The Post Office and transport

Themes to explore:

- Moving the mails.
- Travel and transport systems.
- The environment, speed and the future.

Many people don’t realise that the Post Office was influential in the development of transport in Ireland but since it was responsible for getting letters from one place to another, it was naturally interested in doing this job in the best possible way. Roads, railway lines, shipping routes and even airlines have had close connection with the Post Office in Ireland. As the demand for the delivery of goods and letters increased over the centuries, the need for better transport routes both within Ireland and to its shores became important.

Foot, horse and bicycle

Originally letters were delivered by ‘post boys’ – actually men rather than boys – who walked or used their own horses. The men were poorly paid and equipped and they were sometimes attacked on their travels. In early days too, before there were post boxes on the street, some postmen would walk the streets of Dublin ringing a bell – they were called Bellmen – to attract attention and collect letters from people. Today, post is still delivered by foot to houses and businesses in city and town areas.

The Post Office has been a great supporter of bicycles. Occasionally tricycles with a basket were used for parcel delivery. In rural areas, a donkey and cart might have carried the mail for the postman on his route. Donkeys cost less to feed than horses and the Post Office had rules about how much money was allowed for the cost of feeding and keeping animals employed on delivery!
Mail Coaches

A major change in how post was conveyed came about in 1789 with the introduction of the Mail Coach, the first one operating on the road between Dublin and Cork. This meant that delivery became quicker and letters and passengers were conveyed at eight to ten miles per hour – very speedy for those days! Today some roads are still named after the Mail Coaches that used to use them: for example, the main road out of Sligo town heading towards Ballina in County Mayo is called Mail Coach Road. While the mail coach provided faster travel and improved delivery times for letters, people did not undertake a journey lightly. The roads were dark and dangerous at night and there were often attacks on the coaches for there could be money in the letters and valuables to be stolen from the passengers. There was often an armed guard on the coach but this by no means guaranteed safe passage and several guards were hurt in the course of protecting the mail. The Post Office issued rewards for information leading to the arrest of the desperate men responsible for such attacks.

When railways were invented, people soon switched to the new mode of travel and the Post Office gradually stopped using mail coaches and carts too. They survived in some places for quite a few years and one Italian man who settled in Ireland, Charles Bianconi, had a contract with the Post Office for carrying the post on his famous passenger coaches called Bians. Nowadays, small vans, and large trucks for the longer routes, are the main transport vehicles use by An Post. Eco-friendly electric vans are being tested and may be used much more in the future.

Travelling Post Offices (TPOs)

The first train in Ireland ran between Dublin and Dun Laoghaire or Kingstown as it was then known. The Post Office was quick to see that railways would be very useful for transporting mail and as the railway network grew, the old mail coaches were replaced. In 1855, the Post Office started to use special sorting carriages or Travelling Post Offices on trains.
Post Office staff would work on sorting the letters as the train travelled on its way and mail bags were dropped off and collected at specific points on the route. TPOs had a special net for catching mail bags that were hung up by the local postman for collection: a similar net, at the edge of the railway track, would catch bags sorted for towns and villages on the way. The Travelling Post Office was a great system and served the country for nearly one hundred and fifty years. It helped to speed up the mail and also to develop rural towns as business owners were able to send and receive correspondence and packages more easily.

**Mail Boats**

Regular mail boats, small sailing ships, were used to carry the post between Britain and Ireland from the sixteenth century onwards. Later, ships worked on steam propulsion and as the technology changed so too did the speed at which mail boats could travel. The steam ships carrying the mail between Britain and Ireland were, for many years, the best and fastest in the world. At Cobh, or Queenstown as it used to be called, great transatlantic liners would regularly call to pick up and drop off hundreds of sacks of mail. English and Irish mails destined for America left by way of the mail boats from Cobh.

For people at home living on islands such as the Aran Islands off the coast of Galway, the mail boat was seen as a life line to mainland Ireland. On some islands there were no proper piers and the islanders would have to row out to the anchored mail boat to collect the mails and to hand over letters to the captain. During Christmas 1951 on Inis Mór, the local priest took the life boat out in a storm to bring mails and the mail boat crew to safety. He delivered the Christmas mails to all three Aran Islands knowing how important it would be for families to receive Christmas greetings from their loved ones from all over the world.
A great tragedy took place in 1918, just a month before the end of the First World War, when the mail boat, RMS Leinster, was sunk by a German submarine in the Irish Sea. More than 500 people died including all but one of the Post Office staff who worked sorting letters on board the ship. An Post issued a stamp to mark this disaster a few years ago and a plaque in the GPO museum remembers the Post Office staff who died.

**Air-Mail**

Nowadays almost all letters entering and leaving Ireland are sent on aeroplanes but it was a big step for the Post Office back in 1929 when the first experimental air mail flight between Galway and London was undertaken. The aircraft were very small then and flying was very much a novelty but gradually new routes were set up and airmail costs fell so that it became more affordable for people to post airmail. Older people may remember airmail paper and envelopes which were extra light and cost less to send. The traditional blue air-mail sticker on an envelope helped Post Office staff to distinguish between air mail and ordinary surface letters. The United States and the United Kingdom are the two most important destinations for international mails.

No aeroplanes are as fast as e-mail and similar digital communications, of course, but speed isn't everything! For a while in the 1930s some Irish mail destined for far-away places was carried on the great air-ships, Zeppelins, of that period. It was considered a lovely way to travel but it was expensive and there were some bad accidents which meant that people and the Post Office decided against them. Rocket mail has also been tried but we will probably have to wait until there are Post Offices on other planets before it becomes popular!