

Village Echoes

Compared with 21st century postmen who enjoy all the conditions of a modern worker, early postmen weren't so lucky, but the work seems to have been a way to make a bit of extra money for a few hours. Britain was the first country to introduce a method to pre-pay for postage: before the Penny Black stamp in 1840, people paid on delivery for letters and parcels. By the end of the 1800s London residents received between six and twelve deliveries a day; by contrast, in rural communities such as Goudhurst and Kilndown it was often necessary for outlying farms to collect their post from the village post office where they could also deposit those they wanted to send.

Reminiscences of residents recorded in the 1930s recall a variety of characters who provided a delivery service. Obviously the provision of uniform and transport was not yet in place for a Ted Osborne who lived at Clay Hill Cottages in Goudhurst in the 1880s. His duty was to walk from Goudhurst to Cranbrook to collect mail and deliver on the way back. After a while he had so many items that he bought a donkey and an old cart. But that eventually became too small for the purpose. Goudhurst residents started a collection to raise money to buy a pony and trap. So much was raised that it was enough to buy a whip, a rug, a cushion and a tarpaulin to keep the parcels dry and even some cash in hand. He was described as a messenger in 1871 living at White Stocks Farm but in the 1901 census, after periods as a labourer, he had the title of postman.

In those days there were four deliveries – 7am, 10am, 3pm and 6pm. The main post office was in Staplehurst. George Humphrey of Fair View in Church Road was a 'general carrier mail contractor' who employed Bill Bough, aged 22 in 1901, as a 'mail cab driver'. Bill left Goudhurst for Staplehurst about 8.30 in the evening in a two-wheeled box cart. He collected the night mail from the Station and spent all night on the road, sleeping for about two to three hours in the van. He delivered letters to Staplehurst and Cranbrook post offices, then on to Goudhurst at about five or six in the morning.

George and Tom Messenger, brothers who lived at Tattlebury all their lives, were also remembered as delivering mail. According to the earlier census records they were tailors but later Tom was described as a naturalist, then a bird stuffer. No mention of post-delivery was made. This seems another example of postmen being part-time and irregular.

George Monckton Stevens, a pillar of the community, was living in 1861 in the Post Office in West Road and described in that year's census as postmaster and solicitor's clerk. By 1871 his wife had moved into the Post Office with two unmarried children and a servant. George was then aged 60. He died seven years later and left £450 in his will, a very respectable amount for the time.

In the 1860s John Young went from Goudhurst to Kilndown twice daily and just before he reached a house he used to blow a horn so that anyone who had letters to post could run out with them. In the 1881 census he combined his 'letter carrying' with being a shoe maker and lived at West Road Cottages.

John Giles of Church Road also did a postman's round in addition to his normal work. During the week he did two hours after tea in the evening delivering round to Great Horden and back and was paid 4d an hour. On Sundays he worked four hours delivering to Bedgebury at 6d per hour. Censuses listed him in 1901 as a grocer's warehouseman and in 1911 a farm labourer, but there was no mention of delivering letters at all.

Eventually the service became more and more regularised, with postmen being given proper contracts with the Royal Mail.

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