THE HISTORY OF THE BRITISH ARMY POSTAL SERVICE.
Part 1

Origins

The origins of the BFPO can be traced back to Saxon times. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle makes mention of messengers being sent by King Edward the Elder (899–924) to recall members of the Kent fyrd, but it is generally regarded that the origins of the postal services stem from the Kings Messengers (Nuncii et Cursores) of medieval times. In particular the Royal Post established in the reign of King Edward IV (1461–83) to support his troops engaged in a war against Scotland

FYRD. A fyrd (Old English pronunciation: [fyrʸd]) was a type of early Anglo-Saxon army that was mobilised from freemen to defend their shire, or from selected representatives to join a royal expedition. Service in the fyrd was usually of short duration and participants were expected to provide their own arms and provisions. The composition of the fyrd evolved over the years, particularly as a reaction to raids and invasions by the Vikings. The system of defence and conscription was reorganised during the reign of Alfred the Great, who set up 33 fortified towns (or burhs) in his kingdom of Wessex.

Henry VIII appointed Sir Brian Tuke "Master of Posts" in 1513. Tuke set about formalising the Royal Posts and established regular posting stations between London and Dover. The Royal Posts provided a courier service while Henry was campaigning in France. During the reign of Elizabeth I postal routes were **laid** for her armies campaigning in Ireland and Scotland. A special postal route was **laid** to the West Country in 1588 to carry news and intelligence of the expected Spanish Armada.

Brian Tuke portrait by Hans Holbein c 1527
Source: Brian Tuke - https://en.wikipedia.org

There were three methods of carrying the Royal Mail in the sixteenth century:

1. If a letter was not urgent and the destination was near to a regular **laid** route it was sent by the "laid post". This was aa regular series of postboys carrying the post (a packet of letters in a portmanteau) on a recognised route. These postboys covered stages of 10-30 miles. They were known for their slackness and delivery was therefore slow.

2. Letters to destinations off these laid routes were delivered by messengers paid a retainer and a salary for every day they were "in uniform". They delivered letters all over the country.

3. Letters of importance and urgency were carried by a messenger *"post haste"* without stopping other than to change horse and obtain a signature and endorse letters with times of arrival at destinations on route.

Start of the postal service and the English Civil War

In 1632, Charles I appointed Thomas Witherings as the Postmaster of foreign mails. Witherings saw the possibilities of a profitable national post and three years later proposed to Charles's Council to *"settle a pacquet post between London and all parts of His Majesty's dominions, for the carrying and recarrying of his subject's letters."* To justify the expenditure Witherings suggested that *"anie fight at sea, anie distress of His Majestie's ships (which God forbid), anie wrong offered by anie nation to anie of ye coastes of England or anie of His Majestie's forts...the newes will come sooner than thought,"* implying that the reason for this innovation was to provide better defence of the realm. Two years later a state letter monopoly formally came into being and the public institution of the Post Office was created. It was used to raise revenues to sponsor state activities including war. Under Witherings' organisation a public postal service was established with post offices connected by regular routes established, throughout the country, along the lines of communication used by the Tudor armies. A conveyance tariff was fixed. Postage was paid on receipt of the letter by the addressee and remained so until the Rowland Hill reforms of the 1840s.

Both the Royalist and Parliamentarians maintained their own postal systems during the English Civil wars (1642–51). The Parliamentarians appointed Edmund Prideaux as Master of the Posts, Couriers and Messengers. In this capacity he established within the Post Office an instrument of state control, called the 'Secret Office'. This office was charged with gleaning intelligence from intercepted mail. In the Commonwealth period this control was extended nationwide, as soldiers of the New Model Army were appointed Postmasters and were required to submit monthly reports on the activities of the communities that their post office served. Elements of the Secret Office still exist today under the auspices of the Home Office and its secret intelligence services.

Henry Bishop and the first postal cancellation stamps.

In 1660 Colonel Sir Henry Bishop was appointed Postmaster General, he had served as a Royalist officer during the Civil War. He instigated the use of a metal stamp which was to be

"put upon every letter showing the day of the month that every letter comes to the office, so that no Letter Carryer may dare to detain a letter from post to post, which before was usual".

The **"Bishop Mark"** was designed to show the date on which a letter was received by the post and to ensure that the dispatch of letters would not be delayed. These were the world's first handstruck postage stamps

The postmarks were usually on the back of the letter and are known initially used in the Chief Office in London but were introduced later in Dublin, Edinburgh and New York City.
The original London Bishop Mark, first used 19 April 1661 consisted of a small circle of 13 mm diameter, bisected horizontally, with the month (in serifed lettering) abbreviated to two letters, in the upper half and the day of the month in the lower half. Similar marks were used later in Scotland and Ireland, as well as the North American colonies."

""Common Post" and the War of Spanish Succession

English troops were engaged in the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–13) and campaigned under the command of John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough in Europe. Mail was sent by through the Post Office system using the packet boats that sailed between Harwich, England and Dutch port of Hellevoetsluis. On the Continent the military mail was handled by the Thurn & Taxis Post, the postal service of the Holy Roman Empire. This service was referred to as the "Common Post". After the Grand Alliance armies overran Flanders the Dover-Ostend packet service re-opened, for it had been closed at the start of the war because its packet boats were prone to attack from the French.

In addition to the "Common Post" Marlborough used the Queen's Messengers to carry his communications between his Headquarters and the English Court. The Queen's (King's) Messengers were members of the Royal household detailed with the task of carrying despatches on behalf of the Monarch and her/his ministers. They came into existence in the 1640s. They travelled on horseback and used the official Post Office packet services to cross over the Continent. A direct line can be drawn from today's Defence Couriers of the British Army to these Messengers."

""Armee Britannique" – post mark (1743)

In 1743 the first distinctive post mark appeared on letters sent by British troops campaigning in Europe. The Thurn & Taxis Post, who processed the mail on behalf of the British army, endorsed it with a small circular stamp inscribed "AB" – Armee Britannique.

Mr Sutton was appointed Postmaster to the Army in 1747, but no more is known of him.

Source: History of the British Army postal service - https://en.wikipedia.org

Mail during the Seven Years' War (1756–63)

Clockwise from top left.

The Battle of Plassey (23 June 1757)

The Battle of Carillon (6–8 July 1758)
The Battle of Zorndorf (25 August 1758)
The Battle of Kunersdorf (12 August 1759)

The Seven Years' War was fought in Europe, North America and India. It was a struggle for global primacy between Britain and France which also had a mahjor impact on Spain. The postal lines of communication depended upon the Post Office Packet Service. The troops in Europe had their mail conveyed on the packet boats between Harwich and Brielle in Holland. The mail for the troops in North America was carried on the Falmouth, Halifax/New York packet route. The troops involved in the war in India had their mail carried on the East India Company merchant ships.

In North America, the mail was distributed to the troops through the colonial postal system, which was largely developed under the management of Benjamin Franklin. Mail was often carried between the coastal ports of New York, Boston and Halifax by sloops, and a similar practice operated in the West Indies.

Source: File:Seven Years' War Collage.jpg - https://en.wikipedia.org

Military postage concessions (1795)

In response to the ever-increasing re-direction charges incurred by soldiers posted from one station to another throughout the expanding British Empire an Act of Parliament (1795) was passed to provide cheap postage rates for non-commissioned officers (NCO) and private soldiers or Royal Navy sailors.

This concession allowed soldiers' letters under the weight of 1⁄4 ounce (7.1 g) to be sent and received for one penny, whilst officers' mail was charged at six pence. To safeguard against abuse it was necessary for a soldier or sailor's name and his regiment or ship to be endorsed on the outside of the letter and to be countersigned by his commanding officer. To prevent the abuse of the concession, further legislation was enacted in 1806 imposing a penalty of £5 or a term of imprisonment for any abuser. It came to light that officers were handing their personal letters to their soldiers/sailors, who then signed their names on the covers and presented them as their own to their commanding officer for counter-signature.

Henry Darlot – The Duke of York's Army Postmaster

In the summer of 1799 Prince Frederick, Duke of York and Albany (1763–1827), as Commander-in-Chief of the army, wrote to the Postmaster General (Lord Auckland) to request that "a good intelligent clerk" who could "facilitate delivery and to collect letters and protect revenue" be seconded from the General Post Office as the Army Postmaster to an amphibious expedition to Den Helder, Holland.

Source: File:Frederick, Duke of York 1800-1820.jpg - https://en.wikipedia.org

Source: File:William Eden 1. baron Auckland.jpg - https://en.wikipedia.org

Henry Darlot, a clerk from the Post Office Foreign Section, was chosen as the Army Postmaster, the first to officially accompany the Army overseas. Mail for the Army was handed to the Post Office Foreign Section, sealed in bags and passed to ships sailing to Holland. The Army established a base at Den Helder. When Henry Darlot arrived with his servant, he found that two despatches of mails had already preceded him. The result was chaos. He reported to the Post Office Secretary's Office on 27 September 1799 that:

the mails are both delivered which I assure you is not so easy or businesslike as I imagined it would be, for although the letters are partly sorted in London to the different regiments, there are still a great number for persons not attached to any regiment who are so impatient to be supplied that immediately a mail arrives I am beset by at least a hundred of them. Great confusion is occasioned also by officers detached from the regiment to which their letters were addressed insisting on looking for them before the Drum Majors [who were appointed Post Orderlies for each regiment] get them.

The military campaign was a failure and Henry Darlot lost his horse and much of his equipment in the retreat to the coast. On his return to London, he was commended for having carried out his task "with ability and propriety to the entire satisfaction of the Postmaster-General. " In the two months he was in Holland his Army Post Office made an overall profit of £643 6s 6d. (The postage rates were 1d for soldiers and 6d for officers).

The Post Master General

The Postmaster General of the United Kingdom was a Cabinet-level ministerial position in HM Government. Aside from maintaining the postal system, the Telegraph Act 1868 established the Postmaster General's right to exclusively maintain electric telegraphs. This would subsequently extend to telecommunications and broadcasting.

The office was abolished in 1969 by the Post Office Act 1969. A replacement public authority governed by a chairman was established under the name of the "Post Office (that part subsumed by Royal Mail Group)

Peninsular War – postal arrangements (1809–13)

Despite Henry Darlot's successful attachment to the army, no Post Office official was sent to provide a postal service to the British forces during the Peninsular War. Mail was sent by regular weekly packet service from Falmouth, Cornwall to Lisbon (Portugal). This civilian service was established in 1703.

The mails were received by the British Post Office Agent, Thomas Reynolds, who passed it onto the Quartermaster General's Headquarters in Lisbon. Where the Sergeant Postmaster, Sergeant R Webb (3rd Foot Guards), who had been appointed by the Commander-in-Chief, Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington (1769–1852) in April 1809, sorted and arranged the distribution of the mail. The transit time from London to the field was 13–20 days. Return post left Lisbon for Falmouth, three days a week. There was no censorship of mail. The military mail service was augmented through the use of the Spanish civilian postal service.

When the army advanced into Spain, at the end of 1811, Major George Scovell was appointed Superintendent of Military Communications responsible for all army communications. As part of his re-organisation of the postal and courier service he detailed the cavalry to escort mail. He also ordered that

"bags containing letters sent to different Divisions of the Army must be returned to Headquarters at the first opportunity. The wet bags cause the loss of many letters on the road."

After the battle of Vittoria (21 June 1813), Wellington began to close up on the Pyrenees, thus extending his line of communications. This affected the mail service and the postal operations were moved from Lisbon to the port of Pasajes (east of San Sebastian), the British Post Office Agent there was Charles Sevright, who had spent ten years as a Prisoner of War after his arrest in Holland on spying charges.

In February 1814, the mail service was experiencing some problems again. Wellington became dissatisfied and rebuked Lieutenant-Colonel Sturgeon, who took it very much to heart and deliberately rode too close to the enemy lines at Vic en Bigorre (France) and was shot in the head. The post of Superintendent of Military Communications was taken over by Lieutenant-Colonel Colquhoun Grant.

The Army crossed the Pyrenees in June 1814 and Charles Sevright, moved the postal facility to Bordeaux (France) where it remained in operation until the last of Wellington's army had embarked and sailed for England.

Waterloo Campaign (1815)

Wellington on assuming command of the Allied Armies on 5 April 1815 had to create a command structure. In this structure he recalled now Lieutenant-Colonel Sir George Scovell as Superintendent of Military Communications.

An Army Post Office was set up in the Headquarters in Brussels with two clerks. Mails were despatched to and from the headquarters via Ostend (Belgium) where the British Post Office Agent was Charles Sevright. Army Post Offices operated in France until the withdrawal of British troops in 1817.

Waterloo Campaign (1815)

General Sir George Scovell, (21 March 1774 – 17 January 1861) was a member of the quartermaster's staff of the British Army in Iberia during the Peninsular War.

Scovell is most remembered for the crucial role he played in breaking the codes of the French forces uring that war, their *Grande Chiffre.* A gifted linguist, he was put in charge of a motley crew of various nationalities recruited for their local knowledge and language skills and called the Army Guides. They developed a system for intercepting and deciphering French communiqués.

Source: George Scovell - https://en.wikipedia.org

The Great Cipher (French: Grand chiffre) was a nomenclator cipher developed by the Rossignols, several generations of whom served the French monarchs as cryptographers. The Great Cipher was so named because of its excellence and because it was reputed to be unbreakable.

Modified forms were in use by the French Peninsular army until the summer of 1811. After it fell out of current use, many documents in the French archives were unreadable until it was decoded.
Source: Great Cipher - https://en.wikipedia.org

Military influence on Rowland Hill's postal reforms 1840

In 1840, Rowland Hill (1795–1879) began his reforms of the Post Office. An important part of these reforms was the introduction of a uniform postage rate (i.e. 1d – which could be prepaid using the now famous "Penny Black" stamp), this concept was greatly influenced by the reduced postage rate concessions granted to the Army in 1795.

Several Army officers were called to give evidence at a Parliamentary board of enquiry. One such officer was Captain J Bentham of the 52nd Regiment. He was asked if he had observed the importance of correspondence to the soldiers, he replied:

"I have observed that they take very great advantage of it and they appear to derive great gratification from it, and it benefits them in a variety of ways..."

He also expressed the opinion that higher rates of postage would lead to a total prohibition of the use of the mail service by "the humbler classes". He was then questioned as to the level of literacy in the Army he responded:

"I believe that many of them learnt to write expressly for the purpose of writing their own letters."

Sir Rowland Hill, KCB, FRS (3 December 1795 – 27 August 1879) was an English teacher, inventor and social reformer. He campaigned for a comprehensive reform of the postal system, based on the concept of Uniform Penny Post and his solution of pre-payment, facilitating the safe, speedy and cheap transfer of letters.

Hill made the case that if letters were cheaper to send, people, including the poorer classes, would send more of them, thus eventually profits would go up. Proposing an adhesive stamp to indicate pre-payment of postage – with the first being the Penny Black – in 1840, the first year of Penny Post, the number of letters sent in the UK more than doubled. Within 10 years, it had doubled again.

Source: Rowland Hill - https://en.wikipedia.org