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H I L L

The adhesive postage stamp is such an ordinary article in this day and age that most of us take it for granted. One seldom spares a thought, as one licks the back, and sticks it on an envelope, for the tiny piece of printed paper, nor wonders how and why such a thing came into being. Well, on 17 August 1839, Queen Victoria was graciously pleased to give her Royal Assent to the Bill authorising the establishment of the Penny Post, and on 6 May 1840, the first postal adhesive label, bearing Her Majesty's portrait and the words "POSTAGE ONE PENNY", was placed on sale in Her Majesty's post offices.

Change was not unexpected, for after a long battle, the Postal Reformers, led by Rowland Hill, gained their point, and in December 1839 the way had been prepared, by the introduction of a system of charging a uniform pre-paid rate, for the delivery of letters to any address in the United Kingdom. This method would replace the complicated and inconvenient system of charging the recipient on a sliding scale, the amount due being relative to the distance travelled by the letter, and of collecting the amount due from the recipient.

Rowland Hill was born in Kidderminster on 3 December 1795, and his life was one continuous struggle from his appointment as Secretary to the Post Office until his retirement. During that period, there were many ideas and projects that entered his mind, but from 1836 to 1864, his thoughts were almost entirely devoted to postal questions and the various ramifications.

From early childhood, he had a strong mechanical bent. When he was only five years old, he had made a working model of a waterwheel, but owing to ill-health, it was not until he had reached the age of seven, that his schooling began. This took place at a school in Birmingham of which his father was the headmaster. At the age of eleven, he ably assisted as a teacher at the school, and two years later, he won a drawing prize open to the youth of England, for a landscape in water colours. He enjoyed sketching from nature, but to quote his own words: "At length, however, I discovered that I possessed no natural aptitude for the artistic profession, and consequently directed my efforts on other matters".

His interest in mechanical inventions continued in later life. For over fifty years, he had been a member of the Royal Astronomical Society. In 1857, on the recommendation of the Duke of Argyll, the Astronomer Royal, and other distinguished members, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society; and in 1867, he was elected to the council, of the society. In 1864, he received the honorary degree of D.C.L. from the University of Oxford. In the same year, he was presented with the Albert Gold Medal of the Society of Arts by the Prince of Wales.

However, Sir Rowland Hill will be best remembered as the proposer of "a bit of paper large enough to bear the stamp, and covered at the back with a glutinous wash which the user might, by applying a little moisture, attach to the back of a letter".

The history of the uniform penny postage system is an intriguing one, not without amusing elements. One story, though perhaps untrue, describes how Hill witnessed a touching incident. It is said that Hill saw a postman delivering a letter from London to a young village girl. Sadly, she was unable to accept it because the cost of postage was too great. He approached, but the girl was obviously embarrassed by his intervention. He questioned her and discovered that the letter was from her fiance working in London, but as she was too poor to afford his letters they had devised between them a clever stratagem. By means of various marks and signs, the girl's fiance was able to let her know that he was well and that he still loved her. Hill was genuinely disturbed by the girl's story and decided to devote his work to eliminating such deception. He concluded that there was a vicious circle in which expensive postal charges reduced the number of letters carried, and then forced the charges up in order to make the service pay its way.

In a pamphlet entitled "Post Office Reforms", Rowland Hill condemned the unwieldy methods involved in transmitting letters, which, he claimed, were mainly responsible for the problem. He proposed that the assessment of postage cost, depending on the number of sheets, including the wrapper as an extra sheet, and the distance travelled, should be scrapped. With the pamphlet completed, Hill confidently submitted his proposals to the Government. In it he explained that the adoption of a uniform rate would enable all letters to be prepaid, as the sender would then know the precise cost, and furthermore, the new proposed uniform rate would be assessed on weight alone, not by the number of enclosures. Also, if letters were prepaid, an immense amount of time and clerical work would be avoided; it would vastly reduce the time spent in delivering the letters, besides removing the temptation of purloining money to which letter carriers were then exposed. He proposed the adoption of four methods of prepaying postage; stamped letter sheets, stamped envelopes, the impression of a stamp on the stationery and "small stamped labels", which were to be the adhesive stamps that could be attached to letters.

Together with the presentation of his pamphlet, Hill indicated to the Government that during the early years following the reform, there would be a heavy loss of revenue. He went on to say that satisfied with his calculations, the heavy loss would soon, owing to the reduced rates, be recovered by the great increase in the volume of correspondence handled by the Post Office, and against the apparent loss, the stimulus given to trade by cheap postage would, to a large extent indirectly affect the loss.

Hill's ideas on reform caught the imagination of the public. The merchant classes were in favour of the reforms, as were the majority of the public, and the great advantages, apparent to all except certain Tories, who were annoyed with themselves for not having thought of it first, ensured that its symbol, the new adhesive label, would have a kindly welcome.

Lord Melbourne, the Prime Minister put Hill's proposals to the vote, and they received the vote of confidence in both the House of Commons and in the House of Lords. Queen Victoria, in Her Speech from the Throne, at the close of the session graciously granted the Royal Assent:

"It has been with great satisfaction that I have given my consent to a reduction of the postal duties. I trust that the Act which has been passed on this subject will be a relief and encouragement to trade; and that by facilitating intercourse and correspondence, it will be productive of much social advantage and improvement. I have given directions that the preliminary steps should be taken to give effect to intention of Parliament, as soon as the enquiries and arrangements required for this purpose shall have been completed".

In December 1839, a Uniform Four Penny Post was introduced for a short experimental period while the Post Office adapted to the new system, but it was altered to one penny, or to give it its accepted name, the Penny Post, on January 1840.

When Lord Melbourne's Liberal Government was defeated in the General Elections of 1842, Hill was dismissed from his position at the Treasury. With the return of the Whigs in 1846, he was appointed Secretary to the Postmaster General, in order to supervise and reorganise postal procedure, which was once again in an unsatisfactory state.

Whilst in office, Rowland Hill fought and campaigned to improve postal services. He introduced a time-saving device with regard to the sorting of late Saturday letters. He thought of a system to implement the speeding-up of deliveries. In 1855, he endeavoured to arrange for a Post Office underground

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railway to expedite the transit of mail across London. However, this project did not materialise until 1927, seventy-two years later. In 1856, he divided London into ten postal districts: NW, W, SW, S, SE, E, WE, N, WC, EC, each district being treated as a different town and having its own district office.

Hill was awarded the KCB in 1860 and after a period of ailing health, he decided to resign in 1864. Sir Rowland was presented with the Freedom of the City of London in 1879, but his physical deterioration meant that he was unable to attend the Guildhall ceremony; he had to receive the deputation in his bedroom. On 27 August 1879, he passed away in the presence of his devoted wife.

So died the man whose postal reforms highlight the modern history of the most basic means of human communication. He not only had the ingenuity and the resourcefulness to discover and develop his ideas, but the faculties of self-control, independence and self-discipline. With these potent characteristics, he was able to fulfil his plan of postal reform, to which, from the year 1836 he had devoted his life. ■

** By courtesy of the Crown Agents Stamp Bureau.*