

L is for... letter sheets

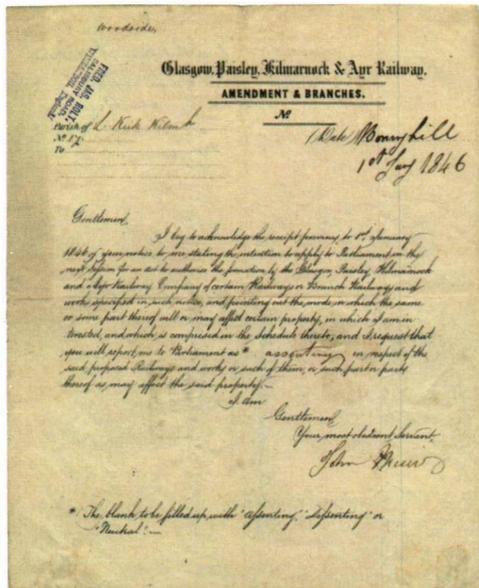


Fig 1 An 1844 letter sheet asking landowners if they agree to a railway line crossing their land

The Penny Post and the Penny Black changed the way the world communicated but these revolutionary innovations did not stop people hating the envelope

BEFORE THE POSTAL REFORMS OF 1840, the cost of sending a letter depended on the amount of sheets used as well as the distance the correspondence was going. An envelope counted as a sheet of paper so they were almost never used as people tried to keep costs down. Today the envelope is of course essential. Then it was an unwanted expense.

Senders usually wrote their message on one side of the paper and the address on the other, folded the paper so only the address was visible, and closed it with sealing wax. This was the 'letter sheet'.

The introduction of the postage stamp in 1840 changed the way a letter was paid for – by weight

only. But people's habits die hard and single sheets of paper – letter sheets without envelopes – continued to be used for many years. Their use saved the cost of buying an envelope and were convenient for businesses sending out order forms or questionnaires to customers and clients as the return address was printed on the form, ready for it to be put back in the post.

Prepaid letter sheets were issued as part of the Mulready postal stationery in 1840 with Penny Black stamps (I will tell that part of the story in a future article). But the public did not like William Mulready's design and his letter sheets were replaced in 1844 by ones with a Penny Pink stamp. Their use gradually declined in the 19th century as the public changed to ordinary paper and envelopes, though businesses continued with letter sheets where it was convenient and saved them money. Companies would use letter sheets for sending out dividend statements, with payment cheques attached, which would be torn off and paid into a bank account. They displayed the amount of money invested, the dividend paid and the rates of income tax deducted. The example from 1912 here shows income tax at 1s 2d in the pound (just under six per cent). These statements can often be found in dealers' stocks, but minus their cheques of course!

In the Victorian period vaccination against smallpox was mandatory and the local medical officer had to be informed of all cases on an official form. Letter



Fig 2

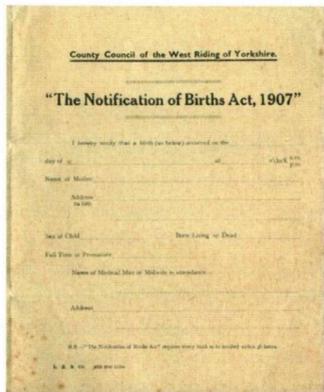


Fig 3

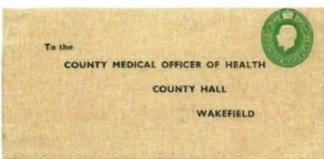


Fig 3a



Fig 4

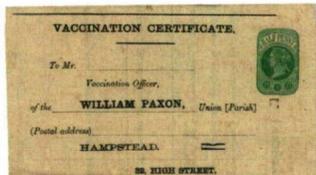


Fig 5

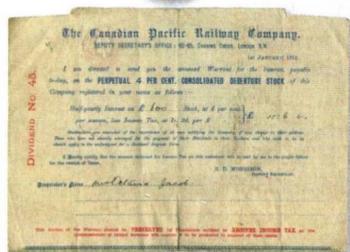


Fig 6



Fig 6a



Fig 7

sheets were used with a ½d stamp that was normally applied to newspaper wrappers, as the form was considered to be printed paper. It was also a requirement for births to be notified by mail (Fig 3 and Fig 3a) in the county in which they occurred. Letter sheets were often used for this purpose, as it avoided an envelope getting separated from a form. To make it easy for parents, the forms were prestamped and addressed, needing only to be folded and put in the post.

During the Second World War arrangements were made for families to write on special letter sheets (Fig 2) to servicemen and internees held prisoner by the enemy. These letter sheets were ideal – easy to censor because they were unsealed and without gum, with no hidden areas where secret messages could be written. Even the stamp was printed directly onto the sheet to prevent people covering a clandestine message with an adhesive stamp.

By the 1860s letter sheets were no longer sold by the Post Office, but they were still being privately produced by stationers for sale to the public. Businesses also continued to have letter sheets produced for their own use well into the 20th century. This ended when the stamped to order facility was withdrawn in 1973.

Next in Baker's A to Z of Postal Stationery: M is for Mulready Stationery.

Fig 2 A letter sheet for writing to prisoners of war. This example used in 1941 was censored both at the start and finish of its journey

Fig 3 and 3a Printed by West Yorkshire County Council, a birth notification letter sheet

Fig 4 Detail of the front of a Penny Pink letter sheet of 1850, which has the stamp impression accidentally inked on both sides of the paper

Fig 5 Victorian vaccination form with preprinted address

Fig 6 A pre-printed letter sheet of 1806 with a dividend statement, but without the cheque. Fig 6a Its front side

Fig 7 A preprinted letter sheet of 1806 with a dividend statement