

THE REFORM OF THE POST OFFICE IN THE VICTORIAN ERA AND ITS IMPACT ON ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ACTIVITY

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Fellow historians. The story I am about to unfold was no less than a revolution in communication technology and promoted by the City of London. People for the first time could write to each other at a reasonable cost. Within a few years the idea had spread to most nations on earth.

Speaking in the House of Lords during a debate on the 1839 Postage Bill - the enabling legislation which led to the introduction of uniform penny postage, adhesive stamps and ultimately the complete reshaping of the British Postal Service - the Duke of Wellington said "it is a curious fact that from the institution of the Post-office to the present time, no important improvement has had its origin in that establishment". The Duke was looking back over some three hundred years, and specifically at William Dockwra's town-posts, Ralph Allen's cross-posts, and John Palmer's network of high-speed mail coaches. In each case the reformer was subject to strong (and sometimes absurd) opposition from the Post-office.

Hill and the Reform Movement

A group of Members of Parliament, businessmen and others, led by Robert Wallace, M.P. for Greenock, were anxious to introduce reforms, but it was a meeting between Wallace and a middle-aged ex-school-teacher and inventor - Rowland Hill - which ignited the fuse. Hill trawled through the ten Reports produced by a Parliamentary Committee on the Post-office, which sat in 1837, Post-office Accounts and other sources, and built up a solid statistical case for a set of practicable reforms. His main proposals were:

That postage be charged by weight rather than number of sheets

That postage should be uniform across the country - irrespective of distance

That postage should be reduced to 1d per half-ounce

That prepayment of postage should be strongly encouraged, in part by the use of "a bit of paper just large enough to bear the stamp, and covered at the back with a glutinous wash..."

Faster delivery of letters and better facilities for posting letters

Gross simplification of the operations of the Post-office.

Hill set out his arguments in a pamphlet called *Post Office Reform; Its Importance and Practicability*, the first edition of which was circulated privately to supporters for their comments. The second edition was published in February 1837 and was widely distributed throughout the country, precipitating enormous public interest expressed in the press, public meetings and an avalanche of petitions to Parliament. In 1838 the Government set up another Committee, chaired by Wallace, to investigate Post-office reform; they reported in favour of Hill's proposals despite desperate attempts by the then Postmaster-General and Colonel Maberly, the Secretary to the Post-office, to prove that their Department was the acme of perfection and that Hill's proposals would lead to financial disaster. A close associate of Maberly's, Edmund Yates, felt that he "was a clear-headed man of business, old-fashioned, inclined to let matters run in their ordinary groove, detesting all projects of reform, and having an abiding horror of Rowland Hill... He liked his status at the Post Office, he liked the salary which it gave him, he was fond of money, and he went through the work; but he was an Irish landlord... and his mind was running on whether Tim Mooney would pay his rent, or Mick Reilly the bailiff would get a good price for the heifer. He was married to a beautiful and brilliant lady, who wrote fashionable novels and went into society, so he had much beside the Post Office to occupy his thoughts".

After another year of struggle the Government eventually capitulated and brought forward the Postage Bill in the parliamentary session of 1838-39. In the City Charles Pearson, the City Solicitor, was involved in the lobbying of Parliament during the parliamentary passage of the Bill. He appears to have acted on behalf of the Committee of Paper-Makers and Stationers in their opposition to the introduction of postage stamps. Some of his working papers relating to his lobbying activities survive and these can be found in the Corporation Records Office. However, on the 16th of May 1839, the Court of Common Council agreed to a request of "sundry Merchants, Bankers and Traders" to use the Egyptian Hall of the Mansion House for a public meeting concerning the proposed "reduction of postage to a uniform rate of one penny". The meeting was duly summoned for 10 July with the Lord Mayor in the Chair and with the object of petitioning Parliament "for the Adoption of Mr. Rowland Hill's Plan...". The following day Common Council resolved to petition the House of Commons in favour of the plan "praying that no consideration of an assumed temporary deficiency in the revenue will induce Parliament to delay the introduction of so important a national measure". The Postage Bill eventually passed into law on 17 August 1839.

It was arranged that Hill should take a temporary post as an adviser to Francis Baring, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to supervise the implementation of his plan. Now, Hill was less than adept in the area of inter-personal relations, always being concerned to justify his own actions and confront those he perceived as causing 'mischief' and putting obstructions in his way. He therefore kept a *Journal*, which, while it may well have begun life as a simple and innocent record of his work at the Treasury, rapidly evolved into an armoury of evidence against his enemies, and Maberly in particular. The first section of the *Journal*, running from his appointment in September 1839 until the end of March 1843 - about six months after he had left the Treasury - is the most interesting from a philatelic viewpoint since it covers the period of preparation for the introduction of postage stamps, the Mulready disaster and the change of colour from the penny black to the penny red. Unfortunately, in September 1841 the reform-minded Whig Government which had backed Hill's work was superseded by an antagonistic Tory administration. Hill's initial two-year appointment was extended for one year, but little progress was made under Henry Goulburn, the new Chancellor, and Hill was made redundant in September 1842.

This precipitated a great public outcry (and a national collection which benefited Hill to the tune of £13,360. 19s. 5d.) and yet another Parliamentary Committee set up as a result of a Petition to Parliament sent in by Hill and supported by his friends. Hill's evidence to the Committee and various other documents were incorporated in his second important pamphlet: *The State and Prospects of Penny Postage...*, published in 1844. Hill, meanwhile, had become a director, and subsequently Chairman, of the London and Brighton Railway Company, remaining in this position until the end of 1846 when a new Whig Government appointed him to the specially created post of Secretary to the new Postmaster General, Lord Clanricarde.

Hill foresaw trouble, since the respective roles of Maberly, the reactionary Secretary to the Post-office in charge of most day-to-day activities, and himself, charged with making significant changes, were never clearly defined. His fears were justified since Maberly had started creating obstructions for his new 'partner' even before Hill took up his post. Hill therefore restarted his *Journal*, and the second section, running from the end of November 1846 until the middle of 1855, is to a large extent a record of an on-going battle with Maberly and a succession of plots to get him retired, sacked or transferred. From the postal history viewpoint we learn about the impact of the rapidly consolidating network of railway lines and many developments in Post-office services on the one hand, and an extended furore over 'Sunday Working' - the Lord's Day Society managed to whip up a great head of steam in a campaign against Sunday deliveries and, indeed, any Sunday Post-office activity whatever - on the other.

The continuous struggle against obstructions and mischief took a serious toll on Hill's health, and this section of the *Journal* is peppered with entries along the lines of "Ill, worked at home" and short holidays taken for rest and recuperation.

Parliament and the public, egged on by partisan newspapers, took an on-going interest in Post-office affairs. A Committee of Investigation in 1854 under Lord Elcho recommended a complete re-organisation of the salaries, arrangements for promotion and job definitions in the Post-office, including, crucially, the merger of the two Secretaryships. Eventually Maberly was moved to the Board of Audit and Hill took over full executive responsibility in April. He no longer needed day-to-day records to provide evidence against Maberly or to justify his own actions, and the *Journal* was accordingly of less importance.

A third and final section commences at the beginning of 1861, soon after yet another change of Government brought Lord Stanley of Alderley into the office of Postmaster General: "...it is generally understood in the office that the P.M.G. is opposed to my plans and views". Lord Stanley interfered in Hill's plans and began to undermine his authority and to undo some of the changes made as a result of the 1854 Committee. Once again Hill's health crumbled under the stress, and he took increasing amounts of time off until his family, friends and medical advisers eventually persuaded him to retire. He left the Post-office on the 4th of March 1864, to great paeans of praise in Parliament and the press, and a generous gratuity and pension. He maintained an interest in Post-office affairs, and the *Journal* eventually peters out in 1869.

Hill died in 1879, having spent a significant portion of his retirement working with George Birkbeck Hill on *The Life of Sir Rowland Hill and the History of Penny Postage* published in 1880.

