

Village Echoes

Who remembers telegrams?

Nowadays, because of email, we have almost instant communication and can receive and reply to a message from the other side of the world in a matter of minutes. As a former Prime Minister, James Callaghan, said “A lie can be halfway round the world before the truth has got its boots on”. However, in the past things were very different.

In 1840 a nationwide Penny Post was established. Prior to that, in the 1830s, two British inventors, William Cooke and Charles Wheatstone, had devised an electric telegraph system. The first telegraph service came into being in 1845 and there were two main British operators: The British & Irish Magnetic Telegraph Co. Ltd. and the Electric Telegraph Co. By the 1850s the messages sent and received by telegraph had become known as telegrams.



The inland telegraph companies were nationalised in 1870 and were then run as part of the General Post Office. Under nationalisation, prices for telegrams were kept low in order to make them accessible to as many people as possible and the telegraph was made available to every post office that issued money orders (similar to the MoneyGrams issued by post offices today).

As can be imagined, telegrams became very popular if it were necessary to send an urgent message to someone about, say, a birth, death or family illness. Added to that, it was extremely useful to businessmen who could continue to conduct business whilst away from their offices. We know, from the 1874 Kelly's Directory, that the staff of Goudhurst Post Office included a skilled telegraphist, Richard Boorn, who had been appointed in 1871.

The telegram business increased enormously under the General Post Office and one result was that messengers had to be employed to deliver the telegrams to the recipients and to bring back to the post office any replies. These messenger boys were attached to each post office and had a uniform and bag in which to carry the telegrams. Reminiscing in 1935, Amos Mercer, a long-term resident of Goudhurst, said that he occasionally did relief work for the post office. One particularly busy time that he recalled was during the period that Isaac Lewis was the owner of Bedgebury (1899 – 1919). Isaac had business dealings abroad and on one occasion kept four telegraph boys busy for the whole day delivering telegrams. For delivering telegrams Amos was paid 2d if he went to Cherry Gardens; 9d to Combourne or Bedgebury; and 1/- to Curtisden Green.



Despite its popularity, the days of the telegram were numbered with the rise of the telephone service and after 1911 use declined rapidly, although WW1 somewhat halted the decline.



Sadly, during the war the telegram was often the method whereby a family heard of the death of a loved one. In 1918 the General Post Office warned that “*The prompt delivery of telegrams especially after dark is difficult on account of the scarcity of suitable boys and the general restrictions in the lighting arrangements.*” Things obviously recovered after the war and in 1935, at the time

of George V's silver jubilee, the Goudhurst children sent a telegram to the King stating *"The children of Goudhurst, Kent send loyal greetings to Your Majesties upon the occasion of your Silver Jubilee."* The reply received said *"The King desires to express to all the children who joined in the message His Majesty's best thanks for your kind congratulations and good wishes on his Silver Jubilee. Clive Wigram."*

In 1913 82 million telegrams had been sent but this had decreased to 50 million by 1939 and by 1970 volume sent had dropped to its lowest level. In 1982, the newly privatised British Telecom finally ceased the telegram service, although telegrams are still available from other private operators.

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