



"IN BRITAIN"  
12/85

Bob

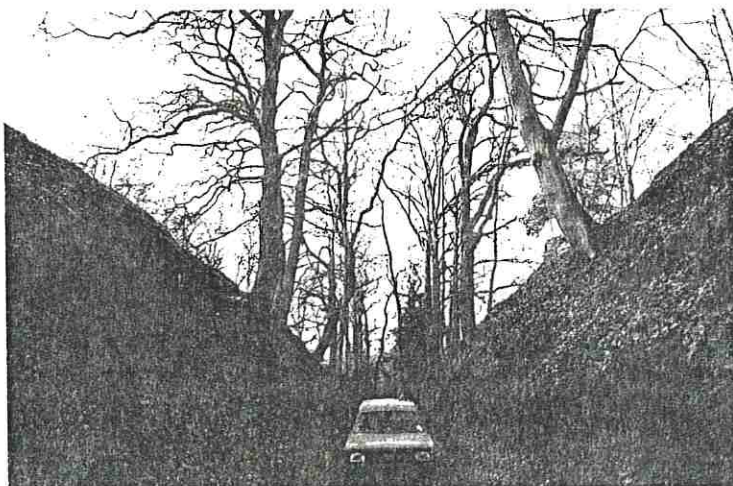
# *All in a day's work* **THE POSTMAN**

BY WILLIAM FOSTER

**L**ES Quantrill was the first to arrive. He parked his red Post Office van in the yard of Pratt's Village Stores, let himself in at the back where the bottles of tomato ketchup and packets of soap powder are stored, and clattered up the wooden stairs to the tiny sorting office under the roof. It was 5.30 in the morning.

And there it was, the day's work staring him in the face, as delivered half an hour earlier by the main sorting office. 'I'd put it at about 2500 different handlings,' said Les, running a professional eye over the tottering pile of packaged goodwill.

They sat there mountainously, letters and Christmas cards from all over the world, peppered with colourful greetings tags like red



*Top and below. Spreading Christmas cheer, Bob Mears gets about in the Surrey countryside in a shiny red Post Office van. He is one of two postmen who work on this route.*

*Sandy Lane*

berries on the holly – and all waiting to be delivered by the two postmen on the busiest mailing day of the year. I could see a box of oranges from Florida, a US customs tag that said: 'Mechanical toy – fragile', a padded box the exact shape of a bottle of whisky from Scotland, a tin of maple syrup with warmest wishes from Canada. Bob Mears arrived a few minutes later and they started to sort the cards and letters into pigeonholes, each labelled according to different routes with those glorious names the British bestow on their streets and houses: Windy Ridge to Edgley Park, Mayor's House to Green Lane, Merrywind to Old Cottage. . . .

When the two postmen arrived on duty, moonlight was still ►

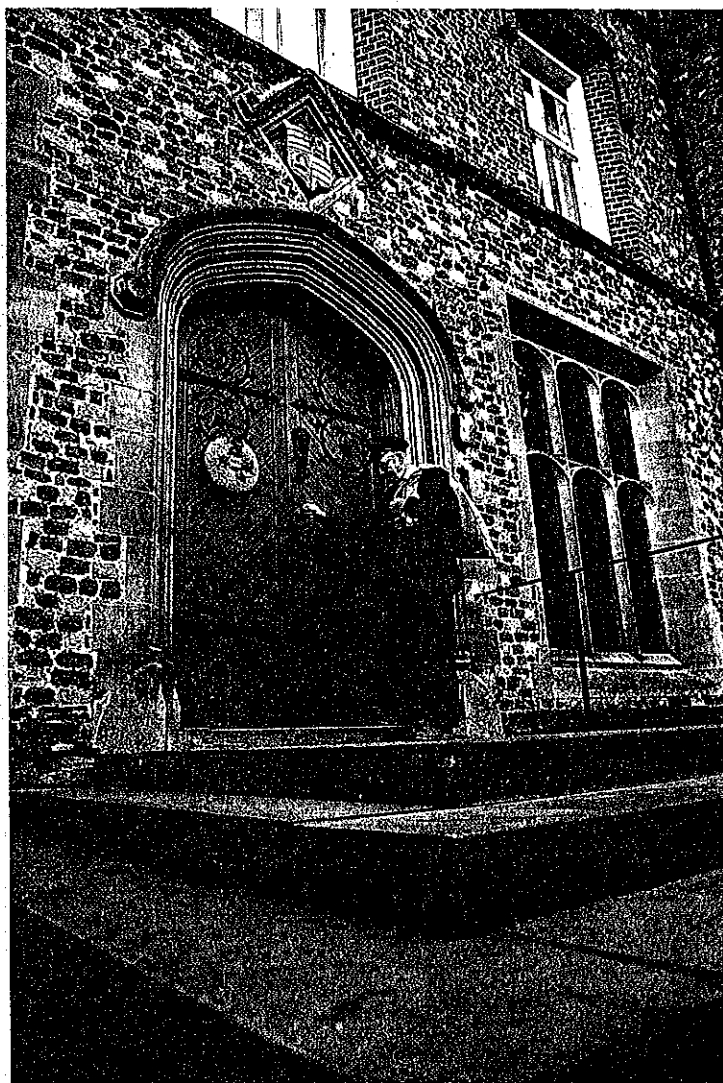




◀ enamelling Albury village, picking out the hump-backed bridge over the icy Tillingbourne stream at one end and the absurd pocket handkerchief of a village green at the other, with its top heavy wooden signpost. But a grey, misty dawn was already seeping through the trees by the time Les had turned his attention to the letters for re-addressing, crossing out Guildford, the nearest big town, on one and substituting another and then pausing and saying: 'Oh, dear'. In his hand lay a Christmas card from the USA addressed to a resident who had died recently. The sender's address, in sensible American fashion, was printed on the back of the envelope. And it was at this point I realised what a great humanitarian the British postman at his best can be. 'Course, I could send it back with "deceased" scrawled across it,' he said. 'But that's a bit of a shock for someone. I'll find time to write the sender a little letter tonight, explaining what has happened.'

Les is the chattier of the two and laughs a lot. Bob's wit is as dry as the stubble on a cornfield. He has been a postman for 45 years, starting in 1940 during the war, when he did his first Christmas delivery by horse and cart. A few weeks later, he found himself sorting his own call-up papers from the Royal Air Force.

In a scattered village community 30 miles from London, where two postmen sort and deliver the letters to 460 people, there are two ways to do the job. Either one sorts above the village store and



Top. Christmas cheer, with local resident Doreen Davis, Les (left) and Bob show off a gift received en route. Bottom. At Albury House.

the other delivers. Or, like Les and Bob, they take it in turns. So at 8 o'clock, as the village stirred into life, Les took the van out for the run to the big house, once owned by the Duke of Northumberland but now converted into 36 apartments for the retired. An entire sack of Christmas mail occupied the back of the van, together with a spade (to dig us out of snowdrifts) and an axe (for chopping up trees inconsiderate enough to fall across our path). Everyone knew the postman. A young mother, waiting for an early bus to Guildford, called a greeting. A small boy wearing an enormous scarf, grinned and waved.

The passing motorist never sees Albury House, with its dotty collection of 63 ornate brick chimneys, every one of them different, put up in the Tudor style by Victorian architect Augustus Pugin. It is tucked away in a secluded park with a historic yew hedge and a noble avenue of beeches and Spanish chestnut. But you can hardly help seeing Albury's other eccentricity, an extraordinary pinnacled church in dashing Perpendicular style, built on a green knoll just north of the park by the early Victorians in 1840. The British, like the Californians, go in for odd religious sects and the short-lived Irvingite church by the park housed a strange mixture of Presby- ▶



terianism and weird ritual before closing a hundred years after its opening. Now it lies there like a beached whale.

Les drove through the park, weaving past the sheep that spilled over the road, sending a couple of pheasants whirring for safety with harsh cries into the trees. 'Things were different when the duchess lived here,' he said. 'We rode bicycles in those days. But she never wanted to see a postman. So we had strict instructions to use the side entrance. If we arrived at the front door like this, she'd phone head office in London and complain.' No one was up, apart from the housekeeper. On the refectory table lay an array of newspapers awaiting their owners, neatly folded and labelled. And in the corner beside a huge fireplace, a vast Christmas tree, its needles beautifully decorated with icicles made of spun glass. The whole place seemed to be holding its breath, as if waiting for someone to ring a bell and declare Christmas well and truly open.

The southern end of the Albury postal area stops at a quarry, where they dig out the sand that fills in the gaps in the new M25 London orbital motorway, that also links Heathrow and Gatwick airports. Huge excavators toiling away below looked like scattered toys from our vantage point on the rim, where Les handed in a bundle of mail, then drove back to base. He is in his 25th year on the same round and would not change it for any other. 'I never tire of this bit of countryside. It must be the most beautiful stretch within 30 miles of London.'

'And I know every inch of it from the old days before they

allowed us vans. For twelve years, I cycled eleven miles a day, using tracks and cut-throughs where I barely saw a soul. There are deer, foxes and badgers round here, rabbits and squirrels by the dozen, plus the less common birds like owls, woodpeckers and the nightjar.'

There are also dogs because the British like their dogs just as much as they like their postmen. Unfortunately, the two do not always see eye to eye, judging by the Post Office's guidelines on *How to Avoid Dog Bites*, which was pinned on the notice board. 'Remember, dogs can tell if you like them and a dog biscuit in your pocket is a better insurance than a stick,' it said hopefully. 'But if a dog stiffens up, holds his tail high, snarls and stares at you, then be on your guard. If he shows his teeth, it may be safest to go no further. . . .'

Bob, for one, taking over from Les, was going a lot further in the van, up to Farley Green, the next village, and then on to Farley Heath, where many of the houses are scattered at random among muddy tracks in what seems to be the middle of nowhere. 'It'll be a rough old journey,' he said, and a mere glance at the battered red van could have told you that. A tracery of scratches from overhanging branches fanned over the roof and bodywork, while a skid in the snow against a tree had accounted for a wing mirror. Clutch and suspension had been renewed six times in only 22,000 miles and the sump once after losing a battle against a hidden tree root.

We drove due south from the village, past the former village

store in the hamlet of Brook that once sold the creamiest milk for miles around and up to the house in Farley Green that has the fiercest dog in the neighbourhood. Bob switched off his engine in the driveway and simply listened. A robin sat on a telegraph wire and surveyed us curiously. Then Bob tooted the horn. An enraged chorus of barks and snarls emerged from the kitchen. 'We're all right,' said Bob. 'The Hound of the Baskervilles is inside.' He was able to get out of the van and push the mail into the letterbox without meeting a particularly cross Alsatian.

If it was not dogs, it was horses. Little girls in jodhpurs were fussing round fat ponies, plaiting their manes with needle and thread, picking out their hooves, brushing their coats till they glowed. But it was people, too, especially the elderly in remote cottages among the gorse and bracken, for whom the postman's call is a welcome part of the day. If the postman notices that curtains are still drawn late in the morning, with the milk untouched on the doorstep, he does not spring into instant action. 'But I'll mention it to Les and he'll ring the doorbell and peer through the windows on his afternoon call, if there's still no sign of life. We're an early warning system, if anything goes wrong.'

And even that was not all. 'I've got the key of Mrs Derwent's house at Winterfold. She's spending Christmas in Arizona and we

*Below. 'Merry Christmas': everyone knows the postman in the scattered village communities of Surrey, only 30 miles from London.*

pop in every day to turn on the central heating overnight to stop the pipes freezing.' Newspapers, as well as the mail, are taken to out-of-the-way dwellings, where newsboys don't deliver. And Les looks after the animals whose owners are on holiday. 'There's a goldfish to feed in Albury, guinea pigs somewhere else. There are seven cats in one house who depend on us to provide the rations and a dog to walk on the road to Shamley Green. A well-behaved dog, of course.' We had arrived at what Bob called 'the hairy bit'. Muddy tracks, no more than bridle paths, disappeared through wooded glades in a confusing tangle – and then disappeared themselves under huge puddles. Bob put his foot hard on the accelerator. 'If we stop now, we stick for good.'

Her Majesty's postal van leaped forward. Branches scraped the roof. Mud flew on to the windscreen. Rabbits fled in terror as we wallowed through the troughs like a ship under full sail. And at the end of the trail, a cottage with smoke from the chimney going straight up into the air like a landscape by Rowland Hilder and a grateful voice saying: 'I think it's a wonderful job you boys are doing.' On the way back, we looked in on Josephine, a lioness in a cage at a house called Candleford, who had been presented to its owner 17 years earlier, when still a cub. It seemed quite unsurprised at having exchanged an African forest for a British winter.

There is Kitty Barrow, aged three, on Farley Green, who is convinced that Bob is the comedian Harry Secombe. And there was 'Ramblers', the handsome house on a remote stretch of sandy heath, with the coloured fairy lights winking round the porch, the welcoming swag of holly on the front door and the Christmas tree that stood beside the fireplace as if it had grown there. On one section of this round, Les takes to a bicycle, finding it quicker than hopping in and out of the van when the houses are set close together. We caught up with him soon after 12, when the last letter of the morning delivery had been pushed through the last front door.

Lunch, and a special lunch at that, had been arranged at a genuine country pub, the King William IV, where the draught beer comes up cool and nutty and well-hopped. 'We come here every year on the busiest day before Christmas,' said Les, settling in front of a blazing log fire. 'A tradition.' Traditional, too, is the King William IV, with its blackened beams and pewter beer mugs hanging beside the bar. And so were the heaped plates of Christmas turkey with all the trimmings, followed by mince pie.

'We've been lucky this year with the weather,' said Bob. 'No real problems.' But the next day it snowed. ■



Les Tilso Bedford-Percie Ford Fair



# Happy village postman retires

Surrey Advertiser  
22 July 1988

A LARGE turnout of Albury people made use of the flower show marquee to mark the retirement of popular postman Mr. Leslie Quantrill.

Mr. John Foulsham said though they were delighted to have Mr. Quantrill and his wife Gladys with them, the delight was tinged with sadness. Mr. Quantrill's apt nickname was "Happy" and his never-failing cheerfulness was an example to all. No child's birthday was ever forgotten and outlying houses cut off from provisions, Mr. Quantrill would get through to them.

A man of many parts — fisherman, organist, accordianist, pianist — he had been pianist to the Ralph Reader Gang Show. He had served in the RAF, on Green Line coaches and as a bus conductor locally when the fare from Albury to Shere was sixpence.

Mr. Quantrill received a plaque with a wallet of goodwill messages, and a miniature post office van containing two cheques for over £1,700. Little Laura Newman presented a basket of flowers to Mrs. Quantrill and the company drank a toast to their long and happy retirement.

Mr. Quantrill, thanking them, said he had had 28 years of happiness looking forward to work every day.

"My dad said I would make a good vicar or policeman, but I did better and became a postman," he said. He thanked post master Brian Robinson for his help, Bob Mears with whom he had worked formerly, and, above all, his wife for her support.

He recalled their trips on Christmas Days with gifts from Miss Lloyd's Trust to the lonely in the parish. Albury was a village where in times of sadness help was always at hand. He would continue to be part of that community.

22/7/88