

# Shirley Post Office in the 1950's

## by Derek Barnham

I joined the G.P.O. as a regular member of staff in January 1950. The Shirley Postmen's Sorting and Deliver Office was at that time situated in a side room of the Baptist Church, the same room has now been remodelled and is used for different purposes. I understood from my older and long serving colleagues that the Post Office had moved in there in 1929 as a temporary building until the new main post office was built in around about 1953.

When the new building was completed, it was considered to be the most modern and up to date Post Office in this part of our area, the flagship of the service, but until that day we had to work in the rather Dickensian conditions of our temporary office.

The Postal Staff in those days consisted of long service postmen who had been too old to be called up for the Armed Forces, some men who had been in the Forces and returned to their former jobs in the G.P.O., and also quite a few post women who had either volunteered or had been recruited into the Service to take the places of the men who had been in the Forces during the War. I might add they had done a splendid job keeping the Postal deliveries going throughout the war years.



Before World War II, I believe one could only be a postman if you were an ex-serviceman from World War I, or coming from a Post Office family. A large majority of people started their Service as boy messengers and in the years that followed working their way up. I myself was not of any of those groups, I think I was the first person in the Shirley office to join through the fact I had been made redundant from my former job and had been a Christmas casual in that office. Yes, even in those days redundancy occasionally reared its ugly head, not altogether the modern phenomenon one might think it was, although nothing like the scale, alas, it is today. In later years many people were to come into the Post Office through redundancy, some from managerial ranks.

In the days when I joined the Post Office it was a Crown Service, to a certain degree under the auspices of the Treasury, which as we know today is not renowned for its generosity. We were Civil Servants, but before you came established you had a long way to go. When you joined you were temporary, and only after the Authorities had checked you and your family background going back many years, also checking out on every job you had been employed in, if you passed your vetting, the next step was to sit the Civil Service exams in Birmingham Head Office, which took about three hours. If you were successful after a considerable time you became established. The actual date of your Establishment was an important time factor in later years as to where it placed you on the seniority list.

To give an example, there would be a revision of walks every five years or so (I must explain all delivery rounds in the Post Office irrespective of how they were performed, by walking, cycling or by van, are called walks). Not all walks are the same, as there are a lot of factors involved, some are better than others. Most of them are comprised of around five hundred households, some more and some less, so where you were placed on the seniority list determined how much choice you had in picking a walk.

I must keep returning to the early post-war days as it now part of modern history.

I have hinted about the conditions as they were then, let me enlarge a bit more, the temporary office was heated by one those old fashioned gas radiators, not very effective at the best of times, made even less by being turned down in the name of economy, the lighting left very much to be desired, and space to work in was very limited. Our franking machine for cancelling the stamps of the letters ready for despatch was rather like an overgrown mangle, the old fashioned kind with a big wheel which you had to turn by hand, an old version of the modern pumping iron. Our sole motor transport for delivery was a pre-war Morris Minor van, the box type on wheels that was used for the country walks. Later on we were allotted another van of the same type, so then our motor fleet was two, a bit different to today's fleet of the G.P.O.

The Stratford Road was delivered on foot, and all the rest of the walks by cycle. When you joined you were given three days tuition on the walk and after that you were on your own. You had to use the cycle that was allotted to that particular walk, so if you were five feet nothing or over six feet it poised rather a problem. There was nothing lightweight about P.O. cycles, they were built like tanks, and you were propelling quite a considerable weight even before it was loaded, but the crunch came when you were loaded ready to go on a delivery. In those days parcels went out on both letter delivery as well as the parcel delivery mid morning. So imagine the scene after sorting all your letters and parcels, you then loaded the carrier on the front of the bike with all your parcels, with so many sometimes you could just about see over the top of them, and with all your letters in your mail bag slung around your neck, not quite like the 'Pony Express' who had their fleet ponies, you had a clapped out old bike.

So thus prepared you went out on delivery at about seven o'clock in the morning. You had already done two hours work as we started at five o'clock, quite nice in the summer but pretty grim in the winter. Facing the elements with a heavy bike plus the weight of its load was no easy task, especially if conditions underfoot were bad or if there was a strong blowing wind. Time was of paramount importance in the Post Office as I will try and illustrate. The walk was timed from the start to the finish and you had to be in the right place at the right time as per the times laid down, and to ensure you were, you were quite often patrolled either by the local office or by the Birmingham Head Office. Also you might have one or even two pillar boxes on the walk, which had to be emptied at precisely the times shown on the time plates, some members of the public who lived by the boxes considered it their self imposed task to see that you did. Although your load of parcels and letters were getting less the further you went, you had the additional problem of the letters for despatch from the pillar boxes alongside the delivery letters still in your bag. After you had completed your delivery, it was not easy to make the deadline as there were so many factors involved.

In those days the postman or post woman was the main link between families with the written word, before the advent of the widespread use of telephones, faxes and all the modern technology. The type of mail was very different in those days, I won't put it in Post Office jargon, but simply small letters were ones which were eagerly looked forward to, as they were from family and friends, and those letters formed the great majority of the mail, the long letters starting with 'Dear Sir or else' were in a minority. Let's look at the facts, telephones were mainly confined to business people and perhaps a few representatives, but even some of those had to wait until we delivered the morning mail to see where they had to go that day. If the ordinary householder had a phone that was really something, so there were few phone bills, there were not so many gas or electricity bills as many people paid as they went along by putting the 'old' penny or shilling in the slot meters. In the main,

houses were rented, it was only in the later years that people started to buy their houses, so there was not so much correspondence and advertising literature that passes through the Post Office to the multitude of car owners today. Televisions were in a minority, people had modest holidays mainly in this country and as for bank balances, few people had enough money to warrant bank accounts. In short all the various aspects of life we take for granted these days were still very much in their infancy.

The lack of that type of correspondence was more than made up by the private letters, as again I refer to the private letters, for in those days the great majority of the population were letter writers of varying ability, and how welcome a nice letter from a member of the family or friend is still true today, be it, alas, becoming a much rarer practice. In those days all football coupons went through the Post Office, there were no collectors as there are today. The Postal staff were not allowed to do the pools. The thousands of coupons we had to deal with each week presented a big problem, as they took up such a lot of our small available space.

In writing this I must refer to the number one problem which has always beset postal staff, I mean of course dogs. Although, alas, these days they face more vicious attacks from the lawless section of the community.

I must stress that I am not a dog hater, quite the reverse, up to a few years ago I have always had a dog and also worked with dogs, but I have no illusions about them. Yes, that canine member of the family that is sleeping peacefully on your hearth as if butter would not melt in its mouth can turn into a ferocious monster at the sight of a postman or postwoman's uniform, and sometimes there are some cases of injury to the staff, believe me in many years of service I have had my full share of encounters with dogs. On the other side of the coin some dogs used to adopt me and considered it was their duty to accompany me on my delivery, which made for good company, admittedly the conversation was a bit one sided. I also had one dog who would wait at his garden gate to take the letters to his owner, and if there were no letters that day the owner kept an empty envelope to take in, so he would be satisfied he had done his duty. On another occasion a little dog at another house had the effrontery to bark and kick up a fuss when I went to his door, only to be told by its owner to shut up, as they had had me longer than the dog.

One of our first encounters with modern advertising in the old office was when some of the well known firms sent out soap packets to everyone, such as OMO, DAZ, PERSIL and others, unlike the well known advert for making one's hands soft and gentle, we suffered quite bad side effects with our skin, the result of handling in bulk, and again they took up such a lot of space. It was rather like trying to get a pint into a half pint pot.

Wages, oh dear, I am afraid were rather dismal to say the least, and although severely frowned upon by the Post Office, postmen had to do part-time work in order to keep one's head above water, and to make matters worse we were classed as rural postmen getting 10 shillings (50p) a week less than the Birmingham postmen and we never came in line with them until the population of Solihull reached a certain figure.

The uniforms in those days were navy blue with a red stripe, made of very coarse material which was not very hard wearing, and when it got wet the dye used to get all over one's undergarments, and it took a lot of washing on my wife's part to get them white again. Also with the amount of walking and cycling we did, our shoes or boots did not last long without having to be repaired, owing to the cost we used to repair them ourselves.

We did not have our pay in packets or envelopes, it was in individual piles on the inspector's desk, and you were called in and signed for your money, a somewhat primitive way of receiving your wages.

Now I will come to the Christmas period, on that alone I could write a book, with all the Christmases that I have experienced in my years of service. Many people who are now at the top of their professions have been Christmas casuals in their student days, and have said how they enjoyed their time working on the mail, but for the regular staff it was a different picture. In those days we only had Boxing Day off, we worked right up until then which of course included Christmas Day, we used to finish the delivery in the evening so we were never able to sit down with the family for Christmas dinner on the

day, we would have ours in the evening but by that time I was too tired to enjoy it. We had done about ten days of hard slog sorting and delivering the Christmas mail, working from 5 o'clock in the morning to perhaps 11 or 12 o'clock at night, sometimes later, people wanted their cards delivered as near to Christmas as possible, so they did not post as early as they do now. If one can imagine one's workload increased to perhaps twenty times more than usual for a period of time it may give some idea of how tired we felt. There was another side of course, the people used to look forward to see us deliver the Christmas cards and the parcels and eagerly awaited the cards coming through their front door or our knock on the door announcing the arrival of a parcel, as for the little children by the look on their faces I think they thought we must have been some of Father Christmas's helpers. During that time we were VIPs, culminating into a wonderful atmosphere on the Christmas day delivery, good cheer abounded and you knew you were a valued member of society, and although you were worn out you had given a great deal of pleasure to hundreds of people for which they were truly grateful.

Apart from Christmas, one might wonder why we did the job (not many people wanted to, we were short staffed). Britain was still to a certain degree in the grip of austerity in those years after the War. I had been in the Royal Navy during the War, so I was no stranger to harsh conditions and stem discipline but that was just my case, although there were others like me. But of course it was a much lesser scale in the Post Office, as we were civilians, but nevertheless it was quite a hard life.

I do not think it would be much relished now by many, with the greatly improved working conditions of modern life. What we did have however was the ability to laugh and joke about things and make the best of it. We shared a sense of companionship, a love of the fresh air (which was fresher than it is now), the fact we knew so many people in our work, and in many instances one was regarded as a friend of the family, in my case there are people who were little children many years ago, who now have families of their own, but they still remember their old postman. Then again there was the pension which went with the job, at that time there were not so many pensionable jobs, unlike now, also we had a pride in our job.

In the early 1950s Shirley and Solihull were two separate delivery offices and it was only when Solihull became a borough that we amalgamated, but that's another story. With regards to Sundays we were on a rota for Sunday collections, one postman or post woman collected from eight pillar boxes in Shirley, our driver collected from the country boxes, and we rendezvoused with the Birmingham driver by where the old front counter Post Office was near Union Road. It was then taken to Birmingham to be despatched. For us it was a span of duty of two hours for which we paid 10 shillings (50p). This is not a history of the Post Office in this area, as such. It is my reminiscences of the days in the early 1950s until we moved into the main office on the Stratford Road, the one people know today. What I have written might give an insight on what was then a little understood public service.

**Derek Banham - February 1994**