening, the Post Office made use of the Liverpool and Manchester railway, and as the rail network was extended in the 1830s and 1840s the circulation of mail became ever more dependent upon this new transport system. The task of "outward sorting" was eased by the introduction of Travelling Post Offices: the mail could be put on the train serving a "road" and sorted for individual towns en route, a process which started in 1838 on the London and Birmingham Railway. Mail coaches had stopped at intervals for the sake of the passengers, which provided an opportunity to sort the letters; when longer railway lines came into operation, the only practicable means of preparing letters for towns along the route was to sort them on the train. The Travelling Post Offices became crucial components of the revised circulation system. Their use was linked with another innovation which was introduced in 1839: "an apparatus for exchanging the letter bags, without the necessity of checking the speed of the train!" The revolution in the circulation of mail was largely complete by 1846 when the last London mail coach ceased operation. London was also an important point of transit for letters sent between provincial towns. The principle adopted until 1865 was that letters should be circulated through London unless this would cause a delay, but in that year it was decided



to revise the circulation system in order to remove pressure on the Travelling Post Offices to and from London. More "cross posts" were to be introduced directly linking provincial centres, and circulation through London and by Travelling Post Offices was to be avoided as far as was compatible with speed and regularity. This could not, of course, be achieved in all cases and London remained the hub of the mail system. The trains used by the Post Office fell into two broad categories. The first was the "ordinary trains" which were run by the companies for their own needs, which the Post Office also found convenient for the carriage of mail. The second category of trains came under the control of the Postmaster General and were further divided into agreement and notice trains. In the case of agreement trains, the timetable, speed and stopping places were fixed by mutual agreement, whereas notice trains were run by the company according

to a timetable fixed by the Post Office. A further distinction was that mail might be conveyed either in the charge of railway guards or Post Office staff. The calculation of payment for the service provided by the railways had to take into account four items. Common to all trains was a charge for the weight of mail carried; the second element was a payment for the conveyance of Post Office staff; the third component was the provision of sorting carriages; and the final consideration was the loss of income from other traffic in consequence of the control exercised by the Post Office. Although it was easy to list the relevant factors, it was not easy to determine the exact rates which should be charged. Precedent might be called into play, for the payment to mail coach proprietors had been based upon their operating costs and had ignored expenditure on roads which were used free of charge. Could the State claim a similar right to use the railway's permanent way without charge? It was not even clear whether the Post Office should pay ordinary commercial rates and contribute to the profits of the railway companies, or whether it was entitled to preferential treatment. It did not take the Post Office long to use the railway; it took the rest of the century to reach a definitive statement of the terms for the conveyance of mails.

Extract from: *Royal Mail-The Post Office since 1840*, by Martin J. Daunton, © Athlone Press, London, 1985.

Center: in 1838 John Ramsey, a Post Office official, designed this Travelling Post Office carriage introduced on the London and Birmingham Railway. Using a tractor arm and a net, the post office workers were able to collect the mail at stations without the train having to stop. This coach had a net to collect mail bags while in motion.

Below: Prussian Travelling Post Office, 1859

