

## A History of Mail Rail

Presentation by Chris Taft, Head of Collections at The Postal Museum



In September 2017 a part of the Post Office underground Railway, Mail Rail, opened up to allow public to take a ride through some of the tunnels for the first time. This new visitor experience was part of the offer of the Postal Museum, which opened in July 2017 on the same site.

Chris Taft's presentation explores the history of this railway and looks at what visitors to the new museum can expect. The talk begins by introducing The Postal Museum and Mail Rail and then introduces what the Post Office Railway was. The talk explores the early history, and looks at schemes such as the pneumatic railway that were experimented with in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Using images from the Royal Mail Archive the story is then told of the problems the post office was encountering in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century in being able to get mail quickly enough from the central London district offices to the railway stations in order to be moved across the country on the overnight Travelling Post Offices (TPO). A Commission was launched in 1909 and the final report of this, in 1911 reviewed a number of options but eventually recommended the design and construction of an underground, driverless electric railway.

As a government department the post office needed an Act of Parliament to get this underway and this was passed in 1913 and design and construction began immediately.

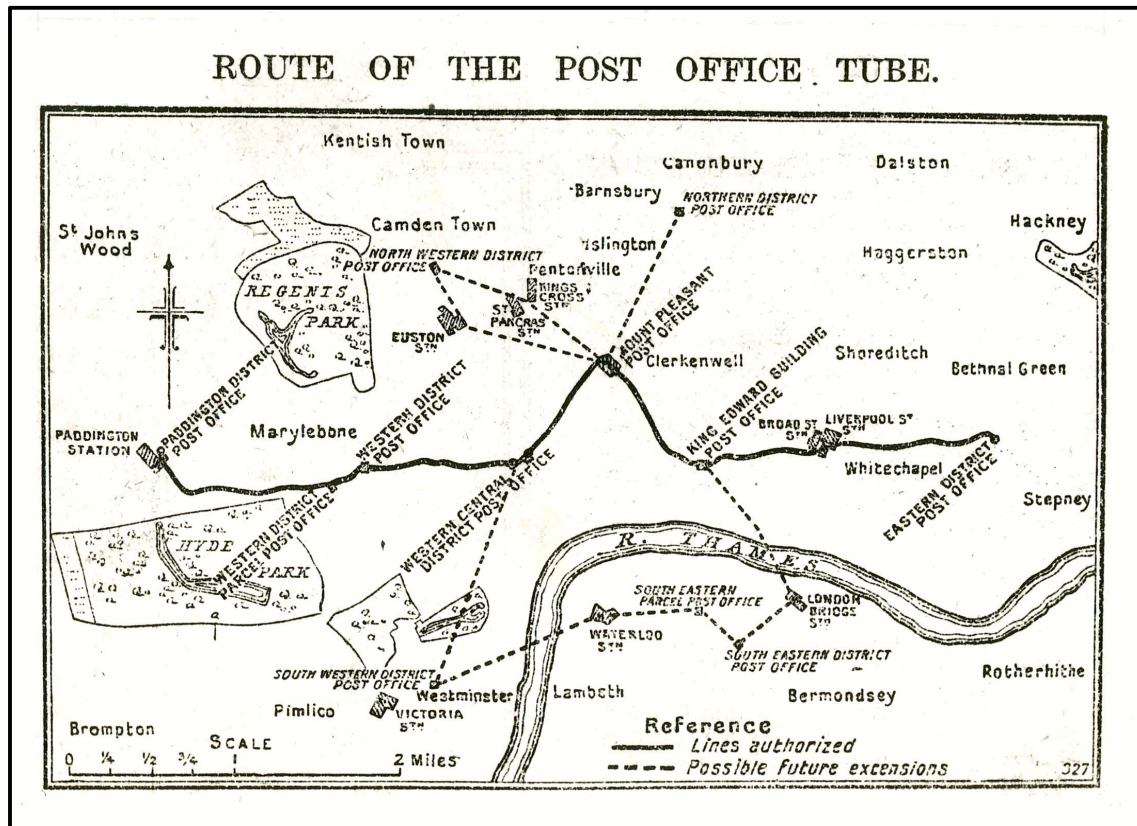
The presentation then pauses the narrative to explore and understand what the railway was. The route and stations that the railway ran through are each explained and original drawings of each station are shown to show how the system works and the way it operated. The operational processes are then explained in detail using original archival photographs. The photographs help

explain the way the mail was moved from sorting offices, into the railway and then moved into other sorting offices or railway stations.





The technical aspects of the railway are discussed including how the system worked electrically, how it was powered and details of the track. The power system is explained in detail including the fact that it was powered on a 440 volt DC system and how the power was dropped to a section of track to bring trains to a stop, the brakes being automatically applied as power was cut. Once powered up again, the brakes would be released and trains would start moving automatically.



After an understanding of the operational and technical aspects the talk moves back to the narrative on the development of the railway. Having explored the initial ideas and passing of the Act of Parliament the presentation looks at the start of construction and outlines the plan to have the railway complete within 15 months. The First World War however delayed significantly the construction and during the presentation alternative uses for the tunnels are looked at. The suspension of construction in 1917 meant that no work was done on the railway again until long after the war, in 1924. For this reason, it was 1927 before the Post Office (London) Railway was open and operational.

After the opening the railway then operated much as planned with only slight changes. Two stations were closed and a new one opened in 1965 as postal operations in London changed but otherwise the railway carried on in its function. During the Second World War the role of the railway was even more important as it made for a safer route to move the mail. The railway did suffer damage but was quickly got up and running again.

Having explored the ideas, design, construction and operation the presentation then looks in more detail at some of the other technical aspects. A history of each type of rolling stock used on the railway is given using original drawings and photographs from the Royal Mail Archive. The engineering story is also told and the purpose of the Car Depot, the maintenance workshop of the railway, is looked at showing images of the Depot as it was when the railway opened. Some of the

people of the railway are talked about including the engineering team that kept the system operating and the postal workers who worked moving the mail on the network.

The presentation is drawn to a conclusion by discussing the reasons why Mail Rail was closed down in 2003. Postal operations in London were changing, the number of Central London sorting offices was declining as functions were combined into a smaller number of buildings. In 1995 a project called Rail Net meant that the Central London railway terminals were no longer being used by Royal Mail for its TPOs and so by 2003 Mail Rail was only linking together three sorting offices and no railway stations, having previously linked six offices and two stations. This meant it no longer became viable and the decision was taken to moth-ball the railway.

That was not to be the end of the story for Mail Rail however and The Postal Museum have given the network a new lease of life. Chris Taft's presentation concludes with an outline of the project to create this new Museum and some images of the new trains built to carry visitors.

Mail Rail holds a deep fascination for many people and since the opening of The Postal Museum in 2017 this interest has been shown by the take up in tickets. This talk offers an overview and history of the railway, shows how it worked and why it was needed and draws almost exclusively from the records held by the Museum within the Royal Mail Archive.

**Chris Taft**

**Head of Collections**