The Post

by John Russell

How did the postal service begin?

For as long as humans have existed there has been a need to keep in touch, to transfer information between people in different places. This could have been news about important events, military information, or families staying in contact. Before the invention of writing, spoken - oral messages were carried from one person to another or between towns. Writing made it much easier to send longer messages; however, it was still difficult to make sure that your message got to the right place.

Who organised the first delivery system?

The Romans created an organised system of mail delivery, called *Cursus Publicus*. This was used by the Emperor and officials to transfer information throughout the Empire. Staging posts and a relay system with horses and carriages meant that messages could move quickly, by using many riders instead of one. It was very important for law and order, business, and military reasons that good communication systems existed. However, the Romans were not (as many people think) the first to realise this. In 2000 BC the Egyptians used a similar messenger system to keep people informed about the laws in the country. The Chinese and Persian empires also used systems of horses and riders more than 500 years before the Romans.

What came after the Romans?

After the Roman postal service disappeared, other systems were created, but never again as large as the Roman's. Rulers of countries or regions (such as Charlemagne) and even the church created their own official mail network. It was also very important for business between countries that good communication existed; international traders and many capital cities set up unofficial postal links. There was one such link between Venice and Constantinople in the 14th Century.

Who could use the post?

Until the mid 1600's in Europe only official Government messages could be carried by the state networks; everyone else had to use less secure, unofficial networks. However, as more roads were built, unofficial networks became safer, more reliable and very profitable. Realising they could make money, governments in most countries took control of their own public postal system - making the unofficial networks illegal!

How was it paid for?

Before the invention of the postage stamp, letters were 'franked.' This meant that it was marked on the letter that delivery had been paid for. This could have been either written or stamped. A post-mark was also stamped on the letter. Invented in 1660 in England, this was a mark that showed where and when the letter had been posted. It was used to see how long it took to deliver the letter - to make sure the service was reliable.

When were stamps invented?

A number of countries claim to have invented the idea of stamps - placing a piece of paper on the letter showing that delivery had been paid for. But the first widely available stamp was the Penny Blank, introduced in Britain by a man called Rowland Hill in 1840. It was a black stamp with a white picture of the Queen's head on it. Hill changed the idea of payment from distance to weight, which

meant you paid for how heavy your letter was, not how far it travelled. The year before its introduction about 75 million letters had been posted in Britain, yet only 10 years later over 340 million letters were sent using stamps. It was a very important invention and completely changed the postal system. To buy a first-edition of this stamp today can cost over £1000!

Who decides international prices?

Until the 1870's it was still very expensive to send mail to other countries. The Universal Postal Union was created in 1874 to help countries work together and set reasonable prices for international mail prices. It cannot tell individual countries how much to charge, but it encourages co-operation. Its main aim is to make sure that "all people have affordable and reliable access to postal services."

What is snail mail?

With the creation of airmail, it's now cheap and quick to send letters to most parts of the world. Unfortunately, the growth of new technology (The Internet, emails, fax machines) means that traditional postal services are becoming less popular. Many people now call traditional post "snail mail", because it does not have the speed of an email or a text message. Remember though, it has been here for over 2000 years, and is still a way of delivering a personal message. Why don't you write a letter to someone today?

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