



TELEGRAPH WORKERS

Caroline Roberts looks at the lives of the women who worked on the pioneering 'Victorian internet'

During just a few years in the mid-19th century the telegraph transformed communication, making it possible to send a written message hundreds of miles in minutes. Before long a network of undersea cables connected us to distant lands in a way that was previously unimaginable.

The first British technology capable of sending electrical telegraphs was patented by Charles Wheatstone and

William Fothergill Cooke in 1837. An operator sent electrical impulses down a wire, causing magnetic needles on the receiving mechanism to move and spell out the message on a dial. The Cooke and Wheatstone device was used for railway signalling, and a network of telegraph wires grew with the expansion of the railways. Before long, the system began offering a messaging service to the public via offices at railway stations.

The Electric Telegraph

Company, Britain's first commercial telegraph company, was formed in 1846 and others soon followed. By the 1850s there were telegraph offices in towns and cities all over the UK. Customers would no doubt have been impressed by the mysterious machines behind the counter, housed in oak or mahogany casings. They would fill in a form with their message, which was translated into abbreviations and transmitted to the telegraph office nearest the destination address, ▶

Female workers at the Central Telegraph Office in London in the 1930s

ANCESTORS AT WORK

► then delivered by a messenger boy. By the late 1860s public use accounted for around three-quarters of telegraph traffic.

As the service evolved, a variety of sending methods appeared, including those using the US system developed by Samuel Morse, creator of the famous code. Some instruments printed dots and dashes on strips of paper, while others used differently pitched bells or receivers that made a clicking sound. These required skilled operators fluent in Morse code. However, the Cooke and Wheatstone needle apparatus was easier to learn and remained the most common system until around 1870, and its use in railway signalling persisted well into the 20th century.

NATIONALISATION

The inland telegraph industry was taken over by the General Post Office (GPO) in 1870. By this time the network consisted of almost 17,000 miles of telegraph line, and it continued expanding. In 1874 the Central Telegraph Office (CTO) was transferred from London's Telegraph Street to the new GPO building on Newgate Street, and

occupied more of the building as telegrams grew in popularity. It employed almost 5,000 telegraphists; roughly a third of them were women.

In fact the industry had used female operators from the beginning. Telegraphy was far more attractive than other female occupations such as factory work or domestic service, although women were paid less than men. In the 1860s an experienced male operator earned 14–25s a week – well above the average wage – while women received 10–14s.

Female telegraphists gained respect for their meticulous work, and their employment in the industry was one of the factors that gradually brought about a change in attitudes to women in the workplace. After a large political meeting in Manchester in 1858, *The Times* praised the speed and accuracy with which the account was transmitted the 200 miles to its office, entirely by women: “Although young girls in general do not understand much of politics, there was hardly an error in the whole report.”



This messenger worked for the news agency Reuters



6d

The Post Office charge for a 12-word telegram in 1870

The Telegraph Song

An 1860s ditty by popular music-hall performer George ‘Champagne Charlie’ Leybourne celebrating the charms of ‘telegraph girls’

1848

The first ‘online wedding’, with vows transmitted in Morse code between the bride in Boston and the groom in New York

‘Your tartan will be safe by the next train’

An early use of the telegraph to place a bet illegally after a horse race had ended – the ‘tartan’ refers to the colours of the Derby winner

A woman learns how to use a London & North Eastern Railway telegraph machine during the Second World War



After the GPO took over the service, girls were employed from the age of 16 and left when they married. Many were the daughters of tradesmen, clerks and the clergy. Competition for jobs was high among both genders as working conditions were good, with employees entitled to sick pay and pensions, and women receiving a gratuity on marriage.

In large offices, men and women worked in separate rooms. Most operators worked eight-hour shifts six days a week, although only men worked through the night. There were periods of frenetic activity but also quiet times, during which they could chat, read, sew or knit. Each telegraphist developed their own sending style as distinctive as handwriting. Operators claimed

Go Visit

Head to Cornwall to discover the history of the telegraph industry

TELEGRAPH MUSEUM PORTHCURNO

a Eastern House, Porthcurno, Penzance, Cornwall TR19 6JX
t 01736 810966
w telegraphmuseum.org

The museum, located in what was once the largest telegraph station in the world, houses working equipment and tells the story of the network's global reach.



to be able to identify not only a sender's skill level, but also their gender, personality and mood from their touch on the keys. They built friendships with colleagues hundreds of miles away, with whom they would engage in banter, even using special signs for laughter and surprise – the emojis of the day.

LOVE OVER THE LINE

There was also the possibility of flirtation over the wires. In the USA the industry spawned a sub-genre of romantic fiction typified by *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes*, an 1880 novel by Ella Cheever Thayer, which is available online at the Internet Archive: bit.ly/wired-love. In it a couple develop a long-distance relationship but find it much harder to communicate in person, a scenario that today's online daters may recognise.

There was also something intriguing about long-distance communications, codes and being party to private conversations that inspired literary figures. For example, Henry James' 1898 novella *In the Cage* tells the story of a female telegraph operator who is fascinated by the messages of a soldier carrying on an illicit affair with an upper-class lady.

As the century drew to a close, the advent of the telephone started telegraphy's slow decline; indeed the GPO began to convert some of its telegraph offices to telephone exchanges as early as 1881.

The technology had played

This photo from the 1930s shows the machine at the Central Telegraph Office reserved for messages to and from the royal household

a key role in warfare since the Crimean War of 1854–1856, and at the start of the First World War many GPO telegraph operators joined the Signals Service of the Royal Engineers. Hundreds of female employees also joined the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, many serving near the Western Front as telegraphists, although as the war drew on the telephone became the preferred communication method.

The telegraph also began to suffer an image problem. During the war, telegrams were used to inform family members of deaths in action and they continued to be used to convey bad news after hostilities ended, probably because it was easier than delivering it over the telephone. The sight of a telegraph boy filled people with dread.

To boost profits, the Post Office tried to change public perception with the introduction of the more expensive and decorative 'greetings telegram' in 1935. It produced commemorative versions for special occasions, such as the 1937 coronation of George VI, and commissioned famous artists to produce designs. The greetings telegram proved very popular, and nine million were sent in 1942. This clever innovation kept the service in operation until the final telegram was sent in 1982. Nowadays, those of us who reach our 100th birthday have to make do with a royal card instead. 📧

RESOURCES

Take your research further

BOOK

The Victorian Internet

Tom Standage

W&N, 1998

This book is a fascinating account of how the telegraph transformed the Victorian world.

MUSEUM

THE POSTAL MUSEUM

a 15–20 Phoenix Place,

London WC1X 0DA

t 0300 030 0700

w postalmuseum.org

The museum's archive includes the records of GPO employees.

WEBSITES

BT DIGITAL ARCHIVES

w digitalarchives.bt.com/calmview

Search thousands of books, documents, images and films.

DISTANT WRITING

w distantwriting.co.uk

This site has a detailed history of the development of telegraphy.

CAROLINE ROBERTS is a writer based in London. Learn more at carolineroberts.co.uk

How To Find TELEGRAPHIST ANCESTORS

Caroline recommends diving into these online and offline collections

The Postal Museum in London (postal.museum.org) holds records for all GPO staff, including telegraph operators employed from 1870. You can search for these in person at the museum, or through its paid-for research service. You will find records of appointments, pensions and gratuities, including those paid to female employees leaving to get married. Pension and gratuity records are usually accompanied by brief career details and notable achievements. Appointment records listing where and when an operator was employed are digitised on ancestry.co.uk.

Your ancestor may also be mentioned in the Post Office's *Blackfriars Magazine* (1850–1890) and its successors: *Martins-le-Grand*, *the Post Office Magazine* (1890–1933) and *The Post Office Magazine* (1933–1966). Digitised copies are available at the Postal Museum.

The BT archive has a list of all GPO employees who gave their lives in the First World War at bt.com/lestweforget. Other records of telegraph operators who served in the forces can be found at The National Archives (search the online catalogue at discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk).