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GPO

DESIGN

POSTERS

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Introduction

This is a book about poster design and graphic communication in Britain. Specifically, this is a book about the General Post Office (GPO) and its posters.

The history of the Post Office may, for the purposes of this project, be divided neatly and conveniently into two parts. These fall on each side of the Great War, 1914-1918. The first half of this history is one of organisational reform, development and expansion. The second is of promotion and publicity.

So, for the purposes of clarity, and because this is a book about posters, the main emphasis of our story is about the second period of Post Office development after WW1. However, the early development of the Post Office organisation is described, later, so as to reveal, more clearly, the special place of the Post Office in modern Britain.

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

Furthermore the Post Office had grown, from its modern origins in 1840 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) and 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 despite a unique organisational status as a Government department with staff drawn from the civil service.

The aftermath of WW1 was a period of economic difficulty. Various factors, devolving from the war and its effects, transformed the financial status of the Post Office. Henceforth, its political masters took a more lively interest in issues of efficiency and resources. It was in this context that the Post Office began to engage in public relations. The organisation has continued to actively promote its efforts ever since.

By 1918, the poster had become established as a powerful means of communication. The modern poster, distinguished by its characteristics of scale, colour and the integration of image and text, has its origins in mid-19C Paris. There, the print technology of colour lithography was combined with new display opportunities made possible by the wide vistas of Baron Hausmann's redevelopment of the 1860s. In addition economic and sociological change combined, in metropolitan contexts, to associate the concentration of population with the material surpluses of industrial production.

The poster was quickly recognised as a uniquely economic and practical means of addressing the markets of the new leisure class. The cultural and aesthetic development of the poster, advanced by artists, industrialists and cultural entrepreneurs, further established the poster as an iconic expression of modern life.

By the 1920's, the poster had entered a golden age of maturity in design, execution and display. In Britain, the large railway companies, London Transport and Shell-Mex and BP Ltd each promoted their activities through poster advertising.

So, the beginnings of Post Office advertising coincide, in Britain and during the period 1930-1970, with the cultural maturity of the poster. From the 1960s onwards, Post Office promotion shifted towards new media channels. The

liberalisation of stamp design, after 1964 and encouraged by Postmaster General, Tony Benn, allowed for much of the cultural communication of the Post Office to be achieved in miniature.

The close association between the Post Office and the state, particularly within the contexts of social realignment after both 1918 and 1945, mean that this is also a book about design in relation to society and the state. In consequence, this book ranges beyond the traditional who and what of design history; and touches on issues of communication, community and identity in 20C Britain.

There are several reasons for doing this -

The first is that, in the main, this kind of graphic material remains little known. This is particularly true of the posters produced by the Post Office. The status of posters as historical artefacts is acknowledged and the posters produced by London Transport, Shell Oil and the various railway companies are recognised as beautiful and significant documents of social history. Post Office posters deserve to be recognised as part of this national achievement.

The poster archive of Britain remains, notwithstanding the Internet, institutionally disjointed and conceptually fragmented. There is no centralised national collection of graphic design and poster art.

The poster archives of our largest institutions are international in scope. Within their plans, the story of a specifically British development of poster design remains a small part of a larger story. The more specialised institutions tend, rightly, to focus on their own area of interest. In consequence, the creation of a coherent overview of poster history and graphic communication in Britain remains beyond the scope of these organisations.

The significance and contribution of graphic art to our cultural life remains misunderstood and misrecognised. In general, cultural commodities are understood as valuable by reference to availability. The cultural ubiquity of graphic design and poster advertising conspires against it being taken seriously. This book provides for a modest reappraisal of the poster material within the British Postal Museum and Archive.

The second main reason is that the Post Office has, in the course of the 20C, successfully re-invented itself. Each of these re-inventions, whether prompted by political, social or technological factors, has also required that the Post Office communicate those changes to their public. Under the terms of their normal operations, the Post Office's public effectively comprised the entire population of Britain and, for much of the 20C, its Empire, Dominions and Commonwealth. This placed the organisation at the forefront of public relations and global communications during the 20C.

The material featured in this book was part of the attempt, by the Post Office, to make its services more widely understood. The posters presented here comprise three main types. These are educational posters for schools, posters providing information about services and more straightforward advertising material. Within each of these groups there are various themes that emerge. These themes speak of the men and women who provide the service, the communities they serve and the technology and organisational disciplines by which the services are assured. The Post Office organisation, its structure and its people are part of a culture of service that provides a powerful sense of collective identity. Understanding how organisations and systems contribute to the construction of collective identity is a crucially valuable part of contemporary design.

Against the 20C backdrop of economic, political and social upheaval, the Post Office has played an important part in defining the communications economy and of aligning the various communities of the global village.

The history, scale and scope of the organisation, as well as its public service status, offer an alternative perspective on the late 20C orthodoxies of branding, marketing and design.

So, the book begins with the posters produced by the Post Office, and accounts for this design as the exemplification of an extensively interconnected, sophisticated and rational system of ideas.

The stamp design, architecture and engineering of the Post Office are all beyond the scope of this book. The work of postage stamp designers, over the last 50 years, and of the Post Office Film Unit, during the 1930s, is already well known. Similarly, Gilbert Scott's K6 telephone box, from 1936, is firmly established as a national icon. So, I make no apology for limiting my terms of reference to the poster communications of the Post Office.

The Aftermath of WW1

The consequences of WW1 were dramatic across each of the combatant nations.

The defeated powers were reduced to circumstances of political and economic upheaval that, ultimately, created the conditions for political extremism and social catastrophe.

The same forces of political and economic transformation were equally applied to the victorious powers, but with very different effects. Britain emerged with the moral superiority of its establishment class reduced its *great power* status diminished.

The emergence, across each of the victorious powers, of popular-front political movements based on democratic reforms obliged the various political establishments to address the newly enfranchised parts of society. Accordingly in Britain, a narrative of social transformation was promoted through the rhetoric of *homes for heroes*.

For the Post Office, the consequences of WW1 were equally complex and wide-ranging. In the first instance, the war accelerated the process of mechanisation throughout the service. The process of integrating motorised transport into the logistics of the postal service was derived from the military experience of WW1.

The management of Post Office logistics was also transformed by the legacy of WW1. The scale and complexity of the war effort helped develop new command structures and disciplines that could extend over great distance. The war also helped introduce new ideas of discipline and responsibility to the workplace.

So, the increasing use of mechanisation was a constant characteristic of the service between about 1920 and 1950, when full operational mechanisation was finally achieved.

Secondly, 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. So, a major consequence of WW1 was a substantial increase in the mechanical capacity and administrative efficiency of the service.

However, this increase in operational capacity came just at a moment when the balance, between the various elements of the Post Office, was shifting. In its earliest period, most of the post comprised local business correspondence. Later in the 19C, as Rowland Hill's system of pre-paid penny postage became more easily available and convenient, the number of private letters and postcards increased dramatically. In addition and over time, a larger proportion of post was sent over greater distances. It should be noted that WW1 also vastly increased the traffic volumes of letters and postcards carried.

The nationalisation of the various telephone companies, in 1912, brought this new service within the Post Office organisation. The gradual increase in telephone communication had the effect, after WW1, of reducing business postal volumes and freeing up capacity within the collection and delivery service.

None of this would have mattered too much if the wider economic context for Post Office operations had remained the same. The end of WW1 was marked by a period of economic crisis. A combination of inflation and economic recession greatly reduced the profit margins 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 simply to look at the volumes of service achieved as a percentage of the maximum possible and within the limits of resources provided. Maximising the volumes of each service suddenly became a priority.

Poster Precedents and Government Propagandas

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.

However, the civil servants of the Post Office were, for various reasons, relatively slow in acknowledging the importance of public relations. In practical terms, they had no experience of that world. Indeed, the historic development of the Post Office had eschewed advertising and public relations as inappropriate for an organisation of its status.

In simple terms, and as long as the service raised revenue for the Treasury, there had been no need for the Post Office to actively promote its services or to solicit extra custom. The management of the Post Office had been quite happy, in this benign environment, for the service to grow more-or-less organically. It was natural, in these different circumstances, for the Post Office to draw benefit from previous example.

The various forces, within the Post Office, of economic pressure and organisational inertia created peculiar and contradictory conditions. From 1921, the Post Office began to exploit the space within its public offices for commercial advertising. The revenue streams derived from this activity necessarily compromised the Post Office's own efforts at publicity. This conflict of interest was only resolved, in 1935, when the commercial contracts were withdrawn.

Beyond the Post Office however, the antecedents of Government publicity were not auspicious. There were, for the administrators and managers of the Post Office, only two practical examples available: the poster propaganda of WW1 and

that of the Empire Marketing Board. These two schemes provided very different models.

The poster propaganda of WW1 was, for the most part, organised by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee (PRC). Their products were aimed, as the name implies, at maintaining the flow of recruits to the front. This was achieved through a variety of images appealing to honour, duty and sacrifice.

A more positive precedent was offered by the propagandising on behalf of the Empire Marketing Board (EMB). The Board was established in 1926 with the objective of promoting trade relations between Britain and its Empire.

Stephen Tallents was a civil servant with a distinguished record in administration. During WW1 he had played an important role in the administration of 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. After the EMB, Tallents moved on to the Post Office and was instrumental in facilitating the posters documented here.

In this context it is worth, I think, positioning Tallents carefully in relation to the organisations and the politics of design reform in Britain. It is possible that the jobs, itemised above, helped Tallents develop a peculiar sensitivity to the problems of managing public perceptions. It is fair to say that, in these circumstances, Tallents developed the principles of public relations from the practical demands of dealing with events and circumstance.

In the event, Tallents became one of the key personalities of second-wave design reform in Britain. The 19C design reform movement had lost momentum through the contradiction between its aesthetic and political objectives. The

political objectives of William Morris required a practical engagement with mass production that was quite antithetical to the ideas of Morris and John Ruskin.

The second-wave understood that social progress could only be achieved by engaging with the social mass. Accordingly a group of personalities emerged, through 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 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.

Beyond the diplomatic efforts implicit in the EMB, the success of the project could only be assured by promotion to the largest possible audience. It made sense, in these circumstances, for the EMB to establish a Publicity Committee.

The Committee, under the chairmanship of Sir Stephen Tallents, was charged with using the techniques of modern advertising to advance the arguments of the EMB. The Committee was substantially augmented by the presence of advertising and communication experts, Sir William Crawford and Frank Pick.

Sir William was probably, during the 1920s, the most important man in British advertising. The Crawford agency was a pioneer, amongst an industry still in its infancy, of the integrated office. The organisation of the office so as to include strategic, creative and managerial elements allowed the agency to provide a complete service to clients. Crawford's had offices in America and Germany and the agency was uniquely open to international developments.

Sir William was, in advertising terms, a progressive. The efforts of the industry should, he proclaimed, be necessarily aimed at the ordinary man and woman.

The extra sales made possible by the use of advertising required a series of efficiencies on the part of manufacturer, distributor and retailer. This created a virtuous loop of increased demand, efficiency and prosperity. The desire to extend this to the widest possible market was entirely utilitarian and benign.

Frank Pick's membership of the EMB Committee was crucial. Pick was already a senior figure in the British design establishment. Pick was recognised for using design, in all its aspects, to promote the public transport services of London. Integral to this expression of service was the structural alignment of engineering, architecture, typography and graphic design.

Pick was part of a wider design reform movement that attached the idea of efficiency to those of progress and community. Pick was instrumental in advancing the integration and co-ordination of transport services across the London metropolis. He understood that the convenience and practicality of public transport could transform the lives of Londoners by allowing the expansion of the city. This, in turn, would provide a variety of benefits with regard to the quality of housing, recreation and health to a greater proportion of the population.

Both Pick and Crawford achieved prominence through reconciling, as much as possible, the demands of commercial expediency with those of the public good.

The presence of Crawford and Pick on the EMB Committee assured the quality and coherence of the EMB message. In addition, these personalities helped create a powerful consensus around the purpose and meaning of their efforts. Inevitably, this had a profound effect on Stephen Tallents.

The EMB produced, in total, some 800 posters. These were displayed in schools and on specially designed display boards. The experience of the EMB convinced Tallents that Government publicity presented a more novel problem than

commercial advertising. Paradoxically, noted Tallents, the use of communications made Government departments more accountable to the public and more open to criticism. The challenge that this presented was for the organisation to embrace experimentation regardless of the likelihood that, in all probability, a proportion of experiments would be unsuccessful.

Tallents identified the main object of public relations as securing the co-operation of the public. Such co-operation was dependent, argued Tallents, on an understanding of the framework, or structure, of the practical and administrative efforts of the organisation. Nowadays, we would recognise this through the concepts of organisational transparency and constructive alignment. These are understood as characteristic of successful systems.

In addition to poster communications, Tallents was receptive to the idea of cinema as a powerful mass media.

The use of documentary films as part of the EMB's efforts was the result of a meeting between Tallents and John Grierson, the documentary film-maker. Grierson had been in America during the 1920s where he had become interested in the progressive issue of public opinion.

The formation of the Empire Film Unit, under Grierson, allowed for the EMB to produce a range of documentary films. Grierson's own film, *Drifters* (1929), established a documentary template combining visual expression with a belief in social progress.

Ramsay MacDonald had appointed Clement Atlee as Postmaster General in 1931. Atlee was especially critical of the ambivalent promotion, by the Post Office, of its new telephone and airmail services. With this in mind Clement Atlee had spoken with Stephen Tallents, at the EMB, about how best to introduce

modern advertising techniques and public relations within the organisation. Attlee quickly convened a Publicity Committee to advance the work of integrating public relations into the work of the Post Office.

It was entirely appropriate that, when the Post Office began to look at public relations, they should look to the EMB. Accordingly, when the EMB was closed in 1933, Stephen Tallents and the Film Unit each moved to the GPO.

Post Office Posters

Administrative Organisation

The success of the EMB encouraged Tallents, when he joined the Post Office, to continue with his public relations strategy. Accordingly, a policy was developed to support the continued efforts of the Film Unit and to develop closer and more obvious links between the fine arts and the publicity material of the Post Office.

To foster this effort, the Publicity Committee was strengthened by the addition of John Grierson, representing the Film Unit, and of Jack Beddington, publicity director at Shell Mex and BP Ltd. Beddington, like Pick at London Transport, was one of the major figures in British design reform during the 1930s.

The Publicity Committee was further supported by formation of an Advisory Committee including Kenneth Clark and the artists Clive Bell and Vanessa Bell. The purpose of these meetings was to identify suitable artists for consideration by the Publicity Committee. The records show that Clark, Beddington and Tallents were in constant communication.

Clark was behind the rationalisation of the scale of fees payable to artists for the use of their designs. He suggested that artists should be categorised, based on their professional reputations, as *first class, established* and *beginners*.

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. Accordingly, *Post Early* became a dominant theme of Post office publicity.

In 1935 Tallents was appointed director of public relations at the BBC. Although his stay at the Post Office had been relatively brief, Tallents had set in place systems that would serve the Post Office until well after WW2.

Maintaining the system was not, however, straightforward. Tristram Crutchley, who succeeded Tallents, seemed unsure of how to handle the opinionated outsiders of the Advisory Committee. Crutchley's held an antagonism towards both modern art and collective decision-making. So, the kinds of committees established by Tallents began to appear, for Crutchley at least, as substantial parts of a problem.

In the end, Crutchley sidelined the Advisory Committee and began to concentrate powers amongst Post Office employees. Alexander Highet became, for all practical purposes, responsible for Post Office posters.

Several artists recall working with Highet. Abram Games, Tom Eckersley and Arnold Rothholz each recalled Highet as someone who was very precise in his instruction to the artist. Highet's objective was simply to remove any confusion about what was required. In the main, this was more about establishing a coherent set of Post Office values than of telling the artist what to do.

The beginning of WW2 transformed the working circumstances of the Post Office. Operational security became, in the first instance, a matter of national survival. As the war progressed, several unexpected opportunities for poster communication emerged.

After the Battle of Britain (August 1940), it became clear that the war would proceed through a series of distinct phases. The first of these, defined by the creation of "fortress Britain" would last until the decisive entry of the USA into the

conflict. Afterwards, a period of material collaboration would eventually be superseded by a large and decisive military operation based on “combined ops.”

Combined Operations provided for the accumulation of decisive military power by the combination of air, land and sea forces. The accurate co-ordination of these services provided a new kind of military problem that required close co-operation and constant communication to prevail. By 1944, the task was further complicated by the requirement to integrate various international elements into the coalition.

The administrative and bureaucratic effort of this co-ordination required a large part of Post Office resources. This rationing in favour of the military establishment was procured, in part at least, by the coercion of the public who were urged to reduce telephone calls and only to write as a matter of urgency.

Indeed, from the Blitz onwards, the efforts of the Post Office to carry on *as normal* became an important part of what Alexander Calder has identifies as the *myth of the Blitz*. The popular mythology of *keeping calm and carrying on* was exemplified through a series of photographic images, reproduced in *Picture Post* and elsewhere, and in the film documentaries of the Ministry of Information.

One of the most famous images of the Blitz was of a postman collecting the contents from a post box amidst the bricks and rubble of devastation. The symbolic potential of this image is twofold. The postman exemplifies the collective and individual spirit. The post box itself, the only structure left standing, speaks of the enduring quality of British organisation and infrastructure.

Of course, once hostilities had ceased, the Post Office embarked on a campaign to re-establish the full use of mail and telephone facilities.

Higet successfully orchestrated the Post Office's poster campaign during WW2. The Post Office, with its infrastructure of communication and service, was ideally placed to capitalise on the extension of welfare provision after 1945.

The ordered internal succession reveals a stability and continuity within the Post Office organisation. This, obviously and notwithstanding the Crutchley years, provided a stable platform of understanding within the organisation and amongst artists and designers of the values and concepts associated with the service.

After 1951, the forces shaping British society shifted the focus of design away from the poster. In Post Office terms, this was most evident in the liberalisation of stamp design promoted from the early 1960s onwards and through the cultural phenomenon of collecting first day and commemorative covers. Much of the work in relation to design and cultural identity was accordingly transferred to the design and promotion of postage stamps.

Themes and Variations

Variations • Education, Information and Publicity

The administrative continuity afforded the poster service by the GPO was reflected in the relative coherence of approach towards display and communication. Tallents had taken, from his days at the EMB, a firm belief in the educational potential of poster design. In addition and specifically directed at Post Office customers were posters providing information about new services and procedures.

A relatively small number of posters provide straightforward advertising messages about the Post Office. Aside from these three groups there are other posters relating to the safety and performance issues relating to the workforce. Across these variations, several themes emerge concerning the history, machinery, people and services of the organisation.

Tallents had issued EMB poster designs, from the late 1920s onwards, in school format. The educational posters were conceived to be displayed, on and off, for a number of years. Accordingly, they were printed double quad size, and on slightly thicker paper. The idea was that the poster images could be arranged on to provide a changing pictorial display of trade, commerce, history and geography.

It is difficult, from our 21C perspective, to imagine the relative austerity of most teaching environments before WW2. The opportunity to display pictures of any sort, within a classroom setting, had usually been confined to images drawn from biblical sources.

The production of educational prints was part of a movement, from the late 19C 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 *Post Office Advertising* in the *Penrose Annual of 1939*, in editions of about 30000. Of these, only about 5000 were displayed on Post Office premises. So, the school posters provide important, substantial and material evidence of the Post Office outreach. Furthermore Cuff noted that the display context, within the classroom, for these images distinguished the kind of work required from that of ordinary commercial art. A quieter kind of image was generally more effective over the longer period of display for these pictures.

It's worth noting that the Post Office was not alone in transforming the classroom environment. Contemporary Lithographs (1937 and 1939) published original artists' lithographs for schools. During WW2, the National Gallery and the newly formed Council for the Encouragement of Music and Arts (later, the Arts Council) published poster prints for exhibition and display. Most famously, after WW2 Brenda Rawnsley established School Prints. The firm, although not entirely successful, produced three series of prints including images by Picasso, Matisse and other European masters.

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 Talents were to HS Williamson for *Overseas Communications*, and to John Armstrong for *History of Communications*.

The Armstrong and Williamson posters provide, between them, eight images that span the history of communications and tell of the development of the GPO. Horse drawn wagons, ships, aeroplanes at Croydon aerodrome, and in the John Armstrong set, a 1930's motorcycle courier finally supersedes the fleet-footed messenger to the Ancients.

Subsequent school posters include 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-WW2 poster design, for including a substantial element of photography within each design. Accordingly, they reference the actuality of Post Office services in a way that connects to the film images of the Film Unit.

In addition to the educational posters the Post office produced more straightforwardly commercial designs for information and advertising purposes. The campaign to *Post Early*, avidly promoted by Tallents and subsequently, was first directed at easing the evening rush to catch the last postal collection of the day. 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.

A number of posters ask that customers *Please Pack Parcels Carefully*. Designers such as Tom Eckersley and Hans Unger produced these during the 1950s. These posters speak of an age where all kinds of oddly shaped things were manhandled through the postal system. The increasingly standardised size, weight and volume of packages is a reflection of the, nowadays, widespread automation of the service.

The increasing volumes of service, made available through the combination of mechanisation and discipline, were expressed through the information graphics of Theyre Lee Elliott.

Lee Elliott was a pioneer of modernist information graphics. Information graphics emerged as a consequence of the changes in government activity that was part of the Modernist alignment between people, resources and policy. Otto Neurath

and the Isotype Institute developed the first pictographic system in Vienna. Later, the *Institute* moved to London and contributed to the visual description of Britain's war effort.

The early efforts at pictographic information graphics were aimed at the presentation of statistical information in simple, pictorial terms. This information was used to justify the plans of centralised command economies and to justify their claims to progress. During the *cold war* these kinds of graphic presentation became unfashionable in the West.

The presentation of this kind of information was, by contemporary standards, technically limited. The expansion of Post Office machinery and services was, notwithstanding the technical limitations of the time, an ideal subject for this kind of presentation.

More obviously related to commercial advertising were the posters produced to promote the convenience of the new telephone services and airmail routes. During and after WW2, the urgent and uncertain economic conditions provided the context for the sustained promotion of the Post Office Savings Bank.

Themes and Variations

Themes • History, People Organisation and Machinery

Across these variations, the pictorial themes of Post Office posters remain remarkably consistent. The historical development of the service is presented as part of a consistent and continuous extension of the social good provided by the Royal Mail.

Typically, the historical development of the Post Office is shown by reference to the machines associated with the mechanisation of the service. So, there are trains, boats and aeroplanes. However there is another theme, implicit within these images, that the organisation of the service is itself an elaborate mechanism and a reflection, or exemplification, of the clockwork of society.

Of course, the increasingly automated and mechanical organisation of society is now understood as a characteristic of modern society. In the 1930s, the workings and consequences of this organisation were much less obvious. *The Machine Age* of the inter-war years could be understood as either an expression of utopian progress or as that of a dystopian and alienating system.

The ambiguity and anxieties attaching to this kind of progress were captured, at the time, in Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932).

Against a background of dystopian politics of the 1930s, the Post Office was able to provide a narrative of technical and humane progress. The organisation of the Post Office is presented as both a socially constructed organisation and as a mechanical system or organisation. The people, staff and communities connected through the organisational mechanism of the Post Office provide for another great theme of the service.

Political Economy

We have already seen how the development of the poster and the rise of popular-front politics coincide during the 1930s. This provided a context in which the technical developments of mechanical reproduction could be increasingly understood as political.

Walter Benjamin was the first person to describe the new relations between mechanical print media and politics. Benjamin itemised the conditions in which a properly progressive form of cultural production could prosper. Without economy, mass-production and mass circulation, cultural propaganda would remain ineffectual. It was crucial in the political circumstances of the 1930s, argued Benjamin, that progressives understand the shifting status of mass-market and popular cultural production.

In practical terms this required an embrace of the mechanical processes of photographic reproduction and automated typesetting. Large editions would reduce the costs of production and increase the potential audience. It was natural, in these circumstances, for these different processes to become increasingly conceptualised through a single and increasingly coherent visual language comprising both typographic and photographic elements.

William Crawford had already described the political economy of commercial advertising as a progressive and virtuous relation. Tallents understood, more quickly than most, how to apply the same progressive relations to organisations.

The extension of the Post Office campaign into schools and the consistent use of posters and cinema for the delivery of its public relations show the Post Office to have understood the economies of scale made possible by the new technologies of mass-communication.

Indeed it is worth considering that, notwithstanding the avant-garde experimentation in Germany and the Soviet Union during the 1920s, the structures established by Tallents provide for the most successful, radical and consistent expression of Modernist design values. Benjamin would have immediately recognised the political economy of Post Office promotion as conforming to his ideas of progressive Modernism.

Of course, what Benjamin was describing was an interaction between politics, media and people. The impact of early print culture, through letterpress printing and literacy, are well known. In contrast, the impact of graphic design and the mass production of visual culture are much less well understood.

Part of the difficulty is that printmaking and processes of making images have, until relatively recently, been shrouded in mystery. We've already noted that the origins of the modern poster were made possible by the development of colour lithography. Quite apart from the mysteries of lithography, incidentally a process of quite magical potential, the development of colour lithography required enormous resources. Each colour required a separate printing. So a six-colour design would require the printing of the edition, six times over, to achieve the complete and finished result.

Graphic design developed, in part at least, as a way of minimising the costs attached to printing these images. This was achieved by economies of design through simplification. It was precisely this simplification that began to distinguish Modern design in the 1920s.

The simplification of design into the assembly of typographic and photographic elements was only part of the economic transformation of 20C image culture. The mechanical reproduction of images, promoted by Benjamin and others, was dependent on the new print technology of four-colour, offset litho. This process

combined the production of different colours and effects into the overprinting of four colours. These were identified as CMYK; cyan, magenta, yellow and key (black). So a single pass through the press could produce a print, comprising an unlimited number of colour effects. In relation to our six-colour example, above, a single printing could produce the complete design.

The mechanical simplifications of four-colour were part of a process that also simplified the make-ready for printing. The offset process facilitated the production of positive, rather than negative, artwork. The development of light-sensitive coatings allowed for the production of zinc plates transformed the make-ready into a darkroom process.

Notwithstanding these technical developments, the political economy of poster printing remained generally under-developed. The resources required to print poster-sized images using traditional colour lithography had tended to concentrate resources, both of skills and plant, into fewer and larger scaled companies. The capacity, within this system, was able to respond to the commercial demands of the 1930s quite easily. In this context, commercial inertia and political economy conspired to resist the introduction of new technology.

The demands of WW2 changed everything by greatly increasing the demand for poster communications and by demanding greater urgency in their production. In practical terms, the advent of war compressed the transformation of the print industry into a very short period. The commercial pain, usually associated with this kind of technical transformation, was effectively camouflaged by the circumstances of war. The losses through bombing and rationing became, for a short period, the equivalents of the usual mechanisms of bankruptcy.

During the 1950s, a similar process of simplification was directed at the craft technologies of screen-printing. The mechanical make-ready of screens made

short-run poster printing an economically viable activity. It isn't surprising that, in these circumstances, several designers should experiment with the potential of screen-print. Tom Eckersley, working at the London College of Printing, conceptualised all of his posters using the flat colours and simplified shapes made facilitated by screen-printing.

Bohemians, Nonconformists and Emigres

We have already seen that, in the context of the administration and organisation of the poster campaigns of the Post Office, the organisation was open to using a wide variety of designers. From the beginning, Tallents and his colleagues welcomed fine artists, established designers and young hopefuls to their offices.

For the purposes of this essay, we need only describe in broad-brush terms, the various groups amongst this wide demographic. In short order, the Post Office was able, over the whole of its campaigns to offer employment to fine artists, commercial artists and graphic designers. In addition and because of the particular circumstances of WW2, there was an opportunity to use the skills of émigré designers. The Post office did this enthusiastically. In shorthand terms, these groups may be identified as bohemians, commercial artists, nonconformists and emigres.

It was not surprising that, given the background and personalities of the members of the committee, the Post Office poster campaign should begin by offering work from artists. Amongst the best known were Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland. Nash was a senior figure within the metropolitan art establishment.

During the 1920s, Paul Nash taught at the Royal College of Art and encouraged his design students to produce a variety of work beyond painting and drawing. There were several reasons for doing this. The first was that this provided a pragmatic response to the difficulties of working in changing economic circumstances. The second reason was provided by the alignment with modernist and avant-garde values that sought to escape the bourgeois values of salon painting and to connect, or reach, audiences beyond the gallery.

Nash encouraged his students to work in book illustration and poster design where possible. Later, Nash formalised this approach to art and design through the formation of the modernist group *Unit One*.

I have already mentioned the patrons associated with the second wave of design reform in Britain during the 1930s. Equally significant is the cohort of artist designers that emerged at this time. The expansion of art education, from about 1900, transformed the cultural impact of art and design by greatly increasing their number. So, the 1930s was a period when opportunity, patronage and potential were realigned.

The Bloomsbury artists had, since their collaboration with Roger Fry at the *Omega Workshops*, pursued a similar approach of integrating art and life through design. The Bloomsbury project should probably be identified with the later stages of the arts and crafts movement and should be understood, in the main, as a retreat from modernity rather than as part of a cultural engagement with a wider and more socially varied audience.

Edward Bawden and Barnett Freedman, both students of Nash at the Royal College, were able to work for the Post Office as part of the project proposed by Nash. Indeed, Freedman made a substantial contribution as a poster designer and as a stamp designer. He was featured in the short film, *The King's Stamp* (1935) directed by William Coldstream.

The Publicity Committee's early commissions, to Kenneth Clark's preferred artists, Graham Sutherland, Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell were less successful.

Vanessa Bell produced an artistic design, as part of a *Post Early* campaign, in which last-minute customers besieged a Post office counter clerk. The committee

judged the image inappropriate. The rejection of Vanessa Bell's picture may have played a part in setting off a critical discussion of the relative merits of Post Office advertising in relation to those of Shell.

Clive Bell, Vanessa's brother, began a critical campaign in which the artistic standards of Post Office advertising were called into question. The Post Office were able to answer their *artistic* critics through John Cuff in *Penrose*. The article made the point that it was pointless to judge commercial work by *Bloomsbury* standards. The address of Post office publicity material was necessarily much wider in scope than that of Shell, in an age when car ownership was still limited. The exact purpose of Bell's criticism remains unclear.

Of course, since Clive Bell, Beddington and Tallents were all colleagues, the argument seems, with hindsight at least, a little incestuous. The advertising departments of both organisations, although unconnected, were guided by the personalities of Tallents and Beddington. In any event, the argument was soon overtaken by the events associated with the outbreak of WW2.

In the main, the most successful poster designs came from artists who were already working in the field of commercial art. These artists were already used to issues of typography, lettering and communication. Commercial art, as an activity, was distinguished by the production of original artwork to a, more-or-less, finished standard. The original work was interpreted by print technicians, whose role was to reproduce it faithfully as possible.

The system of commercial art had evolved in relation to the technical demands of print management and to the expanding demands of the visual communications to support the political and economic organisation of society. By the 1930s, the system had just about grown to its limits. The cost, in time and resources, of

producing visual communications had placed this material beyond all but the largest firms.

New economic methods of visual communications would depend, in the future, on the increasing mechanisation of the production process. So, from the mid 1930s onwards, a new type of work began to be seen. This involved a greater use of photography and an embrace of mechanical reproduction. The role of designer began to emerge, in relation to these technologies, as one of technocratic specification and assembly rather than as simple origination.

It's worth mentioning a number of artists who are part of this transition. The most important personality in design, between the wars, was probably Edward McKnight Kauffer.

Kauffer, an expatriate American, began his career as a fine artist and worked in association with both the Bloomsbury artists and also with the more obviously radical artists clustered around Wyndham Lewis and the Vorticists. From 1916 onwards, Kauffer began to position himself as a commercial artist and designer. His success with London Transport, Shell and with the Post Office cemented his reputation. By the end of the 1930s, Kauffer was associated with the printers Lund Humphries and had established a studio in Bedford Square. The studio became a kind of laboratory where experimentation on design and photography was encouraged.

After Kauffer, a small group of younger designers began to emerge under the patronage of 1930s design reform. The group comprised Abram Games, Tom Eckersley, Henri Henrion and Hans Schleger, called Zero. These designers each made a substantial and unique contribution to the development of graphic design after WW2.

Austin Cooper was another senior and influential figure in British design. Cooper was a successful poster designer and had been contracted in 1923, as one of the big five designers, to the London and North Eastern Railway. In 1937, Cooper established the London Reimann School of Design.

The Reimann School was based on a method of teaching elaborated by Albert Reimann in Berlin. In its original form, the School was organised as an arts-and-crafts based training rather than as the holistic model of the Bauhaus. In any event, as Jeremy Aynsley has noted and in the context of German graphic design, the activities, scope and commercial organisation of the School gave it a significance beyond the much smaller scale activities of the Bauhaus. The Reimann school in Berlin produced some 1000 graduates a year!

In London, the Reimann School promoted a scientific understanding of marketing and public relations in association with illustration and design. The presence of senior figures, Paul Nash and Edward Wadsworth amongst them, further embellished the School's reputation.

The dramatic and urgent circumstances of WW2 provided a context in which the developments and experiments in graphic communication, evident in London at the end of the 1930s, could be worked through. The war provided a context in which two distinct group of designers were able to flourish. The first were émigré designers and the second were nonconformist or outsider designers from Britain.

The Post Office provided a stable commercial relationship in which émigré personalities could flourish. Schleger, Henrion, Lewitt-Him, Reiss, Rothholz and Unger were all able to work.

It's worth noting, too, that a number of British designers came from northern Nonconformist backgrounds. Tom Eckerlsey, for example, was from a Methodist

background whilst his design partner, Eric Lombers, came from a Unitarian family.

Of course, the link between design and Nonconformism is not entirely accidental since radical nonconformists were at the forefront of social change from the *Enlightenment* onwards.

In its Post Office context, the link reminds us of the origins of the modern Post Office.

Design and Meanings of the Post Office

Post Office Panopticism and Social Democracy

Rowland Hill's Proposal

In 1837, Rowland Hill proposed a scheme for a uniform rate of prepaid postage. The plan was elaborated as an argument, published in a pamphlet called *Post Office Reform*. Hill believed that the extension of the postal service would bring economic benefits through critical mass and economies of scale. Hill proposed reform as both an economic rationalisation and as a social benefit.

Hill believed that the reduction of costs would greatly increase the volume of mail. Hill calculated that this increase would justify the extension of postal services so that they were effectively fair and universal throughout Britain. Hill's proposals were therefore an expression of practical Utilitarianism.

Implicit in the proposal for a universal service was the successful expansion of all aspects of the service through counter services, deliveries and collections. At the time of Hill's proposals, many parts of the country lacked postal services and the ubiquitous letterbox remained unknown. We should acknowledge Hill's economic and utilitarian insight and his ultimate vindication in transforming the Post Office into a *department of progress*.

Today, Rowland Hill's achievement is popularly recalled through association with the Penny Black postage stamp. The stamp is famous for being the first of its kind in the world. The Penny Black was issued on 1st May 1840.

The stamp was a visible reminder of Hill's larger scheme. The idea of a universal system implicitly contained within it a standardisation and integration of existing services. The extension of existing services of was also acknowledged as a

consequence of standardisation. For Hill, the design of the new postal service combined elements of structure, organisation, management and economy.

Dissenting Background

The historical context for Hill's proposal for Post Office reform was not simply coincidental. Hill was working within a framework of reform, established by the 1832 Reform Act, and amongst a group of reformers who understood the concepts of political democracy, productivity, efficiency and prosperity to be connected.

The Hill family were dissenting reformers. Thomas Wright Hill was an educational reformer and political radical who devised the single transferable voting system for providing proportional representation. His friends included Joseph Priestley and Thomas Paine amongst others. Rowland Hill was the third of eight siblings.

So, Hill's background was one where the consideration of politics and ethics were seen as practical problems in democracy, fairness and everyday life. The Hill family were founder members of the *Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*.

Useful Knowledge was a publishing venture aimed at the emerging working and middle classes. The Society was aligned with the self-help and emancipatory ideals of the Mechanics' Institutes. Through the Society, the Hills were introduced to a circle of high-minded reformers.

The Larger Plan

Hill's analysis of the existing postal system, revealed that most of the costs associated with postage were derived from the structure of various arrangements that calculated cost according to weight, distance travelled and the number of sheets transported. The organisation and administration of this complex system, combined with the post-hoc payments, further exacerbated its inefficiencies.

Generally, existing services were characterised by the relative limits of their scope and reach. Peculiarly, the recipient was usually required to pay the costs of postage. Accordingly, the costs of postage were estimated as a *tax* and levied on the doorstep of the recipient. It should be noted that, this system, was based on delivering documents to an individual in person, rather than to an address.

The old system was hugely inefficient. The effort of locating the recipient, logging the mail and collecting the payment greatly reduced the number of possible deliveries, even in built-up areas. Worse still, the various inefficiencies of the system actively hindered the extension of services to the wider population.

The deficiencies within this system were widely acknowledged as expensive and corrupt. By the 1830s these disconnected services, with their uneven provisions and expensive administration, were understood to be stifling the development and emancipation of the wider population.

Richard Cobden and John Ramsey McCulloch both advocates of *laissez faire* capitalism and free trade, began to criticise the Post Office. They identified the costly inefficiencies of the service with the policies of protection and privilege supported by the Tory government. McCulloch, in 1833, advanced the view *that nothing contributes more to facilitate commerce than the safe, speedy and cheap conveyance of letters.*

It's not surprising that the criticisms of the Post Office should be most evident from provincial Manchester. The emergence of the city was a phenomenon that transformed the economic, political and cultural life of early 19C Britain. The structures of friendly co-operation and free trade combined in the practical politics of *Manchesterism*.

In Britain, the combination of industrial revolution and philosophical enlightenment produced a new type of liberal governance combining *laissez-faire* capitalism, individual freedom and panopticism.

Panopticism and Organisation

The Utilitarian social reformer Jeremy Bentham proposed *The Panopticon*, in 1785, as a suitable architectural design for any activity depending on observation as the basis of its management and control. Bentham's proposal was, in the first instance, directed at correctional establishments and prisons.

Nowadays, the *panoptic* idea is understood as a powerful metaphor for the evolution of the controlling and disciplinary structures of modern society. Society's tendency to normalise appropriate behaviour, based on observational conformity, mean that the *panoptic* is as evident in organisation and management systems as in architectural structure. It is important to acknowledge that the panoptic combined correctional supervision with associated feelings of security and safety.

In 1832, Charles Babbage, the computer pioneer, proposed a mechanical ordering of the factory system. This was an elaboration of Adam Smith's earlier theories about *the specialisation of labour*, crossed with ideas about quality control, efficiency and productivity that were derived from the progressive industrial and social organisation of Robert Owens' *New Lanark Mills*. Later, these ideas provided the basis for Frederick Taylor's *scientific management* of time and motion.

For Charles Babbage, Robert Owen and Rowland Hill, the management of efficiency, productivity and quality-control were observational activities and devolved from the rational organisation of environment, society and economy. The alignment of political, social and economic affairs, implicit in this view, made

itself evident in a variety of ways. The design of factories and workshops became characterised by larger open spaces within which the synchronisation of parts, into a complex whole, could be observed and managed.

The concept of standardisation included in Hill's proposals was part of a larger process of rationalisation across early Victorian Britain. There are many different examples of this process; George Bradshaw's *Railway Timetable* (1842) is one, Joseph Whitworth's specification of engineering standards and screw threads (1841) is another. Hill's organisation of the London postal district (1856) into ten separate parts standardised the Post Office franchise across its busiest districts.

The substantial changes of postal delivery in Hill's system began to transform the organisation of urban environments. The increasing use of house numbering systems and street naming, towards the end of the 19C, testified to expanding urbanisation, increasing density of population and the requirement for accurate postal delivery. The extended provision of post offices and letterboxes made the universal service a reality. Later, the elaboration of postcodes expressed a further abstraction of time and place.

In an academic and scientific context, the new postal system played a crucial role in facilitating the collection of scientific evidence with which Darwin supported his theoretical model of evolution. Similarly, the new post allowed for the weather records to be systematically collected from around the country. So, the new postal services facilitated the exchange of ideas beyond the faculty and greatly increased the scope of academic activity.

The Post Office was conceptualised by Rowland Hill, in its modern form, as a systematic improvement of the commercial, social and political organisation of society.

Emancipation Expansion and Extension

In general terms and subsequent to its formation, the Post Office has expanded in relation to the historical extension of the franchise across the entire population, including labourers and women. In 1945, the expansion of welfarism created an entirely new, and much greater, community role for the Post Office.

In 1840, it could not be assumed that a Post Office was within reach. There were, effectively, large areas of the country without proper provision. In 1841, about 400 of the 2100 registrars' districts of 1.5 million population or more, were without provision. Between 1843 and 1845 a substantial expansion resulted in the addition of 621 new posts. In practical terms, the capacity of the system doubled between 1839 and 1845.

The widespread use of pre-paid stamps made possible the use of roadside pillar-boxes depositing point for letters. Strong iron boxes were first suggested as safe and secure in 1846. Anthony Trollope introduced them in their modern form, as an experiment, in Jersey during 1852. The successful trial was followed by its extension, across the mainland, from 1853 onwards. In 1855, there were six pillar-boxes in London. By 1900, there were 32,593 in the United Kingdom.

Conclusion

Post Office posters are part of the visual expression of ideas, through graphic design, that connect the disparate parts and activities of society into a coherent system. The system combines elements that, from the *philosophical Enlightenment* and *scientific revolution* onwards, have come to exemplify modern life.

Those parts extend from the social and commercial life of people and nations to their democratic and political relations. The technical achievement of Rowland Hill in realising this conceptual proposal as both a mechanical system and social organisation should not be underestimated.

The global expansion of the system, through collaboration and association, is one of the great achievements of the modern world. The successful *projection* of values is testimony to prescience of Post Office administrators.

The role of Stephen Tallents, in facilitating the visual expression to those values after 1933, is part of the story that deserves, along with the posters, to be acknowledged.

The posters, collected here, remind us that design is an activity that is simultaneously creative, practical and philosophical.

The alignment of these activities into a coherent system is remarkable and deserves not to be taken for granted.

Thanks

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