ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



Episode #77
How International Post Works
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Transcript

[00:00:04] Hello, hello, hello and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about How International Post Works.

[00:00:30] It is the story of global cooperation, of countries coming together to agree something that is in everyone's advantage, and the creation of a system whereby anyone can send a little piece of paper to almost anywhere in the world for, when you put it into perspective, a very small amount of money.

[00:00:53] So, let's not waste a minute, and get started right away.

[00:00:57] In the **era**[1] of constant connectivity, where we all have a little machine in our pockets with which we can contact anyone, anywhere in the world, instantly at any time, it's easy to forget about the magic of the postal system, and specifically, the international postal system.

[00:01:20] People rarely send letters anymore, especially to different countries.

[00:01:27] In the UK it's still common only for a few things - you might send a letter for a special occasion - a birthday card, or a celebration of a new baby.

[1] a period of history with particular features

[00:01:40] However it has become a lot rarer, since we have a completely free, instant way of sending messages.

[00:01:49] When you think about it, though, the international postal system, when it actually works properly, is quite magical.

[00:01:58] I can go to a post office, buy one single stamp, for less than the cost of a coffee, and I can send a letter to anywhere in the world.

[00:02:10] I put that letter into a postbox, and magically it will make its way to whatever country I write on the outside, it'll pass through different countries, but providing I have the right stamp on it, it will end up in the country I want it to, where it will get sent to the right region, then the right office, then it'll be loaded into a van, and delivered, by hand, right to the letterbox of whoever I want it to.

[00:02:43] And for this service, I will pay a very small amount of money.

[00:02:50] If we are talking about just a letter, from Malta, which is, if you weren't aware, a tiny island just south of Italy, in the middle of the Mediterranean, I would pay a maximum of 86 cents.

[00:03:05] That is to the most expensive destination in the world.

[00:03:09] To give you a comparison, a coffee in a cafe here is just over 1 euro, and a Big Mac, if that helps, is about 4 euros.

[00:03:21] So, when you think about it, the cost of sending a letter is incredibly cheap, given the service that you actually receive.

[00:03:30] Or at least, I think it's pretty cheap.

[00:03:33] So what we are going to do in today's episode is explain how this international postal system works, how we got to this pretty amazing situation, and what the future might hold for the international postal system.

[00:03:51] Of course, the postal system didn't always exist. Humans invented it.

[00:03:57] And one human in particular is **credited**[2] with the invention of the modern postal system, or at least, the modern domestic postal system.

[00:04:08] That man's name is Rowland Hill, later Sir Rowland Hill.

[00:04:14] He was born in Worcestershire, in the west of England, in 1795.

[00:04:20] He was a **fervent**[3] believer in the importance of access to information, that the thing holding back progress was the **ease**[4] with which people could access information.

[2] recognised as the person responsible

[3] very strong and passionate

[4] how simple or difficult it was

[00:04:36] He thought that newspapers should be cheaper, and that the educational system should be reformed. It was only through knowledge that people could develop their own ideas, engage with others, and push society forward.

[00:04:54] But where he saw the greatest opportunity for impact was on reforming England's postal system.

[00:05:04] Up until then, the postal system in England was inefficient, complicated, and full of **fraud**[5].

[00:05:13] If you wanted to send a letter to someone, it was the person receiving the letter, not you, the person who sent it, who would pay for the service.

[00:05:24] And the price was far more complicated than it is today.

[00:05:30] The cost was calculated based on the distance that the letter had traveled, and the number of sheets of paper. The more sheets, and the further the letter had to go, the more it would cost the person receiving it.

[00:05:47] And it could end up being really expensive, so people would often try to cheat the system.

[00:05:55] Firstly, members of parliament were allowed to send letters for free. The system allowed for a member of parliament, an MP, to put a mark on the outside of a letter, and sign it, so that it was free for the person to receive it.

[5] dishonest tricks used to get money or avoid paying

[00:06:13] The idea was that an MP should be able to contact their **constituents**[6], the people that they serve, but the system was **ripe**[7] for **abuse**[8].

[00:06:25] What actually happened was MPs would sell their marks to businesses, allowing them to send letters for free - a huge **abuse** of the system.

[00:06:37] Secondly, which is actually something that I think is quite clever, is that if you just wanted to send a message to someone else, you could write in **coded**[9] language on the outside of the letter. So when the postman arrived with that letter, you could examine the outside of it, read the message, and then refuse delivery of it, so you didn't have to pay for it.

[00:07:03] This system was evidently pretty inefficient, and Rowland Hill set to work on improving it.

[00:07:13] He suggested a few things, which seemed revolutionary at the time, but might seem just 'obvious' to me or you.

[00:07:23] Firstly, that it was the sender, not the recipient who paid the cost. You would pay for the letter in advance by sticking something to the front of it - basically what we now know as a stamp.

[6] the people who live in the area an MP represents

[7] very open; in just the right state

[8] wrong or dishonest use

[9] secret, using signs or words only the receiver understood

[00:07:42] Secondly, he suggested that they simplified the price. He saw that most of the cost was actually in the sorting of the mail, not the distance it traveled, or the number of paper sheets.

[00:07:57] So the price would be based on weight, rather than distance.

[00:08:04] And thirdly, he proposed to **drastically**[10] reduce the price. His view was that the price per letter would reduce, but the fact that it was cheaper would mean that more letters would be sent, and overall the postal service actually would make more money.

[00:08:25] As with any revolutionary idea, when it was first proposed, in 1837, it was considered **ludicrous**[11], **denounced**[12] as one of Hill's "wild and visionary schemes". Hill was considered an **eccentric**[13], and this was another plan that would never work.

[00:08:49] But it did have strong support from merchants and bankers, who **urged**[14] the government to adopt it.

[00:08:59] Hill's scheme was an instant success. It was easier, cheaper, and less **liable**[15] to **fraud**.

[10] by a very large amount

[11] extremely silly or unreasonable

[12] strongly criticised in public

[13] a person with strange or unusual ideas and behaviour

[14] strongly encouraged

[15] likely to suffer from

[00:09:08] The volume of letters **shot up**[16], with the number of letters sent, increased dramatically, it shot up, going up by 120 percent from November 1839 to February 1840.

[00:09:25] Hill's idea was quickly adopted by other countries, and the domestic postal system works in a pretty similar way to this present day.

[00:09:35] Yet there was still a problem.

[00:09:40] What happened if you, as an Englishman in London let's say, in 1870, wanted to send a letter to someone in another country, let's say you wanted to send it to Rome, in Italy for example?

[00:09:55] Well, this was still very complicated.

[00:09:59] The letter that you wanted to send would, of course, have to travel through multiple different countries to get to its final destination. And if you were just buying a stamp when you sent the letter, in England, the English postal service wouldn't take that letter all the way to Rome.

[00:10:20] Depending on the route it took, it would have to pass through a mixture of different countries - perhaps France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and others, before it even got anywhere near Rome.

[16] rose very quickly

[00:10:37] Any agreements that countries had in terms of managing their international post were normally **bilateral**[17], they were between two countries, so you would have to send your post first to someone in France, then they would have to forward it on to someone in Switzerland, and they would have to send it on to someone in Italy, to your **eventual**[18] destination in Rome.

[00:11:04] There was no system in place for post to go from one country to another but to pass through another on the way.

[00:11:12] Obviously, that was a massive **hassle**[19], and very expensive.

[00:11:18] Yet now, I can send a letter from a small island in Europe to a small island in the Pacific for less than the cost of a cup of coffee, and it is incredibly easy.

[00:11:30] What changed?

[00:11:33] Well, it was clear to everyone that this original system wasn't going to work.

[00:11:39] But how could it be simplified?

[00:11:42] In 1874, a **congress**[20] was called, led by a man called Ernst Heinrich Wilhelm von Stephan.

[17] involving only two countries

[18] final, reached at the end

[19] a situation that is annoying and takes a lot of effort

[20] a large formal meeting of representatives

[00:11:51] Von Stephan is the man **credited** with simplifying the German postal system, and he **implemented**[21] and improved on a lot of the ideas that Hill had suggested in England.

[00:12:06] Von Stephan had a grand plan for how international postage should work, and he presented this plan to representatives from 22 countries.

[00:12:17] The plan was simple.

[00:12:19] Firstly, that there should be a uniform, **flat**[22] rate to send a letter anywhere in the world.

[00:12:28] Secondly, the postal authorities should give equal treatment to foreign and domestic mail. They couldn't prioritise the domestic post. Every letter should be treated the same.

[00:12:44] And thirdly, that each country should keep all money it has collected for international postage. So in my earlier example of sending a letter from England to Rome, the British postal service gets all of the money from the cost of the stamp. The French, German, Swiss, Italian, or whatever other postal services helped deliver the letter get nothing.

[21] put into action

[22] fixed and the same for everyone

[00:13:11] Now, you might think, well that's a bit unfair. Surely the British postal service should share some of that money, as they only did the easy part of collecting the letter and perhaps putting it on a ship to France.

[00:13:26] The reason that Von Stephan proposed this system, where the sending country got all the money was quite simple. Firstly, it was simpler to not have to add up all of the costs and share them with each country that had been involved in the delivery.

[00:13:46] This would require a lot of administration, and therefore cost.

[00:13:52] But secondly, the idea was that each letter that was sent would receive a response, so in this example, your friend in Rome would write a letter back, in this case the Italian postal service would collect the money from the cost of the stamp, and the British one would get nothing.

[00:14:12] So it would all **even itself out**[23].

[00:14:17] And before you say, hang on, what about the French, German or Swiss postal service, yes, in this example they aren't getting anything, but the expensive part of the postal system isn't the bit in the middle, it's the bit at the start and the bit at the end.

[00:14:36] All of the countries at the congress accepted Von Stephan's suggestions, and in 1874 something called the General Postal Union was formed. It quickly attracted

[23] become balanced or equal over time

countries from all over the world, and just 5 years later it changed its name to the Universal Postal Union, to reflect the fact that, well, it was almost universal.

[00:15:03] This system of only the sending country getting the money for postage was to prove a little problematic though, and certainly unfair.

[00:15:14] It benefited countries that sent more mail than they received, and for some countries, there was a large **imbalance**[24].

[00:15:24] In 1906 it was found that the Italian postal service was delivering 325,000 magazines every year to addresses in Italy, yet a grand total of zero magazines were sent by the Italian postal service abroad.

[00:15:45] As a member of the Universal Postal Union, Italy had to deliver these in effect for free, and understandably, complained that the system wasn't fair.

[00:15:57] However, for 53 years, the Universal Postal Union, the UPU, remained **broadly**[25] unchanged.

[00:16:08] But as the process of **decolonisation**[26] started to happen after the end of the Second World War, and these new countries joined the UPU they, like Italy, ended up receiving a lot more mail than they sent out. Richer countries, such as France, Britain,

[24] a situation in which two amounts are not equal

[25] mostly; in general

[26] territories ruled by other countries becoming independent

and US, were making money by sending much more letters than they received, and the poorer countries, these ex-colonies, were delivering the mail and not getting paid for it.

[00:16:43] They pushed for change, and there was enough pressure within the UPU to create a new system, called “terminal dues”.

[00:16:54] What this meant was that if there was an **imbalance**, a difference, between the weight of the post sent and received between two countries, then one country had to pay the other an amount of money set by the UPU, based on how large the difference was.

[00:17:15] It sounds like an improvement, and it definitely was to a certain extent, but there was another issue with this.

[00:17:24] The amount of money was the same for every country in the world, so the countries with low-cost postal services, either because they had low-cost labour, or because they were very efficient, they benefited from this, as they got more money in **compensation**[27] than it actually cost them to deliver the letters.

[00:17:46] If you receive a million dollars as **compensation** for delivering lots of post, but actually it only costs you $500,000 to deliver that post, well done, that's some profit for your postal service.

[27] money paid to make up for work done or costs

[00:18:01] This situation has, to a certain extent, now been improved - countries are put into one of four different categories depending on how developed they are, and the categories pay different levels of terminal dues.

[00:18:18] But the situation is still far from perfect, and there seems to be a **perennial**[28] battle over what is the right amount of compensation for a country that delivers more mail than it sends. You may have heard Donald Trump complaining about the postal service, and this is partly because of the terminal dues system.

[00:18:43] The United States threatened to withdraw from the UPU. the Universal Postal Union, in 2018, as it claimed it was **subsidising**[29] the cost of packages that arrived from abroad, particularly from China.

[00:19:00] The Americans demanded a system of self-declaration, where it decided how much to charge foreign postal services to deliver their post, not the UPU.

[00:19:14] An American exit from the UPU would have been very disruptive to the global economy. The country handles about half of the world's mail, and the UPU didn't have much of a choice.

[00:19:30] So, **pressed against the wall**[30], it agreed to the US requests, and from July 2020 the US will be allowed to set its own rates that it charges foreign postal services,

[28] lasting a long time or happening again and again

[29] paying part of

[30] forced into a position with no other choice

but these rates can be a maximum of 70 percent of the domestic cost, the cost within that country.

[00:19:51] Naturally, this cost is going to be passed on to consumers, and some have said that the **era** of ultra-low cost shipping from places like China to America is going to be over.

[00:20:05] And if, instead of buying an iPhone case from China for $5 with free shipping, it's going to be $5 and $5 for the shipping, suddenly that iPhone case becomes slightly less attractive.

[00:20:20] It's surely a good thing for the United States manufacturing industry, as suddenly it becomes a lot more competitive.

[00:20:29] But whether it is a good thing for the consumer is another question altogether.

[00:20:35] Certainly Sir Rowland Hill, the inventor of the modern postal service as we know it, wouldn't be particularly happy to see the direction the UPU is going in. A more complicated system that raises the cost of the postal system was everything he stood against, and I imagine that he would be **turning in his grave**[31].

[00:21:00] OK then, that is it for how the international postal system works.

[31] feeling very upset about it, if he were still alive

[00:21:05] It might be a system that has been around for almost 150 years, and it might just seem ‘normal’ to me or you, but when you think about what it took to get here, I do think it is pretty impressive.

[00:21:21] As always, please do let me know what you think of the show.

[00:21:25] For those of you who have emailed in before, you know I love reading and responding to every single email I get, and it’s awesome to hear your views

[00:21:34] And if you haven’t yet done so, please do, I’ll be waiting.

[00:21:39] You can email hi - hi@leonardoenglish.com.

[00:21:44] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds.

[00:21:48] I'm Alastair Budge. You stay safe and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Era	a period of history with particular features
Credited	recognised as the person responsible
Fervent	very strong and passionate
Ease	how simple or difficult it was
Fraud	dishonest tricks used to get money or avoid paying
Constituents	the people who live in the area an MP represents
Ripe	very open; in just the right state
Abuse	wrong or dishonest use
Coded	secret, using signs or words only the receiver understood
Drastically	by a very large amount
Ludicrous	extremely silly or unreasonable

Denounced	strongly criticised in public
Eccentric	a person with strange or unusual ideas and behaviour
Urged	strongly encouraged
Liable	likely to suffer from
Shot up	rose very quickly
Bilateral	involving only two countries
Eventual	final, reached at the end
Hassle	a situation that is annoying and takes a lot of effort
Congress	a large formal meeting of representatives
Implemented	put into action
Flat	fixed and the same for everyone

Even itself out	become balanced or equal over time
Imbalance	a situation in which two amounts are not equal
Broadly	mostly; in general
Decolonisation	territories ruled by other countries becoming independent
Compensation	money paid to make up for work done or costs
Perennial	lasting a long time or happening again and again
Subsidising	paying part of
Pressed against the wall	forced into a position with no other choice
Turning in his grave	feeling very upset about it, if he were still alive

Language spotlight

1. Ripe for

- **Meaning**: If something is ripe for something, it is in exactly the right condition for it to happen, often something bad.
- **Synonyms**: open to, ready for, vulnerable to
- **Antonyms**: protected from, safe from, closed to
- **Examples**:
    - The old computer system was **ripe for** attack by hackers.
    - After years of neglect, the building is **ripe for** renovation.

2. Shoot up

- **Meaning**: To rise very quickly and suddenly.
- **Synonyms**: soar, rocket, surge
- **Antonyms**: plummet, plunge, fall sharply
- **Examples**:
    - House prices **shot up** after the new railway station opened.
    - My electricity bill has **shot up** since the winter began.

3. Even itself out

- **Meaning**: To become balanced or equal over a period of time, without anyone needing to do anything.
- **Synonyms**: balance out, level out, cancel out
- **Antonyms**: become lopsided, tip one way, grow uneven
- **Examples**:
    - Some months I earn more than others, but over the year it **evens itself out**.
    - Don't worry about who pays for dinner tonight; it will **even itself out** next time.

4. Pressed against the wall

- **Meaning**: Being in a very difficult situation with no choice but to act in a particular way.
- **Synonyms**: backed into a corner, cornered, with no way out
- **Antonyms**: free to choose, in control, with room to manoeuvre
- **Examples**:
    - **Pressed against the wall** by the banks, the company agreed to sell its factory.
    - When she was **pressed against the wall**, she finally admitted the truth.

5. Turn in your grave

- **Meaning**: Used to say that a person who has died would be very upset or angry about something happening now.
- **Synonyms**: be horrified, be appalled, be outraged
- **Antonyms**: be delighted, be proud, be thrilled
- **Examples**:
    - My grandmother would **turn in her grave** if she saw how messy her garden has become.
    - The composer would be **turning in his grave** if he heard this modern version of his symphony.

Quiz

Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions

1. Under the old English postal system, who paid for a letter to be delivered?

a) The sender of the letter

b) The receiver of the letter

c) The local town council

d) The sender and receiver equally

2. How did businesses manage to send letters for free?

a) They bought marks from MPs

b) They used stamps from abroad

c) They paid postmen to hide them

d) They sent letters through banks

3. Why did Hill believe that cheaper letters would help the postal service?

a) The government would pay the difference

b) Fewer postmen would need to be employed

c) Businesses would agree to pay higher fees

d) Far more letters would be sent overall

4. Before 1874, why was sending a letter to another country so difficult?

a) Ships to Europe were rare and slow

b) Foreign post offices refused English mail

c) Agreements only covered two countries at a time

d) Letters had to be written in French

5. Why did the United States threaten to leave the UPU in 2018?

a) It said it paid part of the cost of foreign packages

b) It wanted to stop all post arriving from China

c) It wanted the UPU to set its rates instead

d) It disagreed with the price of its own stamps

True or False

6. Rowland Hill was born in the west of England in 1795. (True/False)

7. Hill wanted the price of a letter to be based on distance rather than weight. (True/False)

8. Merchants and bankers supported Hill's plan. (True/False)

9. Von Stephan presented his plan to representatives from 22 countries. (True/False)

10. In 1906, the Italian postal service sent 325,000 magazines abroad every year. (True/False)

Fill in the Blanks

11. The idea was that an MP should be able to contact their constituents, the people that they serve, but the system was ripe for _____.

12. It was easier, cheaper, and less liable to _____.

13. The volume of letters shot ___, with the number of letters sent, increased dramatically.

14. So it would all even itself ___.

15. I imagine that he would be turning in his _____.

Vocabulary Practice

16. What does "**ludicrous**" mean when describing how Hill's plan was first received?

a) Very expensive to set up

b) Kept secret from the public

c) Extremely silly or unreasonable

d) Carefully planned in detail

17. What does "**hassle**" mean when describing how letters were sent abroad before 1874?

a) A long and dangerous journey

b) A clever way of saving money

c) A rule set by the government

d) Something annoying and difficult

18. What does "**broadly**" mean in "the UPU remained broadly unchanged"?

a) Completely and exactly

b) Mostly; in general

c) Officially; on paper

d) Secretly; without notice

19. What does "**perennial**" mean in the battle over compensation?

a) Lasting a long time or happening again and again

b) Fought openly and very angrily in public

c) Starting suddenly and without any warning

d) Taking place only between two neighbouring countries

20. In the podcast, what does "**subsidising**" mean in the US claim about foreign packages?

a) Refusing to pay any part of

b) Charging extra tax on

c) Checking the contents of

d) Paying part of

Answers

1. b) The receiver of the letter
2. a) They bought marks from MPs
3. d) Far more letters would be sent overall
4. c) Agreements only covered two countries at a time
5. a) It said it paid part of the cost of foreign packages
6. True
7. False
8. True
9. True
10. False
11. abuse
12. fraud
13. up
14. out
15. grave
16. c) Extremely silly or unreasonable
17. d) Something annoying and difficult
18. b) Mostly; in general

19. a) Lasting a long time or happening again and again

20. d) Paying part of