



Archives & Records  
Association  
UK & Ireland





For immediate release

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## DISEASE AND DEATH IN THE POST OFFICE – BPMA UNEARTHES ITS MEDICAL RECORDS

Documents recently unearthed at the British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA) cast new light on the perils of smallpox vaccination a century ago.

To tie in with the [Archive Awareness Discovery Campaign](#) the BPMA is holding an Open day on *Sickness and Disease* to showcase staff medical records from over 100 years ago.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, all Post Office employees were immunized by force as many parts of the country were infested with Smallpox. Those working outdoors as well as staff not immunised were given a vaccine. Those who were new to the service were rigorously screened for Smallpox and other ailments as the Post Office was scared of hiring people infected with diseases. They were also given a vaccine before they were appointed; if they refused, they had to obtain a statutory declaration of conscientious objection.

A poster advertisement at the time illustrates the command of the Postmaster-General. General Post Office:

*Owing to the presence of Small Pox in different parts of the Country, the serious attention of all Post Office servants-especially those who are employed out of doors and in infected areas-is called to the importance of vaccination.*

*Persons who have never been vaccinated are recommended to be vaccinated without delay, and those who last successful occurred more than 10 years ago would be well advised to be re-vaccinated.*

*Officers can be vaccinated free of expense by applying to the Public Vaccinator of the district in which they reside.*

Concerns regarding the safety of enforced vaccination were later raised as several postal employees died, many others suffered severe side effects including post vaccinal encephalitis; as a result, compulsory vaccination was later abolished.

**Jenny Karlsson, The British Postal Museum & Archive** commented:

**“We want as many people as possible to come and see the exhibition. Visitors will learn how the ill were treated and medical assistance provided by their employers. Staff infected with contagious diseases were not allowed at work, this raised questions about whether they should be paid and how long managers could force sick staff to be absent. In retrospect, the files provide an insight into modern day medical issues and the handling of diseases such as swine flu, concerns surrounding immunisation i.e. MMR vaccine, and employers providing seasonal flu vaccinations”.**

As well as medical records, visitors will be able to see an array of Post Office guidelines instructing employees suffering from Scarlet Fever, Cholera, Typhus, and Typhoid how to quarantine themselves from relatives, disinfect rooms, live in separate quarters, along with instructions on how to treat and disinfect mail coming from countries plagued with tropical diseases.

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

**“This exhibition highlights the fact that archives are not just official records, collections include the records of the millions of people and businesses that make up the histories and stories of our region and community. Archives let us reach across generations to learn from the past to help inform our future. Throughout the autumn and winter, as part of the Archive Awareness Campaign *Discovery-Archives in Science, Technology and Medicine*, archives across the country are hosting events to celebrate their scientific collections.”**

**– Ends –**

For further details, spokespeople or images on the 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

**Event: Saturday 13 November 10:00am – 5:00pm. FREE, Drop-In**

**Room:** Files will be on display in the BPMA Search Room


**Venue:** The British Postal Museum & Archive

Freeling House, Phoenix Place

London WC1X 0DL

020 7239 2574 or email [info@postalheritage.org.uk](mailto:info@postalheritage.org.uk) for further information

- The Archive Open day is part of the yearly **Archive Awareness Campaign** [www.archiveawareness.com](http://www.archiveawareness.com). This year's theme is Discovery-Archives in Science, Technology & Medicine. The aim of the campaign is to celebrate British ingenuity in science, technology and medicine. The Campaign uncovers the stories behind some of the most groundbreaking inventions from the nineteenth century and highlights the role of the men and women who made outstanding contributions to the field.
- **Media 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 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 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.



# SMALL POX.

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By Command of the Postmaster-General.

GENERAL POST OFFICE.