

# THE RISE AND DEMISE OF THE GENERAL POST OFFICE, ST MARTIN'S LE GRAND

**INTRODUCTION:** In 1829 London's new General Post Office (GPO) opened in St Martin's Le Grand. Designed by Robert Smirke in the Greek Revival style, the purpose-built edifice was the communications hub for Great Britain and the British Empire. It housed a large public office, the administrative functions of the department and sorting offices for inland and foreign mail. Despite several attempts to increase space, the building was in use for just 81 years; it closed in 1910.

*Technical postcard information is in italics and appears below each postcard. Descriptions are (where known, and in this order): year; publisher (Pub.); reference; printing process ('Pro'); postally used ('pu') or unused ('un'); other information. All cards have divided backs unless stated.*



1906; Pub. Hancock & Corfield Ltd; Pro. lithography; pu; undivided back. One of a set of 16 cards showing coaching scenes, based on oil paintings by the artist John Charles Maggs, 1819-96.

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The General Post Office was 380 feet long and 80 feet wide. Originally it had two floors and a large yard at the side and back. Each evening crowds would gather to witness the despatch of mail coaches to all parts of the country. The last mail coach left in 1846.

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From 1840 Rowland Hill's postal reforms resulted in a huge increase in business. To create more space for mail sorting, an extra floor was added in 1846, and another in 1895. The basement was also expanded at the front of the building.

In 1874 the Central Telegraph Office (CTO), known as GPO West, opened opposite the original building. In 1895 GPO North opened to the right of the CTO. This allowed the administrative departments to move out of the General Post Office, now known as GPO East.



Before 1914 (printed in Saxony); Pub. 'B R Ltd' monogram on back, but unable to identify publisher; Pro. halftone; un.

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When the Parcel Post was inaugurated in 1883 the General Post Office was once again placed under increased pressure. Although mail coaches had been superseded by the railways, in 1887 horse-drawn coaches once again used the yard at GPO East, as parcels were cheaper to convey by road than by rail. Mount Pleasant, a new depot one mile away in Farringdon Road, gradually took over all the parcels traffic.



144 LONDON E. C. — Gresham Street and General Post Office. — LL.  
Circa 1905; 144; Pub. 'LL' = Leon & Levy, though by this time the company was known as Levy Fils et Cie.; Pro. collotype; un.



The G. P. O. St. Martin's-le Grand London.  
1904; 1001/26; Pub. Frederick Hartmann; Pro. halftone; pu. Hartmann invented the divided back on postcards.

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In 1910, a new London Chief Post Office (with larger sorting offices) was opened in King Edward Street, at the rear of GPO North. GPO East, now considered obsolete, was closed. The building was demolished in 1912. The only part retained was an Ionic capital from the portico, which was placed in Lloyd Park, Walthamstow. It now stands outside Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow.



The Lion Lloyd Park, Walthamstow  
Circa 1921; 28; Pub. no name on card, probably a local photography business in Walthamstow; Pro. Real photograph; pu.