

## **POSTAL HISTORY IN CUMBRIA**

**17 March 2025**

**Mike Mapleton**

Mike kindly agreed to give his talk at short notice because the booked speaker's car had broken down. Mike began with two stories about being a replacement speaker. First, when he moved to Cockermouth, he found that his next-door neighbour was the secretary to Cockermouth Civic Trust and knew that Mike was interested in the history of the Post Office. One day there was a knock on the door and the neighbour asked if Mike could do a talk about the post to the local Probus Club. At the end of the talk an old farmer said, "You know lad, your subject is about as boring as it could get but you have made it almost interesting". The second occasion was at a WI talk. The ladies were in the habit of organising a competition based on the speaker's talk. Mike found out later that he had replaced a man who was an expert on choux pastry. There were 28 ladies present and they had all produced profiteroles for the speaker to judge.

Mike went on to talk about postal history itself; the General Post Office started as early as 1660. He showed us a hand-drawn map produced on the instructions of a postal inspector during the early nineteenth century. There were three main routes throughout Cumbria: the A6, the A66 and a coastal road. At this time Kirkby Stephen was included in the Brough area. The Isle of Man was initially included in this map with the mail being shipped via Whitehaven; this was later changed to shipping from Liverpool because Whitehaven had become a notorious smuggling port.

Most of the post was carried on foot by 'post-boys'. Mike read from a report: 'On the night of Saturday last, a post-boy carrying mail from Whitehaven to Cockermouth, was fired at using a gun loaded with shot by a person or persons unknown' and as a result he was wounded in the head and face. The reward for information was £50. A similar event took place near Cockermouth a few weeks later but again the miscreant was not found. Sometime later a man was captured in Exeter, who admitted to similar crimes in Cumbria as well as others in the country. He was tried, found guilty and was subsequently hanged.

Because crime against people carrying post throughout the country was increasing, it was realised that more security was needed. Mail coaches were the idea of a business man in the city of Bath. In 1785, a special trunk to carry the mail was fitted to the stage coach which was then defended by the driver and guard. This led Mike to talk about the post-horn which he had brought with him. He explained that his horn was numbered 82, the number of the coach on which it was used; the coach which ran from Shrewsbury to Holyhead. Mike wondered if this is why buses are numbered today.

Mike's next topic was a postmaster called John Fisher Crosthwaite. Crosthwaite wrote in his 1889 autobiography that 'A great change came for the better when we had from Lancaster to Whitehaven well-appointed four horse coaches with driver and guard in scarlet coats. The distance via Kendal, Keswick and Cockermouth was about 80 miles and it took about 18 hours.' Crosthwaite later went on to open sub-post offices in villages in the Keswick area, beginning with Braithwaite.

The penny black was the first prepaid adhesive stamp, introduced by Rowland Hill in 1840. Prior to that, letters had to be taken to a post office and a charge of up to 24 pence was made, depending on their weight and the distance they had to travel. Mike

showed us a letter posted in May 1840 with a penny black stamp in the top right-hand corner. The letter was originally posted in Keswick and was sent to Cockermouth.

A picture of a remarkable post-boy was displayed. It showed Tom Eccles who, in 1869, completed his sixteenth year of walking 26 miles per day without missing a single one. He wrote, 'Rural post workers cover long distances and as well as delivering letters and parcels, they also acted as a mobile post office, selling stamps, weighing packages and selling postal orders. They were welcomed by farmers and especially their wives. Usually when a post-boy reached a village, he would either blow a bugle or a whistle so that the locals knew he had arrived and approached him to do business.'



Holding up a file which contained a letter with an extra 3 penny stamp attached to it, Mike explained that the sender had paid for express mail. This guaranteed the letter would be delivered the next day or, if it had been posted in the morning, then it could have been delivered on the same afternoon.

Other stories included a lady postie who did her round on horseback carrying a rifle with which she used to shoot rabbits which she ate for dinner. Another story told of a post-boy who was drunk; this slowed him down so much that he missed the train on which his mail bag was due to travel. He was sacked for this offence.

Mike ended his informative talk by asking the audience if they had any knowledge of postmen's huts which may be still in existence in the Kirkby Stephen area. The huts were eventually provided so that post men could rest whilst eating their lunch and sometimes they were used as mini post offices. Mike was an excellent raconteur with plenty of interesting stories for the audience.

Tricia Jagger