

Prior to the fifteenth century most letters were royal or government communications carried by state messengers. The Post Office that we know today, in Great Britain, and Europe had its early beginnings around this time. An ability to write letters was confined to those who were educated and able to read and write, thus most of the early letters that survive today come from the archives of merchants, the clergy, the legal professions and the aristocracy.

By the end of the seventeenth century a very good postal service existed throughout Europe and charges for letters were based



on the weight and distance travelled. By today's standards the postal charges were very high and it was the recipient who paid. The first postmarks were introduced during this period and developed rapidly in the eighteenth century. These handstamps showed where the letters originated and thus enabled the post office to calculate the charges. This system remained in Britain until the postal reforms of 1839/40. These reforms were steered through Parliament by Rowland Hill and introduced two fundamental changes.

1. A uniform charge of one penny was charged for any distance in Great Britain for a letter weighing up to ½ oz.
2. Letters could be pre-paid by the sender by means of an adhesive postage stamp which could be bought at the Post Office and stuck on a letter.

These ideas were taken up by all the other Post Offices in the world and the international postal system flourished. The cost of posting a letter in Great Britain was not raised above 1d. until the second World War.

Over the past three hundred years a vast number of letters, documents, postcards and other items connected with the writing and transport of letters, have survived for those who like to collect them. Stamp collections were being made twenty years after the introduction of the penny black in 1840, and by the 1930s most areas of stamp collecting had been studied and catalogued. By the mid twentieth century collectors began to look for other aspects to study than just the adhesive postage stamps. They turned their attention to the postal markings and began to collect and research the handstamps and manuscript postal markings which had appeared on letters prior to the introduction of postage stamps in 1840. The term POSTAL HISTORY was used to describe this new collecting concept which primarily concerns the study of the postage rates and routes of the mail. There is a vast quantity of material from the eighteenth century, right up to the present day, and now the term POSTAL HISTORY embraces letters from all periods.



HOW DO I START?

Because there is so much material, it is impossible to collect everything. It is therefore sensible to give some initial thought as to where you should start. Do not start with too small a subject. It may be interesting to collect letters from the village in which you were born, but if it was small and only had a few postmarks, you will find it very frustrating and difficult to find material to add to your collection. Likewise if you decide to collect the whole of Europe you will be overwhelmed and give up.

WHAT CAN I COLLECT?

The most commonly formed collection is one based around the village or town where you live or from where your family originated. Most of the larger towns in Great Britain had a post office in the eighteenth century. These grew during the Industrial Revolution, resulting in the opening of sub-offices. You might expand your collection to cover an area, such as a county containing several towns, and look at the routes that were used to carry letters between the towns. Such collections can incorporate material right up to the present day. Most people throw away the envelopes that the postman delivers. These may show slogan & advertising cancellations, metered pre-payment markings or phosphor sorting codes used by the modern post office machinery. These are the collectibles of tomorrow and come free on your doormat! You may be interested in transport. Mail throughout the world has been carried first by horse and carriage, and then, by ship, rail and air. All these can make fascinating subjects to collect and can be as broad or as detailed as you care to make them; for example the mail carried by rail could be for the whole country, or

on a specific railway e.g. the Great Western. From the seventeenth century to the present day, all military campaigns produced large quantities of mail from soldiers and sailors. When they were away from home they were prolific letter writers to their family and loved ones back home. Many of these letters have survived and fascinating collections can be formed around a campaign, occupation or even as large as the First or Second World Wars. Likewise collections can comprise various aspects of the postal service such as registered mail, express delivery, postage due or the parcel service. The post offices of nearly every country in the world provided such services.

Collections can be made of mail that travelled over the different routes such as trans-Atlantic, through the Panama Canal, down a river like the Danube, or by air to Africa. Others might care to make a collection illustrating the various postage rates, either over different routes, for different weights of letter or to illustrate the ever increasing postal charges. All these topics and more, come under the general heading of POSTAL HISTORY.

WHERE CAN I FIND MATERIAL?

The fun of collecting anything is in the searching and finding. There are specialist dealers in Postal History. The Internet is a recognised source as many dealers list stock on their websites and eBay or Delcampe have sections where stamps and postal history can be purchased. Stamp magazines will list dealers, some of whom are 'mail order' only and some attend fairs and exhibitions. There are regular stamp fairs up and down the country at national and local level. Even book shops, antique shops or flea markets can reward a look. Then

there are various Auctions, both large and small, general and specialist. As to the cost, this must be tailored to meet your pocket. Do not be too ambitious at first. Many dealers have boxes of cheaper items for a pound or two on their tables. Finally join your local society, specialist society or study circle. You will meet other collectors and will soon be swapping material, learning about the hobby, making contact with other collectors and seeing displays of what they collect. If you want any more information just ask - Good Luck!

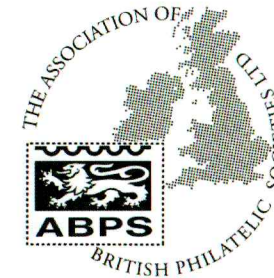


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What is Postal History ?

Association of British Philatelic Societies