

Investigations, Prosecutions and Security in the Royal Mail

A Brief History

Early Investigations and the Solicitor to the General Post Office

The investigation and prosecution of crime in and against Royal Mail Group can be traced back at least as far as 1683, when the Assistant Solicitor to the General Post Office, Gentleman Attorney Richard Swift was appointed on a salary of £200 per annum. One of his principal duties was "the detection and carrying on of all prosecutions against persons for robbing the mails and other fraudulent practices". In this he was clearly effective, as a Treasury letter of 1713 records that "Richard Swift has been Solicitor to the General Post Office for above thirty years in which he has all along acted with great diligence, faithfulness and success".

By the end of the 18th century the Solicitor had clearly delegated some of the duties of detection, as a notorious mail robber John Hawkins wrote concerning his capture "I found two men whose countenances I did not like; it came to my head that they were the Enquirers". At this time the Enquirers were probably solicitor's clerks. John Hawkins was subsequently hanged for his crimes.

In 1793, Antony Parkins, Secretary to the General Post Office wrote to the Postmaster General outlining the duties that the Solicitor performed and the salary for these, which had increased by £50 in 110 years. It is reproduced below, with original spelling and punctuation.

General Post Office
January 26, 1793

My Lords.....

Thus my Lords, I have recapitulated the Duties performed by the Solicitor for the Salary's of £200 and £50 per Annum now paid to him, and I beg leave to observe that I apprehend such Salaries were intended not only as a Compensation for such Duty, but likewise were considered as a Retainer to the Solicitor, and to intitle the Postmaster General to call upon him for his Immediate, nay Instantaneous Exertions to the Duty of the Office, a very important and Confidential part of which Duty is to detect, and carry on Prosecutions against Persons for robbing the Mails, against Clerks, Sorters, Letter Carriers and others, both in the Post Office in London and those of the Country, for offences committed in taking Bank Notes and Bills of Exchange out of Letters: and various other Fraudulent Practices: and I need scarcely observe to your Lordships that those sorts of offences being wholly unknown, until the Parties are either detect'd or in a way of being discovered, the most Instantaneous Exertions of the Solicitor, both by Night and by Day, are frequently unavoidably called for, and he of Necessity must cause every other Business or Engagement to give absolute way to this Important Duty, otherwise Public Justice might be defeated.

I Have the Honour to be, with the greatest Respect, My Lords Your Lordships
Most Obedient Obliged and Faithful Servant Ant'y Parkins.

During the 18th and early 19th centuries reports of the apprehension and sentencing of Post Office offenders appeared regularly in the newspapers. Sentences for such offences have always been harsh and examination of records from those times shows that capital punishment and transportation were commonplace. On 8th May 1795 for example the Evening Mail reported that for "secreting a letter at the Post Office, Evan Morgan, a letter sorter, was ordered to be executed". He was duly hanged on 20th May at the Old Bailey, indeed 3 of the 6 prisoners executed on that day were postmen.

Penalties for Post Office offences were in fact laid down by an act of parliament in 1765, and theft of the mail, as well as secretion, embezzlement or destruction of mail carried a sentence

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of "Death as a Felon", whilst obstructing a mail coach was recorded in 1820 as attracting a sentence of 6 months imprisonment.

The Newgate Calendar records this account of the sentencing and demise of Arthur Bailey, who stole a letter containing bills of exchange in 1811 and forged an endorsement on one to gain benefit from it.

ARTHUR BAILEY

*Executed at Ilchester, 11th of September, 1811, for
stealing a Letter from the Post Office at Bath*

THIS unfortunate man, previous to his detection in the crime for which he suffered, lived in credit, and bore an unblemished character, supporting an amiable wife and several children by his industry. He had long been in the confidence of the postmaster of Bath, who entrusted him with sorting the letters, making up the mails, etc.

Though robberies had been frequently practised upon the office, and letters missed, yet it was some time ere suspicion fell upon Bailey as the plunderer. At length, however, justice, slow yet sure, overtook him. He was convicted, at the Summer Assizes for Somersetshire, of stealing from the Bath Post Office a letter containing bills, the property of Messrs Slack, linendrapers, and of forging an endorsement on one of the said bills.

Shortly after his conviction, Mr Bridle, the keeper of the jail, gave him a list of several letters reported to have been lost from the Bath Post Office, and which it was supposed he must have had some knowledge of. On this he wrote: " I have clearly examined this list, and there is only one I really know of, and that I have received the benefit of -- must beg to be excused from saying which.-- A. B." On another part of it he added: " It has been said I have had concerns with others in the Post Office; now I do positively declare to God that I had no concerns with anyone.-A. B."

Bailey had some hopes of a reprieve till Monday, when his solicitor informed him that all applications to the Secretary of State, the Postmaster-General, and the judge who tried him, were in vain. As the prisoner could be brought to acknowledge only the crime for which he had been convicted, the under-sheriff, in consequence of several letters he had received to that effect, thought he might be brought to make a further confession; consequently, on Tuesday morning, after he had taken an affectionate and distressing leave of his wife and six children, and received the Sacrament, and had been left to himself and his own reflections some hours, Mr Melliar, with much humanity, again urged him on the matter, mentioning particular letters that had been lost; to which Bailey firmly replied: " I must request, sir, you will not press me further on this subject. I have made a solemn engagement with Almighty God that I will not disclose more than I have done, which I think would be a heinous and additional sin to break; if I had not made this engagement I would readily, sir, answer all your questions, and remove all difficulties." Afterwards he observed : " I am about to suffer for what has been truly proved against me. All the rest must die with me."

He was taken out of prison a little after eight o'clock in the morning, and placed in a cart, attended by Mr Melliar, the under-sheriff, and the chaplain of the prison, in a chaise. He showed the greatest firmness on the way to the fatal tree, and when under the gallows he joined fervently in prayer, and addressed the spectators audibly : " I hope you will all take warning " ; then, holding a Prayer Book in his hand: " I beg you to look often into this book, and you will not come to shame. Be sure to be honest, and not covet money, cursed money ! --

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and particularly money that is not your own." He was then deprived of his mortal state of existence, dying without a struggle.

The last postman sentenced to death for theft from the post was hanged in 1836, and the penalty was abolished for such offences in the Post Office Act of 1837, which replaced it with transportation for periods from 7 years to life. Lesser offences, such as retaining a letter delivered by mistake or stealing a newspaper sent by post were punishable by imprisonment only. In recognition of the seriousness of any offences of tampering with the mail however the Act specifically gave power to the court to sentence the offender "to be imprisoned with or without hard labour in the Common Gaol or House of Correction". It also directed that he might be "kept in solitary confinement for the whole or any part of his imprisonment".

The Missing Letter Branch and The Inspector General

Investigation work remained the responsibility of the Solicitor to the Post Office until 1816, when much of it was transferred to the Secretary's Office, where the team of investigators came to be called the Missing Letter Branch. By 1823 Post Office investigators were supported by seconded Bow Street Runners, who were replaced by police officers shortly after the foundation of the Metropolitan Police by Sir Robert Peel in 1829.

In 1840 the introduction of the first postage revenue stamp, the penny black, meant that postal services became more accessible to members of the public and postal traffic volumes rose. So too inevitably did levels of crime, and with increases in the investigative work being carried out, in 1848 an office was created specifically for investigation duties under the leadership of the Post Office Inspector General, who could call upon the assistance of a Clerk in the Inland Office.

The Missing Letter Branch continued to operate, however its duties were restricted to missing letters only. In 1858, the post of Inspector General was abolished and the Missing Letter Branch was reorganized and strengthened by four Travelling Officers in charge of investigations and two Police Constables acting as Assistants, by 1861 there were five officers who were given permanent status. In 1869 the Missing Letter Branch underwent further reorganization and the department was now headed by the Principal Travelling Officer - who became Clerk for Missing Letter Business - and made a distinct unit of the Secretary's Office.

The Confidential Enquiry Branch, The IB and POID

In 1883 the Missing Letter Branch was renamed the Confidential Enquiry Branch and the officer in charge given the title of Director. By 1901 the duties of the Confidential Enquiry Branch were restricted to enquiries only and any other duties were transferred to other branches of the Secretary's Office. Prosecutions remained the responsibility of the Prosecution Division of the Post Office Solicitor's Office. The staff of the Confidential Enquiry Branch comprised then solely of the Travelling Officers, managed by their Director.

In 1908 the unit once again changed its name to the Investigation Branch, usually shortened to The IB. In 1934 the General Post Office underwent a radical reorganization and in 1935 the Investigation Branch became one of the administrative departments of the new Headquarters structure of the GPO, in 1946 the title of the head of the Investigation Branch changed from Director to Controller. In 1967 the Investigation Branch became known as the Investigation Division, and shortly after this the Post Office Investigation Department or POID. POID's staff of civilian detectives were deployed with the approval of Parliament, the Home Office and the Courts, and the department was once again led by a Director. Amongst the many offences investigated over this period, Investigation Branch officers played a key part in the detection and capture of the Great Train Robbers, whose target was of course a mail train.

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The department remained virtually unchanged until The Post Office separated from British Telecommunications in 1981, when each reformed with their own teams for security and investigations. The Post Office Investigation Department continued to support British Telecom in its initial years, eventually ceasing to conduct BT enquiries in 1985.

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The Modernization of The Post Office

A number of reorganizations in the 1990s saw the formation of the Letters, Counters and Parcels businesses within The Post Office, and with the Review of the Corporate Centre in 1996 the Post Office Investigation Department became Post Office Security & Investigation Services (POSIS) within Post Office Services Group, conducting criminal investigations and providing specialist advice and services to each of the Post Office businesses.

In 1999 a further reorganization saw the number of Post Office business units increase briefly and at this point an equal number of smaller Security teams were formed to support these business units. At the same time the three main businesses, Royal Mail Letters, Post Office Ltd and Parcelforce Worldwide developed their own Investigation teams to complement their Security teams, drawing on the expert staff of the Security & Investigation Services to resource the Criminal Investigation elements. All of these teams continued to rely for professional leadership and standards on the central Corporate Security Group, led by the Group Security Director.

Security and Investigations in Royal Mail Group

Subsequent restructurings and a name change to Royal Mail Group has seen the number of businesses reduce to four, Royal Mail Letters (RML), Post Office Ltd (POL), and Parcelforce Worldwide (PFW), together with General Logistic Services, Royal Mail's international parcel operation. Within Royal Mail's Group Centre, Group Security continues to provide strategic direction, governance and performance supervision, and maintains formal links with the Home Office and Ministry of Justice, Police and Law Enforcement Agencies and other Government departments. RML, POL and PFW maintain operational Security and Investigation teams, led by Heads of Security and staffed by professional investigators and security managers.

The investigators in particular are trained to rigorous standards and operate in accordance with all requisite legislation, including the Police & Criminal Evidence Act, the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act and the Postal Services Act. Security managers normally have experience in a wide range of operational and commercial areas, and develop technical competence in fields such as crime risk management and modelling, electronic and mechanical security, behavioural security and so on. At present (2010) there are a total of 287 investigators and security managers employed within Royal Mail Group.

Although bound by the provisions of the acts detailed above and others, and accorded certain privileges in the use of police facilities and access to criminal records and communication networks, these days Royal Mail investigators have no special powers or rights. Suspects are interviewed and searched on a voluntary basis, and where arrests are required the support of police officers or other statutory law enforcement officers is usually sought.

Royal Mail Legal Services, the successor to the Post Office Solicitor's Office continues to be recognized by the Ministry of Justice as a private prosecutor and prosecutes on Royal Mail's account in England and Wales. Royal Mail Security teams report alleged criminal activity to the Procurator Fiscal in Scotland, and to the Public Prosecution Service in Northern Ireland, following the same processes as police services in those two countries.

Royal Mail Group continues robustly to protect the mail and all other assets that are entrusted to it and it remains a principle of the Group's Code of Business Standards and Conduct Code that those who steal from Royal Mail, or its customers, must expect to be detected and prosecuted.