

## The future of the BPMA

Adrian Steel

Rossiter Trust lecture, 8 November 2013

It is a pleasure to give the Rossiter lecture this evening on The Future of the BPMA. Rossiter's wish for a legacy of research and publication in his fields of interest have led to a greater knowledge and understanding of a variety of subjects and this is something that BPMA has in common with the Trust he founded. We care for four hundred years of postal, communication and social heritage and it is not right that the collections and stories that lay within have been hidden, or relatively hidden, for so long. The future of the BPMA is, fundamentally, a future that will put that right, do the collections and stories justice, and do so on a sustainable basis for the long term. The future takes work and time to build, but it is now clear and ready for us to grasp, and in this talk this evening I will look at what this future is, what we still need to do to grasp it, and reflect on my first ten years at BPMA drawing on particular items or stories from our collections that you may hear more of in the next ten.

The future of the BPMA is founded upon a new home. London has lacked what you would think of as a proper postal museum since the National Postal Museum closed at St Paul's in 1998. There have of course been significant events even in my own short ten year association with this field, in particular the 2010 international exhibition and festival of stamps, in London, where we have worked with partners such as the Royal Philatelic Collection and the British Library. As a teenager, and long before I thought I would ever end up working at its successor, I visited the National Postal Museum with my Grandfather. Times have changed and the public's expectation of a museum has moved on since I encountered the philatelic displays, letter boxes and postal history in 1989. The new home for BPMA will feature the latest technology, and a family friendly visitor experience, as well as the high quality display and research facilities that are so much needed. However, it will have a simple and clear name: it will be called The Postal Museum.

The Postal Museum will cover two sites across the road from one another. I have spoken previously here at the Royal about the plans we have for Calthorpe House, a 1920s Art Deco period building on Phoenix Place slightly up the hill from our current archive service location at Freeling House. This building will house the main Postal Museum public facilities on the ground floor - café, shop, and public exhibition galleries which will tell the story of the postal service from its early origins to the present day. Among items you might find in here will be:

- our Mail Coach, which has been on loan at the Grampian Transport Museum near Aberdeen for many years
- our VC, awarded to Alfred Knight for bravery serving with the Post Office Rifles in 1917, when he singled handedly captured a machine gun post under heavy fire
- our famed sheet or sheets of Penny Blacks
- some of the artwork for posters or stamps we care for

and moreover the story of the people behind and associated with the postal service. There will be a permanent display, and an area for changing and temporary timely and targeted exhibitions.

Moving upstairs to the first floor, the Postal Museum has a state of the art archive search room with research facilities, a conservation studio, and an education space for visits from school groups and others, allowing us to increase by 500% the number of students we reach. Combined on the first floor and ground floor we will have the purpose built archive store which will house the paper-based material among our holdings. The core of this is the Royal Mail Archive, two and a half miles of shelving, the earliest item dating from 1636. All the philatelic collections are included here too, and we will no longer need any offsite storage. There will be enough room for everything in the one place. The exception to this is of course the museum object collection, or at least the bulk of it - what you might think of as 3D medium sized and large sized objects. Some may know we currently have a warehouse at Debden in Essex, close to the M25, which contains about 1500 square metres of artefacts from vans to letterboxes to Post Office counters. We will use this material for our displays at the Postal Museum, but we cannot display everything in this way and will still need to keep our warehouse which, as now, will be an open store and remain open to the public on certain days each year.

The second floor of the Postal Museum will house accommodation for BPMA staff. Currently we are spread over two sites over a mile apart and this makes working as part of a small charitable organisation quite difficult. This problem will be put right. There will be meeting rooms, available for hire and we hope that philatelic societies or groups will make use of this resource. And there will be a digitisation studio.

I'd like to say a bit more at this point about what the future of BPMA will mean in terms of improved facilities for research and meeting which philatelists and others can use. The search room will be a world class research facility, designed in line with the latest specifications laid down by the National Archives. One of the highest rated services we currently offer is the 1:1 attention from our staff upon arrival as a first time researcher, and this will continue to be offered at the Postal Museum. Don't forget that, in line with the Public Records Act requirements, the search room will be free to use if you are not visiting the display galleries at the Postal Museum. BPMA finds itself in a very privileged position with the archive: it has a long term contract with Royal Mail and the newly separated Post Office Ltd to provide the archive service on this basis for at least 25 years. With a continued programme of cataloguing and access improvements it will be THE place to go for research on many aspects of postal heritage for years to come.

This brings me to my next point, the importance of online access, linked to cataloguing. BPMA has made great strides in this area over the past ten years. Backed by a significant investment from Royal Mail over the first five years, and sustaining this as best it can thereafter, BPMA has catalogued a very high percentage of the material it holds (comparing extremely favourably with other archives, in particular business archives, as well as museums) and published the catalogue records it has created online. When I started there was no data online, and maybe 10,000 to 15,000 records in the database. We now have over 100,000 records available to search online, made up as follows:

- 20,000 museum objects & photographs
- 80,000 archive files
- 10,000+ philatelic items and album pages

Increasingly we are providing images of museum objects and philatelic material to aid the researcher looking at the catalogue via the internet. Since 2006 The R M Phillips collection has been available online in full and we've added increasing amounts of stamp artwork and have now worked our way well into the reign of the present Queen, Elizabeth II, in terms of publishing catalogue records and images of our main philatelic holdings - for

example proofs and essays. Here are some images of some of the most recently made available:

- 1972 Broadcasting anniversaries
- 1973 County Cricket
- 1973 European Communities issue

Stamp artwork scanning was made possible with funding from, among others:

- Charles Hayward Foundation
- Garfield Weston
- Leche Trust
- Aurelius Trust
- Idlewild Trust

We also have a Philatelic Glossary of terms intended to help the more general researcher understand some of the specialist descriptions in the catalogue, breaking down barriers which might otherwise prevent people engaging with postal heritage. A lot of postal history is also catalogued, much as a result of work by volunteer Mike Bament, and this includes:

- Penny Post & 5<sup>th</sup> clause markings
- Mileage Marks
- Missent Marks
- Ship & Packet Letters
- Paid at
- Uniform 4d and 1d marks of 1839-40

All the feedback we have had from the philatelic community is that you want to see us finish the job of publishing a full catalogue and images, and in particular it is this last thing people want more than anything - high quality images of our philatelic material online to browse, and potentially download. We face substantial problems in doing this at present. We do not have any equipment big enough to scan a full size Registration Sheet, for example, and no space to install such equipment should we be able to obtain it. The value of the material and insurance issues as well as sometimes copyright can also cause us difficulties. And remember, we are not the legal owners of the material in our Collections - it could be Royal Mail, or the Crown, and the legal responsibility to the National Archives of public record material usually applies overriding most questions of ownership in any case. However, the future of the BPMA sees us addressing all these issues through the work of the digitisation studio and of the staff we will have working with us. We will have equipment big enough to scan or photograph registration sheets, and the space to do it; we'll be able to get much more done besides, for example we will be able to tackle the remainder of the stamp artwork even if it is large format, a lot of the post-1985 stamp artwork, for example, is very big. We will be able to offer much more in the way of high quality digitisation for the archive proper as well. A little more about the

funding of this work later on. But it will be a great improvement and something I know you have wanted for some time.

As I have mentioned, the meeting room facilities are also intended to be of use to philatelic groups and societies. We hope that many may choose to take advantage of these, and we will be able to offer space for anything from a postcard fair to a committee meeting of a society, with rooms available at weekends as well as during the week. The aim is that in the future the BPMA will become somewhere which, along with the Royal Philatelic Society, provides a convenient meeting place for those interested in our subject in London. Might we even see a future Rossiter Trust lecture held there?

I have not yet so far mentioned what is across the road from Calthorpe House, and did not do so when I came to the Royal Philatelic Society to introduce the BPMA's new centre earlier in the year. This is Mail Rail, something we've now applied for planning permission for, and something which we hope will transform the future of the BPMA. Mail Rail was the Post Office's own underground railway, which ran from 1927 until 2003. What we are talking about is not just access to the subterranean depot where the old Post Office Underground Railway was supported from until 2003, though this will come first. We are talking about a facility with family friendly access and interpretation and a ride on the Mail Rail lines which used to carry the post below London, in a loop around Mount Pleasant lasting 10-15 minutes, accompanied by an audio visual history of the movement of mail. This will be an exciting industrial conservation project in itself: Mail Rail used to run from Paddington in the west to Whitechapel in the East, 23 miles of track, 6.5 miles of tunnels, carrying 4 million letters a day at its peak, but for ten years has been mothballed and the buildings above it are rapidly being sold off. Preserving access to the tunnels and keeping at least part of the system in visitable condition will be a great achievement. However it will have two significant further impacts on the future of BPMA: first, it will increase visitor numbers and improve the sustainability of the BPMA long term, supporting all the other work the charity exists to do and helping protect us in the future when we might otherwise have to go cap in hand to private owners of Royal Mail should anything go wrong. Second, it will transform the kind of audience we can attract to the story of Britain's postal heritage, emphasising the family audience and providing a great half day on the tourist circuit for all visitors to London from the UK and around the world. The aim here is that by undertaking this endeavour the BPMA broadens the base of support of the public at large for the significance of Britain's postal heritage, and in so doing helps support long term those communities of research and interest that have made it their own.

At Mail Rail young families will have the chance to visit a Family Zone built in the current workshop space, especially designed for those 8 years old and under. No doubt aided by the familiar Postman Pat or Jolly Postman for the younger visitor, the idea is to both educate and entertain in a playful environment as so successfully done at other museums in London such as the National Army Museum and the Museum of London at Docklands. From there visitors then join others and proceed to await their ride on the Mail Rail. A fully narrated tour takes people literally and historically on a journey under London covering the transport of mail through the system, the histories of those who worked to sort and move mail, and returns visitors to the surface via the two platforms at Mount Pleasant to an exhibition in the Car Depot on the subject of Moving the Mail, made more fun by large objects (or as large as we can manage to fit in - for example pneumatic mail cars from the 1860s, or Mail Rail rolling stock from the 1980s) and interactive displays. The whole takes place in an environment sympathetically preserved and recognisable as a uniquely British creation. Current plans see us open access to the depot in 2016 when Calthorpe House opens, phasing in the ride over the next three years (or sooner if we are successful at fundraising).

I have now described the physical future of the BPMA for the next 5-7-10 years and for longer (although I have more to say about the longer right at the end of this talk). You may be asking, is there an 'if' or a 'but', possibly you are asking this based on the long experience of the wait since 1998 for the replacement of the National Postal Museum. Well, the Postal Museum is coming, it is coming to Calthorpe House, and it is coming to Mail Rail; and the success of our fundraising campaign will now determine how much of Mail Rail we can deliver and when. Fundraising is something that the BPMA has not found easy. In the first five years we did not have a dedicated fundraiser on our staff. We have always had success with some funders like the Heritage Lottery Fund and the government agency MLA (now part of Arts Council England):

- The HLF supported the digitisation of the Phillips Collection
- The HLF supported 'Last Post' - a First World War exhibition held in 2008
- MLA supported 'Post office in Pictures in 2010-11

However, it takes time to develop fundraising capacity and relationships with potential donors, and since we have only been able to fundraise for Calthorpe House since 2011 time is not something we have had. We have therefore had to work really hard, from a difficult start, for a capital project of a size which is not an easy one to aim at as a first attempt, and with the issue of Royal Mail and its privatisation and separation from Post Office Ltd to contend with at the same time. Given that this could lead to uncertainty among funders, we have had to focus very hard on ensuring we have a legally nailed down sustainable future as an organisation and a project to help support approaches to funders when asking them to back our future plans. We have even gone as far as getting Royal Mail and Post Office to pay their capital contributions (over £8m in capital grants, low cost loans and in kind support including the donation of Calthorpe House on a 999-year lease - enough to pay for their statutory obligations in all this) into a bank account in our name before we start! This has provided a bedrock to inspire confidence and made potential donors more likely to listen. However it has been a fundamentally difficult fundraising environment and time has been against us.

With this background in mind, we looked at the possibility of fundraising via selling surplus duplicate stamps that were in our possession but not part of our collections. After a confidential competitive tender process, Sotheby's were chosen to auction material, but as many here this evening will know, unfortunately for The Postal Museum plans the sale did not go well on the day. Since then, however, efforts to turn the surplus material into the money that is needed to make The Postal Museum a reality have continued, and will continue. The auction method of sale was the product of good charitable governance, ensuring that when an asset of the charity was disposed of the best price could be shown to have been obtained on the open market. This method largely having failed other options are being considered, although it is not to say that if someone came to BPMA with a proposal for a further auction that being somehow structured differently it would not be taken up by the BPMA's board of trustees: they would after all have a duty to act in the best interests of the organisation, without bias, and the organisation undoubtedly requires the funding gap in the project to be closed.

It should be stressed that in raising funds from the sale of duplicate material BPMA's aim is solely that; it continues to need the funds from sales to support the new Postal Museum. It is not the wish of the BPMA institutionally, nor of any of its staff, to become *de facto* stamp dealers and as with the Sotheby's sale matters of value are left to the experts. All possible methods of fundraising have been pursued over the last few years, in different ways and sometimes with different emphasis, and it is necessary that this continues.

To give a summary, BPMA needs:

- £22m for Postal Museum in full, Calthorpe House and Mail Rail
- £10.8m is secured, including £8.6m approx from Royal Mail and Post Office Ltd
- Of the £11.2m gap:
  - £4.5m from HLF providing we raise match funding
  - £4m match funding needed by end of March 2014
  - £200k approx of this has been raised already
- The remainder would follow after March 2014 and go towards implementing the ride element of Mail Rail.

The £4m target is thus uppermost in my mind. This will, we hope, come from a combination of further sales, corporate donors, charitable trusts and foundations, and individual donations, both from the UK and overseas. In particular I plan to go to America in February to raise awareness, and, I hope, financial support there, following the successful campaign run by the Smithsonian National Postal Museum and the opening of its new Gross Gallery, which I hope to see. BPMA's trustees and staff are fully committed to the fundraising effort. Many of us have now been working at this for several years. Royal Mail and Post Office Ltd are supporting the campaign by providing opportunities where we can approach their major suppliers to encourage them to donate, and also to give us the chance to offer suppliers and others in the postal industry to a package to support BPMA events and exhibitions into the future.

Charitable trusts and foundations which have already pledged support to the Postal Museum include the British Philatelic Trust and the Stuart Rossiter Trust, both showing that the philatelic community at large is willing to contribute towards the delivery of something from which you know you will derive great benefit. In terms of individuals we have received a substantial and welcome legacy from Rosemary Green, someone I understand was well known in philatelic circles and someone to whom grateful recognition will be shown in the new Postal Museum. We have also sought smaller donations from the philatelic community and further afield and are grateful to those who have contributed. A particular appeal was launched in 2012 to the philatelic community to provide funds to equip the Digitisation Studio which will so completely transform what we offer to researchers especially online. It has not as yet though been a case of having a major public appeal; the reason for this is primarily that they always come last in big capital campaigns, when the biggest donors, trusts, corporates and so on have pledged sufficiently to guarantee the form that the final product will take. There is a target for us to secure individual small donations in the next few months as well as donations from the other sources I have mentioned, and you can find Gift Aid paperwork and the like on our website under 'support us'. In time, and at the right time, there will be a lot more publicity to solicit individual donations in what fundraisers call the 'public campaign'. However, you can help us now, by advocating support of the project, by making a donation yourself and encouraging others to do so, and by introducing us to people who could provide significant contributions to the museum, the archive, the education service, the digitisation studio, conservation, Mail Rail, or whatever it might be.

One question that has come up in our fundraising campaign is, if money is given to the BPMA, what guarantee is there that the Postal Museum will be delivered as described, and will it actually be sustainable as an organisation, as a business, as a museum, especially after the privatisation of Royal Mail. To answer the second part first, unequivocally, yes.

We have signed revenue funding agreements with Royal Mail and with Post Office Ltd which cover our core costs until 2040, so, beyond privatisation and whatever else that might bring. To help us ensure no legal procedures can be used to get out of this, a government amendment was made to the Postal Services Act 2011 to oblige a private Royal Mail, in whatever form it existed, to report to Parliament each year on how it was caring for Britain's postal heritage. There can be no hiding away of the obligation both legal and moral to support us, and nor should there be. I hope that a lasting legacy of the Postal Museum project will be the continued strong interest in Britain's postal heritage from the great and the good, the decision-makers and others who have rallied to the cause since 2011. In 1992 the current Freeling House building was opened by the then Lord Chancellor; it was not until 2011 that we had our next Cabinet Minister come to see BPMA and we have now been visited by at least four Ministers with, I hope, more to come.

The future of the BPMA will depend upon continuing good and mutually beneficial relations with supporters and donors. Like other charities we ensure our donors receive recognition, and this is usually shaped to donor needs. For trusts and foundations, due acknowledgement is usually required, as well as reporting to ensure that the outcomes supported (for example, school visits, or provision of an interactive) are delivered. For corporate donors, there can be a requirement for sponsorship, free entry for staff to special exhibitions, or (for example) an ability to hold events in the Postal Museum and in particular in Mail Rail. We are already turning people away from that attraction - we have nearly had London Fashion Week in it twice! For individuals, the important thing is often an ongoing relationship, but there can also be the need for individual recognition or for a particular thing (for example, an annual lecture) to bear the name of the donor. All of these things are the sorts of things we consider.

There is a challenge here on Fundraising, but you can help, and we can do this; the future of the BPMA looks very hopeful, and the best days of the organisation undoubtedly lie ahead.

In the final part of this lecture I want to talk about a small number of my own selections from our collections. The reason to do so is this: BPMA's collections are not static, they grow, and our knowledge about them grows. The new Postal Museum secures that continued development.

I started working for what was then Heritage Royal Mail on 1 December 2003 and served four months as a Royal Mail employee before the charity officially took over. In the time since then we have worked really hard to improve access to our collections, founded on a significant investment in cataloguing our holdings, archival, philatelic, objects, the lot, and in making the catalogue available online. In the ten year period this work has seen us uncover and make more of some significant stories that are perhaps outside of what people might think you would find in a Postal Museum. I include among these the records of the investigation of the Great Train Robbery in 1963 and the first edition of *Ulysses* by James Joyce which was intercepted as an obscene publication in 1922. I often cite these items to visitors as demonstrating the breadth we have on offer, and what can be seen once the Postal Museum is open. They are both stories where I have had a personal role in making the material available. So, what do I think might be the *Ulysses* and the Great Train Robbery of the next ten years?

The first item is the Post Office diary of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. This first came to my attention in 2007 when during the stocktaking period it was processed and reboxed to await cataloguing - it had first come to the old Post Office Archives in the 1990s, in instalments. Daniel Carty was the Postal Director of Northern Ireland from 1980 and it was through him the diary made its way to the archive. The first public appearance material from the diary was in 'Masters of the Post' by Duncan Campbell Smith, the official history

of the Royal Mail, published in late 2011. Campbell Smith had been given access to the diary (which had previously been closed under the Public Records Act) and some of the richness of the story told in such detail by Carty and others, almost day by day, hour by hour at times, was revealed. Carty chronicles each incident as it affected what was a large cross-community employer in Northern Ireland, an institution seen as 'Royal', relied upon to deliver social security (and sometimes contraband) and threatening letters. There are stories of life and death of Post Office staff, and (for example) the story of how during rioting in Derry the Post Office staff were allowed to drive all the mail out of the sorting office for later delivery before rioters set fire to the building. There are many accounts of robbery of Post Office cash vans, for money was vital to the protagonists in the armed conflict. There are also personal stories, of threats to staff (usually prominent staff, such as staff from one religious denomination taking a post in an area strong in the other) and occasionally the stories of threats being carried out. As the period of the Troubles is more greatly reflected upon in the coming years, I am sure that the unique historical record contained in this diary will provide material of significance to historians, of interest and concern to the wider public, and I hope that - subject to exigencies that may need some of the content to be protected in an extended manner to ensure that no harm is done to anyone as a result - BPMA may some day be able to digitise and publish the document.

My next field of interest stems from the post-second-world war 'Reds in the Bed' affair. In Britain it was a pale shadow of the McCarthyite witch-hunts of Communists, sympathisers, fellow travellers, and supposed left wingers, that took place in the United States. Nonetheless it did happen. As a government department the Post Office was not immune. I first started researching this area based on knowledge I had gained in the Company Archive at Reuters news agency where I worked previously. A number of records show how the Post Office tried to seek out and deal with 'Reds in the Bed' in the 1940s, and I discovered that similar crusades took place against other groups, notably 'Irish' (republican) sympathisers. Records show the institution behaving in a way that would not happen now, but was typical of the time.

We have one example of a letter to the then Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, from 1926, the year of the General Strike. This letter, from someone we can only presume to be a very respectable old lady, describes how postmen were allegedly having "numerous and secret meet ups and stirring up evil and revolutionary feelings"... and forms part of a substantial file titled 'Disloyalty' covering the period 1922-26. The file is bursting with letters and articles alleging that Post Office staff were engaged in treason, disloyalty or revolutionary schemes. By the 1930s the files have become more reflective of an organised response with MI5 and the police providing information to the Post Office Investigation Branch. A 1938 memo in one file records, "Employees of the government who are Communists should not be employed in positions where there is any likelihood of their being a source of danger to the community, but should be removed to some other suitable post."

In 1948 there was a general purge of the Civil Service to remove Communists, The files in the archive reflect this - and vetting took place of Post Office staff, one of the sets of the results being reported here. By October 1948 1600 Post Office staff had been vetted by MI5 but only 4 clear cases of Communism and 6 further suspects had been uncovered.

In both the cases I have selected here, Northern Ireland and 'Reds in the Bed', we see the Post Office's role in wider Society being reflected in the records. As yet relatively unresearched in the archive are files which provide new insight into the topics in question. As with the Great Train Robbery and Ulysses, the material in BPMA's collections tells of more than a typical Postal Museum. And this is what I intend that we should continue to be.

## Conclusion

With the new Postal Museum in place the future of the BPMA is an exciting one. The audience for British postal heritage will be diversified and will grow as a result of what we plan and how we plan to do it. The BPMA will be secure in revenue terms and have a great platform for growth, based in London - a centre for philately - but beginning to reach further around the world now it has this base behind it. The Postal Museum offers, I hope, a secure and first class future for the BPMA. I hope you enjoy being part of it.

--