



Press Release

BPMA Exhibition: Travelling Post Office
Location: The Railway Age, Crewe
Date: 4 April 2007 – October 2008
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THE BRITISH
**POSTAL
 MUSEUM
 & ARCHIVE**



From 4 April 2007, you can visit a remarkable survivor from a bygone age – a restored Travelling Post Office (TPO) – at **The Railway Age** in Crewe. TPOs were trains which functioned as mobile sorting offices, where the manual sorting of mail took place whilst hurtling through the country. **The British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA)** has spent over four years and more than £100,000 returning a TPO dating from 1908 to its former glory. Careering along at high speeds – the restored TPO would have originally travelled at a top speed of 70mph – and working in cramped conditions could be both dangerous and demanding. This exhibition recreates the interior of a TPO as it would have been when it was a working carriage and allows you to discover the experience for yourself.

The Post Office first introduced TPOs in 1838, riding the wave of railway expansion to provide a faster and more reliable service. The very early TPOs had no toilets and heating, and fumes from the oil lamps and melting wax caused respiratory problems. Although the work became less dangerous and facilities and working hours improved, the sorting work remained just as demanding on the individual. The dedication and expertise of the TPO staff created a sense of respect and prestige, and despite the risks and hard work, a strong sense of loyalty and comradeship prevailed between workers. Following a post war lull in the number of deliveries and the reshaping of British Railways in 1963, the TPO network went into decline and the last services ran in January 2004. The end of the service was marked with sadness although standard sorting offices were pleased to receive TPO workers as they could often sort at twice the speed of an average sorter!

The BPMA acquired the TPO for their collection from Tyseley Locomotive Museum in Birmingham in 1999. Carriage LNWR20 had been ready for scrap from around 1960 but had luckily been saved by the Railway Preservation Society. Originally built at the Wolverton Works and operated by the London & North West Railway (L&NWR) on the Crewe to Holyhead route until at least 1940, the carriage dates to 1908. The restoration began in 2003, after funding had been secured and although the process was aided by a few surviving original fittings such as door handles and other brass work, it was a daunting proposition. Before restoration could begin the carriage was stripped and left to dry out for six months. Most of the floor and panels had rotted away so new timber had to be shaped where necessary.

Colin Worrall, a specialist joiner contracted by the **L&NWR**, carried out the majority of the extensive restoration at the L&NWR workshops at Crewe and said of the project: "We were thrilled to be a part of the restoration of such an important vehicle and we're delighted that

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this Travelling Post Office will be on display at The Railway Age until October 2008.”

Research into the restoration plans took place at The Royal Mail Archive, the National Railway Museum at York and the National Archives at Kew. Other specialists were also called in to work on the interior upholstery and the new netting for the bag exchange apparatus. Introduced on the very first purpose built TPO in 1838, to save time from stopping and starting at stations, the bag exchange apparatus was one of the most remarkable aspects of the service and allowed TPOs to collect and deposit mail bags simultaneously whilst speeding through stations. Mailbags were enclosed in leather pouches for protection and hung out on traductor arms from the TPO to be collected by the net outside. At the same time, the TPO received pouches of mail from trackside delivery apparatus that consisted of one or more cranes. A passing TPO with its own net apparatus extended would snatch any pouches suspended on the crane whilst simultaneously despatching any pouches into the trackside net.

In the 19th century, workers chosen specifically to work on the bag exchange apparatus were aptly named ‘Iron Men’, for their bravery, strength and skill. The work of these ‘Iron Men’ was made more familiar to the public following the release of the critically-acclaimed GPO Film Unit production *Night Mail* in 1936. The film follows a working TPO on its journey from Euston to Glasgow and involved a prestigious list of film specialists including Basil Wright and John Grierson. The film – which will be shown at the TPO exhibition – features the rhyming verse of the poet **W.H. Auden**, set to the stirring music of **Benjamin Britten**. It was one of Britten’s first commissioned works and he was paid the princely sum of £10.

At the height of its working life carriage LNWR20 would have been a busy, packed carriage, demanding of its overworked postal workers. This exhibition reveals the life, the work and the sounds, behind a working TPO and reveals carriage LNWR20 in its fully-restored splendour.

NOTES FOR EDITORS:

The Railway Age

- o Admission is £3.00 and opening times are from 10:00am – 4:00pm on weekends and bank holidays.
- o The Railway Age is located at Vernon Way, Crewe, Cheshire, CW1 2DB. Further details can be found at www.therailwayage.co.uk Tel: 01270 212 130

The British Postal Museum & Archive

- o *Night Mail* is available to buy on DVD along with other BPMA merchandise online at www.postalheritage.org.uk/shop
- o The BPMA is the leading resource for all aspects of British postal history. From staff records to stamps and from transport to telegrams it cares for the visual, written and physical records from over 400 years of innovation and service.
- o The BPMA is a combined museum and archive, bringing together The Royal Mail Archive and a Museum Store, which both illuminate the fascinating story of British communications.
- o Records in The Royal Mail Archive are Designated as being of outstanding national importance.
- o The BPMA is working towards opening a new combined site, where objects from the museum collections will be on permanent public display alongside The Royal Mail Archive.
- o The Archive Search Room is open to the public to use and enjoy from 10:00am – 5:00pm Monday to Friday and until 7:00pm on Thursdays. It attracts and inspires academics, design students, philatelists and family historians from all over the country. The Royal Mail Archive is located in Freeling House, Phoenix Place, London WC1X 0DL.
- o The Museum Store is open to the public on various dates throughout the year, and is enjoyed by visitors of all ages, including Royal Mail employees and the local community. The Store is located in Loughton, Essex, IG10 3UD and houses the museum collection, which consists of vehicles, bicycles, letter boxes and equipment associated with postal history. A remarkable collection steeped in memories and social history.
- o The BPMA is principally funded by Royal Mail Group plc.
- o The BPMA is the public identity of the Postal Heritage Trust. Registered Charity Number 1102360, Company Number 489605

For further information and high-resolution images, please contact Louise Mitton on louise.mitton@postalheritage.org.uk Tel: +44 (0)20 7239 2574. All images are © Royal Mail Group plc 2007/The British Postal Museum & Archive www.postalheritage.org.uk



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