

CARRYING THE MAILS

By Avis Harms

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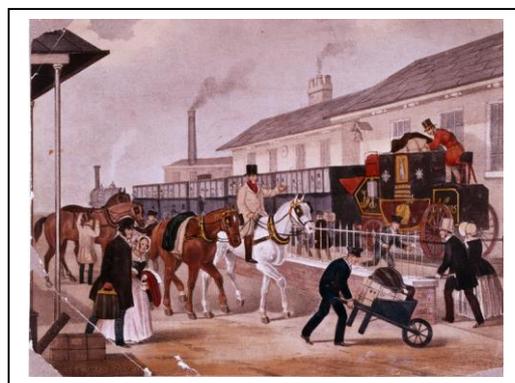
'Carrying the Mails' was an illustrated talk showing many modes of transport employed over the centuries since the inception of the Royal Mail in the reign of Henry VIII.



From 1216 we know that there were Royal despatches on Affairs of State carried throughout the kingdom and to the continent, but it was Henry VIII who set up regular post stages on routes out of London for public usage. However, as yet very few people could read or write. A letter sent in 1542 with three gallows drawn across the bottom of the letter indicated that the recipient had received a reprieve from execution.

In London, to make money, the cost of sending a letter depended on the number of pages sent. We saw a letter from 1646 with cross writing, running horizontally then vertically to save paper but not legibility. By 1770 there was a system of post roads covering the country with the post being carried on horseback. It was a slow business and open to robbery.

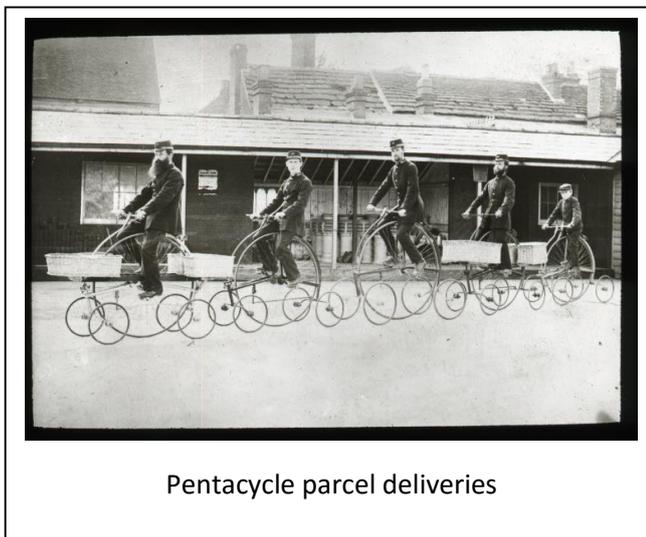
By 1784 stage coaches had been introduced on the London to Bath route making the journey in 18 hours. There were pictures showing the post horn calling up the toll keeper attired in slippers and nightcap, post being collected or delivered through upstairs windows, stage coaches in appalling weather and struggling up or down hills and many pictures where multitudes of stage coaches were all gathered at central post houses.



Inevitably, there were many incidents. John Goodfellow, buried in Moffat, perished while valiantly carrying the post on his back after his coach was stranded in snow drifts. Meanwhile, others were hanged for robbery. A poster offered a reward of 100 guineas after a theft of 7 mailbags and a box of letters bound for the continent. But the cheery pictures showed London letter-carriers with stovepipe hats whereas the parcel-carriers wore shakos!

The Uniform Penny Post was introduced in 1840 throughout the country and the Royal Mail became a government monopoly. The volume of correspondence increased and the modes of letter-carrying rapidly evolved. The first stamp ever, the famous penny black featuring the young Queen Victoria, was introduced.

In 1883 parcel post started. For a while the Sussex Dog Cart worked between Arundel and Chichester. Different types of cycle were introduced for deliveries including the pennyfarthing, a 4-wheeled 2-person parcel-carrier and the pentacycle (also known as the hen and chicks).



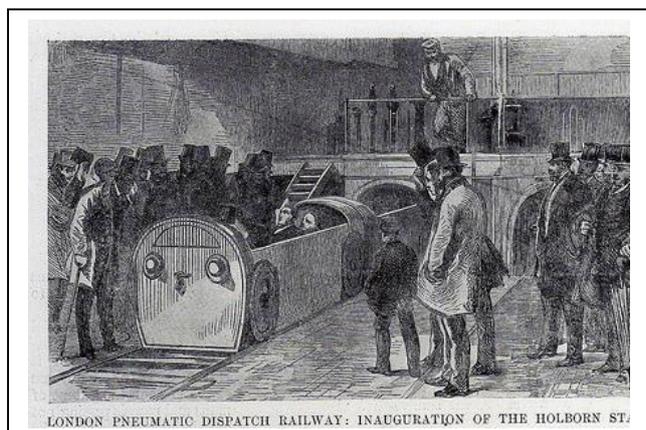
Pentacycle parcel deliveries

Horse-drawn parcel coaches were very top-heavy and by 1900 had become motorised. Vans, motorcycles and autocars were soon introduced as also electric vans.

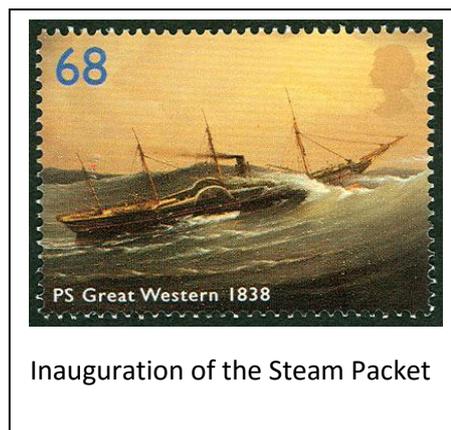
Packet boats were a slow means of carrying overseas mail, with the risk of all mailbags being weighted and thrown overboard if the packet was attacked. Initially, mail carriages were attached to steam trains but ran the risk of sparks igniting the mail. Soon these carriages became mobile sorting offices until they realised that the hessian sacks were causing lung problems in such enclosed spaces.

Between 1863 and 1874 the London Pneumatic Despatch Company used air pressure to either blow or suck capsules on narrow gauge tracks within airtight tubes. Mailbags were loaded into the capsules and within minutes they arrived at their destinations some reaching speeds of 60mph. There was just about enough room for a person to squeeze into a capsule and go for a ride. (A Wadhurst History Society member tells me that she too had a ride in the tube as her father worked for the PO)

Airmail started in 1919 for the troops still abroad after the war and is now a worldwide service.



LONDON PNEUMATIC DISPATCH RAILWAY: INAUGURATION OF THE HOLBORN ST.



Inauguration of the Steam Packet