

A Brief History of Investigations, Prosecutions and Security in Royal Mail

Early Investigations and the Solicitor to the General Post Office

The investigation and prosecution of crime in and against Royal Mail Group can probably be traced back at least as far as 1683, when the Attorney Richard Swift was appointed Solicitor to the General Post Office, on a salary of £200 per annum. As was the case with many of his successors, Swift had a private practice and his services were retained by the GPO for only 3 days each week.

There are no surviving records detailing the range of duties of the Solicitor from that period, but as a Treasury letter of 1713 records: "*Richard Swift.... haveing been Solicitor to the General Post Office for above thirty years has had the care of managing of all Law proceedings wherein the Office has been concerned, in which trust he has all along Acted with great diligence, faithfulness and Success*". It is likely, therefore, that he would have had some involvement with the prosecution of offenders. The Old Bailey trial records show that there were at least two prosecutions of persons committing offences against the Post Office during Swift's period of tenure.

During the 18th century the Solicitor may have been obliged to delegate some of the duties of detection, as accounts (by the brother and a former associate) of the capture of a notorious mail robber, John Hawkins, show: "I found two men whose countenances I did not like; it came to my head that they were the Enquirers". The Enquirers were probably the two constables sent by the Postmaster General to apprehend Hawkins and his associate George Simpson, following a confession by an associate, Ralph Wilson, made personally to the PMG. Hawkins and Simpson were subsequently hanged at Tyburn for their crimes on 21st May 1722.

In 1788 Parliamentary Commissioners reported on an audit of the GPO they had conducted on behalf of the Treasury. This was a fairly regular occurrence, but this one made a significant reference to the office of the Solicitor. The Commissioners observed that the Solicitor of the day did not in fact discharge his duties himself (which the Solicitor himself acknowledged) but instead they were carried out by his Deputy. That Deputy was Anthony Parkin, an attorney in private practice who had been appointed to the post of Assistant Solicitor in 1771. He, unlike the Solicitor, did not receive a salary but derived his remuneration from legal charges and bills. The Commissioners recommended that the duties of the Solicitor should be discharged by one person only i.e. the one actually performing the duty and, accordingly, in 1793 the Postmaster General instructed Parkin to set down "*What Duties the Solicitor of the Post Office performs For his Salary of £200 Per Annum.*" (An additional allowance of £50 p.a. was also payable to the Solicitor by this time – the first increase of salary in 110 years).

Anthony Parkin's reply to that instruction gives a detailed account of his duties, pointing out that he had acted as Solicitor from his appointment in 1771. An extract from that letter is reproduced below, with original spelling and punctuation:

A Brief History of Investigations, Prosecutions and Security in Royal Mail

General Post Office
January 26, 1793

My Lords.....

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

I Have the Honour to be,
with the greatest Respect,
My Lords
Your Lordships Most Obed't
Obliged and Faithful Servant

Ant. Parkin

Parkin's appointment as Solicitor was confirmed shortly afterwards.

Throughout the 18th century and particularly from the time Anthony Parkin was appointed as Assistant Solicitor there are examples in court records of the involvement of the Post Office Solicitor in criminal investigations and the prosecution of offenders, both in London and the provinces. He had assistance from clerks and from elsewhere, such as officers from Bow Street. This arrangement continued into the following century.

During the 18th and early 19th centuries reports of the apprehension and sentencing of Post Office offenders appeared regularly in the newspapers. Sentences for such offences have always been harsh and examination of records from those times shows that capital punishment and transportation were commonplace. On 1st May 1717 for example Francis Williams and Matthew Chessey appeared at the Old Bailey charged with assaulting and robbing a Postboy on the public highway. In those days defendants were obliged to enter a plea to the charges; Chessey refused to do so, unless he had some personal property restored to him. The Court records show that "*...when he obstinately persisted in refusing to plead, the Executioner was call'd and order'd to bring Cords in order to force him to plead, by tying his Thumbs together and so drawing the Noose hard by violent pulling, which is the Forerunner of the Press.*" Needless to say, before this "persuasive" action could be carried out, Chessey entered a plea of "not guilty"! Both defendants were subsequently found guilty and sentenced to death.

A Brief History of Investigations, Prosecutions and Security in Royal Mail

Penalties for Post Office offences were in fact laid down by an Act of Parliament in 1765, and theft of the mail, as well as secretion, embezzlement or destruction of mail carried a sentence of "Death as a Felon", whilst obstructing a mail coach was recorded in 1820 as attracting a sentence of 6 months imprisonment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Brief History of Investigations, Prosecutions and Security in Royal Mail

He was taken out of prison a little after eight o'clock in the morning, and placed in a cart, attended by Mr Melliar, the under-sheriff, and the chaplain of the prison, in a chaise. He showed the greatest firmness on the way to the fatal tree, and when under the gallows he joined fervently in prayer, and addressed the spectators audibly : " I hope you will all take warning " ; then, holding a Prayer Book in his hand: " I beg you to look often into this book, and you will not come to shame. Be sure to be honest, and not covet money, cursed money ! -- and particularly money that is not your own." He was then deprived of his mortal state of existence, dying without a struggle.

The last postman sentenced to death for theft from the post was John Barrett. He was hanged on the 13th February 1832, and the death penalty was abolished for such offences in an Act of 1835, which replaced it with transportation for periods from 7 years to life. Lesser offences, such as retaining a letter delivered by mistake or stealing a newspaper sent by post were punishable by imprisonment only. In recognition of the seriousness of any offences of tampering with the mail however the Act specifically gave power to the court to sentence the offender "to be imprisoned with or without hard labour in the Common Gaol or House of Correction". It also directed that he might be "kept in solitary confinement for the whole or any part of his imprisonment".

The Missing Letter Branch and The Inspector General

Investigation work remained the responsibility of the Solicitor to the Post Office, but in 1816 the post of an additional Clerk was authorised in the Secretary's Office and the routine business of examining complaints, tracing missing banknotes etc was transferred to the new duty. In time this became a team of investigators called the Missing Letter Branch, but the Solicitor retained control over the direction of investigations, continuing to use the services of clerks and Bow Street officers. The first police officer was seconded to the Post Office within three months of the foundation of the Metropolitan Police by Sir Robert Peel in 1829.

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

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

A Brief History of Investigations, Prosecutions and Security in Royal Mail

The Confidential Enquiry Branch, The IB and POID

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

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

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

The Modernization of The Post Office

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

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

A Brief History of Investigations, Prosecutions and Security in Royal Mail

Tragic Events

Although Royal Mail Investigators and Security Managers have been assaulted and injured on a number of occasions whilst doing their jobs, there is only one recorded instance of an officer being killed in the line of duty. On 3rd August 1998 Andy Gardner, Pat Tranter and Neil Roberts, all Investigation Managers, undertook an interview with an Ellesmere postman, James Robinson regarding a large quantity of mail that had been recovered from a municipal rubbish tip.

Robinson admitted disposing of the mail at the tip and during the course of the interview arrangements were made to search his address for more mail. Further large quantities of mail were found at Robinson's home, however during the course of the search Robinson produced an illegally-held handgun and shot repeatedly at the three Investigators. Andy Gardner was hit by two bullets and fatally injured. Pat Tranter was also hit by four bullets and very seriously injured. Neil Roberts was shot at but missed and, in an effort to save his colleagues for which he received the Queen's Commendation for Bravery and the Association of Chief Police Officer's Provincial Police Award, he disarmed and detained Robinson until police assistance arrived.

Robinson was found to have a further handgun and a sawn-off shotgun in his possession, both also illegal. He pleaded guilty to the murder of Andy Gardner, the attempted murders of Pat Tranter and Neil Roberts and to firearms offences. He was sentenced to life imprisonment with a minimum tariff of 18 years. Both Neil Roberts and Andy Gardner received Bravery Awards from Royal Mail. Andy's posthumous award recognised the efforts he had made to alert and protect his colleagues.

Security and Investigations in Royal Mail Group

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

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

A Brief History of Investigations, Prosecutions and Security in Royal Mail

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

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

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

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