Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker continues his series of occupational histories with his ancestor George Robinson, a Victorian postman.

George Robinson was a lifelong shoemaker. Or so I thought. Born in Wollaston, a Northamptonshire shoe-making village in 1802, he'd settled in Leicester by the mid 1820s. Almost invariably he appears in the records as a shoemaker or, in his later years as a shoe warehouseman. His was a working life spent cutting leather, sewing uppers, nailing on soles – one of thousands working in the boot and shoe industry for which Victorian Leicester was renowned.

It all seemed straightforward, until I spotted him in the 1851 census listed as a 'Letter Deliverer'. Apparently it was an interlude, halfway through his working life. With my curiosity sparked, I resolved to find out more. Could I get a sense of his day-to-day working life delivering letters through the Leicester streets?

Online, I dipped into Ancestry's occupational records (www.ancestry.co.uk) – which include British Postal Appointment books from 1831-1969 – and within a few minutes I'd uncovered a trace:

> "Appoint George Robinson as Letter Carrier at Leicester if qualified on the recommendation of Sir Joshua Walmsley Bart MP"

It was dated 11th October 1847 and authorised by 'Clanricarde', the Postmaster General. At first sight, the requirement for a good character reference from the local MP seemed rather heavy. But George's appointment took place at a time when the Royal Mail was keen to maintain its reputation for integrity, honesty and reliability; with the modern postal system still in its infancy, recruiting dependable letter carriers and clerks was of paramount importance.

Prior to the introduction of the Uniform Penny Post in 1840, letters were transported by mail coach, handled by a range of private agents and payment made by the recipient at their front door. It was an expensive and inefficient system and in his treatise of 1837, 'Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicality', Rowland Hill campaigned to re-design the system:

> "the ordinary delivery of letters is an exceedingly tedious, inconvenient and consequently expensive process… If such an arrangement [as pre-paid postage] could by any means be effected, it would undoubtedly economise the time of the Letter Carriers even more that that of the Clerks. There would not only be no stopping to collect the postage, but probably it would soon be unnecessary even to await the opening of the door, as every house might be provided with a box into which the Letter Carrier would drop the letters and, having knocked, he would pass on as fast as he could walk."

To get a clearer idea of how the postal system developed, I head to the Royal Mail Archive (www.postalheritage.org.uk), nestling in the shadow of the Mount Pleasant sorting office in London's Clerkenwell. Using their handy information sheets, I piece together a timeline.

Uniform Penny Postage was introduced in January 1840, with postage rates based upon package weight, regardless of distance. Four months later, the world's first adhesive stamp – the Penny Black – was introduced, later replaced by the Penny Red.
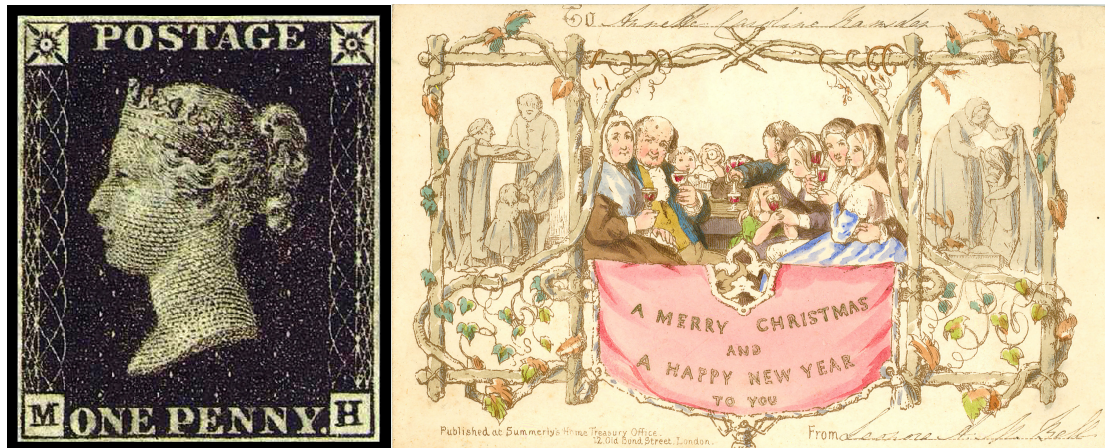
Registered letters start from 1841, Christmas cards were introduced by Henry Cole in 1843, and from 1848 book post allows books, newspapers and other printed-paper to be sent at a special lower rate. Better facilities for the sale of postage stamps became essential and during the early 1840s a network of post offices begins to develop. In parallel, the expansion of the railways enabled the speedy transfer of post between towns.

Against that general background, I search for further mentions of George Robinson amongst the postal records but alas, there are no pension listings or signs of promotion. What is clear, however, is that he joined the post office at a time of great innovation and growth.

John Soer's booklet 'The Royal Mail in Leicestershire and Rutland' proved to be an invaluable source. It records, for example, the three-fold increase in letters almost overnight in 1840 – soon there were 2000 incoming and 1400 outgoing letters being handled each day in the Leicester post office. At times, the postmaster William Parsons struggled to cope and in 1845 he was granted five months' sick leave for illness 'partially of a mental disorder'. To improve the set up, a new post office was erected in Granby Street, designed by William Flint. As the Leicester Chronicle reports on 14 August 1847:

> "THE NEW POST-OFFICE, Leicester, was opened on Thursday, when great numbers of the inhabitants indulged their curiosity by walking into the building and examining its arrangements. The new office is very convenient, though, we imagine, hardly so commodious as it might have been. It comprises a large apartment for the receipt and sorting of letters, a room for the Postmaster, a room for the deliverers and

messengers, a sitting apartment, offices, and a wide passage for the shelter of the public. In the latter are windows where applicants for stamps, letters, and money orders may be waited upon."

A plan of the building survives, showing the post office wedged between the Leicestershire Bank and the Three Crowns Hotel. Tucked away at the back is a room, 16 ¾ feet by 7 feet and apparently windowless, where the letter carriers were based. The first Granby Street post office was rebuilt in 1866 and the replacement (pictured) was set back from the pavement to accommodate queues and a step up from its predecessor, architecturally speaking.

With a burst of civic pride, the Leicester Journal in November 1847 reports on the letter carriers' eye-catching new uniforms. George Robinson, appointed only a month earlier, would have been amongst the first to wear it:

> "THE POSTMAN OF THE MARKET PLACE DISTRICT… We have been favoured with a view of the dress, in which we hear he will make his debut on Sunday next. It consists of a scarlet coat, blue collar trimmed with gold lace, a blue vest edged with gold, black pantaloons, and Hessian boots, a hat with a gold band, the brims being edged with gold lace, and, in addition, a capital waterproof cape."

The timely delivery of letters depended upon two vital factors. One was efficient sorting under pressure – described in 1850 as 'two very violent convulsions, namely, the morning delivery and evening dispatch' – and the second was a complex network of railway services. The 1849 trade directory gives a sense of the daily comings and goings:

POST OFFICE.—William Parsons, Granby street. Letters arrive by mail from London, Northampton, Melton, Oakham, Harboro', Glen Kibworth, Scotland, Ireland, & most parts of the north & west, & are delivered at 7 a.m. in the summer & ½ past 7 a.m. in the winter, & dispatched ½ past 10 p.m. Second delivery, by day mail, arrives at 2 p.m.; dispatched at 8 a.m. Loughborough, Derby, Nottingham, Melton, Grantham & Yorkshire letters are delivered at ½ past 3 p.m.; dispatched at 2 p.m. Stamford, Uppingham & Billesdon letters are dispatched at 10 m. to 4 p.m. Hinckley, Nuneaton, Coventry, Manchester, Liverpool, Scotland, Ireland & Wales letters are dispatched at 25 m. p. 4 p.m

It was Anthony Trollope – post office official and prolific novelist – who championed the introduction of 'strong iron' pillar-boxes. After an initial experiment in Jersey in 1852, pillar-boxes were introduced in the mainland from 1853. In the early days, they were few and far between – London had only six by 1855 and the Leicester trade directory of 1863 pinpoints seven 'Pillar Letter Boxes' in Humberstone Gate, Canning Place, Church Gate and Braunstone Gate, and at West Bridge, Stoneygate and the Railway Station.

Pillar-boxes were not universally popular; a character from Trollope's 1869 novel 'He Knew He Was Right', Jemima Stanbury declared that she:

> "had not the faintest belief that any letter put into one of them would ever reach its destination. She could not understand why people should not walk with their letters to a respectable post-office instead of chucking them into an iron stump – as she called it – out in the middle of the street with nobody to look after it."

By 1857 all was not well; "The Leicester post office is in a very disorganised state, and this is attributable to the ill health and inefficiency of the Postmaster", wrote the post office surveyor. But Parsons continued as postmaster until retiring in April 1860. In his 39 years' tenure, he had overseen the transition from a small town post office to one with a staff of nine clerks, nine letter carriers plus two auxiliaries, twelve rural messengers and a station porter.

It's not clear how long George Robinson served as a letter carrier – somewhere between four and fourteen years – but by 1861 he's back working as a shoemaker. Maybe he became tired of those early starts and heading out in all weathers. Maybe he was a casualty of a post-Parsons reorganisation. Or maybe he was attracted back by the flourishing boot and shoe industry. What is clear however, is the image I now have of him, dressed in a scarlet coat and top hat, setting out from Granby Street to deliver news and good cheer amongst the streets of Victorian Leicester.