

# **Mail Rail Train Ride audio transcript**

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# Welcome - leaving the depot

**Isha (narrator):** Hi, I'm Isha, one of the Mail Rail drivers, and your guide today. We ask all passengers to remain seated for the duration of the ride, and not to lean on the sides of the train, as this may cause it to stop suddenly. Thank you!

Welcome to Mail Rail! We're just leaving the depot, where the trains were maintained. We're in a small train, entering a narrow tunnel beneath the busy streets of London, on a mini railway that once carried Britain's mail for sorting, distribution and delivery.

If this were a working Mail Rail train, we wouldn't be going slowly. We'd be rattling along at 30 miles an hour, and I wouldn't be here either, because the trains had no drivers. They were controlled by an electrical switching system. This was the world's first driverless electric railway, and the only one dedicated to carrying post.

On this journey, you'll hear from people who remember Mail Rail. Here's Beverley Turner:

**Beverley:** My grandfather – Cornelius Lean – was an inspector on the Mail Rail. I have a story about when I was seven and was allowed to go on the Mail Rail against all the rules. I must have said to him that I wanted to go, but when the doors opened there was this little tiny train on the tracks - so small, and I was going for a ride on it, which was so exciting! Until they sat me on it (and) I realised (that) to go on that ride, I had to go into this really dark tunnel and off we went, into the darkness. My grandad didn't come, he wasn't able to come, which probably added to my small anxieties about being on there shall we say.

# Sandbags

**Isha:** Mail Rail could be dangerous. Can you see the pile of sandbags we're passing? That used to be a sand pit designed to catch and safely stop trains that were running the wrong way.

# Platform 1 (eastbound) – introduction

**Isha:** We're arriving at Platform 1, on the right of the train. These platforms were scenes of frantic activity in the days when the railway was doing its job. And on the platform you may notice a dartboard. Steve Holloway, platform worker, explains:

**Steve:** They would set a dartboard up - and they'd have a, have a few games, in their downtime, you know, and the golfers used to get a golf club out and practice with the practice balls with the holes in them. On the platform. Yeah. Why not?

**Isha:** It sounds like a lot of fun and games, but there was a serious need for Mail Rail when it was constructed. In those days it was called 'The Post Office Railway'.

# Platform 1 (eastbound) – show

**Isha:** The Post Office Railway was designed to solve an old problem. As early as the mid-1800s, people realised that mail moving through the streets of London could easily get trapped in traffic.

In 1911 it was decided to build an underground railway, running six and a half miles through new tunnels, seventy feet below the streets. Eight stops would link to sorting offices and railway stations, from which mail crossed the country on regular trains.

Digging of the tunnels began in 1913. It was done almost entirely by hand.

During the First World War, the unfinished tunnels were used to safely store treasures from London's galleries and museums, including the world-famous Rosetta Stone.

The railway wasn't ready for use until 1927.

But once it was in service, the Post Office Railway became something very special indeed.

**Steve:** Some of the guys would have a sleep down there. I don't know how! It was very, very noisy!

**Isha:** Ray Middlesworth, Engineer:

**Ray:** You had the trains coming in – as you're in the tunnel the sound echoes round and you get the screeching of the wheels.

**Isha:** Hung Lee, Administrator:

**Hung:** Not many people knew that Royal Mail had an underground railway.

**Beverley:** It is just fascinating that it ran for so many years and nobody knew of its existence – a lovely little gem of hidden London.

**Isha:** A lot of things stayed pretty much the same over the lifetime of the Railway, and one of them was what



happened every time a train arrived at one of the stations, carrying containers of mail. Some needed taking off to go to a sorting office, and others needed to be loaded on.

**Steve:** They'd come in and it just went mad. Everyone would be pulling off, and then tip that, tip that, get some barrows - put something on.

**Ray:** And all the mailbags would be emptied onto this bucket by a conveyor belt. This thing would rise to the surface and empty them all out onto the platform.

**Isha:** From 1927 to 2003, the railway ran 22 hours out of 24, six days a week, 51 weeks a year. Teams of workers, three shifts every day.

**Hung:** Most of the people I knew, they said Mail Rail was the best job they ever had. It was very family orientated, everyone seemed to get along.

**Isha:** Amanda Stokes, Inspector:

**Amanda:** The railway was just special. There were so many people that I just bonded with. Doing something really unique, but also doing it in great company. What more do you want?

**Ray:** I'm still friends with people I've worked with on the railway. Because they didn't become just work colleagues after several decades, they're your best friends.

**Isha:** Oh! It Looks like I've got a letter to deliver!

# Platform 1 (eastbound) – exit

**Isha:** And now we'll head back into the tunnels.

For staff in the 70s and 80s, life on the railway was like travelling back in time.

**Steve:** I joined in January 1979. When I first went down there, I was amazed. The lighting was really dim. And it was very old. Everything was old. The furniture was old. The dust was everywhere. The conveyor belts were all- needed a coat of paint. It was probably as it was in the 30s, 40s. Hadn't changed since then.

**Ray:** The year I joined, in 1987 onto the railway, it was the 60th anniversary. And, many generations had been through it. There were people there who were trained by people, who were trained by people, who were there at the very beginning. A lot of railway stuff had to be fixed in house or made in house, and you're seeing things that come from the early 30s still there and operational.

# Flood barrier

**Isha:** Let's pause here for a moment where the tracks head off in different directions.

The tunnel to the left leads to Liverpool Street Station, where mail was transferred to the main railway network. And further down that tunnel, there's a pair of heavy steel doors. They are flood barriers.

During the railway's construction, ten men had to scramble to safety when water flooded in to where they were working. The barriers were put in during the war, but luckily haven't been needed since.

When we move off into the loop tunnel, keep a look out on either side of the train, and you'll get a glimpse of what we call 'the train graveyard'. Over to our engineer, Ray Middlesworth:

**Ray:** When trains did have a collision, sometimes the damage was quite severe and so they'd be stored there and on a temporary basis, but temporary became very long term, became permanent. So it did eventually

become a graveyard for these trains. And I believe the old Hoover is down there. It's important to keep the track clean, and they thought well why not build a Hoover, stick it on a set of wheels and we'll take it down there. But one of the problems is in a tunnel that size, is that once you start the air moving it keeps moving. So all that happens is you disappear in a cloud of dust.

# Power cut

**Isha:** Don't worry! It's gone dark because we've lost power to the lights, but they'll be back on any moment now.

During a power cut engineers could re-route the supply from other stations to get the trains moving without delay.

Now that the lights are back on, take a look at the tunnel walls. You can see the great iron rings that were bolted together, one by one, to protect the workers as they dug out the clay. You might also notice things that look like icicles hanging from the ceilings. These are made of a mineral called calcite.

# Bees

**Isha:** People trusted the Post Office to deliver almost anything, which meant the railway carried some surprising parcels.

**Steve:** I used to like bees, they used to post bees, and I think they were in tubes that were broken up into little cells. You'd pick a bag up, and it'd go bzzzzzzzzzz, and you'd go oh it's bees, they've got bees in there, and you'd put them very gently into the container. I used to like that.

# Platform 2 (westbound) – introduction

**Isha:** We've now looped round to platform 2, where trains would head off towards Paddington Station.

We want to give you an idea of what the Railway was like when it was new, in the 1930s. It was a world without emails and texts, even telephones weren't that common. So you wrote and posted letters.



## Platform 2 (westbound) – show

**Isha:** Trainloads of mail arrived at every station, every few minutes, with about a minute to unload and reload. Let's follow a few of those letters.

This is the Colonel – he's writing to the famous poet W. H. Auden, at the GPO film unit.

This is Kathleen – she's keeping in touch with her sweetheart in the navy...

...and this is Mary – her letter is very special – it's going to a princess!

**Kathleen:** Darling Bert. That Navy is keeping you away from me for far too long. And everyone says a war's coming. I do hope they're wrong.

**The Colonel:** Dear Mr. Auden, I feel compelled to express my admiration for your work on the recent film about the Night Mail postal train.

**Mary:** Dear Princess Elizabeth, I am sending you a birthday card because my birthday is on the same day. I hope you will enjoy living in Buckingham Palace. I wish my Daddy was the King like yours. Does he wear his crown all the time?

**Sorting office workers (listing place names):**

Coventry... Macclesfield... Birmingham... Nottingham... Southampton...

**Sorting office worker:** Her Royal Highness, eh? Must be important. In you go.

**Platform workers:** Coming through!

Mind that blooming cat!

Next train coming!

**Mary's voice, as Princess Elizabeth opens and reads the letter:** I hope this gets to you in time for your birthday. I suppose you get lots of letters every day. Please read this one. Yours sincerely, Mary Reardon, age eleven.

**The Colonel's voice, as W H Auden opens and reads the letter:** I look forward to your next production with keen interest. Keep up the good work. Yours sincerely,  
Colonel Arthur Bingley Crouch, Retired.

**Kathleen's voice, as Bert opens and reads the letter:** Must go now or I shall be late for work. Those frocks won't sell themselves. Take good care of yourself Bert, my love. Kisses, Your sweetheart, Kathleen.

## Platform 2 (westbound) – exit

**Isha:** So those three letters all got delivered quickly and safely, and so did the other four million which travelled along Mail Rail every day.

We're now leaving Platform 2 and heading back up to the depot. One of the most surprising things about the railway is how bonded the workforce were.

**Steve:** I would say a good third of the people down on the railway had connections with other guys. Lots of fathers and sons and brothers, and uncles, and all that kind of stuff. And that made the bond between the guys a lot stronger, I suppose it made the culture of the railway that much stronger.

**Isha:** Not all of the Railway workers were men. There was one woman. Traffic Inspector Amanda Stokes:

**Amanda:** I was the only woman who was in a leadership position. I don't ever remember feeling uncomfortable or challenged because I was a woman. So I could have faced a lot of pushback but I didn't. We

made so many friends there. Even since coming to Australia, still being in touch with so many of them. So yeah, it was just really special.

# End of Mail Rail

**Isha:** For most of its life, the network was officially known as the Post Office Railway. In 1987 it was re-branded to Mail Rail, and for a few years it was busier than ever. But in the 90s, email and phones began to eat into the railway's core business.

**Amanda:** I remember us all getting called to a meeting where they talked about mothballing the railway, as if it was gonna be a temporary thing, but I think we all knew that it wasn't gonna be temporary.

**Isha:** Mail Rail closed on May 31st, 2003. It had been in service continuously for almost 76 years.

**Steve:** Someone had the foresight to commission this unique method of transporting mail about, and you've got to applaud that. You'd never forget working on Mail Rail, you'd never forget it. My ghost will walk the platforms at Mount Pleasant.

**Ray:** I always thought, especially when we were just about to shut down, that that was it and it would pass

into history, and no-one will ever know it was here and all the people whose lives revolved around the railway and all the things that happened, I thought they would just disappear into the past, but I'm so pleased that it's been preserved. It looks the same to me.

**Isha:** And that's why Mail Rail matters. What once worked quietly out of sight is now open to everyone. Our visitors have a chance to see the tunnels, hear the stories, and discover the people who kept London's mail moving. Thanks to those who built it, ran it, and saved it, this hidden railway isn't forgotten after all.

# Closing message

**Isha:** Here we are arriving back at the depot. We hope you've enjoyed your tour around the little world of Mail Rail. Don't forget to explore the exhibition as well. There's lots more to see! Goodbye!