

POST OFFICE POSTERS

by Paul Rennie

The British Postal Museum and Archive comprises the historical collection of the Royal Mail and the Post Office. It contains objects and documents associated with both the historical development of the organisation and its services. These objects also speak of the social changes attached to those developments.

The modern postal service was conceptualised by Rowland Hill in 1837 as a universal service. This was distinguished by a pre-paid and flat-rate charge. Hill believed that his proposals would transform the service by increasing volumes. And, thereby, adding substantially to the social, cultural and economic benefits of life in Britain. Hill believed in the Post Office as a *department of progress*.

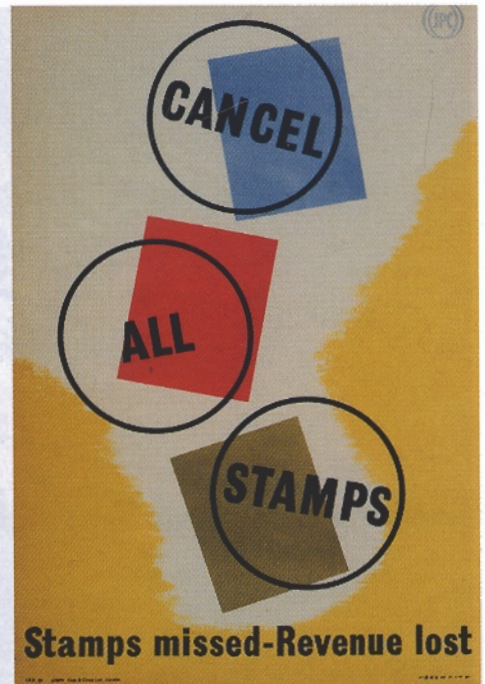
The Post Office's design activities extend far beyond the scope of stamps and machines. During the 1930s, for example, the Post Office pioneered a form of public relations based on cinema and posters. The stamps and films produced by the Post Office are rightly famous. The posters remain less so.

The Post Office grew, from its modern origins in 1840 and onwards, to become an organisation with a wide range of activities and interests beyond the collections and deliveries associated with the Royal Mail. In short order, these interests can be itemised as the consolidation of its money transfer services (1838), the incorporation of savings (1861), telegraphy (1870) and telephony (1912) services. The geographical deployment of these services also required extensive transport interests. The Post Office achieved this expansion as a Government department with staff drawn from the Civil Service.

By 1914, the Post Office employed 250,000 and had an annual revenue of £32.6m. This placed it amongst the very largest concerns of the time. Indeed, until the regional grouping and consolidations of the railways in 1923, the Post Office was the largest single employer in Britain.

In general terms, the consequences of the First World War played themselves out through economic upheaval and political hiatus. These things

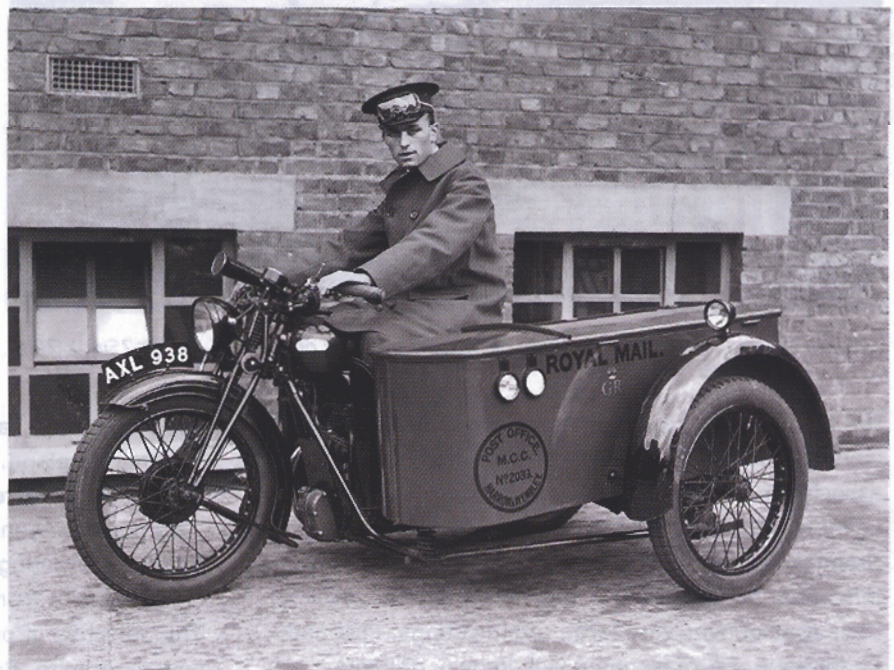
H.W. Browning,
'Cancel All
Stamps.
Stamps missed
- Revenue
lost', 1952,
20in. x 30in.



combined to create a febrile political environment across each of the great powers.

Reformers of the 1920s understood that progress and political equilibrium could only be achieved by engaging with the social mass of the population. This required a new form of communication, identified as public relations. In America, Walter Lippman and Edward Bernays began to conceptualise a form of propagandistic mass media designed to pacify the great majority.

In Britain a group of personalities emerged, through



Royal Mail motorcycle delivery 1930s.



Pat Keely, 'Night Mail' (artwork), 1939, 27½in. x 21½in.



John Armstrong, 'Royal Mail', 1935, 25in. x 20in.



Pieter Huvoneers, 'Send Your Overseas Parcels by Air Mail', 1954, 36in. x 29in.



Edward McKnight Kauffer, 'Outposts of Britain: the Pool of London', 1937, 25in. x 20in.

the Design and Industries Association, whose objectives were to improve the quality of everyday life through the association of design and manufacture. Frank Pick at London Transport, Jack Beddington at Shell, and Stephen Tallents at the Post Office, were the most influential personalities of this patronage by virtue of their control over very large organisations. Pick and Beddington are reasonably well known; Tallents deserves to be much better known.

food rationing. Later, he had worked in the Baltic and in Northern Ireland. In 1926 he was Secretary to the Cabinet Committee dealing with the general strike. Tallents was then appointed to direct the newly-formed Empire Marketing Board.

The Empire Marketing Board had been established with the objective of promoting trade relations between Britain and its Empire. Beyond the diplomatic efforts implicit in the EMB, the success of the project could only be assured

For the Post Office, the consequences of the First World War were specific. In the first instance, the war accelerated the process of mechanisation throughout the service. The process of mechanical and administrative modernisation increased, in turn, the capacity of the service. Larger loads could be moved by motorised traction and those loads could be moved more speedily. In logistical terms it became easier, with telephone and telegraph services co-ordinated, to accurately locate men, machines and post within the great system.

A combination of inflation and economic recession greatly reduced the profits of the postal service and pushed the Post Office into deficit. Suddenly, the convenient arrangements by which the Post Office could raise revenue for the Treasury no longer held. Accordingly, the Treasury and political administration began to look more closely at issues of efficiency within the Post Office system. The simplest measure of efficiency, in these circumstances, was to look at the volumes of service achieved. In this context, maximising the volumes of each service became a priority.

Having understood the importance of increasing the volumes of service achieved, it was not surprising that the Post Office should attempt to promote its services through the use of public relations and poster publicity. Sir Stephen Tallents was chosen, in 1933, to lead this effort.

Stephen Tallents was a civil servant with a distinguished record in administration. During the First World War he had played an important role in the administration of

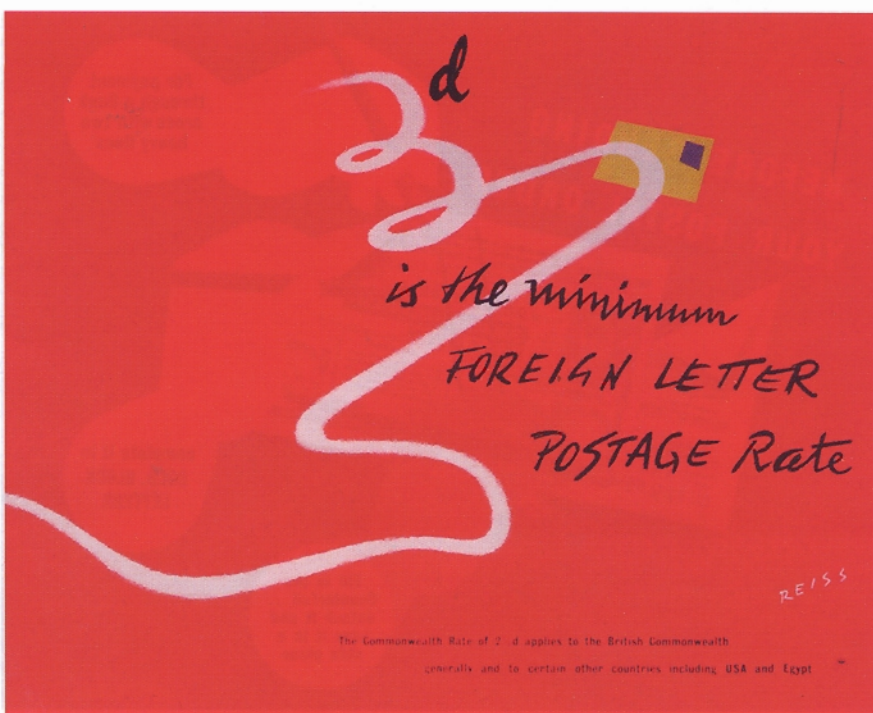
by promotion to the largest possible audience. In these circumstances, Tallents developed the principles of public relations from the practical demands of dealing with events and circumstances. Tallents did three simple things: he co-opted and deferred to the available expertise; he began propagandising with educational material aimed at schools; and he embraced the relatively new technology of cinema and documentary film.

When Tallents arrived at the Post Office, he resolved to sing the same tune. The systems that Tallents put in place were so effective that they served the Post Office, more-or-less unchanged, until the 1960s.

Tallents quickly identified an area where Post Office efficiencies could be greatly increased. This was to apply the full pressure of public relations to the public's frustrating habit of posting letters at the last moment. Any change in this habit would result in a more evenly spread effort for the organisation and its resources. Accordingly, 'Post Early' became a dominant and enduring theme of Post Office publicity. This was soon extended to cover the busy period of post and parcels in the run-up to the Christmas festivities. In addition, as international communications and deliveries increased, the campaign was extended to apply to last postings for overseas delivery.

The Publicity Committee, which included John Grierson and Jack Beddington, was supported by formation of an Advisory Committee including Kenneth Clark and the critic, Clive Bell, and the artist, Vanessa Bell (both members of the Bloomsbury set). The purpose of its activities was to identify suitable artists for consideration by the Publicity Committee.

The production of educational prints was part of a movement, from the late 19th century onwards, to integrate the development of visual intelligence into the school curriculum. Quite apart from any educational benefit, the school posters afforded the GPO a much-increased reach for their images. The school sets were printed, suggests John Cuff, writing about



Manfred Reiss, '3d is the minimum Foreign Letter Postage Rate', 1949, 36in. x 29in.

Post Office Advertising in the *Penrose Annual* of 1939, in editions of about 30,000. Furthermore Cuff noted that the display context, within the classroom, for these images distinguished the kind of work required from that of commercial art. A quieter kind of image was generally more effective over the longer period of display for these pictures.

The Post Office was not alone in transforming the classroom environment. Contemporary Lithographs (1937 and 1939) published original artists' lithographs



Tom Eckersley, 'Please pack parcels very carefully', 1957, 36in. x 29in.



Leonard Beaumont, 'Before Sending Your Postal Order', 1955, 36in. x 29in.



Hans Unger, 'Post early', 1958, 36in. x 29in.

for schools. Most famously, after the Second World War Brenda Rawnsley established 'School Prints'.

School sets of images were produced, on this same basis and each year until 1939, by the Post Office. Amongst the earliest commissions offered by Tallents were to H.S. Williamson for Overseas Communications, and to John Armstrong for History of Communications. Amongst the other artists commissioned by the Post Office during the 1930s were Graham Sutherland, Paul

Nash and Duncan Grant.

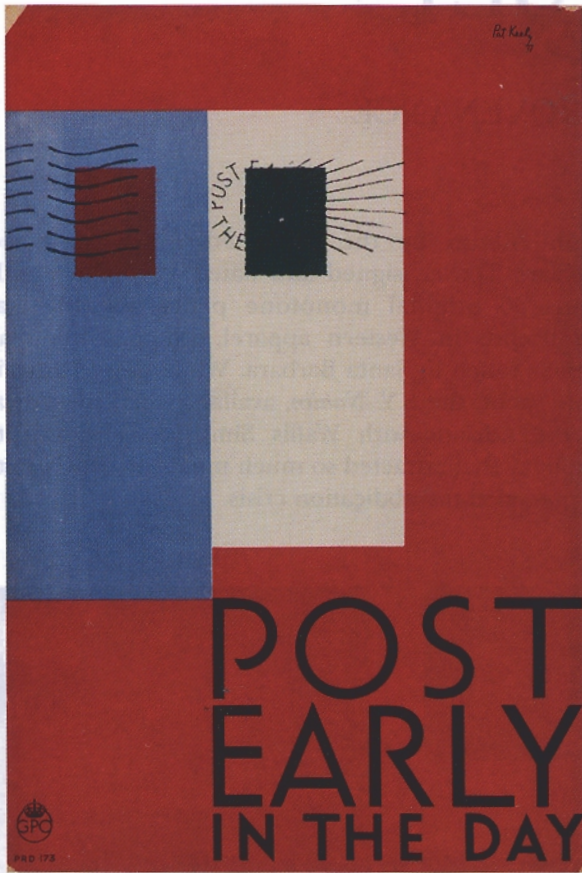
Subsequent school posters include Edward McKnight Kauffer's 'Outposts of Britain', John Vickery's 'Outposts of Empire' and Eric Fraser's 'Signals, Codes and Communications'. The Kauffer posters are slightly unusual, within the context of pre-Second World War poster design, for including a substantial element of photography within each design. The four posters in this series show Kauffer attempting to frame photographic elements within a context defined by fine-art printing.

Kauffer, an expatriate American, began his career as a fine artist. From 1916 onwards, he began to position himself as a commercial artist and designer. His early success with London Transport quickly assured his reputation. By the 1930s Kauffer was able to add Shell and the Post Office to his extensive list of clients. Indeed, by the end of the decade, Kauffer was acknowledged as the senior figure within commercial design in Britain. Elsewhere, the Post Office made use of other senior pre-War design figures: Austin Cooper, Barnett Freedman and Frank Newbould.

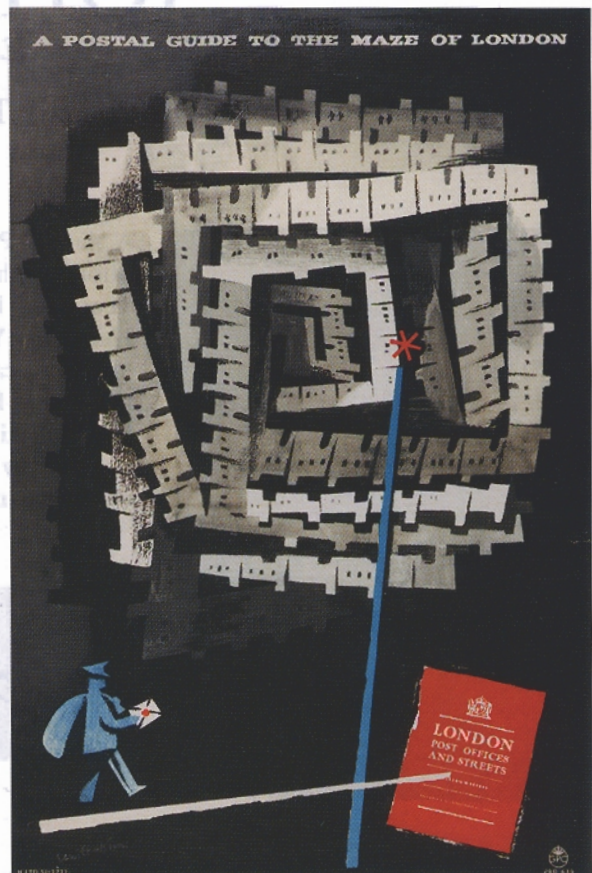
Inspired by Kauffer, a small group of younger designers began to emerge under the patronage of the 1930s design reform. Tom Eckersley had a remarkable career in design. First, he worked as a commercial artist designer with his colleague Eric Lombers. Later, Eckersley was able to combine his war work as a cartographer in the RAF with the design of posters for the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and for the Post Office. Tom Eckersley continued to work with the Post Office until the late 1960s.

Pat Keely produced poster designs for London Transport, Southern Railway and the Post Office from the late 1920s onwards. Keely appears to have combined, in unlikely juxtaposition, the careers of jump jockey and poster design. Keely was also an early member of Alliance Graphique.

Abram Games is the best known of the wartime poster designers. He had just established himself as a poster



Pat Keely, 'Post Early in the Day', 1937, 10in. x 15in.



Lewitt-Him (Jan Le Witt and George Him), 'A Postal Guide to the Maze of London', 1951, 20in. x 29 1/4in.

designer at the outbreak of war. His appointment as official poster designer to the War Office gave him a unique opportunity to develop a graphic style with which to communicate the messages of life and death associated with military activities.

Other names crop up, about whom less is known; Robert Scanlan, Bruce Roberts, Leonard Beaumont and Alick Knight's names appear over a period years from the 1950s onwards.

A number of émigré designers were able to work for the Post Office. The most important of these were F.H.K. 'Henri' Henrion and Hans 'Zero' Schleger. Along with Games and Eckersley these designers formed a group that effectively transformed British graphic design in the post-War period.

Jan Lewitt and George Him were Polish surrealist designers who had arrived in Britain at the end of the 1930s. They worked in collaboration, as poster designers and book illustrators, for the Post Office and other clients. Both Lewitt and Him were members of AGI. The collaboration broke up during the 1950s. Arnold Rothholz had arrived in Britain at the end of the 1930s. He quickly established himself as a successful poster designer and worked with the Post Office for nearly twenty years. Hans Unger had a similarly successful association with the Post Office. Unger, who also designed architectural mosaics,

developed a graphic style that allowed for the integration of 'pop' elements in the early 1960s. Manfred Reiss, from Switzerland, worked as a poster designer in Britain for about ten years. The Post Office was able to give him several commissions. Pieter Huveneers, from Holland, also designed several posters for the Post Office.

By the 1960s, a new kind of society was emerging as a consequence of stability and prosperity. The Post Office reacted to this change by liberalising stamp design. Suddenly, postage stamps began to reflect a much greater range of themes. This shift in communication and emphasis led, inevitably, to a decline in the Post Office's poster output.

GPO Posters by Paul Rennie, a new title in the *Antique Collectors' Club Design* series, provides an introduction to the *British Postal Museum and Archive's* poster archive. For a reader offer, see page 41.

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