

POSTAL SERVICES IN FYFIELD - A BRIEF HISTORY

Postal delivery to Fyfield goes back only one hundred and fifty years but to trace its origins, one must look first at the London Penny Post, launched in 1680 by William Dockwra and taken over within a couple of years by the newly formed Post Office. The service was confined initially to London, the letters being collected by men ringing bells, but by 1692 footposts were delivering and collecting letters from as far afield as Epping and Abridge and the General Penny Post Office in Bishopsgate Street commenced a service to Ongar, apparently three times a day(!).

The transporting of letters was a pretty precarious business, post boys being unreliable and a prey to highway robbery and the practice quickly grew of making letters up into parcels to be carried along the post roads by the armed mail coaches. The post roads radiated out from London to the major towns: to Romford, to Chelmsford and Colchester and to Royston, Newmarket and Norwich. From these post roads, branch post roads were opened to other towns: Colchester to Harwich, Chelmsford to Dunmow and so on.

By the early eighteenth century, Ongar was exchanging "bye mail" with Epping. Both towns lay on the same post road and bye mail was that which was passed directly between two such towns without the delay incurred through the then normal practice of passing all mail back to London first, regardless of destination. By 1717, Ongar was clearly a busy office; Joseph King, the postmaster receiving a salary of £25 per annum but within ten years, his successor, Lionel King was being paid only £5, possibly a reflection of reduced business or perhaps because the postal service was subsidiary to his main business. Lionel King was still in office in 1756 but the next record, 1791 shows that Elizabeth Bancolhin was now postmistress.

During the early days of the postal service, there was no official scheme for delivering letters to individual residences, although many informal arrangements existed for messengers to visit the post towns to collect and deliver mail. This changed in 1765 with the establishment of the Penny Post, allowing for the distribution of mail to surrounding villages by provincial post offices but it was to be eighty years before this new parliamentary act benefited Fyfield. Then, in 1845, the residents of Fyfield requested the Postmaster General to establish a postal service to the village and the request was promptly granted. For the next thirty years, letters for the residents of Fyfield were delivered from Ongar, where the post office was in the charge of the Scruby family for the seventy years between 1816 and 1886; first Maria, then Ann and finally William. This arrangement lasted until 1881 when a sub post office was opened in the village to serve Fyfield and the nearby hamlet of Cannons Green. Shortly after, delivery was extended to cover the slightly more distant Norwood End, more populous in those days than it is now. The status of the post office in Ongar varied during this time; for the fifteen years following 1865, it was re-designated a sub post office of Brentwood.

In 1893, two years before Parish Councils in general, and Fyfield Parish Council in particular were established, the electric telegraph arrived in the village. Residents now had the means of communication with the wider world through the medium of the telegram - today, sadly, defunct - and could send and receive messages of joy and grief alike with an urgency hitherto undreamed of.

Fyfield's link with the outside was finally completed in 1923, when the telephone exchange was installed.

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