Since the time of King Xerxes of Persia, whose messengers Herodotus described with the immortal words “Neither rain nor snow nor gloom of night,” etcetera, postal systems have been organizations with primarily political purposes, vital to every government and to the security and economic well-being of every nation. By the eighteenth century, every country in Europe maintained its own postal system, parallel to, and sometimes in place of, private courier companies. As Richard John showed in his book *Spreading the News*, the United States pioneered the idea of an efficient and inexpensive postal system that could serve all its citizens, an idea that spread to most countries in Europe in the nineteenth century.¹

In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, Great Britain was in a unique situation among the major countries. It was the foremost imperial power in the world and had the largest overseas trade. No other country relied so heavily on its foreign communications. From a postal point of view, Britain’s imperial and international communications deserve as much attention from historians as its domestic network.

Britain was unique in another way, as well, in that all of its foreign communications, and even some of its domestic ones, went by ship. Its overseas postal communications are therefore
closely tied to its naval and maritime history. And the nineteenth century was an age of
revolution in shipbuilding and shipping, with the advent of steamships and shipping lines. Not
surprisingly, as Britain was the foremost maritime and naval power in the world, this
transformation was also highly politicized and subject to government intervention and regulation.

Hence, a study of Britain’s overseas communications must go beyond the internal story of
the postal system, and must include politics, the technology of shipbuilding, and the economics
of shipping. This complex relationship raises a question of interest to a historian of technology
and politics like myself. Did the evolution of ships and shipping determine the evolution of
Britain’s overseas postal communications—the technological determinist question—or, on the
contrary, did the politics of postal communications influence the evolution of ships and
shipping—the social constructionist question? As I will argue in this paper, causality went both
ways, or rather four ways, between imperial politics, shipbuilding, shipping, and postal
communications.

Sailing Packets and Early Steamers

Before the Napoleonic Wars and again from 1815 to 1823, some of the mail to Europe and the
Americas was carried in Post Office packets, small ships with limited capacity. Packets to New
York took an average of forty-five days, sometimes as much as eighty-one. Most of the mail to
and from the United States, however, went in the much faster ships of the Black Ball and other
American lines that took twenty-one to thirty-three days eastward and thirty-five to forty
westward. For a few years after the war, the Post Office was authorized to send its packets to and
from South Africa and India, but that experiment proved too costly and was ended. From then
until 1830, the mail was once again sent in the East India Company’s large lumbering East Indiamen that took anywhere from four to six months to travel between India and England, meaning that a writer had to wait a year or two to receive an answer to a letter.

Meanwhile, entrepreneurs were experimenting with steam power. In 1818-1819 private steamers began crossing the Irish Sea to Belfast in little over eight hours, compared to the twenty hours taken by sailing ships. In 1821, the Post Office began purchasing small steamers for service to Ireland and to France. The switch to steam, however, caused a large deficit in the Post Office budget. In 1823, overseas mail service was taken over by the Admiralty, on the grounds that the Post Office was inefficient and its packets were more likely to be attacked by privateers than ten-gun Navy brigs.

Until the 1830s, steamships were limited to short distances, such as those separating England from Ireland or the continent of Europe. Things began to change under the impetus of the shipbuilders of Liverpool and Glasgow and of the British community in India. The first attempt to send a steamer, the Enterprize, to India took place in 1825, but it failed to win the prize it was named after, having made the trip to Calcutta via the Cape of Good Hope mostly under sail and in 113 days rather than the eighty-five stipulated in the contest. Success came in 1830, when the Hugh Lindsay steamed from Bombay to Suez in thirty days. The mail it carried was transported from Suez to Alexandria by camel and river boat, then put on board the Admiralty packet that served Alexandria. It arrived in London fifty-nine days after it had left Bombay. The future was clear: for the next fifty years, mail service between Britain and its Asian empire, the trunk line of the British Empire, went by the Overland Route through Egypt.
The Overland Route to India

The mail between Britain and India followed a complicated route. From Falmouth on the English Channel it was sent in Admiralty steam packets to Gibraltar, Malta, and Alexandria. From Alexandria the mail was taken by river boat to Cairo, then loaded on carts or camels for the three-day voyage across the desert to Suez. There, it was met by steamers belonging to the Bombay Marine, a branch of the East India Company. The last leg of the journey took a month the first time, and later two weeks or less. In the early years, mail and passengers sometimes missed their connection and had to wait a month in Egypt for the next Alexandria-Falmouth or Suez-Bombay steamer; but soon the Bombay Marine and the Admiralty coordinated their schedule to avoid delaying the mail. In the late 1850s this stretch was replaced by a railroad from Alexandria to Suez via Cairo. After that, the entire trip took two to three months, half the time required for an all-sea voyage around Africa. Between Bombay on the west coast of India and the capital Calcutta in the east, runners carried the mail in eleven days during the dry season or fourteen during the monsoon.

The P&O

Carrying the mail between Britain and India in naval vessels was an anomaly in an age of laissez faire, when entrepreneurs were founding numerous shipping companies. In 1834, lobbying by commercial interests forced the Post Office to grant its first contract, to carry the mail to Rotterdam and Hamburg, to a private firm, the General Steam Navigation Company. Meanwhile, a new company, the Peninsular Steam Navigation Company, began operating steamers between England and the Iberian Peninsula. In 1837, it received its first mail contract from the Admiralty
for a weekly service between England and Gibraltar, with stops in Spain and Portugal. Three
years later, under the name Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company or P&O, it
received a £35,000 contract to carry the mail once a month between England and Alexandria.
Beyond Suez, the P&O got a hostile reception from the East India Company until 1844, when the
company got a £144,000 contract to serve Ceylon, Madras, Calcutta, Singapore, and Hong Kong.
In 1851 it added a regular service to Australia. In 1853, the P&O obtained a new contract, with a
subsidy of £200,000 a year to operate fifteen ships to carry the mail, as well as precious cargoes,
military men, and government officials. Five years later, with fifty-five ships and the transit
across Egypt in its hands as well, the P&O turned what had once been an arduous adventure into
a pleasant month-long journey for wealthy tourists.

Some of the mail and passengers in a hurry shortened the trip by taking stagecoaches, and
later trains, across Europe from Boulogne or Calais to Marseilles or even to Brindisi on the heel
of the Italian boot, and a steamer from there to Alexandria. From the 1860s, travelers and mail to
and from Calcutta could save several days by taking a train across India. By the turn of the
century, passengers and mail could make the journey between London and Bombay in thirteen
days, and Calcutta in fourteen. Merchants and the British community in India complained about
the P&O’s monopoly and its high fares and freight charges, as did the Post Office, but, as the
Select Committee on East India Communications pointed out in 1866, the “question of profit and
loss, within reasonable bounds, is a consideration entitled to little weight in the case of so
important a postal service as that between England and India.”

2
The Transatlantic Mail

The route across the Atlantic Ocean was even more important than the route to India. Most of the transatlantic mail went between Britain and the United States and was of a commercial or personal nature. But there was also quite a bit of mail with Britain’s colonies in North America—Canada, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland—and in the Caribbean, especially Jamaica and Barbados. Finally, there was mail between Britain and the new nations of Central and South America.

Crossing the Atlantic was technologically much more challenging than the route to India, because on the long stretch of open sea, there was nowhere to refuel. The first steamer to cross the Atlantic, the Savannah, relied on its sails for twenty-four of the twenty-seven-day journey. Not until 1838 did two steamers, the Great Western and the Sirius, cross the ocean on steam power alone. And they did so only by filling every available space with coal.

The following year, a Canadian, Samuel Cunard, came to London to seek the North Atlantic mail contract. He did not own a single ship, but he had influential friends in the Admiralty and the East India Company, and was able to obtain a contract to carry the mails between Liverpool, Halifax, and Boston for £55,000 a year. His first ship, the Britannia, would not have been worth building without a subsidy, for three-quarters of her cargo space was filled with coal. When the contract was renewed in 1851, the subsidy was raised to £173,340 a year, with New York instead of Boston as the destination harbor. Starting in 1847, however, Cunard faced a dangerous competitor in the American-owned Collins Line, which received a similar subsidy from Congress as long as it provided as fast a service as Cunard. For several years, the mail went
westward on British ships and eastward on American ones. Then in 1858, Congress cancelled the subsidy, and the Collins Line folded, leaving Cunard to dominate the North Atlantic.

Two other routes merit mention here. For service to the West Indies and the Gulf of Mexico, the Treasury awarded a subsidy to the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company. Another route, to the Cape of Good Hope, was far less important than the other routes mentioned above until the discovery of diamonds in 1867; in fact, it had declined in importance when mail, passengers, and valuable cargo to and from India switched to the Overland Route through Egypt. In 1850, the contract to Capetown was awarded to the General Screw Steam Shipping Company, so named because its ships had propellers rather than paddle wheels. For a few years, it also sent ships to Mauritius and Calcutta, but gave up the contract because it was losing money. In 1857, another company, the Union Steam Ship Company, began serving the Cape. There were also mail contracts with shipping companies serving China, Australia, New Zealand, and the west coast of South America.

**Technological Advances**

Let me pause here to consider the question I raised at the beginning, namely the causal relations between mail subsidies and the development of shipbuilding and shipping before the 1860s. It seems clear that the introduction of steam power came from entrepreneurs who saw a market for rapid passenger transportation on a few lucrative routes: across the Irish Sea, to the nearby continent of Europe, and to the United States. Elsewhere, however, neither passengers nor freight could have borne the cost of steam shipping. What mail subsidies or, in some cases, direct operation by government agencies like the Admiralty and the Bombay Marine did was force the
pace of innovation on the routes to India, the Caribbean, and the Cape. On these other routes, communication was so highly valued for political reasons that the subsidies benefitted not only the postal service, but also the shipbuilding and shipping industries and the passengers and freight their ships carried along with the mail. Its promoters used the infant-industry argument, namely that new technologies needed government help, but once mature, they could stand on their own.

Until the 1860s, oceangoing steamers were like the horseless carriages of a later age: basically sailing ships with a primitive engine. Then came a series of innovations in quick succession that created the ocean liners that dominated the seas for a hundred years.

The first innovation, after the steam engine itself, was the iron hull. The first iron-hulled ship, the Aaron Manby was built in 1821. Though iron was stronger, lighter, and much less expensive than wood, hide-bound naval conservatives resisted the idea for thirty years. When the P&O proposed to order an iron-hulled steamer in 1850, the Admiralty responded that no ship could qualify for a mail subsidy “if built of iron or any other material offering so ineffectual a resistance to the striking of shot” and a year later told the company that “my Lords see no reason to alter their decision.” Not until 1856 did the Admiralty and the Post Office relent and allow Cunard to buy an iron ship.

The next innovation was the screw-propeller. It advantages were immediately apparent for ships going out to sea, where paddles were vulnerable to high waves. It was first used on a ship in 1838, but became popular after 1843, when the engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel launched the Great Britain, the first ship with both an iron hull and a propeller. After 1850 most new oceangoing ships were equipped with propellers, except those that carried mail. Once again the
Admiralty, retrograde in all matters technological, insisted on paddlewheel steamers until 1862, when it finally allowed Cunard to build a mail steamer with a propeller.

Because steamers consumed so much coal, they were limited either to lucrative routes like New York-Liverpool, or where the British government offered a fat subsidy. Engineers knew that the way to improve an engine’s fuel-efficiency was to boost the steam pressure, but that was dangerous on a ship that used sea water because of the salt deposits that fouled the boilers and clogged the pipes. The surface condenser, patented by Samuel Hall in 1834, made it possible to use and recycle fresh water, hence allowing boiler pressures to be boosted significantly. By the late 1850s, such condensers were being incorporated in oceangoing steamers. As pressures rose, it became possible to extract more power from the steam by adding a second, low-pressure cylinder. The first to do so was Alfred Holt’s Ocean Steam Ship Company, which sent a ship in 1865 from England to Mauritius, fourteen thousand miles away, without refueling.

When the Suez Canal opened in 1869, cheap heavy cargo could be transported without transhipment between Asia and Europe instead of around Africa. The canal shortened the distance between London and Bombay of 41 percent. Until 1888, however, ships in the canal were not allowed to go more than five miles per hour, and then only during daylight hours. The mail and passengers in a hurry continued to be unloaded in Suez or Alexandria and shipped across Egypt by rail, thereby cutting several days off the journey. In 1888, ships with electric headlights were allowed to transit the Canal at night. Thereafter, mail and passengers stayed on board the entire way.

The last innovation was the use of steel instead of iron. This had to await the invention of the Siemens-Martin process in the 1870s that made steel cheap enough to build entire ships. Not
only did steel hulls begin to replace iron, but it also allowed engine builders to boost the pressure still more. Triple-expansion engines were introduced in 1887 and quadruple-expansion engines from 1903 on. By then, steamers had become so efficient that the energy contained in a single sheet of paper was enough to move a ton a mile.

**Mail Subsidies**

The innovations that revolutionized ships in the latter half of the nineteenth century were driven by private initiative and capital, with little input from the British government. A Parliamentary Select Committee that investigated the issue in 1860 questioned the need for large subsidies and the process whereby they were granted. It revealed that the government was paying almost a million pounds sterling in mail subsidies, four-fifths of which went to just three companies: the P&O with £400,000, Cunard with £200,000, and Royal Mail with £270,000. Furthermore, less than half that amount was returned in the form of postage on overseas mail; of the £200,000 that the P&O had received by its 1853 contract, only £47,000 was covered by postal income. Half the deficit was covered by the Indian government, and half by the British. The Committee recommended that the Post Office, not the Admiralty, be responsible for mail contracts, and that the contracts be scrutinized and subject to parliamentary approval. It hoped thereby to obtain good or better service for less money.

For awhile, it seemed that competition would bring this about. In 1874, when the P&O contract came up for renewal, Holt’s Ocean Steam Ship Company offered to provide the same service for £30,000 less than P&O. The Post Office wanted to accept the lower bid, but the India
and Colonial Offices persuaded the Treasury that the P&O should get the contract because they were “old friends who had faithfully performed their contract for a lifetime.” By then and until well after World War II, the P&O was treated like another branch of the government, not like a private company. On the North Atlantic, first the Inman Line and later the White Star line challenged Cunard’s monopoly. Just as the Post Office thought it could use this rivalry to eliminate subsidies on the North Atlantic and pay for shipping mail by weight, the lines formed a cartel, the “Liverpool Ring,” that left the Post Office no choice but to award them subsidies. Only on the South African route were subsidies abolished.

**The Purpose of Subsidies**

This raised the question of the purpose of subsidies. In the early years of steam, subsidies were justified on the grounds that they made communication with the Empire both faster and safer than they would have been if the government had relied on its own packets or on ad hoc arrangements with the captains of private ships. But after the 1860s, several fast and reliable shipping lines served the trunk routes of the Empire, and subsidies did nothing to foster technological innovation or improved mail delivery. This created a conflict between the Post Office, which had to make up the deficit between the contracts and postal receipts, and the Admiralty, which had another agenda. As the Admiralty explained at the time of a contract renewal: “Keeping the superiority of the British Line appears to My Lords to be of national importance . . . the pecuniary question of postage is of minor importance in regard to this service.”

In fact, mail subsidies had other, more important purposes than ensuring fast and reliable
mail delivery. One was national pride and prestige in the face of foreign competition. I already
mentioned the short-lived Collins Lines that competed with Cunard for eleven years. Every mail
contract contained the phrase: “The speed of the British ships shall equal the highest speed of the
foreign mail ships on the same route.” As Cunard wrote to Postmaster General Lord Canning in
1853: “If we were to relax now in the size and power of our vessels, the whole service would fall
into the hands of the Americans, which are well sustained by their Government. We can only
sustain our position on the Atlantic by continuing to build powerful ships. The risk of doing so is
very great, as at the termination of a contract the ships would be valueless, being too expensive
to use for any other purpose.”

Just as serious was the appearance in the 1860s of the French company Messageries
Maritimes, Napoleon III’s attempt to steal from the P&O some of the profitable passengers and
cargo between Europe and South and Southeast Asia. Later in the century another even more
formidable rival appeared to contest Cunard’s dominance of the North Atlantic, the most
lucrative route of all. There, prestige and national pride came from owning the fastest ship across
the ocean. In 1897 the Blue Riband was won by the Hamburg-Amerika Line’s new ship Kaiser
Wilhelm der Grosse and in 1903 by the Deutschland. These humiliations were enough to
persuade the British government to award £266,000 to Cunard to build and operate the Lusitania
and the Mauretania, just to win back the Blue Riband.

The Admiralty had another motive besides national pride, and that was defense. During the
years that the Admiralty was in charge of overseas mails, it reserved the right to send an officer
and his servant along with the mail, free of charge. By the terms of the contract, government
passengers and naval and government cargo went free or at a reduced rate. And in times of
emergency, such as the Crimean War, the Indian Rebellion of 1857, or the Abyssinian
Expedition of 1867-68, the government had the right to requisition mail ships for military
purposes. Of course, these events brought windfall profits to the companies involved, such as the
£1.2 million the P&O earned during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1903.

The Admiralty’s demands extended to the design of ships as well. Even after it relented on
the question of ships made of iron, it continued to insist that ships be built strong enough to carry
guns of the largest caliber. By the Armed Cruiser Convention of 1880, the major mail carriers
pledged to build ships that could quickly be turned into fast armed cruisers.

**Penny Postage**

What began as mail contracts therefore evolved into something far more complex and costly.
The Post Office and the Treasury, burdened with heavy subsidies, could not cover their costs by
raising the postage. On the contrary, there was considerable pressure to lower them for political
reasons.

In the 1830s, postal reformer Rowland Hill had agitated for penny postage, in the expectation
that the increased number of letters the public would send and the improvements in operating the
postal system would together more than make up for the revenue lost on each letter; as
economists would say, Hill believed that postal services had a high elasticity of demand and
great potential efficiencies of scale. He was right. Once his reforms were put in place in 1840,
domestic postal service boomed.

Likewise in India, postal service was slow, expensive, and unreliable until the 1850s, when
Governor-General Dalhousie instituted a postal reform modeled on the one in Britain. The
reforms brought postal service within the means of millions of Indians for the first time; as the
Indian economist Mahindra Nath Das observed: “The post office penetrated into innumerable villages of India. . . . The post office also played an important role in breaking down the static nature of Indian society. . . . Judged from whatever angle, social, cultural, educative or economic, the half-anna postal system of Lord Dalhousie played a remarkable role in the progress of India.”

But Hill did extrapolate his proposal to overseas mail, where, he believed, the volume of mail was insensitive to the price of postage, and the cost of transportation was much higher and more variable than within Britain. As a result, there was a tremendous discrepancy between domestic and overseas British mails; sending a letter from London to Paris, for example, cost ten times as much as sending one to Edinburgh, twice as far away. And sending mail to India or America was simply out of the reach of most Britons.

The issue of imperial penny postage was not forgotten, however. Instead, as the British Empire grew ever larger in the late nineteenth century, agitation for cheaper postage revived. In 1887, Henniker Heaton, an Australian who had moved to Britain and been elected member of Parliament, read a paper entitled “The Postal and Telegraphic Communication of the Empire” that attracted much attention. In it, he advocated reducing the postage to the empire to a penny per letter, on the grounds of empire unity. The Post Office and the Treasury, already incurring huge deficits because of the mail contracts, resisted. But finally the Post Office lowered the postage to Australia to six pence and then to four. In 1897, Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain took up Heaton’s argument. In 1898, upon Chamberlain’s urging, the Conference on Postage within the British Empire prevailed upon the Post Office to implement penny postage
to most of the empire, except Australia, New Zealand, and the Cape Colony; as Hill had predicted, demand rose only slightly and revenues declined by £640,000. In 1906, the Post Office followed suit with penny postage to the United States. Finally, in 1912, it introduced penny postage to the entire British Empire, except, for some reason, Pitcairn Island. In effect, the political argument had trumped the budgetary one.

**Conclusion**

The nineteenth century marked the high point in British history. In that century, imperial and overseas postal service grew tremendously, as did shipbuilding and shipping, and so did the British Empire. The three are related. The postal authorities eagerly made use of faster and safer ships and encouraged the development of shipbuilding and shipping through generous subsidies. Entrepreneurs responded to these incentives by building and operating ever larger, faster, and more reliable ships.

Overseas postal service required subsidies from the beginning, for the relatively small amount of mail would never have been able to pay the cost of regular scheduled ocean transportation. Yet the role of mail subsidies changed over the course of the nineteenth century. At the beginning, the subsidies went to defray the cost of transporting the mail. As the century wore on, other goals were added to the original one: to encourage the shipbuilding industry and its technological progress, to show the British flag around the world in competition with other maritime powers, and to furnish auxiliary ships for the Royal Navy in the event of war. Carrying the mail had become a side show in the game of great power rivalry. As the Select Committee on Postal and Telegraphic Contracts had reported in 1860: “The decision on Post Office contracts is
not a mere Post Office question, but frequently involves considerations of an imperial character affecting our political relations, our colonial empire, the efficiency of our army and navy, and the spread of our commerce.\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{SOURCES}


**NOTES**


5. Quoted in Robinson, *Carrying British Mail Overseas*, pp. 143-44.

6. Ibid., p. 267.

7. Ibid p. 140.


British postal system: Wikis. Note: Many of our articles have direct quotes from sources you can cite, within the Wikipedia article! This article doesn't yet, but we're working on it! Post Office Limited, managing the nationwide network of post office branches as retail outlets. Contrary to urban myth, Royal Mail does not own the trademark on the colour red, but a specific shade of the colour red: "Royal Mail, the Royal Mail Cruciform, the colour red (as part of the Royal Mail logotype) and SmartStamp are all registered trademarks of Royal Mail Group plc."[14]. In 2001 the government set up a postal regulator, Postcomm, and offered licences to private companies to deliver mail. This is a survey of the postage stamps and postal history of British East Africa. Britain had interests in this area as early as 1824. Missionaries are known to have settled in the area in 1844. The Imperial British East Africa Company obtained a concession in 1887 to administer this area, from Sultan Bargash of the Sultanate of Zanzibar. The company started to experience financial difficulties in 1891. The situation was made more difficult in 1892 when Britain declared the Sultanate of Zanzibar part The Imperial Postal Service is the state postal and telecommunications monopoly of the Barayaran Empire. The IPS is placed under the control of the Ministry of Posts and Communications of the Government of Barayar. The IPS provides the following services throughout the Imperium: Postal services (including philately). Video telecommunication services: Planetary Written communication services. Barayaran Web Services. Interplanetary communication services.