

# THE HISTORY OF THE BRITISH ARMY POSTAL SERVICE.

## Part 2

### Crimean War – postal services (1854–56)

In March 1854 British troops together with an expeditionary force from France were sent to Turkey and the Crimea in support of the Turks against the Russians.



**The Crimean War** was a military conflict fought from October 1853 to February 1856 in which Russia lost to an alliance made up of France, the Ottoman Empire, the United Kingdom and Sardinia. The immediate cause of the war involved the rights of Christian minorities in the Holy Land, then a part of the Ottoman Empire. The French promoted the rights of Roman Catholics, while Russia promoted those of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Longer-term causes involved the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the unwillingness of Britain and France to allow Russia to gain territory and power at the Ottoman Empire's expense.

Detail of Franz Roubaud's panoramic painting *Siege of Sevastopol*

Initially it was decided that the normal civilian postal service to Turkey and the Black Sea was sufficient and therefore no British Post Office representative was sent to handle the Army's mails. Mail was despatched from London via the French 'overland route' and onto Constantinople (now Istanbul). There it was handed to the French Consular Postal Service who in turn, passed it to the French Army Post Office for distribution to the British Army.

Mail from the British Army was despatched on the French packets from Constantinople to Malta. At Malta it was transferred via the British Post Office agent onto vessels bound for Southampton. The outbound system from Britain proved to be both expensive and inadequate.

**William Howard Russell**, *The Times* correspondent reported:

*There is always something wrong about our letters. At present the French Post Office here is a receptacle of several hundred letters addressed to the generals, staff officers and officers of every Regiment which the [French] postmaster refuses to give up until some chivalrous person pays £12 (300 francs) for the whole bundle and to take the chance of being repaid by the various persons ... to whom they are addressed*



### Sir William Howard Russell,

(28 March 1820 – 11 February 1907) was an Irish reporter with *The Times*, and is considered to have been one of the first modern war correspondents. He spent 22 months covering the Crimean War, including the Siege of Sevastopol and the Charge of the Light Brigade. He later covered events during the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the American Civil War, the Austro-Prussian

Source: File:Wh russell cartoon.png - <https://en.wikipedia.org>

Initially sent by editor John Delane to Malta to cover British support for the Ottoman Empire against Russia in 1854, Russell despised the term "war correspondent" but his coverage of the conflict brought him international renown, and Florence Nightingale later credited her entry into wartime nursing to his reports. The Crimean medical care, shelter and protection of all ranks by Mary Seacole was also publicised by Russell and by other contemporary journalists, rescuing her from bankruptcy.

Russell was described by one of the soldiers on the frontlines thus: "a vulgar low Irishman, [who] sings a good song, drinks anyone's brandy and water and smokes as many cigars as a Jolly Good Fellow. He is just the sort of chap to get information, particularly out of youngsters.

This reputation led to Russell's being blacklisted from some circles, including British commander Lord Raglan who advised his officers to refuse to speak with the reporter.

Further evidence of the problem is illustrated by an officer in the Rifle Brigade, **Henry Hugh Clifford**, who later won a VC at Inkerman. He wrote in a letter home:

*I have just received your letter. It was left here in the French Post Office with 12 letters for me, they not having the three Queen's Heads [reference to a 1d stamp] requisite upon them. For the last 3 months I have not heard from England...*

By May 1854, a new deal over the transit cost was struck with the French postal authorities and this partly solved the problem of holding unpaid mail. Mail was despatched from Britain as before but on its arrival in Constantinople British officers handled it, but unfortunately they had no experience in postal matters and there was soon a buildup of undelivered letters.



### **Major General Sir Henry Hugh Clifford**

(12 September 1826 – 12 April 1883) was an English recipient of the Victoria Cross, the highest and most prestigious award for gallantry in the face of the enemy that can be awarded to British and Commonwealth forces.

Source: File:Henry Hugh Clifford.jpg - <https://en.wikipedia.org>

He took part in the Crimean war, where he received the appointment of aide-de-camp to Sir George Brown, commanding the light division, and was present at Alma and Inkerman, and for his gallantry in the latter battle was decorated with the Victoria Cross, by leading one of the charges, killing one of the enemy with his sword, disabling another and saving the life of a soldier (5 November 1854). In May 1855, he was appointed deputy assistant quartermaster-general, and remaining in the Crimea until the conclusion of the war was then promoted to the rank of brevet major, and received the medal and clasps for Alma, Inkerman, and Sebastopol, and from foreign governments the Legion of

In the meantime, the Secretary of State for War had received many letters of complaint and took the matter up with the Postmaster General (Charles Canning, 1st Earl Canning). He was informed by the Postmaster General that:

*with view to relieving the Officers of HM forces in Turkey from the irksome business of superintending the arrangement and distribution of the large mass of correspondence of which mails between this country and the Army are likely to be composed, the Postmaster General has determined upon dispatching an intelligent and experienced Officer of this Department to act as Army Postmaster.*

Edward Smith, of the Post Office Inland Letter Section, was appointed as the Army Postmaster, and left London in June 1854 with an Assistant Army Postmaster, Thomas Angell. On their arrival they set up a Base Army Post Office in Constantinople.

One of their first tasks was to recover the unpaid mails from the French. This they achieved by using their own money as well as borrowing £50 from the Commander-in-Chief, Lord Raglan (1788–1855). A month later the Assistant Army Postmaster, Thomas Angell set up an Army Post Office in Varna in support of the Army Headquarters.

A regular seaborne mail service was established between Varna and Constantinople. In late summer, an invasion fleet of some 600 ships and 50,000 men gathered at Varna creating a shortage of accommodation which prompted the Assistant Army Postmaster to obtain Lord Raglan's permission to operate from the ship *Ganges*, but the ship sailed for the Crimea before the Assistant Army Postmaster had moved on board. So he established the Army Post Office on the *Sovereign* which was smaller. This caused him sorting difficulties as his report reflects:

*Scarcely had the sorting operation commenced (by making use of buckets for letter boxes) when a perfect rush was made aboard, officers, non-commissioned officers and privates came to demand the letters and papers for their respective regiments, it was in vain that I endeavoured to interpose a barrier to enable me to continue the sorting unmolested ... [because of the confusion caused he sorted through the night] ... On the following morning, at five o'clock, I signalled "Send for letters", but the order being given shortly after for the whole fleet to weigh anchor I was unable to dispose of them.*

The force landed at Eupatoria on 14 September 1854, the army disembarked and marched to Balaklava. On the instructions of Headquarters Smith and Angell switched places. The Adjutant General, General Estcourt instructed that the mails should be organised as follows:

*...When a mail arrives you [Smith] should as speedily as possible inform me of it and name an hour either that day or the next for the delivery of letters at the Headquarters Encampment ... When a mail is to be dispatched you should in like manner inform me when you will collect letters at the Headquarters Encampment and carry them off with you to the vessel which is to carry them away...*

The provision of a proper mail service was hampered by a lack of suitable labour, shipping movement details, dedicated transport and inappropriate accommodation. Matters came to a head when the following report appeared in the *Daily News* dated 13 January 1855 (Balaklava)

*Whenever complaints become inconveniently local, the London Post Office is in the habit of requesting the Postmaster here the state of the case. Such a demand is unfair and unreasonable. A little candour and common sense properly applied would make the Post Office authorities understand that nothing short of confusion can be expected from a Department which as the Post Office to the Forces, is sent out in a pitiful state of hopelessness, with a heavy load of responsibility and with no adequate means of labour resources and powers...*

The article then went on to mention the use of soldiers to assist at the Army Post Office

*A close and patient enquiry into the details of the Army Post Office has convinced me that not the slightest blame attaches to the two Postmasters Smith and Angell, who are merely victims of circumstances. If these gentlemen have committed a fault it is that they did not ruin their prospects in the service to which they belonged by refusing to take upon themselves the responsibility for the mismanagement of others. Instead of detaching the Army Post Office with a sufficient number of clerks and with a couple of carts, drivers and horses for the conveyance of mails they were referred to Naval agents and the superciliousness of young gentlemen attached to the Staff.*

Soon after the publication of this news article two more Assistant Army Postmasters, Mr Sissons and Henry Mellersh, plus seven sorters were despatched from London. They arrived in Constantinople on 5 February 1855. Mr Mellersh was to play a significant part in the establishment of a dedicated Army Postal Service, as he was to become a member of a joint War Office and Post Office committee set up in 1876 to investigate the viability of such post service. He was the only member on the committee who had first hand experience of providing a mail service under war conditions. A further Army Post Office was established at Scutari, to provide postal services to the Barrack Hospital staff and patients



British Army Post Office, Constantinople (1855)

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

### First international money order service (1854)

In response to demands made by Florence Nightingale, a method of transmitting money was devised to allow troops to transfer monies back to their families at home in the United Kingdom. This was designed to prevent drunkenness and became the world's first International Money Order Service. In its first month of operation £7,000 was remitted by the British troops.

Afterwards Malta and Gibraltar were allowed to send, but not to receive orders. By the end of the decade Canada started to send and receive them and the rest of the dominions and colonies of the British Empire gradually followed. In 1869, money orders began to be exchanged with foreign countries, the first two being Switzerland and Belgium. In 1883 they were supplemented by the Postal Order. Peace was declared on 30 March 1856. The Army post Offices in Varna, Scutari and Balaklava were closed, while the Base Army Post Office in Constantinople remained opened and became the centre of the British postal service in the Levant until the outbreak of the First World War.

Shortly after the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854 a branch of the British Army Post Office was established in Constantinople as a sorting and forwarding station for the vast numbers of letters passing to and from the various units of the British forces in the Crimea, as well as those of the Turkish contingent. Sub-offices were in operation in the Crimea and Scutari. This was the first office outside the United Kingdom to make use of British postage stamps, which were issued there about November 1854. Mail which originated, or passed through Constantinople, were cancelled with the "Crown in Stars" or the "O\*O" cancels."

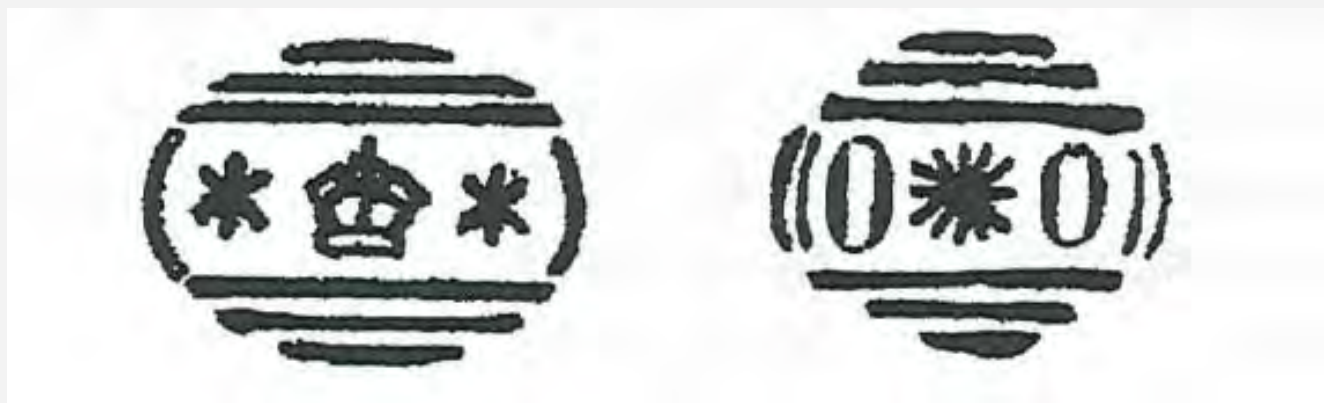


Illustration from "The Levant" Vol1, No.1 2000.

The Journal of the Ottoman & Near East Philatelic Society.

## The Volunteer Movement and formation of Army Post Office Corps (1868–82)

On 12 May 1859 the Government authorised the Lords Lieutenant to raise volunteer corps under the Yeomanry and Volunteer Consolidation Act (1804) in response to belligerent overtures towards expressed by the French against the British. Volunteers were asked to form rifle regiments in defence of the country. Employees from the General Post Office volunteered to join the 21st Middlesex Rifles Volunteers (Civil Service Rifles) and formed a company under the command of Captain **John Lowther du Plat Taylor**. In 1868 du Plat Taylor resigned from the 21st and formed the 49th Middlesex Rifle Volunteers recruited entirely from Post Offices volunteers. Under the Cardwell Reforms the regiment was redesignated 24th Middlesex Rifles Volunteers (Post Office Rifles) in 1880."

### **Colonel John Lowther du Plat Taylor CB VD**

(1829 – 5 March 1904) was the founder of the Army Post Office Corps and the Post Office Rifles.

Du Plat Taylor trained at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, but left in 1844 before he was commissioned. He then joined the Consular Service and was posted to China but was invalided back home after just two years. He joined the General Post Office in 1852 and worked as a Private Secretary to the Secretary of the Post Office, Sir Rowland Hill and then to Postmaster General."

## 1877 War Office – Postal (du Plat Taylor) Committee

The military postal experience of the Crimea and the lessons learnt from the Indian Army encouraged the British Army to seriously review the arrangements for the provision of a postal service to the troops in the field. There were two opinions; firstly, that the Army run its own services as in the Peninsular War. Secondly, that civilians from the Post Office be responsible for the service as in the Crimean and Indian Army example.

The Secretary for War wrote to the Postmaster-General in 1876, with a proposal to form a force of volunteers to run the Army's postal services. The Postmaster-General put the proposal to the commanding officer of the **49th Middlesex Rifle Volunteers, Lieutenant Colonel John Lowther du Plat Taylor**, who was an ex-Private Secretary to the Postmaster-General. A committee was formed, with terms of reference "to consider the formation of a Corps for the performance of Postal Duties in the Field." It assembled at the War Office and the Committee consisted of: · Lieutenant Colonel John Lowther du Plat Taylor, · Major CE Webber RE (a RE telegraphist, who had experience of working with the GPO), · Captain AC Hamilton RE (Secretary), · Major WF Butler RA (Deputy Assistant Quartermaster General), · Mr RS Culey (GPO) and Henry Mellersh (an Assistance Army Postmaster during the Crimean War). The committee submitted its final report to both the War Office and Postmaster General on 28 February 1877. The report contained the following recommendations:

*1. A corps should be organised in peace, made up often in the employment of the Post Office and be formed into a company within 49th Middlesex Rifle Volunteers.*

2. *In war, postal companies should provide post offices in the field.*
3. *An Army Postmaster who would receive his orders from the Chief of Staff or the officer in charge of communications would command the Post Office company.*
4. *Mails should be sorted into Regiments in London or at the Base of the operations.*
5. *Letters from England to Armies in the field should be charged such extra postage as would enable home-ward letters to be forwarded free of charge.*
6. *A money order and register letter service should be provided.*
7. *The Army Service Corps should in all cases provide transport.*

Nothing came of these recommendations and they were shelved until 1882, in spite of du Plat Taylor's efforts to resurrect the idea in 1879. When he brought to the attention of the War Office the poor mail arrangements reported in *The Times* during the second Afghan War (1878–80).

In 1881 a rebellion broke out in Egypt which threatened Britain's passage to India through Suez. In response an expeditionary force under Sir Garnet Wolseley was despatched to quell it. This gave Lieutenant Colonel du Plat Taylor the opportunity to raise the matter of the postal corps again and it was agreed that an Army Post Office Corps (APOC) should be formed.

Queen Victoria issued a Royal Warrant to that effect on 22 July 1882. The recruits were drawn from the GPO employees serving with the 24th Middlesex Rifle Volunteers.



Source: File:24th Middlesex Rifle Volunteers, 1897.jpg - <https://en.wikipedia.org>