

The British Post Office to-day is admirably administered, and when the final development shall have been consummated it will in all probability take rank as one of the most perfect and most beneficent of all human organizations.

In referring briefly to the development of the Post Office, it will be convenient to allude to some of its functions and operations in connection with the following reforms:—

- (1.) The adoption of penny postage in the United Kingdom.
- (2.) The adoption of the postal telegraph system in the United Kingdom.
- (3.) The adoption of penny postage throughout the Empire.
- (4.) The adoption of a postal cable service between all parts of the Empire.

All these great advances are associated with the Victorian era. The first took its origin in the year when the young Princess Victoria ascended the throne, and the last was initiated a few weeks before, when as Queen-Empress she passed away. It remains for King Edward VII. to see completed a service of transcendent importance to the vast inheritance bequeathed to him by his illustrious mother.

The First Reform.

The annals of the Post Office show that before the reign of Queen Victoria postal services were generally defective; that the postal rates were most burdensome; that the charges on letters varied according to the distance they were transmitted, and were in consequence exceedingly inconvenient; that in some instances the postage exceeded the rate now levied more than twenty-fold; and that it averaged nine times the present charge.

In 1837 a remarkable pamphlet appeared under the title "Post-Office Reform: its Importance and Practicability." The author, Mr. (afterwards Sir) Rowland Hill, had carefully studied all the existing conditions, and in the work mentioned he made public his conclusions, and pointed out the benefits which would result if certain radical changes which he recommended were carried out. The principal change proposed was to reduce the postage to a uniform rate of 1d. per letter, without regard to distance, within the limits of the United Kingdom, and the author did not hesitate to declare that with this change there would be at least a fivefold increase in correspondence. His proposal was ridiculed as wild and visionary, and encountered the honest opposition of many high in official life. Those connected with the Post Office, from the Postmaster-General down, were especially pronounced in their hostility. To the last they persisted in predicting complete failure as the certain result of the proposed reform.

Sir Rowland Hill, however, in submitting such a bold proposal, had made quite sure of his ground. His conception of a uniform penny postage was the outcome of a thorough knowledge of the subject which he had been at pains to acquire. It was not a happy thought merely, but the result of laborious investigations, and he had satisfied himself as to the practicability of the proposal before announcing it to the public.

Its convenience was obvious, in view of the fact that there were, on inland letters alone, from twenty to thirty different rates of postage. Moreover, he was able to show that the reduction to a uniform charge of 1d. per letter would not permanently interfere with the revenue, although for a few years it would diminish receipts. He foresaw that the expansion of business and the enormous increase in correspondence would speedily cause the revenue to recover itself.

The progress of public opinion in favour of the reform was so rapid that Parliament took up the matter before the end of 1837, and appointed a Committee of inquiry, which sat throughout the session of 1838 and examined many witnesses. The result of the investigation is well known, but it is not perhaps so well known that the resolution establishing the vital principle of the reform was carried only by the casting-vote of the Chairman, Mr. Robert Wallace, member for Greenock. The publication of the report of the Committee, embodying the arguments in favour of penny postage, gave an extraordinary impetus to the demand for the proposed measure, and but a short time elapsed before Parliament granted one of the greatest boons ever conferred on a people.

Penny postage came into force throughout the United Kingdom in January, 1840, and before many years had passed all the evil forebodings respecting the loss of revenue were falsified. The benefits resulting from the change were conspicuous, and were not confined to the United Kingdom. Six years later a public subscription was raised throughout the country in recognition of Sir Rowland Hill's services, and the knighthood bestowed on him by his Sovereign was another attestation of his merit. At a later day Lord Palmerston, after pointing out in the House of Commons the advantages which penny postage had bestowed on the nation, concluded by moving, "That the sum of £20,000 sterling be granted to Her Majesty as a provision for Sir Rowland Hill," a man whose name should be remembered in every country, for every country has benefited, and will continue to benefit, from his thoughtful labours.

Harriet Martineau describes the great postal reformer as "a man of slow and hesitating speech, but so accurate, so earnest, so irrefragable in his facts, so wise and benevolent in his intentions, and so well-timed in his scheme that success was certain from the beginning."

By the year 1854 the postal improvements resulting from Sir Rowland Hill's initiative had been adopted more or less completely in every civilised country. Speaking in the United States Senate in 1870, Charles Sumner referred to Sir Rowland Hill as—"The son of a schoolmaster, of simple life, and without any connection with the Post Office, he conceived the idea of radical reform—he became the inventor or author of cheap postage—there are few more worthy of honour; and, since what is done for one country becomes the common property of the world, he belongs to the world's benefactors."

In 1897, the year of Her late Majesty's Diamond Jubilee, the British Post Office gave a new significance to the expression "penny postage" by increasing the weight of letters for which a penny suffices to pay the carriage within the United Kingdom from 1 oz. to 4 oz. No such letter rate exists in any other country in the world.