

Animals in The Post Office

Cats

Cats were first officially appointed by The Post Office to catch rats and mice in September 1868 (although there had undoubtedly been cats in post offices before!). Three cats worked on probation at the Money Order Office in London, with an allowance of one shilling a week. The cats had to rely on mice for the rest of their food, with the Post Office Secretary warning that if the problem with mice was not reduced within six months the allowance would be cut. Happily on 7 May 1869, it was reported that “the cats have done their duty very efficiently”. In 1873, they were awarded an increase of 6d per week to their allowance. The official use of cats soon spread to other post offices with the cost of maintaining them varying at each office.

In 1952, articles appeared in several newspapers and journals stating that Post Office cats had not received an increase in their salary since 1873. The following year a question was raised in the House of Commons asking the Assistant Postmaster General, Mr L D Gammans, “when the allowance payable for the maintenance of cats in his department was last raised...”. Mr Gammans replied that “There is, I am afraid, a certain amount of industrial chaos in The Post Office cat world. Allowances vary in different places, possibly according to the alleged efficiency of the animals and other factors. It has proved impossible to organise any scheme for payment by results or output bonus ...there has been a general wage freeze since July 1918, but there have been no complaints!”

The whole question of using cats raged for several years after Mr Gammans’ speech, until it was finally agreed that they should be retained and, in 1956, Head Postmasters and Telephone Managers were able to authorise an allowance of 1s 6d a week for the upkeep of a cat. However, with the rising cost of milk and cat food, the allowance was soon raised to 2s 6d a week and by 1958 was 3s 6d a week.

Celebrity cats

Minnie, the official Post Office Headquarters cat, died on May 16 1950. She was replaced by one of her fully-grown kittens, believed to be Fluffy. The most popular cat of all, however, was one of Fluffy’s offspring, Tibs, who was born in November 1950. Tibs eventually weighed in at 23lbs and lived in the Headquarters’ refreshment club in the basement of the building. He not only kept Post Office Headquarters completely mouse-free during his 14 years’ service, but found time to appear at a ‘cats and film stars’ party and have his portrait included in a 1953 book *Cockney Cats*. After Tibs died on 23 November 1964, his obituary in the January 1965 *Post Office Magazine* was headed “Tibs the Great is No More”.

In April 1971, a mysterious female cat was seen wandering the basement of the Headquarters building. She gave birth to five kittens, four of which were found good homes and the fifth, a black and white male named Blackie, was kept for duty at HQ. His mouse-catching skills were exemplary and he even became a television star, appearing on the BBC’s *Nationwide* programme. Officials pleaded for an increase in Blackie’s pay in 1983 and, after top-level negotiations, Blackie and all his fellow Post Office cats received a 100 per cent increase to their £1 a week salary. Blackie died in June 1984, since when there have been no more cats employed at Post Office Headquarters. Their numbers declined after cloth mail bags, regarded as a delicacy by mice, were replaced by the not-so-tasty plastic variety.

Dogs

Controversy has long raged as to whether mail was ever carried by dog cart. Legend has it that between 1830 and 1850, mail was conveyed between Chichester and Arundel, Sussex, in a cart drawn by four large dogs, and that this cart was once the victim of an attempted robbery by highwaymen.

A letter in the April 1965 Post Office Magazine describes an unusual cart found in Swansea. A plaque on it showed a coat of arms, the words "Royal Mail Cart", the maker's name (Simpson, Fawcett and Co., Leeds) and a patent number. The company first appeared in a telephone directory in 1900-1901 and the patent number was confirmed as being issued for a dog cart. A "mail cart" had been authorised for bags sent on Sunday between Leeds and Cross Gates in 1903, so it was possible that the cart was bought and used by a contractor to The Post Office, even though the use of draught dogs was made illegal in 1855.

In 1939, during the building of The Post Office's new transatlantic radiotelephone receiving station at Cooling Marshes, near Rochester, air began to leak through the cables connecting the 16 aerials to the station. As an experiment, a dog was used to detect the location of these leaks. A Mr H S Lloyd, who trained dogs for the Home Office, brought along his labrador retriever named Rex and a gas, which smelled strongly of cats, was added to the air pumped into the cable. Rex went along the route smelling out any leak three feet or so below the surface, and began to dig wherever he detected the smell of the gas. He found 14 leaks in total, which meant the cable could be repaired without digging up two miles of the cable route.

Horses

Horses have been used to carry messages from very early days when they were "posted" at intervals on main roads so that messages from Court could be sent from London as swiftly as possible. In 1784, these reached speeds of up to 10 mph. The teams of horses were changed at inns every ten miles meaning that some routes required over 100 horses. The vast underground cellars of the Bull & Mouth Inn, one of London's principal coaching inns, served as stables for up to 200 horses at a time.

The horses were not employed by The Post Office but were provided by contractors. They were, however, entitled to sick leave. A note from 1898 states that "Mr T C Poppleton's horse of The Post Office is suffering from sore shoulders and unable to perform his official duties". Horses continued to be used after the demise of the mail coach service to pull mail carts and vans, but by the late 1930s they

had largely been replaced by motorised vehicles. Horses were, however, used on a limited basis in remote areas and even London had a horse-drawn mail van until 1949.

Mail has also been carried by donkeys, which were supplied by contractors to pull mail carts. A donkey was used, for example, to carry the mail up the very steep High Street in Clovelly, Devon.

Sources

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