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James Grant

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TRAVELS IN TOWN.

CHAPTER VII.

THE POST OFFICE.

Its origin—Its situation, dimensions, and appearance—Business in the Inland Office—Letter carriers—Preparing for the despatch of the mails—Number of letters which pass through the Post Office—Number of letters forwarded through private conveyances—General observations and statements—Reflections suggested by a sight of the letters previous to their being sorted—Scene in the vestibule, and departure of the mails—Transmission of newspapers—The average number sent through the Post Office—Enelosing newspapers in covers—The Two-penny Post Office—Its history and present state—General remarks.

THE General Post Office is one of the noblest institutions not only in London, but in the world. It is worthy of a great country like England, and in none but such a country could it ever have been brought to that admirable, I may almost say perfect, state in which it now exists. It

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will be my chief purpose in this chapter to convey to my readers some idea of the vast and complicated, though perfectly harmonious machinery, in constant operation in this wonderful establishment.

The Post Office dates its origin from the year 1635, in the time of Charles the First. Previous to that time letters were forwarded to different parts of the country by any chance conveyance which offered itself. The necessary consequence was not only an exceedingly dilatory delivery, but, in many cases, the miscarriage of important letters. It was this that induced a Mr. Palmer of Bath to endeavour to devise some plan by which the important object of a safe and speedy conveyance of letters from one place to another, might be gained. He accordingly suggested the propriety of establishing coaches for the purpose, which should run at regular intervals of time. The experiment, for it was at the time viewed in no other light than as an experiment, was first tried by causing coaches to run between London and Bath. It was soon found to answer the intended purposes

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so admirably, both as regarded safety, dispatch, and even economy, that in a very short time similar coaches were appointed to run throughout every part of the kingdom in which there existed any considerable traffic. The Treasury speedily began to find that the Post Office would prove a source of considerable revenue. In a few years, a revenue of several thousand pounds was derived from it. It went on steadily increasing until it produced, in 1783, after paying all expenses, an income to the Government of 145,000*l.* per annum. Since then, as will be afterwards seen, the net revenue derived from the Post Office has increased to more than ten times that amount.

The General Post Office of London used to be in Lombard Street, in a very confined and inconvenient situation. The premises there, being found much too small for the amount of business transacted, and it being desirable that a more central situation should be fixed on,—the present site in St. Martin-le-Grand was chosen nearly twenty years ago for a new building, though that building was not be-

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gun for some time afterwards, and was not finished until 1829. The situation of the new Post Office is the best that could have been chosen. It is in the very centre of the most active and business part of London. It is at the east end of Newgate Street, and the south end of St. Martin's-le-Grand. It is not above fifty yards from St. Paul's, and, considering the part of the town, may be said to be in a fine open locality. The building is of the Grecian Ionic order of architecture. The basement is of granite, but the body of the edifice is of brick, faced with Portland stone. The building is large, and has a magnificent appearance. Its length is four hundred feet, and its breadth eighty feet. The portico in the centre of the front, which has an imposing effect, is seventy feet broad, and consists of six columns of Portland stone ; which columns support a triangular pediment, on which is inscribed in Latin, the name of George the Fourth, the then reigning monarch, and the year in which the superstructure was completed. At the extremity of each wing is a portico of four columns. The front of

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the building is to the west. The front has forty-four large windows : at the back, or east front, the number of windows is no less than one hundred and eighty.

Beneath the centre portico is a vestibule which has a singularly imposing effect. There is always a greater or less number of persons in it,—some on business, and others merely passing through it, as affording a short cut from St. Martin's-le-Grand to some parts of the City eastwards, or from the latter to St. Martin's-le-Grand. On the north side of the vestibule are the receiving rooms for letters, and apartments for the sorting or classification of all inland letters and newspapers. The mails are all received at the east front ; strictly speaking, the back of the building. On the south side are the Foreign Office, and the Offices of Receiver and Accountant. At the east end of the vestibule are the Two-penny Offices. The largest room in the establishment is that in which the sorting takes place, and is hence called the Sorter's apartment : it measures forty-six feet in length, by twenty-four in breadth. As any

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accident to the Post Office by fire might be attended with most unfortunate results to the country, the building has been made fire-proof. At night the appearance of the place is strikingly imposing, owing in a great measure to the vast number of gas-lights which are seen burning. The entire number of gas-burners with which the place is fitted up, is one thousand.

The business of the General Post Office commences at the Inland-office a little after six o'clock in the morning, the time at which the mails arrive. The first thing to be done is to see that all the mail-bags have arrived, and that they are properly fastened. The sub-postmaster's bill is then examined, to see that it corresponds with the amount of paid letters. If the amount be surchargèd, it is reduced; if it be under, it is increased to the proper extent. These are duties which are performed by the superintending-resident of the Inland-office, assisted by some of the clerks under him. The next thing to be done is, first, to sort the letters and newspapers into divisions, and then to subdivide them into walks. This is a process

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which requires the utmost care, and, to accomplish it within the specified time, the greatest dispatch. The number of persons employed in the work is accordingly very great. Including the letter-carriers, it is at present, or was in the beginning of the present year 405. Of this number there are 84 clerks, 50 sub-sorters, 30 messengers, and the remaining 241 are letter-carriers. The clerks sort the letters, and the sub-sorters the newspapers. The messengers assist in carrying them in bundles, from place to place, and the letter-carriers receive them for the purposes of delivery, and also, to a certain extent, assist in the previous sorting of them. There is what is called an early delivery of letters in the City, in order that those most extensively engaged in mercantile business may have the advantage of receiving communications from their correspondents before breakfast. The early delivery commences at half-past eight in the morning, and is usually finished by half-past nine, or a little after. It is not performed by the usual letter-carriers, but chiefly by the sub-sorters, who are a sort of

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promoted letter-carriers ; or something between letter-carriers and the clerks. These persons, in addition to their salaries from the Post Office, receive gratuities from the parties receiving letters. The emoluments derived from this source are very considerable. The same parties ring the bells, as it is called, every evening, for half an hour after the shutting up of the branch-offices, in the various walks into which the town is divided ; and for every letter brought them, they are allowed to charge a penny. Their emoluments from the two sources combined, are, as regards the City, so great, that while the salary of the junior letter-carriers is 1*l.* 3*s.* per week, theirs is reduced to 14*s.* in consideration of the amount they receive in this way. The sub-sorters all consist of senior letter-carriers. Some of them, it is understood, average about 200*l.** a-year, after being obliged,

* When one of these lucrative walks falls vacant, owing to the death, continued illness, or other cause, of the party who had it, it is offered as a matter of right to the next senior letter-carrier on the establishment. It often happens, however, that he cannot avail himself of the opportunity thus offered him of bettering his circumstances, in consequence of

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which they all are, to pay a certain amount into a fund, called a superannuation fund. Many of their incomes exceed 150*l.* a-year. In order to expedite the delivery of the early letters as much as possible, the sub-sorters do not wait to receive the postage, but call for it after eleven o'clock.

The general delivery commences about nine o'clock. Those letter-carriers, whose walks lie

his not possessing the requisite capital to "work the walk," as the technical phrase has it. In that case the offer is made to the next person in the order of seniority, and so on until some one having the means of working the walk, has the offer made to him. The sum required for this purpose is often very great. The Broad Street walk, in the City, cannot be worked by any letter-carrier, with a capital of less than 2000*l.* Another walk in Cheapside, requires at least from 1200*l.* to 1500*l.* for the purpose. The reason why so great a capital is required, is, that the large mercantile houses only pay their letters once a month; whereas, the postmen must settle with the Post Office three times a-week. The credit, therefore, is given entirely at their own risk, as it is at their own option. The consideration they get in return from the merchants, for the accommodation thus afforded them, is certain gratuities, which constitute by far the largest part of their income. Sometimes they suffer from bad debts. Instances are not uncommon, in which merchants in an extensive way of business fail, owing the postman from 15*l.* to 20*l.* for unpaid letters.

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in the western or other distant parts of the town, immediately on receiving their letters and newspapers, spring into an omnibus, provided by their employers for the purpose, which carries them at a rapid rate to their several destinations. By this means the remoter parts of London are not much later in receiving their letters than those parts in the immediate neighbourhood of the General Post Office. An hour and a half is the time which, in ordinary circumstances, the delivery is expected to occupy in each walk. Every letter-carrier has his walk, making nearly 240 walks altogether into which the town is divided. On delivering his last letter he proceeds to the nearest Receiving-house, and gets a certificate signed by the receiver, to show that he completed his delivery in proper time.

Of late, a second delivery of letters has been established. These are letters which come by a second mail, bringing bags from the leading places in the North of England. As it would be found impossible for the general post-carriers to deliver the letters which come by this