

January 10, 1840

GREAT BRITAIN ESTABLISHES PENNY POSTAGE

An act of Parliament establishing a uniform letter rate of one penny throughout the British Isles transformed the postal system from being primarily a source of state revenue to a facilitator of commerce and communication. The British system provided a model for other postal systems around the world.

LOCALE: British Isles**CATEGORIES:** Government and politics; organizations and institutions; communications; trade and commerce**KEY FIGURES**

Sir Rowland Hill (1795-1879), campaigner for postal reform

Robert Wallace (1773-1855), Whig social reformer and member of Parliament

William Leader Maberly (1798-1885), chief civil servant in the British post office

SUMMARY OF EVENT

The passage of the Reform Act of 1832 produced an immediate shift in the balance of power in the House of Commons. Power moved from its traditional rural and agricultural base to industrial areas in the north of England. At the same time, the adoption of steam power for transportation, beginning with shipping about 1820 and railroads in 1828, meant that travel between major urban centers was cheaper, faster, and more reliable than it had been a decade earlier. Reform of all social institutions, long overdue, became the order of the day in Great Britain in the 1830's, while laws restricting the voting franchise to property owners ensured that reformers in Parliament primarily represented the interests of the middle class.

The British postal system still operated according to regulations and methodology instituted a century earlier, when commerce was centered overwhelmingly in London and mail traveled by post coach over abysmal unpaved roads. Like the stamp tax on newspapers, the fees paid for posting first-class mail produced significant revenue for the government, but in the process discouraged communication while tempting people to circumvent the system. To avoid the tax, large commercial firms shipped their correspondence in parcels and paid a private party to deliver it.

Newspapers and franking privileges created another drain on postal revenue. Prior to 1826, a newspaper tax of

four pence (4d) covered postage when Parliament lowered the tax to one penny (1d) without revoking the posting privilege; newspaper carriage was effectively subsidized. Commercial firms with very large mail volumes were known to support campaigns for Parliamentary seats mainly in return for having the Member use his frank on the firm's business correspondence.

Although postal revenues should have increased while the economy was expanding and the population was growing, postal revenues in Britain remained flat between 1815 and 1840, an indication that widespread evasion and the depressing effect of high rates were major problems. Postage rates varied with distance and the number of sheets, and they usually were paid by the recipient. In 1830, a two-sheet letter from London to Edinburgh cost a shilling to mail, nearly a day's wages for a common laborer. Moreover, almost one-quarter of letters mailed ended up in the dead letter box because recipients could not or would not pay to receive them.

In 1833, Robert Wallace, representing the Scottish industrial city of Greenock, began campaigning in Parliament for a more streamlined, cheaper, and more uniform postal system. His efforts received a boost with the publication of Sir Rowland Hill's 1837 pamphlet outlining a system of postal reform. Hill argued that the principal function of a postal system is to serve the public by encouraging communication, and that the cost of mailing letters should reflect only the cost of delivering them. He calculated that most of that cost was independent of distance and predicted that if a low uniform postage rate were adopted, increase in mail volume combined with economies of scale would quickly make the system again self-supporting.

Hill's ideas had broad popular support. In 1837 and 1838, Parliament received more than three hundred petitions in favor of Hill's reforms. A select committee, headed by Wallace, drafted a bill embodying them. The bill passed the House of Commons in 1839 as a ministerial measure backed by Lord Melbourne's Whig government. Few members on either side of the House opposed it in principle, although there was much debate about rates. In the end they settled on a uniform rate of one penny to mail a half-ounce letter between post offices anywhere in Britain, effective on January 10, 1840. The action also established postal savings accounts, giving working-class people a secure place to set aside small amounts of money.



Great Britain's first penny postage stamp, like all British stamps, features a portrait of the reigning monarch, Queen Victoria.

Postage stamps, an innovation not anticipated in Hill's pamphlet, proved a key feature of this first modern postal system. Gummed stamps—the famous penny black—bearing Queen Victoria's youthful profile could be purchased at any post office. After 1840, most letters in Britain were prepaid, eliminating cumbersome collection procedures. Stamps served as a convenient alternative currency in an era when most transactions involved hefty amounts of pocket change.

Postage stamps also became an important part of national iconography. For the British Empire, the image of the reigning monarch was and still is the unifying feature of all postage stamps. When other countries followed suit, they chose their own images: monarchs, national heroes, notable events, landmarks, and a host of other topics. In line with a policy of avoiding anything tinged with monarchy, United States law forbids depicting the president or any other living person on postage stamps. This one innovation, stamp iconography, multiplied thousands of times and spawned a whole culture.

Initially, the penny post provided only carriage of letters between post offices. In villages, shopkeepers often

undertook to collect and deliver mail to the nearest post office, counting on increased traffic to offset the cost. Larger towns instituted private or municipal delivery services. In Birmingham, for example, one could obtain door-to-door pickup and delivery for one-half d (or cent) per letter. The corner pillar box, a secure dropping-off point for letters, first used in Jersey in 1850, was reportedly invented by English novelist Anthony Trollope.

Parliament appointed Hill to oversee conversion of the main post office in London to the new system. This created a protracted conflict between Hill and William Leader Maberly, the senior civil servant in the office. The conflict was not entirely Maberly's fault. Like many reformers, Hill had no practical experience in the department that he proposed to manage, and he had miscalculated many of the details. He failed to anticipate the cost of adding extra employees to handle the increased volume of mail and blamed the resulting deficit on Maberly. Partisan politics also intruded. When Sir Robert Peel's Tory government took office in 1842, it fired Hill. A Whig government reinstated him in 1847. When Maberly finally resigned in 1856, Hill took over running the British postal system.

The institution of penny postage succeeded spectacularly in raising the volume of mail and putting private delivery services out of business. The number of letters mailed in Britain rose from 76 million annually in 1839 to 169 million in 1840 and 322 million in 1847. Gross revenues declined initially, but they had nearly regained the 1837 level by 1847. Because of the increased costs of running the expanded postal system, net revenues for the country as a whole did not show a positive balance until the middle of the next decade. The British postal system exists as it does mainly because of gradually instituted door-to-door delivery, the addition of parcel post in 1890, and the acceptance of the principle that a net profit in densely populated areas should be used to subsidize delivery to remote locations.

SIGNIFICANCE

The institution of an affordable nationwide system of letter delivery in Britain in 1840 marks the ascendancy of common sense in the public sphere. The penny post was proposed by an outsider with no connection to Parliament, to the old posting system, or to major industrial enterprise. The new system was initiated with little fanfare

and implemented at minimal cost, and it rapidly became a fixture of everyday life in Britain. Long-distance written communication, something of a luxury at the beginning of the century, would travel further down the social scale. Coupled with increasing literacy and affordable rail travel, communication kept a mobile workforce in touch with its roots.

Sir Rowland Hill's strategy for keeping first class mail in the public sector, forestalling private competition by providing service so inexpensively that any alternative would be economically unviable worked far better than aggressive coercion. The idea that a universally accessible postal service is a vital part of a nation's economy and social life can be dated to British postal reform in 1840.

—Martha A. Sherwood

FURTHER READING

Daunton, Martin J. *Royal Mail: The Post Office Since 1840*. Dover, N.H.: Athlone Press, 1985. Contains detailed treatments of the old postal system, the various economic arguments, and the conflicts between Maberly and Hill.

Leavitt, Joshua. *Cheap Postage: Remarks and Statistics on the Subject of Cheap Postage and Postal Reform in Great Britain and the United States*. Boston: Cheap Postage Association, 1848. This contemporary pamphlet includes postal statistics for Britain and the United States (1840 to 1848), the complete parlia-

mentary debates on the postal act of 1840, and a wealth of anecdotal material.

Matthew, H. C. G., and Brian Harrison, eds. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: From the Earliest Times to the Year 2000*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. This reference book includes biographies of Hill, Maberly, Wallace, and Trollope.

Reinhart, Carsten, and Anthony S. Travis. "The Introduction of Aniline Dyes to Paper Printing and Queen Victoria's Postage Stamp." *Ambix* 44, no. 1 (1997): 11-18. A British journal explores how the introduction of postage stamps impacted the printing industry.

Siebert, Bernhard. *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*. Translated by Kevin Repp. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999. A cultural and social history for advanced students that examines how the postal system helped determine what kind of literature was written and how it was written. Includes the chapter "Postage One Penny: Rowland Hill's Post Office Reform."

SEE ALSO: May 24, 1844: Morse Sends First Telegraph Message; July 27, 1866: First Transatlantic Cable Is Completed; June 25, 1876: Bell Demonstrates the Telephone; June, 1896: Marconi Patents the Wireless Telegraph.

RELATED ARTICLES in *Great Lives from History: The Nineteenth Century, 1801-1900*: Samuel F. B. Morse; Sir Robert Peel; Anthony Trollope; Queen Victoria.

April 27, 1840-February, 1852

BRITISH HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT ARE REBUILT

Following a disastrous fire in 1834, construction of the new Houses of Parliament began in 1840 under the direction of architects Charles Barry and Augustus Pugin. Built in Perpendicular Gothic style, the Lords' Chamber opened in 1847 and the Commons opened five years later. In addition to their importance as the center of the British government, the structures have become enduring landmarks that have helped to define London's Thames riverbank.

ALSO KNOWN AS: Westminster Palace

LOCALE: Westminster, London, England

CATEGORIES: Architecture; government and politics

KEY FIGURES

Sir Charles Barry (1795-1860), architect

Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852), designer

Edward Middleton Barry (1830-1880), architect and designer

SUMMARY OF EVENT

At about 6:00 P.M. on October 16, 1834, a fire broke out under the debating chamber of the House of Lords in Westminster Palace, the formal name for the Houses of Parliament. Multitudes watched from both shores of the Thames River, and artist J. W. M. Turner recorded the sight for posterity. A very low tide made it impossible to pump enough water to fight the fire effectively, but the oldest portion of the structure, Westminster Hall, was saved from the conflagration.

Now a part of London, Westminster was for many centuries a suburb of the city and home to the royal family. White Hall, Westminster Abbey, and Westminster Palace, dating back to the days of King William II (r. 1087-1100), constituted the royal precincts. The king and his counselors resided there when they were in London until 1512. The nobles of the House of Lords met in the king's or queen's direct proximity, while the Commons generally met in the refectory or chapter house of the nearby abbey. During the Reformation, private chapels, including that of the king, were outlawed, and the palace's St. Stephen's Chapel became home to the Commons in 1547. As royal power and authority waned and Parliament's grew during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Westminster Palace truly became the center of the kingdom and the nascent empire, though it remained a haphazard collection of medieval structures. The fire wiped the slate clean.

While conservatives lamented the destruction of the ancient seat of government, liberals, who held sway in the 1830's, saw the project as a great opportunity to reembody the newly reforming Parliament. Some wanted to relocate the Houses (they resented the term "palace" with its undemocratic overtones) on a new site, away from the traditional royal neighborhood. Proponents made much of the odd shape of the original building site and problems of drainage and flooding. King William IV offered Buckingham Palace, but the radical member of Parliament Joseph Hume countered with the idea of St. James Park or behind the National Gallery. Sydney Smirke and the *Westminster Review* championed Green Park, across from Buckingham Palace. The editor of *Architectural Magazine*, John Loudon, suggested Leicester Square, and Alexander Rainy preferred to see the buildings constructed at Charing Cross, connecting them to the development of Regent Street and London's broader urban development.

In March of 1835 the House of Commons appointed a select committee to advise on sites and architectural styles. The original site was kept, but arguments now centered on the style of the Houses. The classical style traditionally had great appeal in England, but so did the flavor of continental revolution and Catholic monar-



London's Houses of Parliament. (R. S. Peale/J. A. Hill)

chism. Given the aesthetic sway of Romanticism, a more native style such as Gothic or Elizabethan proved more popular. A design competition was organized around these two choices and announced on June 3. Any republicanism embodied in the Classical was obviated, while English tradition and the stability it implied carried the day. A royal commission was empaneled to judge the architectural drawings and plans, and on January 31, 1836, Charles Barry's entry was chosen.

Barry had selected a fifteenth-century Perpendicular Gothic style that echoed the Henry VII Chapel in the abbey. It was a style he had worked with in Birmingham. Barry had studied architecture on the Continent, and his first important work had been St. Peter's Church in Brighton. After additional churches in Manchester and Oldham, he had his first significant commissions in London. He employed the designer Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin to draft his entry for Westminster Palace,

a natural choice since Pugin was a vociferous advocate of authentic Gothic revival and a past collaborator with Barry in Birmingham. Pugin also was a Catholic convert, a Shakespearean set designer at Covent Garden and King's Theatre, an architect, and a firm believer in medieval-style social and political hierarchy. The pair continued fine-tuning the plans until May, when they published the final design. At this point Pugin left to pursue other projects, and Barry proposed the cost estimate of £700,000, which was quickly raised to £865,000.

To help dispel fears of hydraulic problems, work on the Thames embankment was accelerated, a project that increased and regularized somewhat the new building's footprint. Barry's wife ceremonially laid the keystone on April 27, 1840, and work began in earnest. The firm of Grissell and Peto carried out most of the construction. The stone selected for the exterior was carefully chosen, but unfortunately it began to wear soon after placement. Nonetheless, the walls rapidly went up on the long building with its great courtyards and rows of windows. Barry relieved the potential monotony of this type of edifice by applying asymmetry to the elevation itself and to the two main towers, the one over the royal entrance—King's and later Victoria Tower—at 336 feet tall and the clock tower at the opposite end, home of Big Ben, which is 316 feet tall. A third tower was added for ventilation over the central lobby, adding further interest to the skyline if not cleaner air inside.

In 1844, when Barry's plan for the structure was finally completed, he brought in Pugin once again, this time to carry out the design work for everything from inkwells to door frames to wallpaper and furniture. Pugin's taste for and knowledge of "authentic medieval" enabled him to create a unified and meaningful program of decoration that runs from the austere in the Commons Chamber, to the lush and extravagant in the royal rooms. Pugin and Barry established the so-called Thames shops to carry out the exquisite manual craftwork in metal, wood, plaster, stone, and glass. Although Pugin died in 1852, his designs continued to shape the decorative work in its latter stages.

In April 1847 the Lords' Chamber was opened to Queen Victoria, and three years later the Commons Chamber debuted, to the great displeasure of the members. True to the architects' sense of hierarchy, the "lower" House was left small, cramped, and underdeveloped, especially when compared with the sumptuous Lords' Chamber with the royal throne. By February, 1852, the necessary alterations had been carried out, and the State Opening of Parliament, with the queen present, took

place. Victoria knighted Barry and provided him a commission of £40,000, while Pugin received little attention.

The Pugin-designed clock tower was completed only in early 1857. The great bell in the carillon, nicknamed Big Ben for Benjamin Hall, the first commissioner of the office of works, cracked in October and had to be recast and remounted a year later. Work on the speaker's house ceased in January, 1859, and Barry died the following year. His second son, Edward, completed work on St. Mary Undercroft Chapel, the central lobby, and the robing room. First Commissioner Acton Smee Ayrton dismissed Edward Barry in 1870, marking the formal end of the project.

SIGNIFICANCE

As with the choice of site, the selection of the northern European, medieval, and High Church Gothic styles over the pagan and Roman Classical—or any other competing—style was significant. The style played neither to the democrats nor to the imperialists but reinforced the sense of English tradition, directly connecting the "new" both to what had been in the place of the Houses and what remained. Architecturally, the chosen style also helped legitimize the Gothic Revival movement, which had often drifted downward into the silliness of "follies" and architectural frippery that trivialized the tradition. Gothic Revival would now move from the outer ring of the eccentrics to the very heart of the empire.

Even in the early twenty-first century, the Houses of Parliament visually, more than any other structure, define the Thames River bank, clearly eclipsing the royal Tower of London at the other end of the older city. Symbolically the Houses articulately link the political tradition of popular government with the storied past and the roots of English world power.

—Joseph P. Byrne

FURTHER READING

Atterbury, Paul, ed. *A. W. N. Pugin: Master of Gothic Revival*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, for Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, 1995. A catalog published to accompany an exhibit at the Bard Graduate Center. Contains ten essays about Pugin, including a biographical sketch and discussions of the Gothic sensibility, Pugin's interior design, Pugin's Catholic churches in England and Ireland, and Pugin and the Gothic Revival movement in France and North America.

Cannadine, David, et al. *The Houses of Parliament: History, Art, Architecture*. London: Merrell, 2000. An il-

illustrated history of Barry's most famous work, placing the buildings in a historical, political, and cultural context.

Clark, Kenneth. *The Gothic Revival: An Essay in the History of Taste*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1964. The most popular and readily available work on the peculiar zest for making everything old that seized the Victorians. A classic, scholarly read.

Cooke, Robert. *The Palace of Westminster: Houses of Parliament*. London: Burton Skira, 1987. An illustrated overview of the history of housing Parliament, including the rebuilding after the 1834 fire.

Riding, Christine, and Jacqueline Riding, eds. *The Houses of Parliament: History, Art, Architecture*. London: Merrell, 2000. A large-format, well-illustrated collection of essays on the historical building and its rebuilding and uses.

Rorabaugh, W. J. "Politics and the Architectural Competition for the Houses of Parliament." *Victorian Studies* 18 (1973) 155-175. A brief but careful study of the

politics surrounding the choice of the site and Barry's plan for the palace.

Solender, Katherine. *Dreadful Fire: Burning of the Houses of Parliament*. Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1984. An exhibition catalog of contemporary views of the disaster.

Stanton, Phoebe. *Pugin*. New York: Viking, 1972. A critical discussion of the architectural style and works of Pugin, including the Houses of Parliament.

SEE ALSO: July 4, 1848: Ground Is Broken for the Washington Monument; 1883-1885: World's First Skyscraper Is Built; Nov. 3, 1883: Gaudí Begins Barcelona's Templo Expiatorio de la Sagrada Família; Mar. 31, 1889: Eiffel Tower Is Dedicated.

RELATED ARTICLES in *Great Lives from History: The Nineteenth Century, 1801-1900*: Sir Charles Barry; Daniel Hudson Burnham; John Nash; Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin; Sir George Gilbert Scott; George Edmund Street; J. M. W. Turner; William IV.

December 2, 1840

U.S. ELECTION OF 1840

For the first time in U.S. political history, two truly national parties campaigned using tactics that would characterize future presidential elections.

ALSO KNOWN AS: William Henry Harrison's election as president

LOCALE: United States

CATEGORY: Government and politics

KEY FIGURES

William Henry Harrison (1773-1841), winning candidate who became president of the United States in 1841

Martin Van Buren (1782-1862), president of the United States, 1837-1841, and losing candidate in 1840

Henry Clay (1777-1852), leading Whig politician

Andrew Jackson (1767-1845), president of the United States, 1829-1837

Richard Mentor Johnson (1780-1850), vice president of the United States under Van Buren, 1837-1841

John Tyler (1790-1862), winning vice presidential candidate who later became the tenth president, 1841-1845

SUMMARY OF EVENT

The presidential election campaign of 1840 marked the beginning of a new era in U.S. politics: For the first time, two parties that were truly national in scope competed for the presidency. In every state, politics was now established on a two-party basis. This campaign also inaugurated the circus carnival atmosphere that was to characterize presidential elections. It represented the culmination of the democratic surge of the Jacksonian age. More U.S. citizens—2.4 million—voted in 1840 than in any previous election. They represented 78 percent of the electorate, a turnout rarely even approached in any other presidential election. Indeed, some historians have commented on the irony of the fact that the first true expression of the Jacksonian era's mass political parties was to elect a Whig as president.

The Whig Party, which formed during Andrew Jackson's second administration, was an aggregation of dissimilar groups. It included the old National Republicans, who had always been opposed to Jackson, former Anti-Masons, and many people who had supported Jackson in 1828 but later turned against him because of his stand on such major issues as nullification, federal aid to internal improvements, and the Bank of the United States. Some