



The Greetings Telegram



Telegram delivery boy. c1935
(TCB 392/PG 6)

Telegrams were a popular means to send a message quickly and effectively. The idea goes back to the mid-nineteenth century, when brief messages were transmitted using the electric telegraph. From 1870, all the various telegraph companies came under the authority of the Post Office, which then had a monopoly over the telegraph service, and effectively every post office became a telegraph office. The Post Office changed the price for a message from 20 words for 1/- (1 shilling) to 12 words for 6d (6 pence). This had an effect on the style of messages as to save cost; people wrote shorter, more direct messages that took on the appearance of a memo rather than a letter. These telegraph messages were dubbed “telegrams”.

At the local telegraph office, people would fill out a form with the message they wished to send. Then the message would be transmitted electrically along telegraph wires to the nearest telegraph office to the intended address. From there it would be hand delivered, on foot, by a messenger boy, later on motorcycles were used.

The cost of the service meant that the wealthy were the main users and, then mostly only to convey urgent news. The telegram reached its heyday during the 1890s-1920s. During the First World War, a particularly sad use was to inform family members of those killed during active service. From the 1920s, the telephone became the fashionable means of communication. However, telegrams were often

still used to convey bad news, as people found it easier to send a message rather than have a difficult conversation over the telephone. The telegram came to be seen as the source of bad news and the arrival of the messenger boy was often greeted with dread.

The Post Office kept the telegram service running but at a serious loss due to the small number of customers. To halt the decline and to move away from the idea that telegrams only brought bad news, in 1935 the Greetings Telegram was introduced. By paying, more for a decorative telegram these “good news”, telegrams rescued the telegram service until an eventual decline in the 1980s.



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In 1930s police call points were introduced. Similar to the fire alarm call points, the police call points used telephone rather than telegraph communication, a result of the increase familiarity of telephones with 2.5 million on the network. The police call points used the street pillar format or were incorporated into police kiosks and allowed the police on the beat to talk to their local police station as well as the general public to access the police in an emergency. The police could unlock a regular handset from the call point, whereas the public upon opening a door could speak to their local police station through a grill.

The Greetings Telegram was a cheerful alternative to its plain standard counterpart, richly illustrated and delivered in a special golden envelope. Post Office representatives had been particularly impressed by their widespread popularity in Europe, Scandinavia the USA and Commonwealth countries.



A German telegram from the 1930s (POST 33/3235)

German Greetings Telegrams were particularly ornate, intricate and artistic in design and in the cities, a messenger boy dressed in a distinctive uniform of red coat and white gloves delivered them in style.



Mrs Calkin James, a Post Office employee, designed the first Greetings Telegram. [Type 1, 1935] (TCB 480/1)

The first UK Greetings Telegram UK was a formal design, having a richly decorated border of gold and scarlet on cream paper. A bright golden envelope was introduced at the same time, made from gold-coated brown paper and incorporated features of the design from the telegram form. In 1936 the charge for nine words was 9d and 1d for each extra word. By 1957 a greeting telegram cost 5/- (5 shillings) for twelve words whereas a standard telegram cost 3/6 (3 shillings and 6 pence). The Greetings Telegram, along with reductions in the cost of a standard telegram, successfully revived the fortunes of the telegraph system.

Not only did the Greetings Telegram service prove to be immensely popular, (the average of Greetings Telegrams sent rose from nearly 3 million in 1937 to 9 million in 1942), it also earned the GPO a great deal of prestige due to the originality, variety and beauty of their designs.



Publicity poster by Kraber, 1936 (TCB 319/PRD 154)

Commissioned Artists

Established artists such as Rex Whistler, Claudia Freedman and Eric Fraser (1951) were commissioned to design cards and envelopes. In addition, the expanding publicity department of the Post Office embraced the new fashion, in British advertising, of using fine artists for graphic design. Young artists, many of whom went on later to achieve great success, were commissioned fresh out of art school to design publicity posters.



Greetings Telegram by Kathleen Atkins [Type 23, 1942] (TCB 480/45)



Interior of a 21st Birthday edition Deluxe Greetings Telegram by Ken Thomas [Type 73, 1976] (TCB 480/129)



Coronation issue designed by Macdonald Gill [Type 7, 1937] (TCB 480/10)



Valentine's Greeting Telegram by John Strickland Goodall [Type 28, 1952] (TCB 480/39)

Valentine's and Deluxe Telegrams

As Greetings Telegrams were proving to be popular, it was decided to introduce designs for specific occasions namely: Valentine's Day on 14th February 1936 and in 1937 a Coronation edition, along with four more Valentine's Day designs.

By 1942, there were 23 different Greetings Telegrams when production was halted due to World War II.

The new decade saw the introduction, in 1950, of the Greetings Telegrams along with occasional issues of Valentine's telegrams. However, the design and print were of a lower quality than pre-war issues.

In 1957, the "Deluxe" Wedding Greetings Telegram was introduced as a large folding card with matching envelope. Later, further "Deluxe" issues were created for celebrating birthdays, births and St. Valentine's Day while the standard Greetings Telegrams continued to be issued for other occasions.

The Telemessage

In 1981, British Telecom introduced the Telemessage which completely replaced the telegram service the next year. Telex was used to transmit messages rather than telegraph and it was delivered by post.

The convenience and the immediacy of the telephone had triumphed and old style telegram service was no longer viable.



Example of a Telemessage and Envelope, 1982 (TCB 417/E 76491)



References and suggested further reading

BT Archives Library

British Greetings Telegrams and Telemessage Special Occasion Cards by Ian G. Wilkinson (1991)
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The Greetings Telegram Service and check list of all issues by Doris M. Green (1967)
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The Story of the Greetings Telegram Service in Great Britain by John C.W. Field
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