

## **Post Haste, The Scottish Postal System 1603 to 1847**

By Edwin Arthur

I deliberately chose a start and finish date and have used an event in each year as part of my tale. I also tried to concentrate my research on the Edinburgh to Berwick upon Tweed section of the mail run. The start date should be familiar – 1603 Union of Crowns.

James VI got to London on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 1603. My story actually starts on a day and date before the main event. In fact at 3 am on Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> March 1603, Elizabeth 1 of England has just died and the heir to the throne is over 400 miles away.

The fact that a Royal Messenger, named Sir Robert Carey, rode all these miles in just under three days has nothing to do with his stamina or indeed the stamina of his horses. All credit must go to an efficient Tudor postal service which, from 1545, had established a regular post service between Edinburgh and London, the service having been set up to pass messages of state between monarchs, ambassadors and so on.

The word 'post' was originally given to the messengers or despatch-riders but in time the word came to be used to identify the points where horses were changed. Usually posts were at 20 mile intervals.

Prompted, no doubt, by that historic journey, a Privy Council of 5<sup>th</sup> May 1693 established a Scottish Royal Mail System and 'Postmasters' were appointed at Cockburnspath and at Haddington. The two ends of the run were at Berwick, which for postal reasons remained under Scottish control, and at Edinburgh at the foot of the Canongate.

The Register of the Privy Council of 1603 shows that a John Killoch or Kinloch, an indweller in the Canongate, appeared before the Lords of the Privy Council and entered into a contract to carry packets and letters from Edinburgh to His majesty King James in England and agreed to have sufficient horses available for that service. Similar arrangements were made with William Arnot of Cockburnspath and Alexander Simpsons of Haddington.

Looking at how the postal system grew, I became very quickly aware of two factors that had been present exerting their own influence on the story. A period of 244 years spans my research band and some recognition of the events of these years is essential.

Twenty-two years after the Union, James VI died to be succeeded by Charles I and in that year (1625) the public in England only were officially allowed to use the postal system. Scotland had to wait a further ten years for the same privilege.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1637 the new Liturgy was read for the first time in St Giles resulting in an uproar and the Scottish Privy Council, fearing for their life, locked themselves in Holyrood Palace. The Privy Council advised Charles I that it would not be safe to meet in Edinburgh and recommended Linlithgow and Stirling so posts were set up in these towns.

We move to 1649. Charles I has been executed and Scotland declared for Charles II in the dream that he would be a Covenanting king but Cromwell destroyed that dream at the Battle of Dunbar in 1650. There was now one country and one parliament which established one General Post Office in 1656.

Needless to say, Cromwell did not trust the Scots and the year before he had sacked all the Scots serving the post between Berwick and Edinburgh, even the post-riders.

We go forward now to the Jacobite Risings of 1715 and 1745 which resulted in a lot of mail being intercepted by the “wrong people”. The 1715 Rising resulted in the foot post between Edinburgh and Stirling being replaced by a horse rider.

Another restriction was the lack of roads. Until the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, roads worthy of the name hardly existed. There were no tarmac roads that we take for granted today. Outside towns most roads were merely tracks worn by repeated use. There were no signposts and in open country it was as if each traveller had chosen his own path. It was sometimes claimed that travellers approaching a town from the west one year, could just as easily find themselves approaching it from the east the following year. Bridges too were in short supply and, as often as not, a river crossing was but a narrowing of the track on each bank. There are still 16<sup>th</sup> century bridges at Musselburgh, Haddington and East Linton.

Improvements to the road system came in the form of turnpike roads. Finance from private investors was used to make improvements and after the road had been authorised as a turnpike by Parliament, road users had to pay a toll. The first road to be turnpiked in 1750 was the Great Post Road from Edinburgh to Berwick, the act itself being used as the means of repairing the section of the road between Dunglass and Ravensheugh.

The idea of the turnpikes did not meet with general approval and history records that “the inhabitants of Haddington complained loudly of the oppression that was to be laid upon them by making them pay toll for every bit of coal they burned.”<sup>(1)</sup>

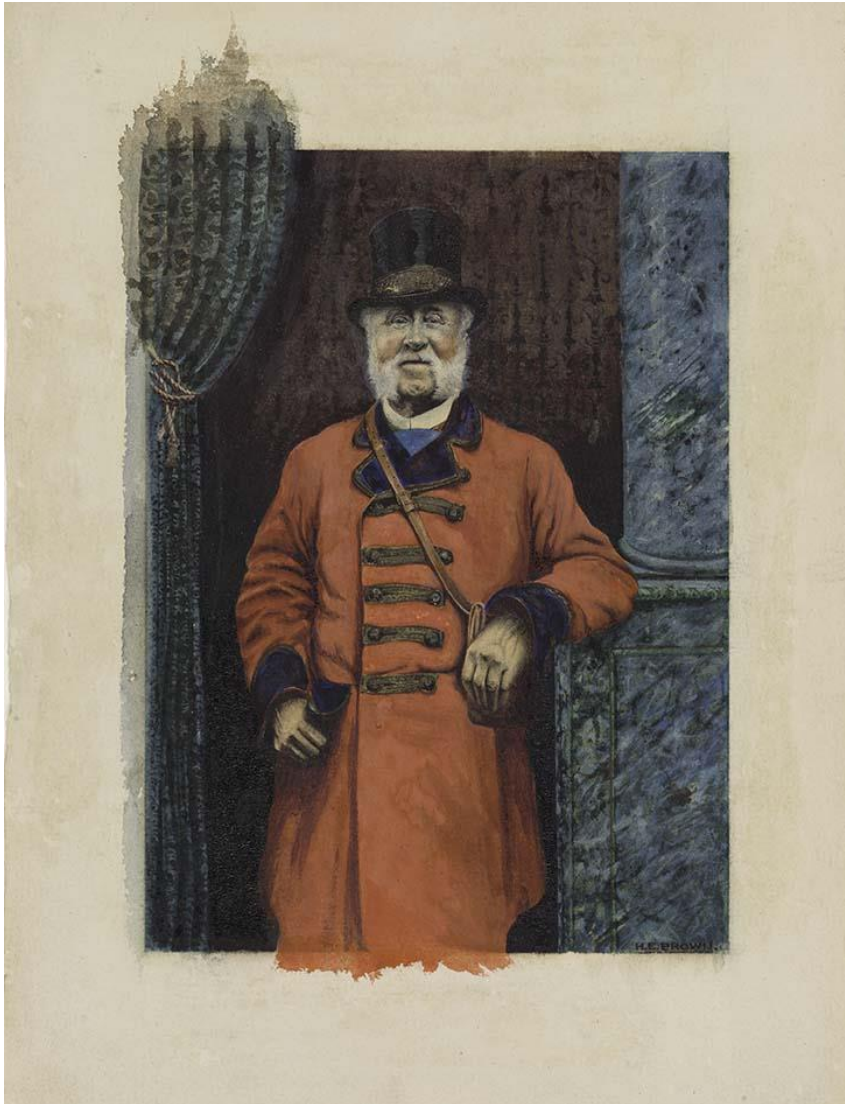
Looking back at a 17<sup>th</sup> century postal system it appears very strange that the often dangerous task of carrying mail was entrusted to Post Boys as young as 15 or 16 years, although there was no age limit and there were instances of Post Boys aged 60 years and over. They had no protection; just a boy on a horse with the post in a portmanteau strapped behind. At 10 pm on 13<sup>th</sup> August 1692 the Post Boy riding the last stage to Edinburgh with the English mail was held up at Jocks Lodge and robbed not only of the mail but his horse too!

It was inevitable that a safer and swifter service would evolve and mail coaches were eventually introduced in 1784, although the first Edinburgh to London run was not until 1786. Mail coaches were to provide a swifter service as they were expected to travel both day and night; no mean feat in an age of no headlamps or street lights. These coaches also had precedence over all other road traffic and initially they were also exempt from toll charges.



Restored 18<sup>th</sup> century mail coach. Image from [postalmuseum.org](http://postalmuseum.org)

The responsibility of looking after the mail fell on the shoulders of the guard, who was armed with a blunderbuss and two pistols. Just how these were to be used was set out in a long list of regulations. The guard had to see that the coach kept time, that everything along the road was done properly, that the horses and harness were in good condition and he was also expected to help in the changing of horses. He was paid 10/6d per week. His was a royal appointment and he wore the royal uniform of red and gold with a tall hat.



Moses James Nobbs (Last of the Mail Coach Guards) by H.E. Brown. Image from [postalmuseum.org](http://postalmuseum.org)



Guard's blunderbuss. Image from [postalmuseum.org](http://postalmuseum.org)

There was something special about a mail coach and people loved to see it flying past and to hear the horn blowing as it entered a village or town or indeed when it was within 250 yards of a toll gate. Woe betide the toll-keeper who failed to open the gate in time!

In 1808 mileage marks showing the mileage from London to the destination, and hence the cost of postage, came into use in Scotland. Before that date only the start town had been displayed. The Haddington mileage marks over the years fell from 378 to 370 to 366 mainly due to improvements to the roads which in turn reduced the actual mileage.

The regular time for the London to Edinburgh mail was about 60 hours. The average expected speed was 10 miles per hour and only 2-3 minutes were allowed to change the horses. In addition to the Royal Mail coaches, a passenger-only coach began the daily run from Blossoms Inn, by Cheapside in London, to the Star Hotel in Edinburgh in July 1831. For the first time too a passenger-coach would not pause for the night and by using more than 100 horses, 6 drivers in relay and only one change of coach (in this case in Carlisle), would reach its destination in 47 hours. The Royal Mail did not have such luxury and sometimes, almost beyond belief, would use only two horses for some journeys.

The longest run in the British Isles for Royal Mail was from London to Thurso – 783 miles in 4 days and 40 minutes. The timetable in 1836 showed the coach leaving the Bull and Mouth Inn, London, at 7.30 pm and approximately 24 hours later (7.58 pm) it reached Thirsk. At 8.17 am on the next morning it arrived at Berwick, then 11.41 am at Dunbar, 12.45 pm at Haddington, arriving in Edinburgh at 2.23 pm.

Only in Edinburgh was a reasonable rest allowed and the run restarted at 4 pm. After approximately 72 hours on the road the coach reached Kinross. On day 3 they arrived at Inverness but another day was needed to complete the run to Thurso.

By the 1840s coaching began to be overtaken by railways. Even the few coaches which had reached 12 mph could only manage that speed with the greatest difficulty and it meant galloping all the way. Horses could go no faster and so coaches were beginning to be taken off the road where there was a railway alternative. The story ends in 1847 at Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The flags are at half-mast. The mail coach is leaving for Edinburgh but this is the end of an era for this was the very last mail coach. The railways have won.

(1) Smiles, S. (1874) *Lives of the Engineers*, Vol IV, Rennie, p218.