

Book Review

Bessbrook to Ballinadee, *a postal tour of Ireland*, by Stephen Ferguson. Published by An Post, General Post office, Lower O'Connell Street, Dublin 1, Ireland. Softcover, 2023.

Stephen Ferguson, An Post's Company Archivist and Museum Curator has written on various aspects of Irish postal history including GPO staff in 1916, the Irish Post Box and the Post Office in Ireland. Here he adds another fine book that records and acknowledges the place of local post offices in Irish life over several generations. In alphabetical order, there are brief descriptions of 89 post offices in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The book starts with 31 pages on the general history of Irish post offices. In his introduction, Mr. Ferguson writes "For generations the local post office has been the heart of communities, both urban and rural, throughout Ireland. From the splendid magnificence of Dublin's GPO to the humble interior of some isolated cottage, the post office has served as the medium that connects the State with its citizens, an honest broker that can be trusted with messages and money and relied on for a bit of sensible advice in difficult times". Introductory sections include the development of the network, becoming a postmaster, post office buildings, the daily routine – work and conditions, and modernizing the system.

The book then covers the post offices from Abbeyleix in county Laois to Youghal in county Cork. Approximately one page is devoted to each post office. A brief history is given for each town, as well as any historical events that have taken place there. What would draw a tourist to the town? A photograph of the last or existing post office in the town, mostly taken by the author, as well as an historical photo of the original post office. The historical photos were accessed through sources such as the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, the National Library of Ireland and the Postal Museum. Finally, there is a brief description of the architecture of many of the post offices. A great deal of information for one page, but the author achieves this very nicely.

Some of the towns mentioned have had post offices since the 17th century; for example, Carlow, on the Munster Road – the postal route south to Cork. The post office in Belfast dates to 1739. Many of the post office buildings date to the mid 1800s and are still standing, although many are no longer used as post offices; for example, Bessbrook in county Armagh, built in 1866. One of the earliest illustrations of an Irish post office, dating to 1835, is of the building in Piltown, County Kilkenny; originally a hotel and post office, the building still stands as a pub and restaurant.

There are descriptions of several unusual post offices. The Curragh Camp, in county Kildare existed to serve the needs of one class of customer in particular – soldiers. The Drumcree post office in county Westmeath, until it closed in 2006, was the last thatched premise operating as a post office in Ireland. The Floating Post office was a special service associated with the mail boats that plied between Kingstown (now Dun Laoghaire) and Hollyhead in Wales. Twenty-one

Post office staff lost their lives in 1918, when the mail boat *Leinster* was torpedoed by a German submarine. The Mountjoy, county Tyrone post office is now part of the Ulster-American Folk Park at Omagh. The North Strand post office in Dublin, that was bombed by the Germans in 1941, although Ireland was neutral in the war. There is much more; the post offices associated with the formation of the Irish Free State, post offices on islands, Travelling Post offices etc.

The author includes many photos of the postmasters, post mistresses, and postal staff who worked in these post offices. Most were hard working and their jobs were taken up by later generations of the family. They were positions that required the highest degree of honesty and if one was caught being dishonest there was a high price to pay. Postmaster Arthur Wallace, from Carlow, was found guilty of stealing money and forgery and was hanged in Barrack Street just one week later.

There is little in the book on “postal history”, that is postage, postal routes and rates. But for those interested in the many surviving post offices throughout Ireland, this is a wonderful addition to the literature.

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