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Postmistresses and the state, 1660–1715

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ABSTRACT

Women's place in the post-Restoration Post Office has been overlooked in the existing literature on the mail, 1660–1715. Historians and historical geographers have explored the bureaucratic and administrative history of the Post; the expansion of postal routes; and the importance of change in the postal network to the delivery of letters. There has, however, been no social history of the post. This article reveals the positions occupied by women within the early modern post but focuses principally on postmistresses in the period 1660–1715. It explains why women, particularly widows, were considered suitable for the office. The article defines the role of postmaster and explains the behaviour required of officeholders, combining hospitality, logistics, administration, and the provision of intelligence. The functions and legitimation of postmasters developed considerably from the mid-seventeenth century alongside similar offices within the early modern state. As important cogs in an increasingly complex machine of communication and administration, postmistresses were part of the process of state formation, and their work legitimised the state in the provinces. This article argues for the first time that postmistresses were a significant, and yet unnoticed, presence in the early modern British state at a key stage of its development.

Postmistresses and the state in England and Wales, 1660–1715

When in 1669 Martha Warner petitioned Charles II to continue as postmistress of Thetford, she had no conception of her small role in the process of state formation in England and Wales. Describing her husband's diligence, his death in service while delivering letters to the Postmaster General Lord Arlington, and the ruin of herself and her young family, she argued that she was experienced in holding the office and that she deserved to continue in the place.[1] There is no evidence that Warner's petition was successful, although a number of her female peers did gain positions through petitioning at the Restoration.[2] From 1660, it was not unusual for women like Warner to be employed within the context of the British Post Office and the postal services more generally.

This article will show that women were employed as postmistresses along the postal routes of England and Wales from 1660 and that they formed a significant part of the workforce of the Penny Post from its establishment in 1680. This represents the beginnings of a re-evaluation of the British postal industry and its intersection with women's work. Given the absence of any previous consideration of women's part in it, this is of considerable note. This article will outline the roles that women occupied and give an initial sense of their numbers and geographical location within the Post Office in the period 1660–1720. This comprises the period from the appointment of the first Postmaster General in 1661 through to Ralph Allen's reform of the postal system in 1702, a crucial stage in the development of the postal network and its integration into the state.

I will argue that the Post Office was a part of the state at a key time of its development, that women's involvement in that state was important, and that senior male postal office-holders were prepared to argue in favour of women's appointment to this particular Crown office. I consider the preference for appointing widows, and the problems and difficulties faced by postmasters in a period of significant tension and political instability.

The Post Office was part of the British state and the 'coordinated and territorially bounded network of agencies exercising political power' described by Michael Braddick.[3] Scholarship has revealed the breadth of early modern state authority and made a case for the period as a key point in the modernisation of the state. Alongside the organs of central government there was a developing network of local administration.[4] If the Court, Privy Council, and parliament were the highest expressions of the power of the state, the inferior officers around England and Wales were also vitally important to these power structures. As Steve Hindle has argued, magistrates, constables, churchwardens and overseers were 'the institutions and individuals through which authority was mediated, filtered, and expressed'.[5] The Post Office in England and Wales has not previously been examined in a detailed way in the light of scholarly arguments on state formation. Despite this, the postal institutions and network fit clearly within Braddick's definition of the state as 'a coordinated and territorially bounded network of agents exercising political power'.[6]

Postmasters occupied a political role, controlling access to news, intelligence, and communications. Mark Brayshay has described how from Elizabeth I's reign, the post room began to 'operate as an interface between the everyday insular world and both the affairs of far-off places and the loftier overarching concerns of the state itself'.[7] This aspect of postal history in Europe and North America has not gone entirely unnoticed: Maria Ågren, Lindsay O'Neill, and Susan Whyman have all situated postal systems within this process of early modern state development. Whyman most notably refers to the British Post Office as a 'national institution with agents throughout the land', as well as an 'agent of modernisation'.[8] As the state developed and expanded over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the postal network grew too. The revenue of the Post Office rose by over twenty-five per cent on the Dover Road between the years 1672 and 1677 alone, and that of the new Rye and Hastings route rose by just over forty-one per cent *per annum*.[9]

Its servants were a vital part of the Post Office's expansion. Historians have acknowledged that early modern women played informal roles with 'quasi-public power' in the parish, as brokers of gossip who played an instrumental part in moulding public opinion, and that they participated in public life at a local level. They have demonstrated the varied

nature of women's work, and the agency of women in petitioning from the 1640s onwards.[10] Discussions of women's role as servants of the state are very limited, however, and although it has been mentioned very occasionally that there were female postmasters and footposts, the significance of that fact in terms of women's involvement in such a public, intelligence-focused, and politically important Crown office has been missed.[11]

Women were involved in almost every stage of the postal process. There was a female Postmaster General, the head of the Post Office. Katherine, Countess of Chesterfield, was Postmaster General from 1664 to 1667 after inheriting it upon the death of her third husband, Daniel O'Neill.[12] Further down the hierarchy of the General Post Office, there were female letter receivers, stationers, mail and bag makers, landlords, waggoners and carriers.[13] Three of the twenty-one London letter-receivers listed in a 1653 notice were female, and several more are listed within Establishment Books and accounts of the Post Office from 1682 to 1702.[14] Letter receivers were London shop-keepers or business-owners who were paid to receive letters prior to the transmission to the General Post Office. There were three female letter-carriers working for the General Post Office in 1695–6.[15] Within the Penny Post in the period 1695–1706, there were at least thirty-five women who received letters at their places of business across London. They included eighteen coffee-women, three victuallers, three chandlers, two seamstresses, two strong water-sellers, and one fishmonger, meal-seller, grocer, and milliner. The waggoners and carriers, transporting goods and packages around the country, included women across England, from Dover to Bridgenorth, and from Worcester to York.[16] Also on the Post Office books were a female plumber, a housekeeper, and a leather-stitcher.[17] There were female foot-posts, the early modern equivalent of the post-woman, outside London.[18]

Women, therefore, worked within the postal system and hierarchy in a wide range and scope of positions. They were in senior and menial roles; static and highly mobile roles; and were contractors as well as employees.[19] This provides further challenge to Judith Bennett's hypothesis that women's work was invariably low-paid and low-status in the early modern period.[20] The women of the post have never featured in scholarly discussions of the industry nor of women's work in general, and yet the postal services seem to have been one sphere in which women could undertake a variety of roles.

Women's contribution as postal officeholders was supported and defended by the senior court appointees in charge of the Post Office. Their ability and right to occupy positions at the heart of an intrinsically political intelligence service was upheld and even presumed. Their advice on other appointees was solicited by senior officeholders. At a crucial stage in the expansion of the Post Office women were at the heart of the organisation, and yet they have gone almost completely unnoticed by historians of British state formation, the post, and even of women's work. The historiography of the post has rarely examined the lives of the people who worked within the British postal system. While the roles and representations of occupations as diverse as fishwives, spies, milliners, chapmen and pedlars have been explored, those of postal workers remain neglected.[21]

It remains the case that early modern women's working practices have been less examined than those of their male counterparts. In terms of the post, however, men and women are almost equally invisible in the historiography. There are only a couple of articles on male postmasters and one on carriers and letter bearers, amidst a great

number of institutional histories of the Post Office or letter receivers.[22] The only scholarly work on female postal workers focuses on the struggle for gender equality and the positive impact of World War Two.[23] There is no published research on the men and women of the early modern Welsh post. This institutional or administrative focus has led to a neglect of the social history of the post and to its connections to the wider development of the state being unexplored. As we do not have a strong understanding of who worked for the Post Office, carrying out its orders and day-to-day functions, we cannot hope to comprehend its operation outside the bureaucratic. In contributing to a clearer picture of postal personnel, this article begins to address that deficiency.

It is uncontroversial that women's work in pre-modern England and Wales was diverse, demanding, and took place both in and outside the home.[24] Casual employment was associated with married women, though there were examples of trades where single women played a role, such as millinery and baking.[25] Depending on the relationship between women and the guilds and the nature of the work involved, women could carry on their husband's business after he died in a range of industries such as baking, brewing, printing and butchery.[26] On this level, therefore, it is unsurprising that women were also involved in providing postal services. For female footposts, the physicality of the work, in travelling miles on foot to deliver post to rural locations, had parallels in other occupations, as did the hospitality element for postmistresses. The requirement for literacy and an awareness of news and print culture is similar to the world of printing and bookselling (in which women also played a significant part), though obviously less central to the role.[27] Postmasters from the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries were usually innkeepers, also providing hospitality and accommodation.[28]

Despite this, the overwhelming assumption of scholars researching the development of the post is that it was a male industry. One definition of a diplomatic courier, for example, is 'a *man* employed as a messenger enough times to make *his* couriering a substantial part of *his* job'.[29] Carriers and footposts are overwhelmingly discussed in reference to male examples, as are postmasters.[30] Contemporary representations of postal workers tally with this modern impression. There are no representations of female postal workers in cheap print, including ballads and pamphlets. A search of Broadside Ballads Online and the English Broadside Ballad Archive reveals that from the eighteenth century onwards ballads about carriers existed but were confined to representing male waggoners.[31] Female postal workers were largely invisible in the public record, not even being denounced for their mobility (as were fishwives) or for their access to potentially secret or privileged information (as were 'intelligencers').[32]

This article focuses specifically on postmistresses, and will confine itself to a discussion of their work, position, and relationship to the state. The role of postmaster or postmistress has not been precisely defined within existing historiography. This is possibly because its boundaries were porous. Even Thomas Gardiner's 1677 definition of 'Postmasters Their work and Duty' contained some very wide-ranging clauses which hinted at the mixed administrative, logistical, and intelligence aspects of the role.[33] It was a uniquely wide-ranging post combining private enterprise in the hospitality business with a Crown office.

Most Post Offices were located within inns. Inns were at the top of the drinking (and hospitality industry) hierarchy and, as such, could be substantial businesses. They served alcohol, food, offered accommodation for travellers and their horses. They sometimes

had warehouses and large function rooms that could be hired out for public or private functions.[34] Inns were on prominent roads and tended to be run by the more respectable sort. This made them ideal for serving as Post Offices. Postmasters' duties included keeping post-horses, operating a staff of post-boys and employing carriers, sending on the postbags in a timely manner, completing postal administration, providing intelligence to the centre, and extracting suspect letters when instructed.[35]

Women identified firmly as postmistresses in this article were either listed as salaried in the Annual Accounts of the Post, were described as such in correspondence, or undertook administrative tasks reserved for postmasters.[36] To date, 230 postmistresses have been confirmed, holding office between 1666 and 1720 on postal routes across England and Wales.[37] They held office in towns of major national importance such as Newcastle, in prosperous towns like Salisbury, Cambridge, or York, as well as smaller towns along less prosperous routes. Postmistresses served key ports: Dover Riding had a postmistress from 1703 to 1707, as did Holyhead from 1666 to 1667.[38] Some towns had several women in the role, perhaps generations of the same family, for example the three Carter women who were postmistress of Abingdon from 1690–1714.[39]

There were far more men involved in the postal business than women. This is to be expected. The proportion of women was not, however, miniscule. A document listing the revision of the postmasters' salaries and stages in 1667 identified 142 postmasters, of whom eleven, or eight per cent, were female.[40] Lists of postmasters' salaries for 1687 include 172 postmasters: 147 male and twenty-five, or fifteen per cent, female.[41] The Annual Accounts of the Post Office for the year 1711 showed that there were twelve farmers of letters, of whom one was female; twenty-six individuals who paid rent for the right to bye or way-letters, of whom six were female; and 237 salaried postmasters, of whom thirty-five were female.[42] Within that sample, nine per cent of farmers were female, twenty-three per cent of those who rented the right to bye-letters, and fifteen per cent of salaried postmasters.

It is likely, given the nature of the sources, that this is an underestimation of female involvement in the post, but even so it is not inconsiderable. Peter Earle's analysis of church court depositions demonstrated that nearly seventy-five per cent of women were maintained wholly or partly by their own labour, but this clearly varied by profession, geographical area, and sector: Collins has found that in the period 1606 and 1908 between three and four per cent of apprenticed clothworkers were female, Speechley that twenty per cent of days worked by agricultural wage labourers in Somerset were undertaken by women in the period 1685–1720; and Ben-Amos that between 1609 and 1740 ten per cent of apprentices in Southampton were female.[43] The postal service, therefore, employed a reasonably high, but not unusual, proportion of women as office-holders. This is one key difference: postmistresses were not only employees but holders of a Crown office, with the responsibility for reporting domestic intelligence as well as for managing the flow of information across England and Wales.

Significantly, women in many cases were considered for their professionalism, loyalty, capability, and experience in executing the role. This was not uniform, and their sex was sometimes mentioned as a disabling factor. A 'young woeman' was rejected by Roger Whitley as a candidate for postmistress in 1675 because the place 'is not soe proper for her, as a settled service, and without doubt a man (if he have any ingenuity) liveing in the Place, may be much more serviceable, in delivering Letters, & getting

Returnes and promoteing all the interest of the office, then shee can be'.[44] Youth and single status seem to have been the sticking points for Whitley here. Writing to Mrs Elizabeth Partridge of Bawtry, Whitley urged her to discharge her place with 'Care and integrity', threatening otherwise to withdraw her deputation because of his 'Opinion that your Sex, is not soe fit for Imployments of this nature'.[45]

Yet Whitley continued to employ women to manage Post Offices around England and Wales. In several other examples he appointed women instead of men and was willing to defend their appointments against those who had proposed male candidates.[46] In writing to Mr Cappur of Nantwich about Mrs Phillips of Whitchurch, Whitley refused to displace her, considering 'what shee paid to Come into the Imployment, and how long shee hath Enjoyed it'. Whitley went on to explain that it was 'not my Practise, to displace any officer, without good Cause for it'.[47] In doing this he assessed Mrs Phillips in the context of her role, rather than her sex. In the case of Mrs Prestwood of Ipswich, he was initially sceptical about her appointment following her husband's death 'Considering the Greatness of your Business', but sent her articles and Deputation soon afterwards, and appointed her despite there being other candidates for the office.[48] Postmistresses' advice was also sought in the matter of appointments. Mrs Dorothy Willison of Penrith, for example, recommended two men for new postal stages in 1689, while in 1677 Rebecah Rafts was asked whether she knew of any 'friends' who wanted to take on the letters at Saffron Walden, or whether she herself could take on the contract and employ someone there to receive letters.[49]

There was a clear preference for widows to be appointed as postmistresses. Mrs Lanoy, widow to Mr Lanoy of Carmarthen, a Frenchman and former comrade of the Deputy Postmaster, refused the chance to serve in 1675 as she felt herself to be incapable, against Whitley's expectation.[50] As Whitley wrote to a worried postmaster's wife, 'noe widdow hath bin turned out since I Came into this office'.[51] This was generally true even when there was a man petitioning for the role. In 1674, for example, Roger Whitley refused to remove the place of postmistress of Shields from an unnamed 'poore old woeman' in favour of a gentleman, one Thomas Fleetwood, who had secured the favour of the county. Unless the woman was to quit her place, he wrote, Fleetwood would not be appointed.[52] In 1677 Whitley put off other interested parties for the Post Office of Lynn until the widow, Mrs Emes, had negotiated a contract.[53] There are several possible reasons for such a preference, evident in Post Office correspondence and accounts.

First, post offices were often situated within large inns. Inns were generally by their nature family businesses, where the landlord's family played a significant role in operating the concern. According to Bernard Capp a 'substantial minority' of inns were wholly run by women, usually widows, with some amassing considerable wealth through their work. Christine Churches, Amy Erickson, and Jane Whittle have also identified this pattern.[54] In some senses this is not surprising: Peter Laslett calculated that 12.9% of households in early modern England were run by widows.[55] Postmasters' wives would most likely have experience and knowledge of the core business of the inn, and would additionally have a strong understanding of the communities in which they were based and the connections which the inn had with other inns, post offices, and associated businesses. This brought distinct advantages for them as postmistresses, where

community and local knowledge was crucial not only to the daily business of receiving and delivering letters but also to the gathering of news and intelligence to send back to the centre.

Second, alongside their work within the inn and their resulting community knowledge, postmasters' wives were evidently experienced in the postal business itself, judging from Roger Whitley's correspondence as Deputy Postmaster General. When Whitley could not get a response from a postmaster, he would often write to the man's wife, as with Mrs Gascoigne of Sittingbourne in 1673 or Mrs Lodge in 1677.[56] Sometimes a record of their involvement is the result of a wife's reported ill conduct, for example Mr Clovyle's wife, who was admonished (via her husband) for refusing gentlemen's horses and treating them 'very unhandsomely, both by words and actions', or Mrs Joyce Crank's temper and tongue.[57] Mrs Gascoigne of Sittingbourne was condemned alongside her husband and servants for opposing officers of the Crown in opening a Frenchman's portmanteau in 1675.[58] In rare instances couples held the office jointly, as with John Wauchop and his wife Elizabeth Home of Cocksburnspath, Scotland, in 1696, or Sarah Wainwright and William Rawson of Ferrybridge.[59]

The latter examples point to a shared trade, but it is possible that other instances of women named as postmistresses in their widowhood were actually succeeding to the role of head of household and thus revealing their own occupation, rather than taking on a new trade or even continuing their husband's occupation.[60] Whittle discusses the example of Susan Basacke, who ran a tavern while her husband fished, and Jane Ainge, who was bequeathed an inn which she had run with her husband, passing it on to her own two daughters upon her death.[61] Either of these situations might apply to early modern postmistresses, and both would fit them for the office, if experience, respectability, and loyalty were the main qualifications.

Third, the office of postmaster seems to have had an element of heritability which neatly fitted within rhetorical discourses available to early modern wives and widows. Heritability of officeholding is an element of state formation or development that has featured in discussions of eighteenth-century Western European administrations and of the provincial bureaucracy of the Ottoman Empire, but which is also evident in Britain in the seventeenth century.[62] Postmasters and postmistresses refer in correspondence and petitions to the generations of family who had served the office in that place before them. Thomas Taylor of Tadcaster petitioned Charles II in 1660 asking for the return of the place of postmaster which his family had served since the time of Queen Elizabeth I, and for which his father was seized and executed by Fairfax while carrying an express for Prince Rupert during the First Civil War.[63]

Widows, for example Jane Shirte of Caxton and Suzana Poole, petitioned for the office of postmistress after the Restoration and referred to their holding the office with their son, or principally so that their son may take it on when he reached his majority.[64] If an office had the potential to be heritable, widows such as Shirte or Poole could use the rhetoric of family when petitioning those in authority. This rhetoric, like some earlier historiography, portrayed the women as 'caretakers of family businesses'.[65] It was an effective way for women to claim the right to an office. It added weight to other arguments about experience and loyalty and, as with other examples of women using patriarchal assumptions to their own ends, it used ideals of female behaviour to achieve individual ends.[66] Heritability did not necessarily mean that the office was actually passed over when the relevant male

relative reached their majority. Many widows held the office of postmistress for years after the death of their husband, and even when sons or sons-in-law joined the business the women did not always step back, as with Mrs Rowse of Dover.

On the other hand, sons (and, on some occasions, daughters) do seem to have taken on the role of postmaster from their mothers when they were ready to relinquish the role. Barbara Mince of Dartford, for example, yielded her office to her son Vargas Mince in 1701, having held the position since 1695.[67] In some cases, the mothers appear afterwards in a supervisory or advisory role. Mrs Greene of Nottingham, for example, held the office alongside her son after 1676/7.[68] Mr Butcher, son to Mrs Hunt of Doncaster, negotiated her terms with Whitley in 1673, while her daughter Mrs Mainwaring was apparently also involved in the post office.[69] There were three Carter women running the post office at Abingdon between 1690 and 1720, and two Gabel women at Louth in the years 1711–1720.[70] Such a pattern would lead to continuity in the service offered, with deep local knowledge and connections being established and passed on. A reputation for familial reliability and loyal service would also benefit the Post Office.

When poor service, for example delayed or lost letters, affected well-connected ladies and gentlemen the likelihood of dismissal or serious admonishment was enhanced. When Lord Albermarle complained about poor service between Witham and Burntwood in 1673, for example, Mrs Dorothy Drywood was asked to admonish her staff and not to let it happen again.[71] When Mrs Sarah Hunt's post-boy threw a letter on the ground after a shepherd refused to carry it for him to Sir Philip Montaine's house, she was threatened with being called to account for such abuses.[72] As is evident from both of those examples, a good postmaster was also an effective manager of their staff, punishing malefactors or examples of 'roguery' among their post-boys and making sure that all at the Post Office followed the rules set down for them. This expectation was made clear in correspondence with senior Post Office officials. In 1675 Mrs Aldred of Winchester and Mr Thomas of Southampton were both commanded by Roger Whitley to investigate which of their post-boys dropped letters in a pond, to be discovered by a servant of a local gentleman. He asked that they severely punish the offender 'to deterre others, from Committing soe horrid, and scandalous an abuse hereafter'.[73] Women were clearly able to take on most of these duties, and the way that inns operated allowed them to employ others to undertake those which were physically or socially impossible.[74]

Fitness for office was, as with magistrates, appraised in social as well as administrative terms. Postmasters were required to be orderly, respectable people who could gather statements of support from local gentry and clergymen.[75] This reflected wider social values and structures. In character, postmasters or postmistresses were required to be respectable and honest, loyal and well-regarded in their communities. Endorsements, certificates, and letters in support of postmasters and candidates to be postmasters frequently mentioned 'good behaviour', modesty, and keeping a reputable house.[76] There was also a strong bias towards those whose inns were patronised by notable people. Mrs Margaret Bowles's inn was recommended on the basis that 'A Great many of the noble men of the nation when they come to Deale doe take up theire Lodgings at her hous'. The examples of 'the Lord Duke Grafton, the Lord Bartlit, the Lord Admirall Harbert and severall imbassadors' were clearly included as a favourable indication of Bowles's suitability and trustworthiness.[77] Margaret Bowles was not shy about her

capacity to be trusted, noting on the back of her certificate that 'if you thinke that more hand are requisit I can have A hundred more'.[78]

These women were evidently well-versed in patron/client relationships and were able to solicit testimony in their favour, particularly when under attack by a rival candidate for their office. Elizabeth Gaylard of Totnes sought permission from Sir John Wildman to refute 'some fals informations given in against me'. Gaylard requested that she have the chance to vindicate herself in front of three named gentlemen (Sir Walter Young, Thomas Reynell Esq., and Mr John Elwill), in the meantime gathering 'a Testimoniall from the principall Marchants and other Inhabitants' of Totnes.[79] The resulting testimonial was indeed glowing: thirty of the 'chief Inhabitants' of the town signed the document, which praised Gaylard's diligence and faithfulness in her twenty-four years of service, emphasised their contentedness, and refuted any allegation that Gaylard had a reputation for 'loosing, destroying, or neglecting any letters'.[80]

Certain behaviour was viewed as particularly troublesome or inappropriate. Correspondence between deputy postmasters and other Post Office officials indicate problematic qualities. Incivility, not unsurprisingly, was one example. George Hulke of Deal was condemned for his 'Loose and Scandalous Life' and 'troublesome and Litigious Conversation' as opposed to the 'good behaviour and Reputation amongst her Neighbours' enjoyed by Mrs Mary Watts in the same town.[81] Similarly Joyce Crank of Birmingham was condemned for her ill reputation and 'tongue lyke coales of juniper'.[82] A frequent complaint was of slow riding and delivery, alongside neglect of the mails.[83] This appears sometimes to have been a rhetorical strategy masking disputes between postmasters, but it did result in occasional loss of office or admonishment. Ann Bradley of Farrington and Mrs Masterson of Canterbury both received sharp letters for these errors. Slow riding and neglect, as Whitley argued, hurt 'his Majesty & the publique', and risked bringing the office into disrepute.[84] As the Post Office was an extension of state power, an office of the Crown, behaviour that affected its efficiency and, therefore, reputation, was of great concern.

Wrongly dating post labels to pass the blame for slow delivery to neighbouring postmasters was also scandalous. Sarah Hunt of Doncaster lost her office partly due to her neglect in sending the post on, and partly because she amended the time on the post label to avoid censure. Whitley also passed on complaints about over-charging of Lord Halifax's steward and other gentry.[85] Over-charging was seen as particularly dishonourable, as was sending on the post bag via passing merchants or travellers, such as Mrs Beane of Beaumaris's Chester pewterer or Mrs Spencer of Rochester's seaman.[86] Further complaints related to the opening of letters (particularly when political reasons were suspected) and the illicit opening of the postbag itself in order to extract and share the official government newspaper, *The Gazette*, which was only sent by post to subscribers and was not for sale to the general public.[87] These complaints were not gender-specific, either in their language or in their distribution. Men and women were charged with loose living, neglect, and inappropriate treatment of the post.

Political and religious loyalty was of paramount importance, and dismissals were made when it seemed like an individual was either politically or religiously suspect, or unreliable. A close watch was placed on postmasters after the 1648 uprisings and suspected royalist sympathisers dismissed from their posts throughout the Commonwealth and Protectorate regimes. The Post Office Act of 1657 was open that one of its main

purposes was to 'discover and prevent many dangerous, and wicked Designs'.[88] As a result, its appointees had to be loyal to the current regime. Those perceived to be disloyal, or suspect, were replaced with those attested to be of greater affinity with the government of the time.[89] Ensuring the safe and uninterrupted delivery of letters, intelligence, and news was a political role. It was also a political role due to its close relationship with state intelligence.[90]

The requirement for loyalty was a key legitimising discourse, and at moments of crises postmasters were required to affirm and prove their political and religious loyalty.[91] Upon a change of regime, there were also changes in officeholders, and the Post Office was no exception. This is particularly evident in 1660 and after 1688.[92] A certificate in favour of the Deal postmistress Mary Watts mentions that she was 'a Loyall person to the present Goverment and always Did and now doth behave her self of Good behaviour to all their Majesties Leige people'.[93] Whitley had been informed that Rebecah Rafts, on the other hand, had not taken the Oath of Allegiance and Supremacy and the Test, and warned her that it was 'not safe for any one to beare an office, that will not conforme to the laws Established'.[94]

Postmasters and postmistresses were tasked with providing intelligence reports as well as intercepting letters as directed by their superiors, and their actions in this regard were defended at the highest levels. The postmasters' role of detecting intrigue meant that they were tasked with intercepting, expediting, and monitoring correspondence that passed through their offices. As Nadine Akkerman has commented, scholars have long been 'unable or unwilling' to discern the activities of women involved in intelligence, and she mentions postmistresses as one example of women working 'behind the scenes'.[95] While the postmistresses that Akkerman discusses are necessarily of the elite, this is also true of their humbler sisters in both London and the provinces. In 1683, for example, London postmasters were shown the handwriting of Lord Grey of Werke, who had fled for the Continent following the Rye House Plot, so that they could intercept and forward his correspondence to Sir Leoline Jenkins, Secretary of State.[96]

Meanwhile in rural Wales in 1696, Elizabeth Davis of Montgomery reported a suspicious horse match and 'cocking' in the area, seen as a possible cover for oppositional activity. As a result, troops were moved to the vicinity in anticipation of disorder.[97] This kind of reporting happened in a more systematic way during the preparations for the Glorious Revolution of 1688, as the government sought to track the movements of suspicious figures such as Henry Booth, 2nd Baron Delamere. The Governor of the Post Office, Philip Frowde, requested by express accounts from postmasters of Delamere's movements and information about reactions to the unfolding events. One woman, Mary Rathbone, postmistress of Lichfield, was amongst those who replied with a narrative of Delamere's progress alongside expressions of loyalty and hope for 'his Majesties good success in all his undertakeings'. If she heard anything further, she noted, Frowde would 'here thereof by the paquet'.[98]

It is unclear why, after 1660, women were officially trusted with the authority of the post and the discretion to gather intelligence and protect secrets.[99] It is possible that royalist use of female spies in the Interregnum contributed to their acceptance as postmistresses: though there have been no official records located of women occupying the office before 1660, there are a noticeable proportion after the Restoration. Another possibility is that the Crown was more urgently concerned about the gathering of information than

the gender of the source. Women's role as 'gossips' – as brokers of informal and possibly unreliable information, usually viewed as part of a patriarchal negative stereotype of women's talk - has been analysed in some depth.[100] As Steve Hindle has argued, women speaking in public ran considerable risks, particularly regarding political and spiritual matters.[101] Although the information provided by postmistresses was not public *per se*, it was used to form political responses to events. It is interesting, therefore, that women were trusted to gather local information of importance to the Secretaries of State in London, in their capacity as postmistresses.

One potential reason for this apparent anomaly is that the ability to gather information without attracting attention was an asset to those governing the Post Office. With their dual role as postmasters and innkeepers, the custodians of the post, male and female, were ideally placed to do this. Competent postmasters were at the centre of their communities, had contact with people of all socio-economic backgrounds, and were cogs within wider networks of communication. A woman could provide the vital information necessary for a state on constant alert for seditious activity just as well as a man, providing she were loyal and honest, and there is no evidence that the information provided by postmistresses was assessed in a different way to their male counterparts. Women, therefore, played an important role in gathering domestic intelligence and their reports were apparently trusted: this runs contrary to the traditional stereotype of female unreliability, and to the preparedness of late seventeenth-century governments to take a pragmatic approach to intelligence gathering.

In conclusion, the office of postmaster developed as the state itself expanded. As a result, postmasters facilitated government and managed privileged information, and their position was one of responsibility. Mistakes or abuses were taken seriously and portrayed as damaging to 'his Majesty & the publique' as well as the Post Office.[102] Although it has been often neglected in discussions of state formation, the office of postmaster clearly fits into both Braddick and Hindle's definitions of the expanding state.[103] Lindsay O'Neill and Susan Whyman have argued that the post was 'emblematic of the state's growing power', something borne out by the features and functions of the role of postmaster.[104] Maria Ågren, writing about urban Sweden, has also identified postmasters and postmistresses as valuable state servants. She explains the benefits and risks of state service which would have been intimately familiar to the postmistresses of England and Wales in the early modern period.[105]

The office was legitimised by oaths of allegiance, certificates of suitability, bonds, and security, and the fitness of each individual postmaster or postmistress to serve was determined by their loyalty and social respectability as well as their capability. The office of postmaster had specific functions and a clearly demarcated territory, and authoritative power in that office depended on a current warrant - those continuing to act after being dismissed were subject (at least in theory) to punishment. The threat of legitimate physical force was present for postmasters and their employees who abused their office, for individuals who threatened or abused postmasters, and for those who caused disruption to the service they were charged with undertaking. This was as true for postmistresses as for their male counterparts. They were subject to the same requirements and strictures and, correspondingly, benefited from the same rewards. These included fees, social status, and authority, as well as perks such as warrants to prevent quartering.[106] Early modern postal workers provided a vital service, one that was important for

government, status, economic and legal transactions. It had to be reasonably efficient, trustworthy, and reliable. Despite contemporary complaints, evidence from postal marks suggests that it generally was efficient.[107]

Women were at the forefront of the Post Office in this period of expansion and formed a substantial minority within the cadre of state servants that it produced. They were appointed, as were their male counterparts, for their experience, loyalty, and skill in managing their office. This experience resulted often, though not always, from managing a post office alongside a husband or other relative, and it was often developed and maintained over decades. Postmistresses were skilled negotiators, often with those in senior roles at the Post Office. They were involved in monitoring and reporting on local events and reactions to national circumstances. Like postmasters, postmistresses were criticised for the speed of their horses, ability to accommodate the needs of prominent men, and more seriously and occasionally thefts, mistreatment, and assorted perfidy.

Although women were invisible in contemporary representations of the post, their presence as postmistresses, carriers, and footposts indicates that many senders and recipients of post would have been accustomed to women's involvement in the Post Office. This article has demonstrated that women were key to the expanding postal network in England and Wales from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. They occupied a role with Crown authority and significant political responsibility: one which the seventeenth-century ideal of womanly behaviour did not admit. Although present in significant numbers from the Restoration, their existence has largely passed without comment. Further research is needed to uncover the social history of the post: the quotidian work; the exceptional requests; the relationship with the centre, and much more. This work will form the core of my forthcoming book.[108] Connecting the Post Office in England and Wales to the wider European and global context, and covering the story through the eighteenth century and beyond will also be significant. Women's contributions will be central to that social history. Without them the story of the Post Office cannot be told in full.

Notes

1. The National Archives (TNA), SP 29/266 fo. 248: Petition of Martha Warner, 25 October 1669.
2. For example, Jane Haughton of Waltham and Sara Sympson of St Albans. TNA, SP 29/6 fo. 183: Petition of Jane Haughton, 1660; SP 29/6 fo. 159: Petition of Sara Sympson, 1660.
3. M.J. Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England c.1550–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 9.
4. A. Fletcher, *Reform in the Provinces: The Government of Stuart England* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1986), 116; Braddick, *State Formation*, 4–5.
5. S. Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 21.
6. Braddick, *State Formation*, 9.
7. M. Brayshay, 'Royal Post-Horse Routes in England and Wales: The Evolution of the Network in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Century', *Journal of Historical Geography* 17, no. 4 (1991): 373–89, at 374.
8. M. Ågren, *The State as Master: Gender, State Formation and Commercialisation in Urban Sweden, 1650–1780* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 6; L. O'Neill, *The Opened Letter: Networking in the Early Modern British World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 19; S. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers, 1660–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 47–8.

9. B. Austen, *English Provincial Posts, 1630–1840. A Study Based on Kent Examples* (Bognor Regis: Phillimore & Co. Ltd, 1978), 15.

10. B. Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 267, 272, 292.

11. Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 293.

12. She farmed the office herself until her own death, although Lord Arlington undertook the administration. Sarah Poynting, 'Stanhope, Katherine, *suo jure* Countess of Chesterfield, and Lady Stanhope (bap. 1609, d. 1667)'. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-15669 (accessed February 26, 2024).

13. A full exploration of these roles will be provided in my forthcoming book, a social history of the early Post Office. TNA, AO 1/1954/29; Postal Museum and Archive (PMA): POST 59/2: Queen Anne's Establishment Book; British Library (BL), MS 78505: Declaration of Post Office Accounts, 1715–16; T. De Laune, *The Present State of England, or, Memorials Comprehending a Full and Succinct Account of the Ancient and Modern State Thereof* (London, 1680), 386–435.

14. Letter-receivers appear not to have been routinely listed in Post Office accounts. *All Gentleman Merchants, and Other Persons May Please to Take Notice …* (London, 1652); Postal Museum & Archives (PMA), Post 59/2: Queen Anne's Establishment Book; BL, Add MS 38863: Establishment Book of the Duke of York; Add MS 62091: Thomas Gardiner's 'Generall Survey of the Post Office', 1682.

15. TNA, AO 1/1954/29: Audit roll, Declared Accounts of the Post Office, 1695–6.

16. De Laune, *Present State of England*, 386–435.

17. TNA, AO 1/1954/20: Audit roll, Declared Accounts of the Post Office, 1695–6.

18. No doubt a detailed survey of gentry financial accounts and correspondence would locate more such 'post-wenches' in counties across England and Wales. J. Crofts, *Packhorse Waggon and Post: Land Carriage and Communications under the Tudors and Stuarts* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 55; A. Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (3rd ed., London: Routledge, 1992), 63; BL, Add MS 61689 fo. 86: Correspondence and Papers of Sir John Wildman as Postmaster General: Testimony of Mary Torring, 1689; National Library of Wales (NLW), Chirk F 13272, 18 Dec. 1654, 20 Apr. 1656, 16 January 1657; Mostyn Hall, Mostyn Correspondence, vol. 7, no. 36: Thomas Whitley to Thomas Mostyn, Aston, 25 December 1691.

19. It is quite probable that further research will reveal many more women than have been discussed above: those not in postmaster positions do not appear in the main run of Annual Accounts of the Post Office, and future work will encompass a search for the traces of women's work in the wider Post Office beyond the already cited Declared Accounts. The survival of Declared Accounts is decidedly patchy.

20. J. Whittle and M. Hailwood, 'The Gender Division of Labour in Early Modern England', *The Economic History Review* 73, no. 1 (2020): 3–32, at 5; J.M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenges of Feminism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 62.

21. A. Buis, C. Spain-Savage and M.E. Wright, 'Attending to Fishwives: Views from Seventeenth-Century London and Amsterdam', in *Mapping Gendered Routes and Spaces in the Early Modern World*, ed. M.E. Wiesner-Hanks (Farnham: Routledge, 2015), 177–202; J. Collins, 'Jane Holt, Milliner, and Other Women in Business: Apprentices, Freewomen, and Mistresses in The Clothworkers Company, 1606–1800', *Textile History* 44, no. 1 (2013): 72–94; N. Akkerman, *Invisible Agents: Women and Espionage in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); J. Peacey, '"Wandering with Pamphlets": The Infrastructure of News Circulation in Civil War England', in *Not Dead Things: The Dissemination of Popular Print in England, Wales, Italy, and the Low Countries, 1500–1820*, ed. R. Harms, J. Raymond, and J. Salman (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 97–114.

22. Brayshay's chapter on letter carriers assumes that the agents he considers were male. M. Brayshay, 'Conveying Correspondence: Early Modern Letter Bearers, Carriers, and Posts', in *Cultures of Correspondence in Early Modern Britain*, ed. J. Daybell and

A. Gordon (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 48–65; D. Campbell-Smith, *Masters of the Post: The Authorized History of the Royal Mail* (London: Penguin, 2011); W.G.S. Dibden, *The Post Office, 1635–1720* (Bath: The Postal History Society, 1960); H. Feldman, *Letter Receivers of London, 1652–1857: A History of their Offices and Handstamps within the General, Penny, and Twopenny Posts* (Bristol: Postal History Society, 2 vols., 1998); F.G. Kay, *Royal Mail: The Story of the Posts in England from the Time of Edward IVth to the Present Day* (London: Rockliff, 1951); W. Oliver, 'A Local Post-master of the 17th Century: Christopher Thwaites of Greta Bridge, 1626?-1693', *Teesdale Record Society Publications* 10 (1944 for 1943): 17–18; S.K. Roberts, 'A Poet, A Plotter, and a Postmaster: A Disputed Polemic of 1668', *Bulletin of the IHR* 53 (1980): 258–65; P. Scott-Cady and H.L. Cady, *The English Royal Messengers Service 1685-1750: An Institutional Study* (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999).

23. M.J. Crowley, 'Women Post Office Workers in Britain: The Long Struggle for Gender Equality and the Positive Impact of World War II', *Essays in Economic and Business History* 30 (2012): 77–92.

24. Jane Whittle's recent article does much to discuss and disentangle the terminology, theory and problems with assessing women's economic contributions. J. Whittle, 'A Critique of Approaches to "Domestic Work": Women, Work and the Pre-Industrial Economy', *Past & Present* 243, no. 1 (2019): 35–70.

25. Collins, 'Jane Holt, Milliner'.

26. O. Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, Volume One: 1500–1800* (London: Vintage, 1995), 238–48; Valerie Wayne, 'Introduction: Locating Women's Labour', in *Women's Labour and the History of the Book in England*, ed. V. Wayne (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2020), 1–26, at 2.

27. See Wayne, ed., *Women's Labour*.

28. Brayshay, 'Royal Post-Horse Routes in England and Wales', 375, 379.

29. My emphasis. E.J.B. Allen, *Post and Courier Service in the Diplomacy of Early Modern Europe* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), 22.

30. E.g. Brayshay, 'Royal Post-Horse Routes', 375; Brayshay, 'Conveying Correspondence', 50, 52–3; J. Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing, 1512–1635* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 137–8.

31. http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/search/?query=carrier&f_Themes=Carriers&d=1750; https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/30361/xml; https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20095/xml; https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/31877/xml

32. Buis, Spain-Savage and Wright, 'Attending to Fishwives', 179; Akkerman, *Invisible Agents*, 4 and *passim*.

33. BL, Harley MS 7365: 'A Generall Survey of the Post Office, with seuerall Usefull Remarques to the particulars of it', 1677.

34. B. Capp, 'Gender and the Culture of the English Alehouse in Late Stuart England', in *The Trouble With Ribs: Women, Men, and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. A. Korhonen and K. Lowe (Helsinki: Helsinki Colloquium for Advanced Studies, 2007), 103–27, at 105; P. Clark, 'The Alehouse and the Alternative Society', in *Puritans and Revolutionaries: Essays in Seventeenth-Century History Presented to Christopher Hill*, ed. D. Pennington and K. Thomas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 47–72, at 48.

35. Austen, *English Provincial Posts*, 7.

36. The sources used to identify postmistresses and those working within the postal industry are varied and not always consistent in their format. This can make it difficult to confirm whether an individual (male or female) was a salaried postmaster or whether they had a more intangible role within the national Post Office structure. As an illustration, between 1678 and 1720 nine women were listed in the General Accounts 'payments due' sections and did not appear elsewhere in either the accounts or other sources. These women may well have been postmistresses, but their status could not be confirmed. Where possible, multiple sources have been cross-referenced to confirm an individual's status as postmaster of a

particular town or route. Even the Annual Accounts appear not to always list salaried post-masters reliably.

37. They can be identified principally within the following documents and collections: PMA, Post 94/13-17: Whitley Letterbooks, 1672–7; Post 3/1: Annual Account of the General Post Office and Annual Accounts of Postmasters and Agents in England and Wales, Edinburgh, Dublin, and some European Packet Stations, 1678–9; Post 3/3: Annual Accounts of the General Post Office, Jan. 1685-Mar. 1700; Post 3/4: Annual Accounts of the General Post Office, Apr. 1700-Mar. 1710; Post 3/5: Annual Accounts of the General Post Office, Apr. 1710-Mar. 1720; BL, 78505: Declaration of Post Office Accounts, 1705–6; BL, Add MS 62091: Thomas Gardiner, 'A Generall Survey of the Post Office', c. 1682; BL, Add MS 61689: Correspondence of Sir John Wildman as Postmaster General, 1688–91; TNA, AO 1/1954/29: Declared Accounts of the Post Office, 1695–6; AO 1/1954/30: Declared Accounts of the Post Office, 1696–7; AO 1/1954/31: Declared Accounts of the Post Office, 1697–8; Post 94/11: Revision of Postmasters' Salaries and Stages, 1667; Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/JO/10/1/447/603.

38. Calendar of Treasury Books, vol. 21, cccxii; vol. 22, cccxii; Post 3/4: Annual Accounts; BL, MS 78505: Declaration of Post Office Accounts, 1705–6; Postmasters' Salaries, 1710–20; Post 94/11: Revision of salaries and stages; TNA, SP 29/184 fol. 83; SP 63/347 fol. 1: Certificate by Grace Swift.

39. PMA, Post 3/5: Annual Accounts.

40. PMA, Post 14/11: Revision of Postmasters' Salaries and Stages.

41. PMA, Postmasters' Salaries, 1687–1700.

42. It is difficult because of the scattered nature of the sources to provide a conclusive sense of the proportion of male and female postmasters over the entire period. 1711 has been chosen as a representative year for this article. PMA, Post 3/5: Annual Accounts.

43. P. Earle, 'The Female Labour Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries', The Economic History Review 42, no. 3 (1989): 328–53, at 337; Collins, 'Jane Holt, Milliner', 74; Whittle and Hailwood, 'Gender Division', 6; I.K. Ben-Amos, Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 135–6; K.D.M. Snell, Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England 1600–1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 270–90.

44. PMA, Post 94/15 fol. 457: Whitley to Mr Dikes, 5 January 1675.

45. PMA, Post 94/13 fol. 24: Whitley to Mrs Partridge, 24 December 1672.

46. For example, Mrs Mary Emes of Lynn and Mrs Landike of Bath (1674). PMA, Post 94/17 fol. 304: Whitley to Mrs Mary Emes, 17 Feb. 1677; Post 94/15 fol. 746: Whitley to Mrs Landike, 14 August 1674.

47. PMA, Post 94/15 fol. 501: Whitley to Mr Cappur, 4 March 1675.

48. PMA, Post 94/13 fol. 150: Whitley to Mrs Prestwood, 29 May 1675.

49. BL, Add MS 61689, fol. 37: Mrs Dorothy Willison to Sir John Wildman, Penrith, 27 May 1689; PMA, Post 94/17 fol. 425: Whitley to Rebecah Rafts, 25 August 1677.

50. PMA, Post 94/15 fol. 708: Whitley to Mrs Lanoy of Carmarthen, 2 Nov. 1675.

51. PMA, Post 94/15 fol. 384: Whitley to Mr and Mrs Dikes of Newcastle, 10 Oct. 1674.

52. PMA, Post 94/15, fols 270, 282, 449, 460, 467: Whitley to Mr Dikes of Newcastle, 1674.

53. PMA, Post 94/17 fol. 304: Whitley to Mrs Emes, 14 Feb. 1676/7.

54. Capp, 'Gender and the Culture of the English Alehouse', 107, 114; C. Churches, 'Women and Property in Early-Modern England: A Case Study', Social History 23, no. 2 (1998): 165–80, at 178; A.L. Erickson, 'Married Women's Occupations in Eighteenth-Century London', Continuity and Change 23, no. 2 (2008): 267–308, at 293; J. Whittle, 'Enterprising Widows and Active Wives: Women's Unpaid Work in the Household Economy of Early Modern England', The History of the Family 19, no. 3 (2014): 283–300, at 291, 295.

55. P. Laslett, 'Mean Household Sizes in England since the Sixteenth Century', in Household and Family in Past Time, ed. P. Laslett and R. Wall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 147.

56. PMA, Post 94/15 fols 51–2: Whitley to Mrs Gascoigne of Sittingbourne, 11 November 1673; Post 94/17 fol. 377: Whitley to Mrs Lodge, 26 June 1677.

57. PMA, Post 94/15 fol. 40: Whitley to Mr Clovyle of Brentwood, n.p., 30 October 1673; BL, Add MS 61689 fols 34, 66–7.

58. The Gascoignes were apparently vindicated as an apology was later issued for the behaviour of the agents involved. PMA, Post 94/15, fols 633, 638: Whitley to Mr Gascoigne, 1675.

59. Calendar of Treasury Books, vol. 21, cccx; vol. 22, cccx, vol. 26, p. 301; BL, Add MS 78505: Declaration of the Post Office Accounts, 1705–6; PMA, Post 3/4: Annual Accounts, 1701; Post 3/5: Annual Accounts, 1710–20.

60. C. Macleod, 'Enterprising Widows: Family, Business, and the Succession Process' in *Women in Business Families: From Past to Present*, ed. J. Heinonen and K. Vainio-Korhonen (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 199–217, at 203.

61. Whittle, 'Enterprising Widows', 295.

62. E.g. T. Ertman, *The Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 8–9; S.A. Lazer, *State Formation in Early Modern Alsace, 1648–1789* (Woodbridge: University of Rochester Press, 2019), 79; C.H. Koh, 'The Ottoman Postmaster: Contractors, Communication, and Early Modern State Formation', *Past & Present* 251, no. 1 (2021): 113–52, at 143–4.

63. TNA, SP 29/6 fol. 180: Petition of Thomas Taylor, 1660.

64. TNA, SP 29/6 fol. 127: Petition of Jane Shirte, 1660; TNA, SP 29/3 fol. 96: Petition of Susan, widow of Richard Poole, 8 June 1660; SP 29/3 fo. 95: Suzana Poole to Charles Whittaker, n.p., 8 June 1660.

65. McLeod, 'Enterprising Widows', 199.

66. See S. Beale, 'War Widows and Revenge in Restoration England', *The Seventeenth Century* 33, no. 2 (2018): 195–217; J. Daybell, 'Scripting a Female Voice: Women's Epistolary Rhetoric in Sixteenth-Century Letters of Petition', *Women's Writing* 13 (2006): 3–22; A. Thorne, 'Women's Petitionary Letters and Early Seventeenth-Century Treason Trials', *Women's Writing* 13 (2006): 23–43.

67. PMA, Post 3/4: Annual Accounts, 1685–1700; Post 3/5: Annual Accounts, 1700–10.

68. PMA, Post 94/15 fol. 778: Whitley to Mrs Greene and Mr Greene, n.p., 18 January 1676/7.

69. PMA, Post 94/13 fols 289, 301–2, 330: Whitley to Mrs Hunt of Doncaster, 1673.

70. PMA, Post 3/3: Annual Accounts, 1685–1700; Post 3/5: Annual Accounts, 1685–1700; TNA, AO 1/1954/29: Declared Accounts of the Post Office, 1695–6.

71. PMA, Post 94/13 fol. 152: Whitley to Mrs Drywood, 3 June 1673.

72. PMA, Post 94/15 fol. 451: Whitley to Mrs Hunt, 20 May 1675.

73. PMA, Post 94/15 fol. 467: Whitley to Mrs Aldred and Mr Thomas, 14 January 1675.

74. Riding was one such duty. PMA, Post 94/13 fol. 434: Whitley to Lord Bulkeley, 6 February 1675.

75. Braddick, *State Formation*, 35.

76. BL, Add MS 61690 fol. 1: Certificate of Deal men in favour of Mrs Margaret Bowles, n.d.; Add MS 61689 fol. 73: Julius Deedes to John Wildman, Hythe, 4 August 1689.

77. BL, Add MS 61690 fol. 1: Certificate of Deal men in favour of Mrs Margaret Bowles, n.d.

78. BL, Add MS 61690 fol. 1: Certificate of Deal men in favour of Mrs Margaret Bowles, n.d.

79. BL, Add MS 61690 fol. 26: Elizabeth Gaylard to Sir John Wildman, n.p., c.1689/90.

80. BL, Add MS 61689 fol. 96: Testimonial for Elizabeth Gaylard, 1689.

81. BL, Add MS 61690 fol. 24: Certificate of Deal men in favour of Mrs Mary Watts, n.d.; Add MS 61689 fol. 73: Julius Deedes to John Wildman, Hythe, 4 August 1689.

82. BL, Add MS 61689 fol. 66: James Greir to Mr Thomas Evans, Birmingham, 15 July 1689.

83. Austen, *English Provincial Posts*, 29–31.

84. PMA, Post 94/15 fol. 40: Whitley to Mrs Ann Bradley, 1 November 1673; Post 94/15 fol. 45: Whitley to Mrs Ann Bradley, 6 November 1673; Post 94/15 fol. 583: Whitley to Mrs Masterson, 22 June 1675.

85. PMA, Post 94/13 fol. 63: Whitley to Mrs Hunt, 13 February 1672/3; Post 94/13 fol. 289: Whitley to Mrs Hunt, 14 August 1673; Post 94/15 fols 211–12: Whitley to Mrs Hunt, 21 April 1674; Post 94/15 fol. 527: Whitley to Mrs Hunt, 10 April 1675.

86. BL, Add MS 61690 fol. 33: Petition to Sir John Wildman by the Inhabitants of Kimbolton, n.d.; PMA, Post 94/13 fol. 23: Whitley to Mrs Beane, 24 Dec. 1672; Post 94/15 fol. 619: Whitley to Mrs Spencer, 26 May 1675.

87. PMA, Post 94/17 fol. 317: Whitley to Mr Blackborn, 10 March 1677; Post 94/17 fol. 344: Whitley to Mr Ballard of Usk, 28 April 1677.

88. 'June 1657: An Act for setling the Postage of England, Scotland and Ireland' in *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642–1660*, ed. C.H. Firth and R.S. Raid (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1911), 1110–13, at 1110.

89. Austen, *English Provincial Posts*, 41.

90. A. Marshall, *Intelligence and Espionage in the Reign of Charles II, 1660–1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 78.

91. Marshall, *Intelligence*, 79.

92. This is largely due to the survival of petitions and papers of senior Post Office officials from these two moments.

93. BL, Add MS 61690 fol. 24: Certificate of Deal men in favour of Mrs Mary Watts, n.d.

94. PMA, Post 94/15 fol. 452: Whitley to Mrs Rebecah Rafts, n.p., 19 December 1674.

95. Akkerman, *Invisible Agents*, 3.

96. F.H. Blackburne Daniell and F. Bickley, eds., *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reign of Charles II, 1683 (July-September)* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1934), 218–19.

97. W.J. Hardy, ed., *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reign of William and Mary, 1689–1702. Vol. 7: William III, 1696* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office 1913), 209.

98. BL, Add MS 41805 fol. 254: Mary Rathbone to Philip Frowde, Lichfield Post Office, 21 November 1688.

99. It is clear from petitions in 1660 that women had informally exercised the office before the Civil Wars and Interregnum.

100. See, for example, Capp, *When Gossips Meet*; S. Hindle, 'The Shaming of Margaret Knowsley: Gossip, Gender, and the Experience of Authority in Early Modern England', *Continuity & Change* 9, no. 3 (1994): 391–419; M. Ingram, '"Scolding Women Cucked or Washed": A Crisis in Gender Relations in Early Modern England?' in *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England*, ed. J. Kermode and G. Walker (London: Routledge, 1994), 48–80.

101. Hindle, 'Shaming of Margaret Knowsley', 408–9.

102. PMA, Post 94/15 fol. 583: Whitley to Mrs Masterson, n.p., 22 June 1675.

103. Braddick, *State Formation*, 9 and *passim*; Hindle, *State and Social Change*, 21–3.

104. O'Neill, *Opened Letter*, 19; Whyman, *Pen and the People*, 47–8.

105. Ågren, *State as Master*, 5–7, 18, 43.

106. James II, *A Proclamation For quieting the Post-master General his Deputies and Assigns in the Execution of his Office* (London, 1685).

107. M. Brayshay, *Land Travel and Communications in Tudor and Stuart England: Achieving a Joined-Up Realm* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014).

108. S. Ward Clavier, *Post Haste: A Social History of the Early Modern Post* (in production).

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