

BASINGSTOKE POST OFFICES 1808-1971

From the 17th century Basingstoke was an established post town¹ at the crossroad of routes from London to the west and Reading to the south. Several coaching inns, in particular the White Hart, served as posting houses for mail collection and despatch.² Letters were placed in the window of the inn and before the use of envelopes c.1840, they were folded and sealed with wax to keep the contents private.³ Recipients had to pay to collect letters, this service was therefore out of the reach of working families.⁴ Money orders were available from 1792.⁵ Robert Cottle, Chief Magistrate and five-time mayor of the borough, became the town's first postmaster in 1808.⁶ He operated out of a small shop in Winchester Street. Two hatches in the wall enabled customers to knock to deliver/collect their letters while remaining on the roadway.⁷ Mail was put into a postbag each night at 10.00 p.m. and delivered to the Angel Inn in Market Place where the stagecoach driver would sort them into the different towns he was passing through.⁸

In 1840 Sir Rowland Hill reformed the postal system and introduced the Penny Post, charging a penny per half ounce of weight regardless of distance. The volume of post increased quickly as more people could afford the service and post offices soon opened throughout the country. This coincided with the railway coming to Basingstoke in 1839.⁹ Cottle's office received and despatched mail several times a day by rail and money orders were granted and paid from 9.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m.¹⁰ By 1844 letters arrived and were despatched twice a day by rail from London and once a day from the south-west, Portsmouth, the Isle of Wight, Southampton and Winchester. Letters were delivered at 7.00 a.m. in the morning during the summer and 8.00 a.m. in the winter.¹¹ A small post office opened in Worting in 1847.¹²

Cottle retired in 1859 at the age of 71 when the business passed temporarily to C.J. Jacob and then to the Misses Curtis who had previously worked with Cottle. They moved to premises in 26 Wote Street formerly occupied by a tobacconist and newsagent.¹³ During their management they also offered a savings bank (1861), and a telegraph office (1870).¹⁴ Postal carriers delivered the mail to local premises at

¹ <https://sites.google.com/site/ukpostofficesbycounty/home/england> (accessed 21 Mar. 2017).

² British History on Line vol 4.; *Hants. & Berks Gazette*, 21 Mar. 1925.

³ *Hants. & Berks Gazette*, 21 Mar. 1925.

⁴ <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/queen's/postalreforms.html> (accessed 21 Mar 2017).

⁵ <https://sites.google.com/site/ukpostofficesbycounty/home/england> (accessed 21 Mar. 2017).

⁶ http://www.basingstokegazette.co.uk/memory_lane/11800552.changes_to_the_Royal_Mail/

⁷ *Hants. & Berks Gazette*, 21 Mar. 1925.; White's Dir. of Hants, 1859. p.491.

⁸ http://www.basingstokegazette.co.uk/memory_lane/11800552.changes_to_the_Royal_Mail/

⁹ www.Victoria County History, Hampshire Work in Progress, New Series Vol 1. The Railways in Basingstoke.

¹⁰ *Hants. & Berks Gazette*, 21 Mar. 1925.

¹¹ Pigot & Co. Directory 1844, p.10.

¹² <https://sites.google.com/site/ukpostofficesbycounty/home/england> (accessed 21 Mar. 2017).

¹³ *Hants. & Berks Gazette*, 21 Mar. 1925.

¹⁴ <https://sites.google.com/site/ukpostofficesbycounty/home/england> (accessed 21 Mar. 2017).

7.00 a.m. and 11.00 a.m. every day but by 1875 a third delivery was introduced at 5.00 p.m.¹⁵ Pillar boxes were erected on Winchester Street, Sarum Hill and Church Street.¹⁶

Parcel Post was introduced in 1883; the increased workload caused the sole surviving Miss Curtis to retire.¹⁷ New, larger premises were required. The site chosen was a garden space at 23 Wote Street, opposite the Immanuel Church. The building was built by private enterprise to specifications laid down by the Postmaster General and then leased back to him.¹⁸ It was constructed by Joseph Tigwell whose son became the local postmaster.¹⁹ Sunday deliveries came into being for the first time and later on an additional weekday delivery was introduced making four a day.²⁰ This office operated for more than 40 years.²¹

Several small post offices had short lives: Essex Road 1889-1906; Reading Road 1893-1917, re-opened 1925-1972; Fairfields 1893-1999; Chapel Street 1895-1904; South View 1905-2005; Station Hill 1904-1920, re-opened 1924-1967; Flaxfield opened 1902.²²

In 1910 an agreement was made between the Postmaster General and Thomas Tilling Ltd of Peckham to carry mail by van between Basingstoke and Farnham at a cost of £460 a year.²³

During the First World War, women were employed as postal workers for the first time.²⁴ In 2017 a plaque in the Post Office in London Street commemorates five members of staff who lost their lives during the war.²⁵

The Wote Street premises eventually became too small and over a period of two years new buildings were erected in New Street by G.W. Oliver which opened in 1925.²⁶ These were designed in Queen Anne style with bricks made by the Daneshill Brick and Tile Co. Ltd, which also supplied bricks to other post offices and police stations in the area. The public building was constructed of steel and concrete to minimise the risk of fire. Serving counters were arranged with compartments for privacy and tables and chairs were available for writing telegrams and waiting for

¹⁵ http://www.basingstokegazette.co.uk/memory_lane/11800552.changes_to_the_Royal_Mail/ (accessed 22 Mar. 2017).

¹⁶ Post Office Dir. of Hants, 1875, p29.

¹⁷ *Hants. & Berks Gazette*, 21 Mar. 1925.

¹⁸ *Hants. & Berks Gazette*, 21 Mar. 1925.

¹⁹ *Hants. & Berks Gazette*, 21 Mar. 1925.

²⁰ http://www.basingstokegazette.co.uk/memory_lane/11800552.changes_to_the_Royal_Mail/ (accessed 22 Mar. 2017).

²¹ *Hants. & Berks Gazette*, 21 Mar. 1925.

²² <https://sites.google.com/site/ukpostofficesbycounty/home/england> (accessed 21 Mar. 2017).

²³ Postal Museum POST 10/304.

²⁴ http://www.basingstokegazette.co.uk/memory_lane/11800552.changes_to_the_Royal_Mail/ (accessed 22 Mar. 2017).

²⁵ <https://www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/memorial/76846/> (accessed 21 Mar. 2017).

²⁶ *Hants. & Berks Gazette*, 4 Apr. 1925.

telephone calls. A telegraph room was on the first floor with a waiting room for messenger boys along with a retiring room for ladies, a paper room containing official forms, a staff room and the postmaster's office. The second floor housed store rooms and the basement had more storage rooms for cleaners, the furnace and stoke hole. The whole building was heated by central heating and lit by electricity.²⁷

The telephone system was also included here with an exchange to the left of the main office.²⁸ A single storey sorting office equipped with the latest sorting equipment for letters and parcels was to the rear of the premises behind a spacious yard for mail vans. Premises at the end of the yard provided accommodation for the engineers, truck sheds, cycle and motor-cycle garages and ladder stores. Near to the sorting office were retiring rooms for the staff, one for postmen and one for clerks, containing cooking facilities. An innovation for the town was the fitting of outside stamp-selling machines and two openings in the letterbox for letters and newspapers.²⁹

This building functioned until 1971 when the post office moved to its present site in London Street and the sorting office was built at Priestley Road in 1978.³⁰

²⁷ *Hants. & Berks Gazette*, 4 Apr. 1925.

²⁸ http://www.basingstokegazette.co.uk/memory_lane/11800552.changes_to_the_Royal_Mail/ (accessed 22 Mar. 2017).

²⁹ *Hants. & Berks Gazette*, 4 Apr. 1925.

³⁰ http://www.basingstokegazette.co.uk/memory_lane/11800552.changes_to_the_Royal_Mail/ (accessed 22 Mar. 2017).