Abstract

Speaking in London two years ago, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, a founder of the world wide web, compared the connectivity created by the digital world with the position 150 years earlier when the United Kingdom’s postal reforms of 1840 totally transformed the accessibility of the postal services. The course of the Industrial Revolution and the development of a mass market which spread across the globe, and which continues to this day, was enabled to a large extent by the enhanced ability to send and receive information in a timely fashion.

The foundation for these momentous changes stemmed from Government policy in the form of legislation which was implemented in the United Kingdom by Postal Treaties or Conventions between the Post Offices of countries around the world which had a mutual interest in enabling accelerated written communication. The intention of this paper is to focus upon the facilitation of mercantile communication and to examine the changes enabled by the legislative actions of the United Kingdom government and the executive implementation of the policy by the Treasury and by the Postmasters General.

The paper will seek to examine the development of postal treaties involving the United Kingdom government, beginning with the first international agreement between Thomas Witherings and the French Postmaster in 1636, followed by the first ‘modern’ Treaty with Portugal signed in London on 20th February 1705. By analysing the clauses of over sixty treaties and conventions, together with the additional articles added from time to time, it is possible to identify a focus which moved on from simply an acceleration of the mails, as in the Treaty of 1705, to a concentration upon mercantile intelligence in the form of newspapers, printed matter and patterns of merchandise. Whereas the second postal treaty with Portugal in 1810 had created reciprocal concessions for members of the armed forces and Government envoys and ministers, by 1845 the postal convention with Hanover extended the preferential treatment accorded to newspapers and prices current as the principal conduits of commercial information.

The formation of the G.P.U. in 1875, renamed the U.P.U. in 1878, might have been thought to have obviated the need for future bilateral postal agreements. The paper ends therefore by examining the individual agreements that were necessary in order to develop Datapost, or E.M.S. as it became known, into a global network in the 1970s followed by Intelpost in the 1980s. With many specialised postal services made redundant in an age of
electronic communication the question that has to be asked is whether the bilateral postal agreement has had its final flowering.

Source material:
Parry’s Consolidated Treaties
Reports to the Select Committee on Postage 1838
The Postal Museum Archive, London.