

THE STORY OF ALRESFORD'S POST - AFTER 1800

By

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The first part of this story (in Alresford Displayed 1985) ended with the entry in Post Office Minutes of the appointment of a "Post Officer" at Alresford, in 1784, and a further Minute in 1802 reporting his imminent retirement. The 1801 census shows him lodged at 25 Broad Street, now "The Old Post Office".

Miss Mary Russell Mitford in "Our Village", writing in the early 1800's, describes the roads at that time as "the abyss of pulverised gravel which had the impudence to call itself a hard road .

if you meet a carriage coming along the bottomless middle of the road, what a sandy whirlwind it was ... vanishing into its own dust".

It was the new "Macadamised" roads, and Telford's bridges that made possible a fast Mail Coach service in a century of innovation and great change. In May 1785 the Hampshire Chronicle had reported on "Mr. Palmer's excellent plan of conveying the mails" and added "the inhabitants of Winchester and the neighbouring towns should convene meetings to apply for an extension of this Mail Coach plan to Winchester and Southampton". Only seven years later the 'Universal British Directory 1 could report "The Mail coach from London passes through ALRESFORD every morning between three and four o'clock on its journey to PCOLE, from which place it arrives every night about eleven o'clock at ALRESFORD on its way to the Bell & Crown Inn at Holborn". It added "The Post Office (at Alresford) opens at eight every morning and shuts at nine o'clock at night"! It also reported two regular daily coaches to London and three "waggoners" each week.

At this time local mail was collected from, and delivered to village "Receiving Houses". From the late 18th century many areas charged a "Penny Post" for this service when it was carried out by Post Boys who wore blue jackets. Alresford did not establish a "Penny Post", unlike most Post Towns in Hampshire, and it appears that it relied on the villages to find someone to take mail to and from Alresford.

In June 1836 the Solicitor to the Post Office reported to the Post-Master General "I have been informed of a murder having been committed on a Postman in the vicinity of Alresford. I called on the Postmaster of that town to state why he had delayed stating the facts immediately to your Lordship, in obedience to one of the Standing Regulations ..." "From his reply it appears that the unfortunate party was not an official messenger but a person employed by the inhabitants of BRAMDEAN to call at the Post Office in Alresford for their letters. This, and his knowledge that the police had been fully apprised of the case, had caused his apparent inattention to the orders of the Board. As the unhappy man was not a servant of the Department, and the necessary steps had been taken by police officers for the apprehension of the offender it does not appear necessary for your Lordship to interfere further. I have caused the Postmaster of Alresford to be written to, cautioning him that hereafter the orders of the Board must in all respects be rigidly adhered to". The Alresford postmaster later reported that "John Deadman has been convicted of the murder of the Alresford/Bramdean letter-carrier and convicted".

Patronage played a large part in local appointments at this time and the Postmaster was no exception. One of the men most influential in Hampshire was Sir William Heathcote, M.P. In February 1802 a Mr. Rose proposes Mrs. Smith to take over the Post Office in Alresford. The Post Master General minuted "I shall be ready to concur on receiving Sir Wm. Heathcote's recommendation". Sir *Vim.* Heathcote replied "If Mrs. Smith be not a married woman and

otherwise eligible, I presume the Post Master General will appoint her Postmistress of Alresford". In July the Postmaster resigned and the Secretary to the Post Office wrote to the P.M.G. "As Miss (sic) Smith has been strongly recommended by Mr. Rose and Sir Wm. Heathcote, I presume your Lordship will order her appointment without delay".

After only eighteen months the Post Office Solicitors report the Alresford's Postmistress as insolvent. Normally a new Postmaster had to be 'guaranteed' by two Bondsmen. Apparently Miss Smith only had one as a P.O. Minute says "We shall sustain no injury, but it is hard on Mr. Jackson that he should have to pay the whole arrears as the Bond was not executed by two persons". The P.M.G.'s reply was "It is hard on Mr. Jackson but I do not see what the P.M.G. can do".

In November 1804 Sir Wm. Heathcote recommends MR. HART, a publican, to whom the P.M.G. "had no objection". Presumably a publican proved unsatisfactory as a Postmaster, for in July of the next year the P.M.G. is advised of Mr. Hart's resignation and an application from William Harris on behalf of William Skinner. The memo went on "It is certainly desirable that at Alresford, and at all other places, the Post Office should not be at Inns, but at Private Houses. I presume you would be inclined to consult Sir William again". The Mail Coaches still used the Inns as staging posts but the mail itself was often picked up, and delivered, at the Post Office by means of a bag on a pole, whilst still passing at speed. Alternatively, the delivered bag of mail might be thrown out as the coach passed, and the outgoing mail picked up at the Inn.

Sir William's third recommendation in as many years proved more successful as Wm. Skinner served for 21 years and was succeeded by his son, Thomas Skinner, for a further 16 years.

They housed the Post Office at 4 EAST STREET, which had been bought by William's father about 1752. William gave two Bond Securities for £400 - Benjamin Whitear (a seedsman) and Peter Kirby (gentleman). When Mr. Kirby died he was replaced by Mr. John Dunn, solicitor.

John Freeman, M.P. for Hampshire, wrote to the P.M.G. in March 1820 "Mottley & Harrison, Editors of the Hampshire Telegraph, have begged permission to use my name in Franking their paper. I have accepted their request". It was in this year that Free Postage was extended to M.P.'s and others without the privileged person actually signing the mail. The newspaper would get free postage.

In February 1824 the P.M.G. was advised "In December last year the Alresford mailbag to Southampton was lost. Every enquiry was made for seven days, but without effect. It appears the bag was found by a man named Shuttle, who picked it up in a street in Winchester and detained it for enquiry. It was however at last delivered to the Postmaster of Winchester. In the case of lost bags it has been the custom to fine the guard one guinea to remunerate the finder. In the present case he was suspended and the reward would have had to be paid out of the Revenue if the finder had been deserving of it". It appears that, although we had received a letter stating that the finder was entitled to some reward, the Postmaster at Winchester very properly demurred at paying to Shuttle, who can read and write, is a Parish Clerk and a Watchman of the City. He, having found the bag within a hundred yards of the Post Office, had the duty to report the fact to the Constable of the Night. The Clerk to the Commissioners for superintending the Watching, Paving, etc., of Winchester writes that "they are of the opinion that John Shuttle most grossly misconducted himself while in the discharge of his duty on this occasion and have therefore discharged him from their service". "I presume your Lordship will approve the conduct of the Postmaster of Winchester and consider John Shuttle undeserving of any reward whatsoever". ("Approved, Chichester").

In 1826 THOMAS SKINNER (a barber, also at 4 East Street) was appointed on his father's resignation. He put up a Bond of £300. His uncle, Mr. Wise, lived next door at 2 East Street, and he mentions Thomas as "Postmaster" in his Will of 1834.

The Alresford Mailbag went astray again in 1829. A certain James Ward was apprehended for "secreting the bag and applying some of the negotiable contents to his own purposes". The trial described him as a "Mail Cart robber". The Postmaster at Alresford put in for £44.8/- for Law expenses including a chaise from Battle to Lewes. The account was approved.

The Agricultural Riots in 1831 put the local Post Offices to small additional expenses - 8s. 8Jd for Alresford! - which were claimed from the P.M.G. He was advised that "the question of these expenses was brought to the notice of your Grace's predecessor and as they were strictly on Her Majesty's service I presume your Grace may be pleased to allow their claims" ("No, Richmond").

The Hampshire Chronicle reports in 1834 on efforts to establish a direct mail between Winchester and Newbury, and later to Chichester, Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight. At that time such letters went up to London and then 'back' to places on a different main road. As postage rates were based on the total distance travelled, there was naturally pressure for what had become known as 'Cross Posts', i.e. across from one post road to an adjacent one. These were gradually introduced.

By 1839 the Railway had connected London with Basingstoke, and Southampton with Winchester. Between Basingstoke and Winchester travel was still by coach. So coaches and horses would be put on the train at Southampton, taken off at Winchester; a dash to Basingstoke, and there entrained again. The total journey was time-tabled for 5 hours. There were objections to the Sunday running of trains, to which the Railway replied that it had 'both a statutory Duty and a legal contract with the Post Office to carry mails every day' . (They did not add that the only Sunday mail train left London at 8 p.m.!)

The Post Office at last accepted that postal charges should be the same, irrespective of distance travelled, and in December 1839 a uniform 4d postal rate came into force, becoming a 1d post on 10th January 1840. In advance of these changes the Treasury had approved salary increases for all, recognising the likely heavy increase in the use of the Post.

The 6th May 1840 saw the issue of the world's first postage stamp - the Penny black (described officially as "a label"). The stamps met with suspicion and mistrust. Many people were not prepared to lick the glue, and left it for their servants to do so! Until 1853 pre-payment in cash was allowed to those who preferred it.

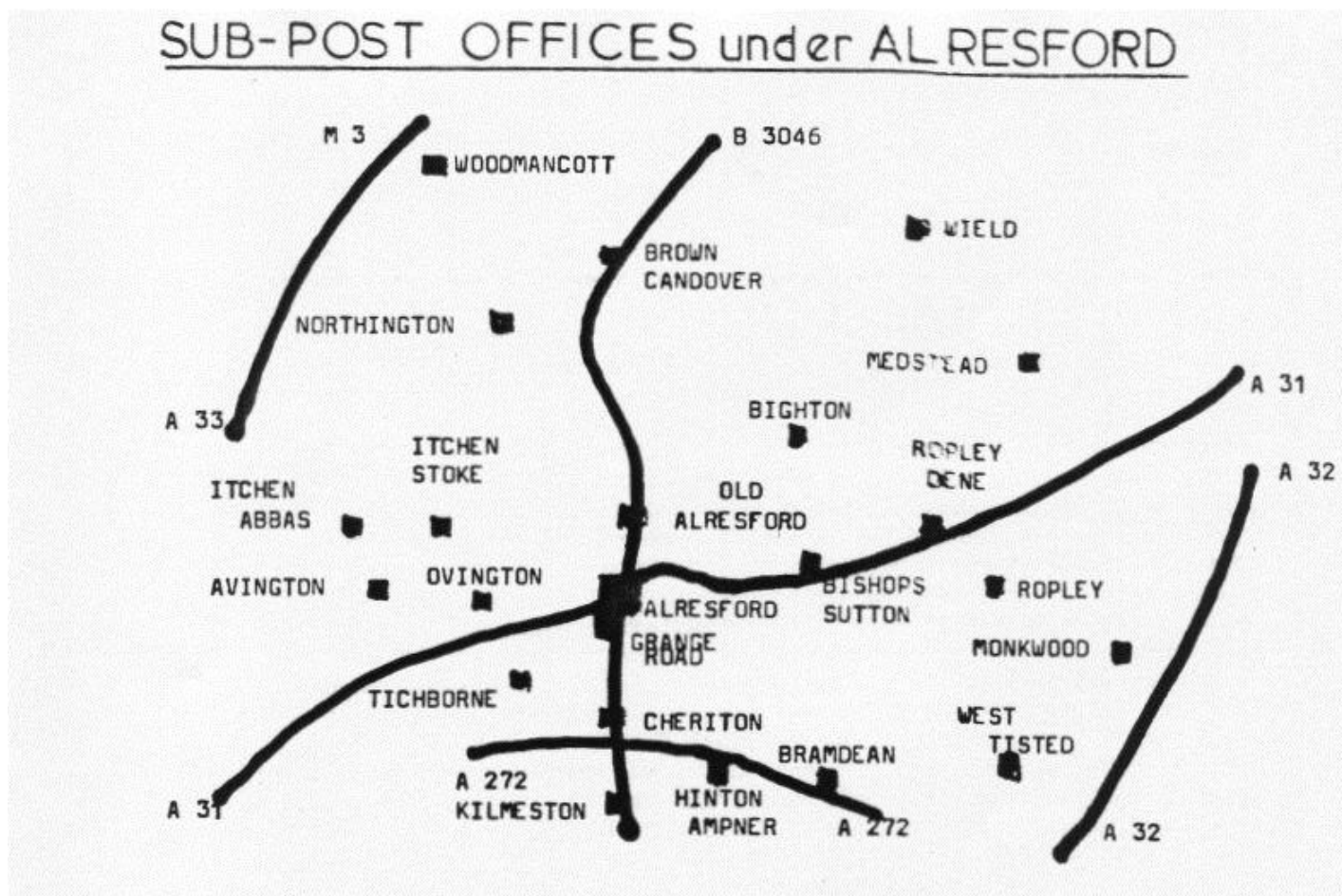
The 1841 Census showed Thomas Skinner, aged 50, living at 4 East Street and described him as "Postmaster". Next door to the Swan Inn lived SARAH REYNOLDS, described as "stamp distributor". She was responsible for Commercial and Excise Stamps (Fiscals) as had been her predecessor Wm. Laine at the Swan Inn itself in 1830. By 1841 the tally of letters at Alresford was about 1400 a month. Thomas Skinner retired in 1842. He was followed by Ms. ANNE KEENE. (She was described by Sir William as 'Mrs.' but by the Post Office as 'Miss'. Safer to call her Ms.!) Her Bond was for £300. She established the Post Office at her home, 3a WEST STREET. There was a vacancy in 1848 for a "Messenger" from Alresford to Tulford (sic), wages 10/- a week. A year later there was an application to the P.M.G. for an increase in wages for the letter-carrier but this was not approved. In 1852 "the inhabitants along the line of post between Alresford and Northington, and also the Messenger himself, desire the resumption of the Sunday post". This was approved.

This was a time of considerable expansion in the area covered from New Alresford. In 1852 Charles Major was Postmaster at Old Alresford. There were RECEIVERS at ITCHEN ABBOTS (sic) - John Stanbrook; BRAMDEAN (Thos. Hall, cabinet-maker); CHERITON (Richard & Olive Harfield, Blacksmith); NORTHINGTON (Mrs. Harriet Seacombe); ROPLEY (Wm. Williams); BIGHTON (Thos. Shadwell); BROWN CANDOVER (Chas. Pink). Others are shown on the map. At one time Alresford had 22 sub-offices (see map). At this time letters by the WINCHESTER/ALTON Mailcart came twice a day. AINSWORTH HOUSE was granted a free delivery in 1864 but this was discontinued six years later. In 1865 Ms. Keene retired, as did

Thompson, a Rural Messenger. Her successor was GEORGE PEPLOE and the Post Office returned to 4 EAST STREET for the next 29 years.

The coining of the Railway to Alresford in 1865 re-established the day-mail links to and from Alton and led to a general speeding up of the service. The watercress industry began and flourished. MISS PINK'S appointment to TICHBORNE Old Post Office deserves a mention, for she continued there until living memory. Less fortunate was PINNOCK, a Ropley Messenger, who was sacked for intoxication on duty in 1873. Ten years later the Hampshire Chronicle reports "John Andrews, a mail cart driver of Alton, was summoned for 'not having his horse under proper control while driving along the highway'. At three a.m. the mail cart was seen passing down Pound Hill with the reins trailing along the ground, the defendant being asleep on his seat. The constable called to him but got no reply, and the horse passed on to the Post Office, where it stopped of its own accord, the defendant being asleep. Fined 10/-."

George Peploe was still Postmaster when his Office was moved to 23 BROAD STREET in 1894. It thus returned to where it had been for a few years from 1801/4. Peploe retired in 1899, after 34 years as Alresford's Postmaster. He died a year later. His successor was GEORGE CURTIS, who took over a staff of 4 clerks, 9 postmen and 4 rural postmen. The postmen, with bulls eye lanterns on their bags, walked or used pony traps. It is said that until 1902 the postmen from Alresford used to sound a horn at the bottom of the hill approaching Wield for people to bring and collect letters. Later the postmen had bicycles and wore breeches and puttees. In 1904 the Post Office moved to its present site at 15/17 WEST STREET. It was at first leased for 21 years at £101. p.a. and a further lease was taken out in 1924.



ALRESFORD POSTMASTERS

SWAN INN

1784 Wm. SHAWFORD

25 BROAD STREET

before

1801 'A Shoemaker'

1802 Miss (Mrs?) SMITH

1804 Mr. HART

4 EAST STREET

1805 Wm. SKINNER

1826 Thos. SKINNER

39 WEST STREET

1842 Ms. KEENE

4 EAST STREET again

1865 GEORGE PEPLOE

who, in 1894, moved to

23 BROAD STREET again

1900 G. CURTIS

15/17 WEST STREET

(the present site)

1904 G. CURTIS moved here

1909 G. LUND

1911 G. CURTIS again

1916 J.K. BENN

1925 H. PEPLOE

1930 H.B. HAMMOND

1936 F.A. BASCOMBE

1945 J.W. BLAKE

1954 C.E.W. BROWN

1960 H. WHEELER

1964 T. RODSTONE

1977 Supply Officers

from Southampton

1980 C. POLLOCK

1981 G. WEST

GRANGE ROAD SUB-POST OFFICE

1910 Mr. NORLEY

1951 ?Mrs. POINTER

1973 CLOSED on the death of Mrs. Pointer.

However, the site was purchased by the Post Office in February 1937. Before Kilmeston had its own sub post office, the school mistress was authorised to sell stamps and postal orders (the latter to enable villagers to send money, as very few if any would have had Bank Accounts). This may have continued until after the first World War, and was no doubt the practice in most rural areas. A sub post office was opened in GRANGE ROAD, ALRESFORD, kept by Mr. Morley and later by Mrs. Pointer for many years until 1973. From 1909/11 Mr. G. LUND replaced Mr. Curtis at West Street, but he returned again in 1911 until 1916.

Until the first World War the Postmasters had been local people and to most of them their Post Office was their life as well as their livelihood. From 1805/1909 there were only five Postmasters in Alresford. Since then it has become a career staging post, with eleven Postmasters in seventy years, and three years of temporary supply Officers. It is interesting that of those early Postmasters two were women. This quick succession of Postmasters brought to Alresford MR. G. WEST, the present Office-holder, whose assistance the writer gratefully acknowledges. He tells me he suffers one disadvantage - Alresford is alphabetically at the top of any Reports and Statistics circulated to, and discussed by Regional Postmasters, so always get the most critical appraisal! Most of us who use the Post Office would agree that his increased provision of information leaflets, displays of new stamps, and the special First Day Covers Posting Box, together with his pleasant and helpful staff, give us a surprisingly good service in the cramped office in which they have to work. To the Postmen too, who give cheerful service in all weathers, we give our thanks, even if they only visit the Sun Hill area once a day!

POSTSCRIPT No account of the Post Office in Alresford would be complete without a reference to JOHN FREEMANTLE. He is described as 'Postman and Shoemaker', which is a considerable understatement. He was a letter carrier for 55 years until his death in 1894. Among his activities he wrote verse, was local Press Correspondent, and much in demand as a lecturer. He was a local preacher and also acted as a letter-writer for illiterates. He was a skilled engraver and made coffin plates. But his greatest love was mathematics and he completed 200,000 sq. feet of astronomical diagrams. These were offered to the G.P.O. Museum in 1897, but so far I can find no trace of them. He lived in poverty, being given a Benefit Concert in the Town Hall (now the Community Centre) in 1892, and a £20. gift raised by a whip-round among the Postmen in West London in 1893. His death was sudden, while singing a hymn in the Methodist Chapel on Sunday

evening 22nd April 1894. He was buried in Alresford churchyard. No stone marks his resting place.

The FREEMANTLES were an old-established Hampshire family. In the late 16th century a John Freemantle lived at Medstead and before that John and Elizabeth Freemantle lived at Bishops Sutton. Nicholas Freemantle was Parish Clerk of Bishops Sutton and died in 1711. Freemantles were famous Alresford cricketers and later one of them was groundsman to the Rifle Brigade. In 1811 John Freemantle, of the Fulling Mill, was buried in Old Alresford. His widow carried on the Mill. A Harry Freemantle, who died in 1855 at the age of 81, may have been John Freemantle's father.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS As mentioned at the end of Part 1, most of my information has been culled from the files of the Post Office Museum in London; the Hampshire Record Office, and the files of the Hampshire Chronicle. I am very grateful for the help received from them.

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