

# ARCHIVE COLLECTIONS

## Access Policy

Gavin McGuffie, Senior Archivist, Collections Team  
12/2024

## Overview

This policy sets out the key criteria covering access to archives at The Postal Museum.

This policy will be communicated to The Postal Museum staff and via The Postal Museum website, and to external agencies and others with an interest on demand. It will be reviewed every two years.

---

## 1 Definition of community/aims for access

The Postal Museum's archive team will engage with as wide a community as possible. It currently serves a community with wide-ranging interests from local historians to international academics. Here is a breakdown of some of our user communities:

- Relatives of people who have worked in the postal business. In the main, this community engages with The Postal Museum as family historians, using records in The Royal Mail Archive to track down information about their family members and ancestors;
- Specialists interested in an aspect of postal history as a leisure pursuit. This could be stamp collectors/philatelists, letter box enthusiasts or those interested in postal vehicles over the years;
- Those with an academic interest in the contents of the archive, whether studying a subject that the Archive illustrates in detail (airmail, uniforms), one where the Royal Mail Archive provides a useful case study (the development of public relations, the employment of women) or one where the large quantity of data can contribute to a study (average age of retirement, causes of time off work, etc.);
- Creatives including those interested in the history of design who study examples from the stamp, poster collections, etc.;
- Those (architects, structural engineers) who require knowledge of Post Office historical infrastructure to inform current projects;
- Media, including news outlets for fact checking and period dramas seeking historical accuracy.

We will also encourage engagement with our core stakeholders, the two current businesses, Royal Mail Group and Post Office Ltd and their workforces. There are very good reasons for them to value their history and Archive and they have used material in it and stories from it when promoting new products or making their workforce aware of the long history of their organisations. They have also needed to access many historical records as part of their participation in the Post Office Horizon IT Inquiry. These companies are aware of their responsibilities as owners of the Archive which is why they have agreed to fund its storage and management until 2040. Other important stakeholders are The National Archives and the wider Postal Museum (including its volunteers) which houses the Archive and employs the people who look after it.

Access to and outreach for the archive collections and services will be developed both through wider Postal Museum audience planning work and more specific work on understanding and analysing the needs of our archive community.

---

## 2 Customer Care

The Postal Museum (including its archive team) is dedicated to maximising access and ensuring that everyone can benefit from this offer regardless of background or personal characteristic. This is evidenced in the Museum Access Policy which has been signed off by our Board of Trustees.

In the Archive research room, we aim to reach high standards of customer care, greeting visitors in a friendly, polite and respectful manner and offering to assist them with their research should they require it. We have a target to answer written and telephone enquiries about the Archive within ten working days, acknowledging (and very often answering) within two working days. We have visitor feedback forms available, send surveys to recent visitors and take part in the Archives and Records Association's surveys of visitors and distance enquirers, taking comments given in them seriously and acting on them as appropriate.

---

## 3 Relevant legislation and ethical codes in relation to access

The key piece of legislation affecting access to most of The Postal Museum's archive collections (The Royal Mail Archive) is the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FoI) which superseded the access provisions of the Public Records Acts 1958 and 1967. FoI and subject access requests under the Data Protection Act 2018 will be directed in the first instance to Royal Mail/Post Office Ltd.

The Postal Museum will continue to identify legislation through following professional information exchange means and engaging with those bodies who comment on and disseminate new, and amendments to, legislation – The National Archives UK, the Archives and Records Association, the Information Commissioner's Office, and the Intellectual Property Office among others – via communication, training courses, listservs, etc. As a designated Place of Deposit responsible for holding public record material, The Postal Museum will liaise closely with colleagues at The National Archives, UK. As part of our Archive Services Agreement with Royal Mail and Post Office Ltd, we meet with the staff responsible for the management of their records four times a year and will discuss access legislation with them.

All staff are committed to complying with the Archives and Records Association Code of Ethics, updated in February 2020.

---

## 4 Restrictions and responsibilities surrounding the use of archives

Most archive material is open to all researchers. Any restrictions on access to material in the Archive will be:

- standard Public Record closure under the 20-year rule (records eventually being opened when they are 20 years old);
- extended closure for Freedom of Information personal information exemptions or other agreed extended closure reasons with the reasoning being communicated on the online catalogue - if we notice personal data within a file then we will consider the best way of making the wider material available without compromising data protection legislation (redaction, closing specific documents or in rare cases the whole file);
- in circumstances where material is in such poor physical condition as to restrict access. In these circumstances we will still try to provide some kind of access – via a surrogate copy or in the presence of a conservator;
- in circumstances where digital material is in an obsolete format we are unable to provide access to. In these cases, access will be provided to the bitstream files but not the content;
- where the material is completely uncatalogued;
- where material is in a format that we cannot enable access to (e.g. audio-visual media); for this reason we have transferred Royal Mail Archive moving image material to the British Film Institute and oral history material to the British Library Sound Archive where it can be properly housed and viewed.

We will engage with our community through a number of means, via explanations on our online catalogue indicating how long material in the Archive might be closed for or blogs discussing what material has become open at the start of a year.

Researchers can request privileged access for material that is closed under the 20-year rule. To do this, they need to put in a request to see specific files to Royal Mail or Post Office Ltd.

All new users of The Royal Mail Archive are required to watch a short video on handling archives to introduce or remind them of appropriate care when using archive material. This is also emphasised in our public access research area, where a set of rules is displayed prominently.

The Postal Museum allows users to make copies of the records using their own equipment (provided they do not use flash photography, tripods, hand-held scanners, or risk damage to the material) or they can request the Museum makes copies at a charge. In doing so they will be required to follow relevant copyright legislation.

---

## 5 Means of Access

### ARCHIVE RESEARCH ROOM

We will provide physical access to the material in The Royal Mail Archive in an open and friendly manner. While there is a ticket charge for visiting the galleries of The Postal Museum and riding on Mail Rail, people can research and consult The Royal Mail Archive for free.

Access to the research room is step free (using a lift), there is a touch pad operated door and wheelchair users can use any desk in the room. All staff receive Disability Awareness Training.

The room is designed to enable two levels of access depending on the needs of our varied users. The open access space allows drop-in access to explore secondary sources such as our reference library, surrogates of our most frequently used/visually appealing collections, and online research tools (many of our most popular family history resources are available in these ways). This is a welcoming, barrier-

free space intended to encourage those less familiar with visiting archives to explore and discover. The more secure part of the room enables a level of security appropriate for research using unique, irreplaceable, original archival material.

The room is open every Wednesday to Friday, 10:00-16:30 (excluding bank holidays) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday of each month.

In the room visitors can:

- Browse our reference library;
- View microfilm copies of archival material;
- Look at staff magazines, Post Office Circulars, photograph and poster albums;
- Search our catalogue and other digital resources (currently on three terminals);
- Explore their family history using our records and ancestry.co.uk online (includes digitised appointment books and pension records);
- Study original material from The Royal Mail Archive.

New users of our original material will be required to fill in a User Card registration form and provide two forms of identification (a proof of name with a valid signature and a separate proof of address) on their first visit.

To look at original material on a Saturday requires an appointment due to the limited number of archive staff on site that day. We also encourage all those intending to look at original material to book a desk in advance, in case we are particularly busy that day or if the material they want to look at will take up more than one desk (plans, maps, etc.).

### **REMOTE ENQUIRY/RESEARCH SERVICE/REPROGRAPHICS**

We will also engage with our user communities remotely, answering many kinds of external enquiries. We will inform the enquirer of the information we hold that may answer, or help to answer, their enquiry and how they can access this information, but we will generally not carry out detailed research. The exception is a paid Family History Research Service which we can undertake. Users can also request remote copying of archive material.

### **WEBSITE/ONLINE CATALOGUE**

The Archive and its online catalogue have detailed sections dedicated to them on The Postal Museum's website.

We have long had a very healthy percentage of catalogue entries for The Royal Mail Archive accessible on our online catalogue and we will continue to add material. As well as information on the material held by The Postal Museum, the catalogue also includes digitised copies of many photographs, posters, maps, etc.

Those who want to access original material can do a certain amount of pre-visit preparation using the Reader Order Module function of our online catalogue. This allows them to mark records as favourites, create wish-lists of potentially useful records and order up to ten items in advance of their visit, meaning that these are ready for them when they arrive at the Archive research room.

We will keep The Postal Museum's directory entry in The National Archives' Discovery catalogue ([discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk)) up to date and provide The National Archives with other summaries (known as series level descriptions) about the collections within our Archive.

Several series of records of particular interest to family historians are available for distance research on ancestry.co.uk's website.

### **BORN DIGITAL RECORDS**

Born digital records (records first created in a digital form) are identified as such in our online catalogue. At present users are requested to contact the archive team to request access.

The Museum is setting up a public portal to access born digital records remotely. This will be integrated into our Digital Preservation System which is used to store and preserve this content.

In the interim access will be provided on request by sharing links to the relevant content, or via the users' preferred file transfer platform.

### **PUBLICATIONS/GUIDES**

As well as the information on the website The Postal Museum will continue to make available onsite hard copy guides such as an overview of the Archive, conducting family history research, and using our microfilm records, as well as selected hard copy catalogue listings.

---

## **6 Form of access to archives**

In addition to access via the Archive research room and remote enquiries - the main means by which we provide access to the Archive - we will also contribute to the Museum's wider outreach activities.

Wider outreach will include, but is not limited to, publications of research, talks to groups (both onsite, offsite and virtually), engagement with museum learning activities, promotion on The Postal Museum's blog and via its social media channels. It also includes appearances of archive material in exhibitions at The Postal Museum and other external organisations (on occasion, and subject to fulfilment of loan conditions) and support for institutional fundraising.