

Blackford's Lost Post Office? The current decline in rural postal services in Scotland

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Preamble: Blackford, in the south of Perth and Kinross, has always been a working village and had been the site of tanneries, a boot factory and, thanks to the quality of the local water, several breweries. Today the local water is still the basis of village employment: the Highland Spring bottling plant and the Tullibardine single malt distillery. [1]When my wife and I moved to Blackford in 2007; one of the plus factors was that it had a functioning Sub-Post Office. As recounted below, after two months without postal facilities at the end of 2015, the village was provided with a once weekly 75 minute call from the Kippen Mobile Post Office (MPO) from January 2016. Commencing 5 September 2016 the frequency rose to three calls a week. When the MPO is here, the service is excellent. However, the village Community Council would still like to see a fixed postal facility operating six days a week.

The reasons for the decline in postal services are well known, e-mails give instant communication, the growth of internet shopping and the resultant appearance of rival parcel delivery services. In addition the privatisation of the Royal Mail Group has resulted in a downgrading of the traditional commitment to a universal postal service throughout the United Kingdom. This paper looks at the history of Blackford Post Office, considers the emergence of Post Office Ltd as a separate entity outside the Royal Mail Group and notes the options offered under the 'Outreach Services' concept including a discussion of the current use of Mobile Post Offices in Scotland. The changes in the documentation of Blackford mails from 2009 onwards are described.

Blackford Post Office: The Post Office in the village of Blackford was opened on 7 January 1845, mails to be routed through Auchterarder as Post Town. It must be a strong possibility that this event was linked to the planned construction of the Scottish Central Railway (SCR) from Greenhill Junction on the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railway via Larbert, Stirling and Dunblane to Perth. Peter F. Marshall recorded that 'the plans and sections of the proposed route through Strathearn were deposited with the House of Commons before the beginning of the 1844-45 session of Parliament'. The SCR Bill received the Royal Assent on 1 July 1845 and despite delays, the official opening date was set for 22 May 1848. Blackford Station indeed opened in 1848 and was closed on 11 June 1956. [2]

Ken Smith recorded the above Post Office opening date on his website together with the following

Blackford information: [3]

- 1865 - Blackford designated a Railway Sub-Office, (RSO), able to exchange mail directly with railway Travelling Post Offices
- 1866 - Post Office number '381' allocated
- 1874 - Designated a Money Order - Savings Bank office
- 1898 - Designated a Telegraph Office, code QVD
- 1905 - Designated Sub-Office of the Post Town (The 1905 Post Town not stated, as not used in village postal address; Post Town usually Crieff at this time)
- 1973 - Auchterarder becomes Post Town on 1 June
- 2009 - Sub-Office status downgraded to a 'Partner Outreach' service on 26 January

2015 - 'Partner Outreach' service withdrawn on 31 October on change of ownership of village store, the former Sub-Post Office
2016 - Weekly visit of Mobile Post Office from Kippen initiated on Wednesday 6 January from 16.00 to 17.15.

From 5 September 2016 a second MPO was provided for the Kippen sub-office enabling three calls to be made a week to Blackford on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. See the 'Local Public Consultation' leaflet. [4]

There have been at least two Post Office buildings in Blackford. The earlier building, perhaps the original building dating from 1845, was located at the south-west end of Moray Street, the main road through the village, formerly part of the A9. A postcard used in 1908 showed a view of 'Moray Street (West) Blackford' with an 'X' marks the spot to indicate this early Post Office, see Fig. 1. This building has long been demolished, but the outline of the lower roof can be found on the gable end of the surviving contiguous building.

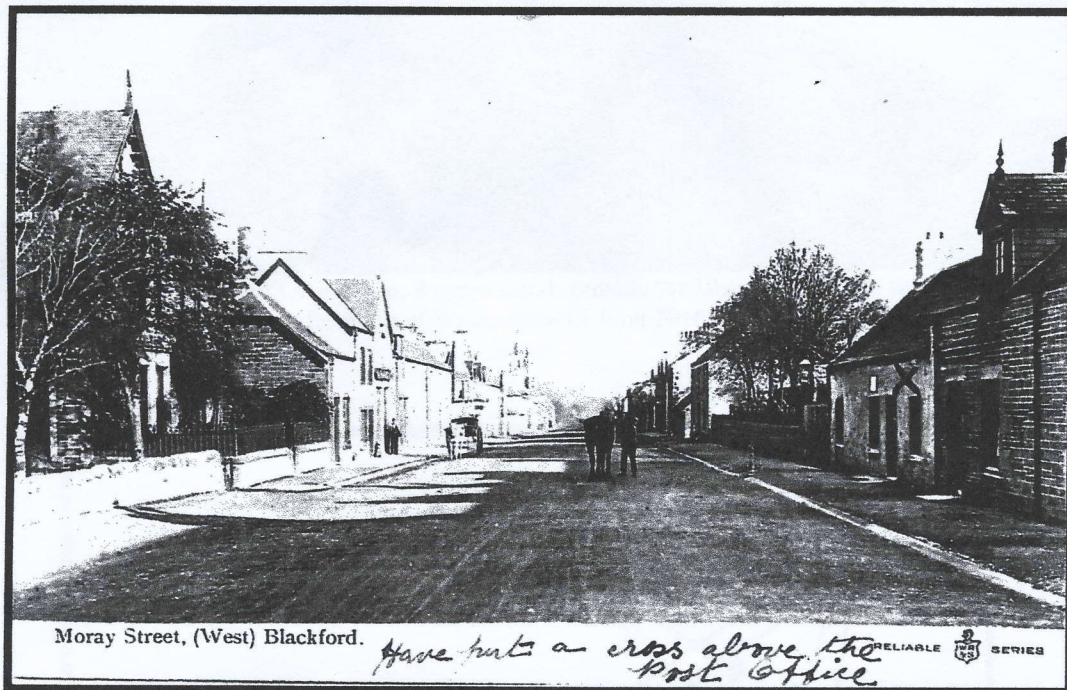


Figure 1: PPC of Moray Street, (West) Blackford, showing early Post Office at right with manuscript 'X'; subsequently demolished. Postally used 5 August 1908.

The more recent Sub-Post Office, still the village store and outside which today's Mobile Post Office parks, is situated at the opposite north-eastern end of Moray Street, much closer to the former Blackford Railway Station, see Fig. 2. A sketch map shows the locations, see Fig. 3.



Figure 2: The Mobile Post Office from Kippen stands outside the Blackford village store, the former Sub-Post Office, on the afternoon of Wednesday 15 June 2016. Note the wall letter box still in use.

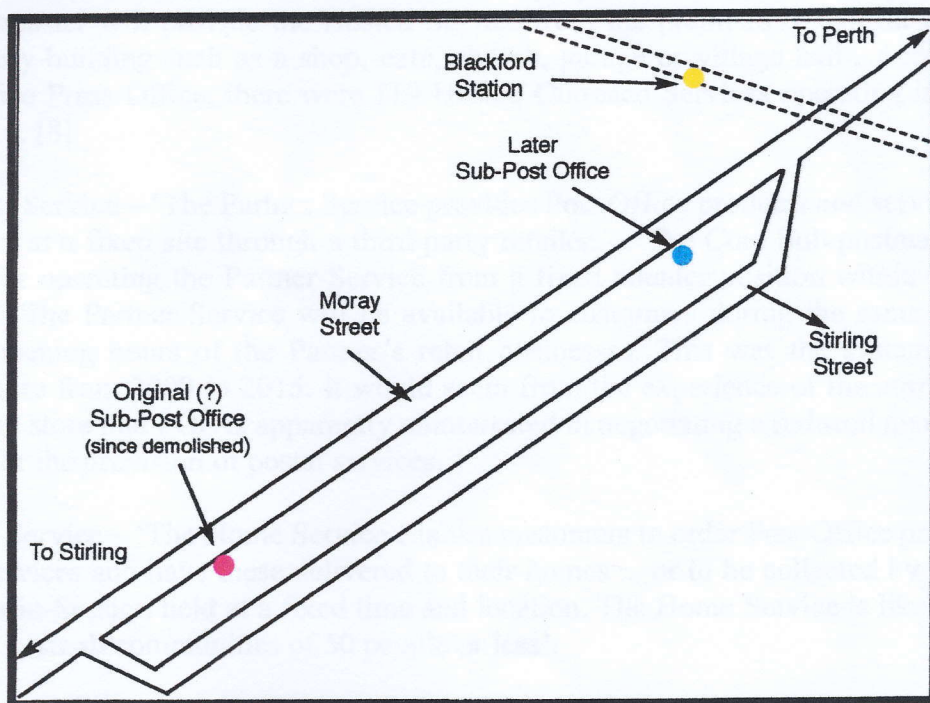


Figure 3. Blackford sketch-map

The emergence of Post Office Ltd (POL) as a separate entity outside the Royal Mail Group: A four page Post Office pamphlet, *Network Change Programme*, was issued circa

2008 and made available in Blackford just before the Sub-Post Office was downgraded. It analysed the problems of the Post Office network which was losing 'in excess of £3m a week before Government support'. [5] As a consequence of the Postal Services Act 2011, Post Office Ltd., the former Post Office Counters Ltd., became independent of Royal Mail Group on 1 April 2012. That is, POL is still a state-owned limited company, part of the British Government's Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, through Postal Services Holding Company Ltd. [6] POL have published a detailed Code of Practice regarding changes to the postal network. Appendix 2 lists the Government's 'Minimum access criteria'; to include:

99% of the UK population to be within three miles and 90% to be within one mile of their nearest Post Office branch

&

95% of the total rural population across the UK to be within three miles of their nearest Post Office branch [7]

When the Blackford Outreach Service was closed at the end of October 2015, the Post Office notice in the window of the village store referred customers to Auchterarder (PH3 1BJ) and Muthill (PH5 3AN) Post Offices which were approximately four and a half and over nine miles from the Blackford village store. There is no public transport from Blackford to Muthill.

The 'Outreach Services' of POL: The *Network Change Programme* referred to above quotes four kinds of Outreach Services:

a) Hosted Service – 'The Hosted Service provides customers with access to a range of Post Office products and services at a fixed site during specified hours on fixed days. The Core Sub-postmaster will provide the Hosted Service from the premises of a local business or a community building such as a shop, café, church, garage or village hall'. According to the Post Office Press Office, there were 119 Hosted Outreach Services operating in Scotland in June 2016. [8]

b) Partner Service – 'The Partner Service provides Post Office products and services to customers at a fixed site through a third party retailer. ... The Core Sub-postmaster pays the Partner for operating the Partner Service from a fixed counter position within the Partner's premises. The Partner Service will be available to customers during the same hours as the normal opening hours of the Partner's retail businesses. This was the system used in the village store from 2009 to 2015. It would seem from the experience of the current owner of the village store that POL is apparently uninterested in negotiating a reduced number of hours per day for the provision of postal services.

c) Home Service – 'The Home Service enables customers to order Post Office products and/or services and have these delivered to their homes ... or to be collected by the customer at a Drop-in-Session held at a fixed time and location. The Home Service is likely to be most suited to ... small communities of 50 people or less'.

d) Mobile Service – ‘The Mobile Service is a travelling Post Office situated within a mobile vehicle and brings Post Office and retail products and services to communities without relying on fixed premises. ... The vehicle has an access lift so that disabled customers can also access the vehicle’.

As of 3 June 2016, eight Mobile Post Offices were operational in Scotland based at:

Coldstream, Borders (serving four locations)
 Cowdenbeath, Fife (serving seven locations)
 Dalbeattie, Dumfries (serving six locations)
 Dalrymple, Ayrshire (serving five locations)

Denholm, Borders (serving seven locations)
 Kippen, Stirling (serving seven locations)
 Turriff, Aberdeenshire (serving four locations)
 Wick, Caithness (serving eight locations)

The Kippen MPO, serving Blackford, also covered Braco, Buchlyvie, Croftamie, Fintry, Gargunnock and Thornhill. [9] See Table 1 below indicating the timetable offered in July 2016.

Kippen MPO timetable in July 2016

Monday:	09.00 - 11.00	Buchlyvie
	11.30 - 13.00	Gargunnock
	14.00 - 16.00	Thornhill
Tuesday:	09.00 - 10.00	Gargunnock
	10.30 - 11.30	Thornhill
	12.00 - 13.00	Buchlyvie
	13.30 - 14.30	Fintry
	15.15 - 17.15	Braco
Wednesday:	09.00 - 10.00	Thornhill
	11.30 - 13.00	Buchlyvie
	13.30 - 15.30	Gargunnock
	16.00 - 17.15	Blackford
Thursday	09.00 - 11.00	Buchlyvie
	11.30 - 13.30	Gargunnock
	14.00 - 16.00	Thornhill
	16.30 - 17.30	Fintry
Friday:	08.30 - 09.30	Fintry
	10.00 - 12.00	Gargunnock
	12.30 - 14.30	Thornhill
	15.00 - 16.30	Buchlyvie
	16.45 - 17.15	Croftamie

Table 1

With Kippen acquiring a second MPO at the end of August, Blackford is currently served three times a week to the timetable shown as Table 2. This incorporates new calls at Carnock and at two locations in Clackmannan, plus improved services at Blackford, Braco and Croftamie.

Interim timetable for Kippen MPO No. 2 from 5 September 2016

Monday:	09.00 - 11.00	Braco
	11.30 - 13.30	Blackford
	14.30 - 16.00	Clackmannan FK10 4JA
Tuesday:	09.30 - 10.30	Braco
	11.00 - 13.00	Blackford
	14.00 - 16.00	Clackmannan FK10 4JA
Wednesday:	10.00 - 11.00	Carnock
	11.30 - 12.30	Clackmannan FK10 4EX
	12.45 - 13.45	Clackmannan FK10 4JA
	16.15 - 17.15	Croftamie
Thursday:	09.00 - 11.00	Blackford
	11.30 - 13.30	Braco
	14.00 - 16.30	Clackmannan FK10 4JA
Friday:	As at 5.9.2016	reserved for extension to additional villages

Table 2

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MPOs provide a broad range of useful services including cash withdrawal with an appropriate card, purchase of postage stamps, issuance of Certificates of Posting, handling of 'Signed For' and 'Special Delivery' material and parcels including International Parcelforce Worldwide.

According to the Post Office website, MPOs visit over 250 locations a week in rural locations across the UK, so Scottish usage equals about 20% of the UK total. [10]

Changes in the documentation of Blackford mails from 2009 onwards: During the last years of the Sub-Post Office, a single ring 24mm diameter cds inscribed BLACKFORD AUCHTERARDER PERTHSHIRE was used for Certificates of Posting (COP) etc., see Fig. 4. In the early Outreach Service era, Blackford came under the Braco Sub-Office, it now closed and replaced by the Kippen MPO. For COPs a 35mm diameter BRACO cds was used for a time, see Fig. 5. Printed Horizon COPs were later used inscribed Blackford Village Shop, see Fig. 6, and since January 2016 receipts were inscribed c/o Kippen Post Office with 'Sterling' for 'Stirling', see Fig. 7. Fig. 8 shows the KIPPEN MOBILE 2 cds used at Blackford on a P326 Certificate of Posting on 12 September 2016. Receipts for cash withdrawal are now inscribed Kippen Mobile 2.

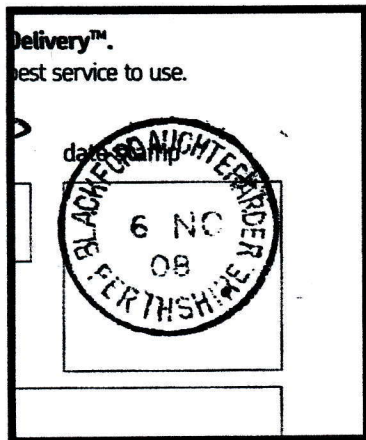


Figure 4: Final Blackford cds showing Post Town as Auchterarder

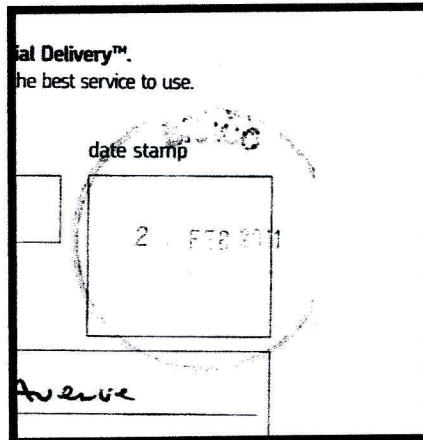


Figure 5: Large diameter BRACO cds

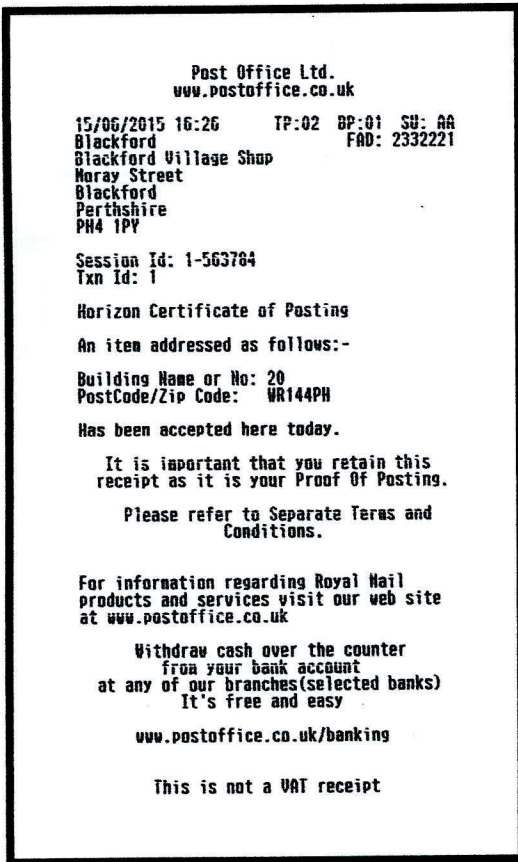


Figure 6: Printed Horizon COP from the Village Shop



Figure 7: Printed COP from [redacted]
[redacted]

Certificate of Posting

This is a receipt for 1st and 2nd Class inland letters and ordinary overseas items sent by Air or Surface mail.
Keep it safe – if you need to make a compensation claim you will need to produce this certificate.
1st or 2nd Class post should not be used for sending money or valuable items – use Special Delivery™.
If sending money or valuables overseas, please ask at your local Post Office® branch for advice on the best service to use.

Please write the name, address and postcode for each item you're sending in the box below (in ink).

number of items

staff initials

date stamp



name

address and postcode

Alan Wishart Fern	
19 Strath Naim	
LAW ML8 5LL	

please continue on the back (if necessary)

P326 PAD June 09



Fig 8 shows a P 326 Certificate of Posting with the brand new 'KIPPEN MOBILE 2' cds used at Blackford on 12 September 2016.

References:

- [1] David Strachan (ed), *A History of Blackford*, (Perth, Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust [In association with Blackford Historical Society], 2010).
 - [2] Peter F. Marshall, *The Scottish Central Railway, Perth to Stirling*, (Usk, The Oakwood Press, 1998).
 - [3] Ken Smith, <https://sites.google.com/site/ukpostofficesbycounty> [downloaded 7 June 2016].
 - [4] Post Office Ltd, *Changes to Kippen Mobile service - Local Public Consultation*, 13 July 2016.
 - [5] *Network Change Programme*, Post Office Ltd, nd, c. 2008, 4pp.
 - [6] *Post Office Ltd.*, Wikipedia [downloaded 13 June 2016].
 - [7] *Code of Practice on Public Consultation and Communication with respect to change in the Post Office network*, POL, May 2014, <http://corporate.postoffice.co.uk/modernising-post-office> [downloaded 1 February 2016]
 - [8] communication from Michael Norman, 3 June 2016.
 - [9] Michael Norman, *op. cit.*
 - [10] <http://corporate.postoffice.co.uk/modernising-post-office> [downloaded 1 February 2016].
- [Text slightly revised 7.2.2017]

Acknowledgements:

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