POST OFFICE SEAL AND SEALING WAX

This seal for the Balemartine Post Office, complete with case and sealing wax, was given to An Iodhlann by Calum MacKinnon. Calum comes from Balinoe, although he now lives in Seattle after a distinguished career as an engineer with Boeing.

The first postal service between Edinburgh and Glasgow started in 1663 – on foot. The postal network gradually spread out from the urban centres, and in 1791 a post office was set up in the new fishing village of Tobermory. In 1801, the Tiree chamberlain reported to the Duke: "A small packet [boat] has been established between Croig [a village on Loch Cuan on the north coast of Mull] for letters and the accommodation of passengers, for which it is hoped your Grace will get some encouragement from the Post Office as she goes regularly every Thursday if the weather permits, and to give a situation to the packet-man. It is hoped that your Grace may be pleased to order him a croft at Scarinish upon more easy terms than others are to have them." (Iain MacKinnon from Heanish was known as *Iain Èirdsidh 'ic Eòghainn a' Phacaid* 'Iain the son of Archie the son of Hugh of the packet').

By today's standards, speeds were painfully slow. A letter posted on Edinburgh's Princes Street at that time would have travelled to Glasgow by mail coach, then on to Inveraray and Oban by horse, crossing Loch Awe on a ferry. From Oban the mail was carried in a small boat to Kerrera and then from Kerrera to Auchnacraig near Grass Point on the south coast of Mull. The bag would then have been carried on foot by a runner to Tobermory and then on to Croig, where it would have waited for the weekly packet across to Tiree. The whole journey would have taken two weeks to complete. The post office in Scarinish may have opened in 1803 inside the shop, but sending a letter was the preserve of the wealthy until the 1840 Uniform Penny Post. It was not until 1881 that the first foot post was established on Tiree for the general public, a twice-weekly route from Scarinish to Middleton, although Alexander MacLean from Balemartine was recorded as a "post runner to the [Hynish] lighthouse [base]" in the 1871 Census.

In 1880, the railway came to Oban. This allowed mail posted in London to be delivered the following day. In addition the paddle steamer *Pioneer,* operated by David MacBrayne, made a daily trip from Tobermory to Oban and back to coincide with new train time. Despite these improvements, service on Tiree remained patchy. A visitor to the island in 1882 reported that a Tiree girl who was a housekeeper in Glasgow had become seriously ill. Her employer wrote urgently to the family on Tiree, asking them to visit urgently. After four days he wrote again. Sadly, the

housekeeper died, and her body was sent home to the island. The first thing her family knew was her coffin being brought to the door. The original letter to her family arrived at the house half an hour later. The commissioning of the new pier at Gott in 1917 was meant to improve matters once and for all. However, in 1926 the mail boat service fell off due the steamer's poor quality coal, and questions were asked in the House of Commons in London.

Tiree's second post office had been scheduled to open on Shore Street, Balemertine. The second postmaster, however, took ill, and new premises had to be found. Alasdair MacNeill, who had previously run a shop in Balinoe, won the contract. Balemartine Post Office opened in 1894 in Balinoe, and the name has stuck.

Sealing wax was widely used to ensure letters and parcels could not be opened surreptitiously. I remember it myself as a common household item in the 1960s. By the nineteenth century, it had come to be made of shellac, the resin produced on the bark of trees in India and Thailand by the lac insect, dyed with venetian red.

Dr John Holliday