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POST-OFFICE.

SUNDAY DUTIES.

THE following is a copy of the original minute on this subject, which was submitted to the Postmaster General in February last:—

TO THE POSTMASTER GENERAL.

1. In obedience to your Lordship's instructions, I beg to submit my views as to further measures for reducing the Sunday duties of the Post-office, and as to other improvements connected therewith.

2. The importance of affording to all connected with the Post-office the utmost amount of rest on the Sunday that is consistent with a due regard to public convenience having led to measures for the total suspension of money-order business on that day throughout England and Wales, it is very satisfactory to remark, that neither the announcement of the change, nor the experience of it thus far, has brought on the department a single complaint from the public; and I confidently anticipate like satisfactory results should the Treasury concur in your Lordship's recent recommendation of a similar measure in Ireland and Scotland.

3. Your lordship will recollect that, in considering the above improvement, the importance of similar relief as respects other duties was kept in mind; and, from the investigations which have been made, there can be no doubt that a further very important relief as relates to Sunday work may be effected in all the provincial offices.

4. The consideration of this question, however, is closely connected with that of a measure mainly relating to public convenience, but which, contrary to first appearances, proves on investigation to have a direct tendency towards the same object of Sunday relief.

5. The transmission of letters through London on the Sunday, your Lordship is aware, has long been a desideratum, having been recommended by the Commissioners of Post-office Inquiry in 1836 (7 Report, p. 9); and by a committee of the House of Commons in 1838 (3 Report, p. X); and again suggested by several members of a committee of the House of Lords in 1847 (Report of Select Committee, Ev. 430—445).

6. The obstacles to the adoption of these recommendations were, first, an assumption that it would increase the Sunday work of the department; second, a fear that it would lead to a Sunday delivery in London.

7. Both these apprehensions, as will be shown hereafter, are groundless.

8. Since the time when the above recommendations were made, the importance of the change has greatly increased, the Sunday average of letters involved in the consideration having advanced since 1836 from 5,000 or 6,000 to 50,000 or 60,000, or tenfold.

9. The importance of the change will be still more manifest on reference to the fact, that this present number of London "forward letters" for a single day much exceeds what was in 1836 the corresponding number for a whole week; for the expediting of which it was determined by Government, on the recommendation of the Commissioners of Post-office Inquiry, to establish day mails at an estimated cost of £15,000 a year (7 Report, p. p. 5 and 121).

10. The evil of the present arrangement, already so great, is constantly increasing, partly because of the general increase of letters, but mainly because of the centralising tendency of the railways. The greatly increased speed of conveyance, too, obviously tends to make any detention more severely felt: and the inconvenience is particularly serious when, as occasionally happens, the detention falls on a mail from the East or West Indies.

11. The evil of detention has been found so serious, that in several cases the rule has been evaded, either by making use of other existing channels for the conveyance of the mails sent on ordinary days through London, or by the actual establishment of Sunday cross-posts, either of which

arrangements obviously involves increased expense, trouble, liability to error, perplexity to the public, and additional Sunday work. Thus, the mail between Winchester and Birmingham is sent on the Sunday through Exeter; and again, the correspondence between the towns served by the North-Eastern Railway and those served by the North-Western Railway is conveyed on the Sunday by a mail-cart, expressly running on that day between Cambridge and Wolverton, through Newport Pagnel, a distance of 47 miles—an arrangement involving an expense of £148 per annum (£98 for the cart and £50 for additional sorting at Newport Pagnel), besides a direct increase in Sunday occupation.

12. Meantime the mail trains, excepting a few of the day mails, run as on other days, and, save as regards London, convey letters as usual. Even to London nearly all letters from Ireland, Scotland, and the out-ports, as also all foreign and colonial letters whatever, are brought, as on other days, the same being partly assorted at the chief office on the Sunday, for delivery or for forwarding, as the case may be, the next morning.

13. For the performance of these duties and for the selection and delivery of the "States," (Letters addressed chiefly to the higher offices of Government) twenty-six persons are ordinarily employed at the chief office on the Sunday, their time of occupation being, on the average, six hours. The arrival of a heavy mail from abroad requires a greater force.

14. To remove the evils of this weekly suspension of the ordinary transmission through London, and the anomalies arising out of it, and with the view of diminishing the amount of Sunday work in the department as a whole, I propose that the *existing mail trains* should bring up on the Sunday, in addition to the present bags, the *forward stamped letters*—excluding, however, newspapers, parliamentary proceedings, and all documents not paying the full letter rates. These limitations *will avert, on the one hand, any possibility of a Sunday delivery of letters to the London public*, and, on the other, any unnecessary addition to the Sunday accounts.

15. The restriction to stamped letters may perhaps cause some inconvenience to the public, especially at first, arising out of their difficulty of knowing what correspondence passes through London and what does not; but as it is in contemplation to confine the receipt of money paid letters to the chief office of each provincial town, and as the deputies can be instructed whenever the want of a stamp would cause the detention of a letter to state as much when it is presented for pre-payment (an arrangement which will be facilitated by the comparative leisure of blank post day), it appears to me that the danger of inconvenience to the public will be small, and certainly far less than that which now results from the doubt as to whether even stamped letters posted on blank post day will be detained or not.

16. The inland letters thus brought in, as they would require no accounts either to be examined or made out, would be dispatched by the existing day mails, in those cases where this would be necessary to secure their earlier delivery on the Monday.* All the other letters, whether inland or not would be sent by the night mails. It is obvious that, under this arrangement, none of the letters in question could be delivered anywhere on the Sunday.

17. I should also strongly advise that in the performance of the above mentioned duties at the London office, no infringement should be allowed on the hours of divine service; the whole interval from ten in the morning till five in the afternoon being left perfectly free, and I should propose to extend this arrangement as far as practicable to the existing duties at that office.

18. By availing ourselves of the time now occupied by the clerks of the travelling post-office in assorting such of the letters in question as now reach them by the special cross-posts, I am of opinion that a force of twenty-five men, at the expense of £300 per annum, will suffice for the duties now proposed; and when it is considered that in the single anomaly referred to above the plan will effect a saving of £148 a year,

* This proposition has subsequently been modified, the despatch being confined entirely to the night mail.

it appears highly probable that the total reductions effected by the improvement will fully compensate such additional expense.

19. I should add that, although Mr. Bokenham, whom I have consulted, sees no difficulty as regards the practicability of the general measure, he is of opinion that little aid can be afforded by the clerks of the travelling post-office; consequently, though willing to try with twenty-five additional men, his impression is that a somewhat larger number will be necessary.

20. As regards the effect of the proposed change on the amount of Sunday occupation, it is manifest from what has already been stated, that for the increased force at the chief office there is, to say the least, a large set-off elsewhere. A further examination, however, will put the matter in a light still more satisfactory.

21. It is notorious that a blank post is everywhere preceded and followed by a greater amount of correspondence than usual. Thus, in London, the average number of letters is greater on Saturday by six per cent., and on Monday by 25 per cent., than on other days. But, as respects the correspondence sent through London, Saturday evening is at present in most towns a blank post time. It therefore follows that such correspondence is despatched from the provinces in unusual amount on Saturday morning, and on Sunday morning or evening, according as there may or may not be a Sunday day mail.

22. Now, each of these augmentations tends to produce additional Sunday work, both to the department and to the public. For the letters in the first category are for the most part distributed by the post-office and read by the public on the Sunday, and those in the second are, for the most part, written by the public and despatched by the office on Sunday.

23. It is obvious, therefore, that, as far as relates to the letters in question, the proposed change would entirely get rid of Sunday work, as respects the public—while as respects the department, it would exchange work now dispersed through nearly a thousand offices for concentrated occupation in one—the latter requiring a less proportionate force, and falling on such time as to be dealt with without infringement on the hours of divine service. It is manifest, therefore, that as respects general supersession of Sunday work, the balance is in favour of the proposed plan.

24. The advantage, however, by no means rests here. The plan will be an important aid, as will be shown hereafter, to measures for relieving the provincial offices as regards Sunday business in general.

25. As regards the chief office, the force now proposed to be employed on the Sunday would suffice for nearly all the ordinary duties necessarily belonging to that day, and thus it would be possible to defer most of the work now done on the Sunday till after midnight; and thus to avoid any material increase in the Sunday force. This latter change, however, implies the previous consolidation of the inland and district post offices.

26. Nay, were it thought necessary, there are means, arising in part out of the comparative leisure at most country offices on the Saturday, by which Sunday work at the chief office might be reduced considerably below its present amount. As, however, these means involve some complexity, and possibly additional expense, I do not propose them at present. But hereafter, should they prove sufficiently simple to be reduced to practice, and not too expensive for adoption, there can be no doubt that this prevention of the weekly delay or irregularity in the vast correspondence which ordinarily passes through London, so far from involving any increase in the amount of Sunday work, would, independently of its aid to other measures of relief, directly produce a material diminution of the same.

27. I now come to the special question of relief to the provincial offices. The measures in contemplation appear in the following extract from my minute of Dec. 6, 1848:—

“That every office in England and Wales be closed for all purposes from ten to five o'clock on the Sunday, except for the receipt and despatch of any mails in the interval; but that a box be left open for the posting of stamped and unpaid

letters. Further, that there be only one delivery of letters on that day."

28. This proposal having been referred by your Lordship to the English surveyors, has met with their unanimous and earnest concurrence. It appears, however, that although the general rule is to have only one delivery on the Sunday, there are several towns in which there are two. The discontinuance of the additional delivery, although, with one doubtful exception, approved of by the surveyors, might, nevertheless, in the absence of other alterations, produce serious complaint from the public: the Sunday transmission of letters through London, however, would, as regards most towns in England and Wales, withdraw so large a proportion of letters from the second delivery (already very light), that the little delay in the delivery of the residuum would be of no moment. Such withdrawal, however, it must be admitted is, in relation to the public convenience, an objection, *pro tanto*, to the plan; but, as the delivery of these letters on the Monday morning would be made conjointly with that of many letters now detained till Monday afternoon, or, in some instances, till the next day, the measure, as a whole, would probably give satisfaction, even in the comparatively few towns where the delay would occur. Everywhere else it would certainly be felt as a great boon.

29. This change, therefore, being considered as part of the general measure, I have no hesitation in recommending that (with possibly one or two exceptions, which, if necessary, will be submitted hereafter) the second delivery be abolished throughout England and Wales; Ireland and Scotland being left for after consideration; and that the plan, as proposed in my minute of December 6th, be now carried into effect. The reports of the surveyors are submitted.

30. It may perhaps assist your Lordship in deciding the important question now submitted, if I briefly recapitulate the results, negative as well as positive, of the whole of the measure.

31. First, It will prevent irregularity or delay (often amounting to twenty-four hours) in the transmission of probably 50,000 letters a week.

32. Second, It will add little or nothing to the expenses of the department.

33. Third, It will cause no increase whatever of mail-trains or other means of transmission, to or from London, on the Sunday.

34. Fourth, It will neither bring in nor take out a single London letter, and therefore cannot cause either a Sunday delivery or a Sunday collection in London.

35. Fifth, While it will not affect the number of Sunday collections elsewhere, it will materially reduce the number of Sunday deliveries.

36. Sixth, While, so far as the public is concerned, it will leave matters precisely as they now stand in London and the vicinity, it will tend greatly to reduce Sunday letter writing and reading elsewhere.

37. Seventh, It is true that, as regards the London Post-office, it will in the first instance require the attendance of about 25 persons on the Sunday, but these will not be allowed in the slightest degree to infringe on the hours of divine service; and I am of opinion that eventually even this limited attendance may be avoided, and the Sunday work in the London office reduced much below its present amount. On the other hand, as regards the provincial offices, it will release a very large body of persons now engaged even during the hours of divine service, and will thus afford to many hundreds, perhaps even to some thousands, needful rest, and the opportunity of attending the services of the day.

38. Should your Lordship approve of these proposals, I submit that the necessary application be made to the Treasury.

39. Some important measures of relief to the rural messengers, and rural receivers on the Sunday, which have been suggested by Mr. W. Johnson will still remain for your Lordship's consideration: but, as they are not essential parts of the main plan, I propose to submit them hereafter in a separate minute.

February 3, 1849.

ROWLAND HILL.