

Monday 14 February 2011

## PASSION THROUGH THE POST

A series of Valentines cards, giving rare insight into romantic items in the Postal services' 800 card collection, are currently available online.

Spanning over 200 years, the cards include the earliest Valentine's and First World War Valentines postcard. The British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA) is marking 'lover's day' by highlighting several of these images.

**Jenny Karlsson, The British Postal Museum & Archive commented: "The BPMA is the leading resource for postal history, and has a vast collection of exquisite and amusing Valentines cards in its collection. This online exhibition shows the importance of Valentines cards throughout history."**

The display includes the earliest Valentine's card in postal service which dates from about 1790 and is known as a Rebus or a 'puzzle purse'. A single large sheet of paper folded to a smaller size, the puzzle is to unfold it in the right way to see the small illustrations and read the verses handwritten on the folds. A verse on the card reads:

*My dear the heart which you behold  
Will break when you the same unfold  
Even so my heart with lovesick pain  
Sure wounded is and breaks in twain.*

Similarly, a comical card from 1840-70 depicts a lady in Victorian clothes and opens to reveal a goose in blue and pink dress with a yellow hat and feather. The front verse reads: '*You fancy you display such grace/But how is that with such a face*'. The inside reads: '*Your waddling walk too, tis no use/You look but like a silly goose*'.

Also on display are letters sent in the 1830s by Sir Francis Freeling, Secretary of the Post Office to the Postmaster General complaining about having to pay to receive Valentines. On 11 February 1835, he highlighted the need to make sure that the increased volume of post did not cause disruption. The letter reads:

*'It may be necessary to mention that on or about St. Valentine's Day, there is a most extraordinary influx of many thousand letters – to the Two penny post in particular...even former years we have had an addition of 50, or 60,000 Letters, consequently every possible exertion is necessary on our part to prevent delay and interruption to the general Mass of correspondence'.*

Other fascinating items in the collection include a perfume sachet, a silk valentine card, a card in the shape of a fan and pop-up and pull-out cards.

**Angela Owusu, Archive Awareness Campaign Officer** said:

**“There are lots of amusing reads to find in this exhibition. The Valentine’s practices of our forefathers will serve as a reminder of what can be expressed with a sheet of paper, a little imagination, and a lot of words”.**

To view the exhibition log on to

[www.postalheritage.org.uk/exhibitions/onlineexhibitions/valentines](http://www.postalheritage.org.uk/exhibitions/onlineexhibitions/valentines)

Facsimiles of the Valentines cards will also be on show at the POSTED exhibition in Hackney, London. The display will coincide with an early evening event on Valentine’s Day involving readings of love letters etc. See [www.postedprojects.co.uk/](http://www.postedprojects.co.uk/) for further details.

**– Ends –**

For further details, spokespeople or images on Archive Awareness Campaign, please contact **Angela Owusu** on **0208 392 5237** or email [Angela.Owusu@nationalarchives.gov.uk](mailto:Angela.Owusu@nationalarchives.gov.uk)

#### **Notes to Editors**

For more information or images on the BPMA contact Jenny Karlsson, The British Postal Museum & Archive email: [jenny.karlsson@postalheritage.org.uk](mailto:jenny.karlsson@postalheritage.org.uk); Phone: 020 7239 2574

#### **The History of Valentine’s cards through the post office**

- The name of the day is linked to a Christian martyr named Valentine. He signed a letter to his jailer's daughter, whom he had befriended and with whom he had fallen in love, “from your Valentine.”
- Sending special letters for Valentine’s Day probably dates back to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century.

- Since the nineteenth century, handwritten notes have largely given way to mass-produced greetings cards.
- In the early nineteenth century, when the Penny Post was not yet widely available, the cost of postage had to be paid by the person receiving the post. The cost was based on both the distance travelled and the number of sheets posted. Some of the Valentines sent were less than flattering, and might be sent anonymously out of spite.
- The introduction of the Universal Penny Post in 1840 made it possible for more people to afford to send items through the post. This meant that a letter could be delivered within a certain radius for the price of one penny.
- Valentine card production became big business and those sent during this period were often beautifully made and decorated.
- During the First World War, postcards were often sent between soldiers and their families, and picture postcard Valentines sent home to loved ones were greatly treasured.
- The Post Office introduced greetings telegrams in 1935. These were brightly decorated and proved to be very popular.
- The first Valentine telegram was produced in 1936. These telegrams continued to be sent for many years.
- Around one billion Valentine's Day cards are sent through the post worldwide every year.

### **Valentine's cards in the BPMA collection**

- The British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA) has around 800 Valentine's cards in its collection.
- The Valentine's cards are part of BPMA's ephemera collection.
- The oldest Valentine in the BPMA collection known as Rebus or a 'puzzle purse'.
- Other early Valentine cards feature a design known as the 'flower cage' or 'bird cage' design. The painted surface of the card depicts a flower or a bird. A fine thread in the centre of the image is pulled to show how the paper has been cut into a lattice pattern which forms a 'cage' and reveals a hidden image below.
- Other Valentine's cards in the collection include a valentine perfume sachet; valentine card in the shape of a fan; silk valentine card; pop-up card and pull-out card.
- **The British Postal Museum & Archive** is the leading resource for all aspects of British postal history. It is a combined museum and archive, bringing together The Royal Mail Archive and a Museum Store. With collections ranging from staff records to stamps, poster design to photography and from transport to telegrams, it cares for the visual, written and physical records from over 400 years of innovation and service, illuminating the fascinating story of British communications. Records in The Royal Mail Archive are designated as being of outstanding national importance. For more information see [www.postalheritage.org.uk](http://www.postalheritage.org.uk)
- **Archive Awareness Campaign** is spearheaded by the Archives & Records Association (ARA) ([www.archives.org.uk](http://www.archives.org.uk)) and funded by The National Archives ([www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)) and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council ([www.mla.gov.uk](http://www.mla.gov.uk)).
- Archive Awareness Campaign [www.archiveawareness.com](http://www.archiveawareness.com) is an ongoing celebration of all kinds of fascinating archive treasures. It celebrates and promotes local and national archives. Throughout the year archives across the country open their doors to showcase history, hold open days and present workshops to help the public discover a piece of their own history.