

## POSTAL REFORMS AND GLOUCESTERSHIRE'S POSTAL HISTORY *by George Cole*

In 1635 King Charles I decided to allow the general public the facility of his royal postal system and thereby started a social change of far reaching consequences resulting in the highly mechanised Royal mail of today.

Gloucestershire has played its part in the many changes and reforms since 1635 and two interesting postal dates occur in the county in 1993.

December brings the 140th year since Anthony Trollope proposed in 1853 that roadside pillar boxes should be considered for the City of Gloucester and on 14 October the 25th anniversary of the introduction in 1968 of post codes in the county is celebrated.

Regarding pillar boxes it would be useful to return to the year 1840 when Rowland Hill's uniform penny postage reforms resulted in a huge increase in the amount of mail being handled in the post. Hill's radical reforms enabled people working in the newly industrialised towns to afford to write to folk back home and also helped businesses to expand their trade.

Post Office Headquarters were regularly receiving requests for increased posting facilities and a person wishing to post a letter was required to hand it in to the various letter receiving offices, which were few and far between, there being no roadside post boxes at that time. By December 1851 the Revd. W J Charlton of 11 Lansdown Terrace, Cheltenham had suggested to the Post Office the erection of 'Cast Iron Posts' at the corners of streets to enable letters to be received and taken out by the postman. The Revd. Charlton had pointed out that this was a plan being carried out in Belgium and could well prove useful in this country.

Rowland Hill had also made a similar suggestion and likewise Mr Butler of London University; Henry Cole, a colleague of Hill, was to add his voice to the campaign. It is generally considered however that the person who deserves full credit for the actual introduction of roadside posting boxes to this country is the novelist Anthony Trollope. Mr Trollope was employed as a surveyor's clerk to the Post Office and had been sent to the Channel Islands to improve the postal services. He suggested in November 1851 to George Cresswell, Surveyor of the Western District of England, that iron letter boxes be installed in St. Helier, there being no letter receiving office in the town. Trollope's proposals were forwarded by Cresswell to London and consent was given by the Postmaster General for boxes to be supplied on a trial basis to both St. Helier and St. Peter Port. The boxes were manufactured by John Vaudin of Jersey and by 1852 and 1853 pillar boxes had been installed in both Jersey and Guernsey.

### POST BOXES

Following his work in the Channel Islands Anthony Trollope was transferred to revise the rural posts in the Western Districts of England. It was while he was engaged on improving the rural posts from Gloucester that he proposed in December 1853 that roadside pillar boxes should be provided in the city. This followed an earlier suggestion that a box be installed at Botchergate near Carlisle around September 1853, this being the first box to be supplied on the UK mainland. Because of the success of the Botchergate box the Postmaster General gave agreement that boxes be erected in Gloucester "in the several positions suggested by Mr Trollope"

and in due course, by 1854 Gloucester became the second area on the mainland to receive post boxes.

Mr Peter Copeland in his *Gloucester's Postal History* in 1988 has revealed that the earliest boxes in Gloucester were sited at:- Worcester Street, Alvin Street, Ryecroft, Westgate Street, Littleworth, Wotton, Stroud Road, London Road and Lower Barton Street.

Post Office records indicate that these boxes are thought to have been made by J.M. Butt and Co., engineers of Sweetbriar Street in Gloucester. Butt and Co. were one of the first manufacturers of pillar boxes and hold a notable place in postal history. Indeed the oldest working post box on the mainland is situated at Barnes Cross in Dorset and was cast at the foundry in Sweetbriar Street in 1854. Two further Butt boxes survive, one in a private garden in Haverfordwest and the other is part of the Post Office collection at the National Postal Museum in London. Among other items, Butt and Co. were engaged in the manufacture of street manhole and cellar covers and several examples still survive in the Kingsholm area of the city.

Mr Brian Frith's article on Butt and Co. which appeared in *The Gloucester Citizen* on 17 April 1978 coincided with the issue by the Post Office of a special commemorative post card featuring the Barnes Cross box.

Unfortunately, none of the original Butt boxes now survive in Gloucester and the present oldest box still in service is Box No. 19, situated at the rear entrance to the Cathedral in Pitt Street, having been erected on 28 March 1885. No. 19 box is one of a type



No. 19 Pitt St. a Handyside anon. 1885.

known as an Andrew Handyside "Anonymous" Pillar Box A, due to their being no royal (VR) cipher on the door. It was brought to the attention of the Secretary of the Post Office in 1887 that the standard pillar box of the time, manufactured by Handyside Co. of Derby, did not show the cipher and it was immediately ordered that the royal cipher must appear on all future castings.

The Pitt Street box celebrated its 100th birthday in some style on 28 March 1985 when pupils of the nearby King's School

decorated it with a hand made large 100th birthday card.

Cheltenham has a number of old pillar boxes, the most famous being the Penfold octagonal type designed by the architect J.W. Penfold and cast by Cochran Grove and Co. of Dudley during the period 1866-1872. Eight of the original medium size 1866 boxes



38 Pittville Circus Road, 1866, Penfold.

are sited in Cheltenham, seven being still in use at:- Bayshill Road, Lansdown Place, Montpellier Walk, St. Paul's Road, Douro Road, College Lawn and Pittville Circus Road. The box formerly positioned at St Mark's Post Office is now on exhibition in the Regent Arcade. A third slightly modified Penfold is located at Pittville Spa. All of these boxes are designated as Grade II listed buildings.

The oldest box however in the historic county (if one ignores the administrative district of N. Avon), is placed in the wall of the estate of the Earl of Ducie on the B4509 at Tortworth and was cast in 1857 by Smith and Hawkes and Co. of the Eagle Foundry, Birmingham. This box is one of only ten of this type still in working use and is known as a First National Standard Wall Box B. Gloucestershire has links with the Eagle Foundry, the company having been taken over in 1879 by Mr George Gordon Brodie and renamed the Eagle Range & Foundry Co. Although having been born in Warwickshire, Brodie was educated at Cheltenham College and spent his retirement years and died at 'The Woodlands', The Park, Cheltenham in 1928. He was also chairman of the well known Halford Cycle Co. and his obituary appeared in *The Birmingham Post* on 28 May 1928. It is also interesting that Betty Smith in Chapter 9, 'The First Steamboat' of her book *Tales of Old Gloucestershire*, has noted that Jonathan Hulls of Broad Campden while engaged on building the first steamboat, forwarded drawings to THE EAGLE FOUNDRY in Birmingham in 1737 which then produced the various parts for him.

There are a number of other boxes of interest throughout the county and two which may be mentioned can be seen in the Promenade in Cheltenham and at the Bus Station in Gloucester. Although not of a great age, having been cast between 1910-1933 during the reign of King George V by Handyside & Co., these boxes are two of only 10 double apertured boxes of their type still in use in the country.

The Promenade box was re-sited from Tewkesbury Road Post Office on 23 March 1986 to take the place of the wall posting box formerly provided at the closed main Cheltenham Office following its transfer to new premises in the High Street.



Box No. 14 Tortworth, Smith + Hawkes, 1857, "Down Shute".

Further detailed information on the history of Post Offices and pillar boxes in the city of Gloucester can be found in Mr Copeland's book.

Rowland Hill's reforms were during a period when changes and improvements were in the air. In 1847 the *Town Improvements Clauses Act* was introduced and local commissioners were empowered to name streets and number houses thereby more clearly identifying properties in roads and streets. This was an obvious help to the Post Office following the heavy increase in letter postings after the uniform penny postage was introduced in 1840.

#### MORE RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

However, by the 1950s and 1960s, this boom paled into insignificance when by that time the Post Office was dealing with the immense task of handling over 30 million letters per day. This led to pressure for mechanised sorting to be introduced to deal with the vast quantities of mail, hence the need for a form of address which could be read and processed by machines.

The system adopted in 1965 was a revised version of the alphanumeric codes introduced experimentally in Norwich in 1959. This allowed an exact sub-division down to a single property or a small number of addresses on a postman's route. Gloucestershire addresses were first coded in 1968 but it was not until 1984 when sorting machines were brought into use in the new main Post Office in Eastern Avenue, Gloucester that the full benefit of machine sorted post-coded letters in the county came into force.

Allocating a code to all the addresses in Gloucestershire, as may be imagined, was a quite daunting task. The team, gathered from various areas of Gloucestershire in 1967 to tackle the problem, was led by William Merrett, under the general supervision of the Gloucester Head Postmaster, Sam Angood. Considerable work was involved in checking each postman's walk containing every address in the county but nevertheless the team completed their labours on schedule and the target date of October 1968 was achieved.

It was decided that in addition to informing each household and business of their allocated code by post card, an exhibition of the post coding and mechanisation system be displayed in a prominent site in the county town.

The final choice of the boot and shoe department of the old

Gloucester and Severnside Cooperative Society in Brunswick Road was perhaps a not inappropriate venue particularly in view of the amount of shoe leather expended in walking the street, roads and lanes of Gloucestershire when the properties were checked and recorded.

The original Gloucestershire Post Code Directory of 1968 was based on dividing the county into sections containing the main towns of Gloucester, Cheltenham, Stroud (including the surrounding villages and Stonehouse), Cirencester and nearby villages, followed by the remaining areas sub-divided into Gloucestershire, West, North and South. This format however, was found in use to be impracticable and subsequent directories were amended on several occasions. This has resulted in the present directory listing all places from Ashleworth to Wotton-under-Edge in alphabetical order.

Although post codes were completed and introduced in Gloucestershire in 1968 it was not until 1984, as previously mentioned, that actual mechanised sorting of post coded mail took place. The disparity between the introduction date and when machine sorting commenced can be traced to a number of factors. Problems nationwide stemmed from a moratorium in 1972 on the use of machine sorting over the rate of payment for coding desk work by various staff associations. There was also initially a low percentage of letters being posted with a post code included in the address and in the case of Gloucester in addition to the above difficulties there was insufficient accommodation at the George Street sorting office to take the new machines.

Eventually, all these problems were resolved and following agreement by Gloucester City Council's Planning Sub-Committee

in March 1983 for a new sorting office in Eastern Avenue, all was set for the culmination of the efforts of the post code project team of 1967/68. Plans for the new sorting office building were completed under the direction of Mr Angood's successor as Head Postmaster, Ted Clark, with a team led by Bob Taylor. The office was finished by mid 1984; the machines were brought into use in October and on Wednesday 24 April 1985 His Royal Highness The Duke of Gloucester unveiled a commemorative plaque at the office and declared the new complex officially open. Changes are, however, continuing with the introduction in 1991 of Optical Character Recognition (OCR) machines capable of reading and processing typed, post coded addresses at 36,000 per hour.

The future holds more revolutionary changes such as bar coding of business mail, video coding and containerisation. One wonders what the great reformer of 1840 would now make of the Royal Mail of 1993 and the many transitions since the birth of the Penny Post.

#### **SOURCES**

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