



Case Study
Inside a Royal Mail Sorting Office

Exec Summary:

This case study looks at the management styles adopted by an iconic British institution, The Royal Mail, with insights being provided from working 'on the inside'

The case study is in two parts:

Part One looks at the leadership and management issues encountered inside a sorting office in the three and a half week period running up to Christmas

Part Two, in the form of a structured diary, provides a narrative on engaging with Royal Mail including what it's like to work in a sorting office as a 'casual' worker during the busiest month of year for Mail sorting

PART 1

Leadership and Management Style Highlights:

Lack of Context:

Royal Mail managers did not establish a contextual framework at any time about the role being fulfilled by the 'casual' sorters at the sorting office. Where does the Mail come from; where is it going; what happens if Mail is mis-sorted before it arrives at the sorting centre, or vice versa if incorrectly sorted before being moved on; why is it important to sort as accurately as possible; what do the acronyms and abbreviations used throughout the sorting area mean? Simple things that would have provided workers with a frame of reference for their tasks were not undertaken, potentially to the detriment of the work itself.

Numbers of Managers:

From observation, we remain baffled why it took five managers per shift to run the operation at the sorting centre. With less than one hundred people on shift at any given time, the only visible roles were at sign-in at the start of a shift, or for queries relating to specific parts of the sorting activities. Though it must be noted that much 'industry' was shown by all five managers all of the time.

Budget and Planning:

From observation we believe the only aspect of budget activity was at sign-in. The sheets that the casual workers signed to say they had arrived at the sorting centre for the shift were collated and forwarded to a central processing office in Sheffield (via Edinburgh we were told) from which payment was made to the individual on a weekly basis one week in arrears.

From a planning perspective we can only comment on observations made regarding the workflow issues during a shift and from comments made by the managers on shift at any given time.

Workflow was clearly haphazard. None of the managers knew how much Mail was coming into the sorting centre at any given time of the day or night. As far as we could ascertain, twenty minutes was about as much advanced warning of a delivery of mail. On more than one occasion it came as a complete surprise when lorry loads appeared.

Organising and Staffing:

Each shift had its team of Managers. Each appeared to have different ideas about how the same job of sorting should be done. There were clear tensions between shift management teams with clear aggression towards some specific management individuals from other shifts.

Taking innovation from casual workers appears to have been unwelcome. It took adoption of the idea by a junior manager to effect change. Even that took three days to percolate through the system and another day to achieve action. We subsequently found out that the suggestion to change the format of sorting into the frame within a bullpen was, in actual fact, how the full-time sorting office in Edinburgh was organised.

Organising and Staffing (continued):

Staffing was purely dependent on the contracted casual worker turning up for the shift. As a consequence more efficient teams were redeployed when possible to help out those less effective or swamped by large volumes of mail. Royal Mail had clearly undertaken hiring at an earlier stage. Firing of staff due to transgression (i.e. theft) was immediate. We saw no evidence of the alleged 20 found thieving being replaced. Fewer numbers achieved the required output overall as the weeks rolled on

As a consequence of being unable to tell the volume of mail due for delivery, it became clear that a degree of 'management experience' was being brought to bear when volumes of mail either began to increase significantly, or when it was anticipated that it was going to increase significantly, as in previous years. In these instances, and during a shift, one of the Royal Mail managers would ask 'for volunteers' to work a longer shift the next day with varying degrees of success, especially towards the end of the month when 'worker fatigue' began to be noticeable

To put worker fatigue into context: The 'casual' worker was employed to work a shift of eight hours. Over the eighteen-day contractual duration in December, the anticipated number of hours at work should have equated to 144 hours. By volunteering for additional hours to meet the anticipated or actual increases in volumes of mail to be sorted, with the exception of the final Saturday night shift before Christmas that nobody volunteered to work, the writer achieved 192 hours – a third more than anticipated

Controlling and Problem Solving:

Management control usually could only be seen at the beginning of a shift and at break times. Only occasionally did it take place during a shift. At shift start the Manpower workforce in particular were given instructions of where to go (usually doing the same job as they were the night before) for that shift. Royal Mail 'casuals' generally were left to get on with it

At break times a Royal Mail Manager – usually the same one - would walk from the top of the floor space to the bottom shouting it was break time. The same when the shift ended. Intervention during a shift was to move teams as a whole or in part to sort out short term volume issues in other teams or to undertake another specific task required to keep the mail moving during the shift

Problem solving fell to one or two of the more visible Royal Mail Managers only. Usually the problem was not really a problem but advice on what to do with a particular item or where something was supposed to go after being sorted

Transgression through theft was the only other area we could identify as remotely problem solving – and the action for that, we were told, was to be undertaken by members of Royal Mail Security

Command and Control:

The management style in general was Command and Control – very much do as your told. Only with those individuals in the ‘casual’ worker cadre who clearly ‘had a bit more about them’ was the management style altered to request action

No Authority:

From what we could ascertain there was little authority held by the team of Royal Mail Managers. Key decision-making was referred off site. Leadership was therefore never encountered or apparently necessary

Management Tensions:

There were clear tensions between Managers within a shift team and between managers of different shift teams. This mostly came into the open at the end or beginning of shifts when changes were being made to how the floor layout should be for the next shift. Body language and verbal language was very clearly at heightened levels. Cooperation was by default rather than design

Contradictory Instructions between Managers and Shift Management Teams:

There were several instances where one manager would request the ‘casual’ workers to do something only to be countermanded by another within, in most cases, a few minutes. One notable event was when one shift manager asked casual workers who had volunteered for additional hours to help sort cards manually for franking, something that the night shift hadn’t done before. After an hour or so the individual manager concerned went off shift. His replacement gathered all the mail into sacks and dispatched the lot to Edinburgh to be sorted by machine....

If this arbitrary change is endemic within Royal Mail it is, in our opinion, unsurprising that the attitudes of resistance to change are being encountered and publicly declared

Self-Regulating Teams:

There was very clear evidence that most ‘casual’ worker teams became self-regulating very quickly. That is they organised their work rate, work quality, and individual interactions without outside interference from Royal Mail managers

Duplication in Sorting:

One of the most annoying aspects of sorting was the volume of duplication. Because the initial cutting and splitting had either been mis-sorted before it arrived at the bullpens or because the cutters and splitters couldn’t be bothered to sort the post coded bags properly, some parcels packages and larger envelopes went through the system three, four, or five times. On one occasion a casual worker confronted one of the managers with a parcel that had been through his sorting area on four occasions that evening and was clearly a foreign item (i.e. parcel to be mailed over seas). The Manager personally took the parcel to the mis-sorts area and claimed on his return that he had made sure it was correctly sorted. The very same item appeared as a mis-sort later that evening!

Parkinson's Law:

Because workflow was inconsistent the classic observation of Parkinson's Law could be made. That is the amount of work available is made to fit the time allowed to do the work – rather than getting in done as efficiently as possible

Use and Role of Values:

There was no evidence of the use or role of values of the Royal Mail being articulated to the casual workforce

General Comment:

It became apparent during the period that a number underlying issues were emerging and they are as follows: management styles and their consequences, the distinctions between Leadership and Management were not well understood or practised, and the principles of ownership

There are a number of issues that appear to underlie the practices, procedures and behaviours that were observed during the period of contact with the organisation. They are, not exclusively, the following:

- The impact on performance of management style and behaviours
- The consequences of a failure to distinguish between (and the implementation of that distinction) leadership and management
- The importance of a sense of ownership and inclusion for all those involved, especially casual staff
- Of communication and its poor quality impacting on performance and morale
- A general lack of understanding and appreciation of quite basic human psychology and its application to the work place

Two final comments: (i) the Royal Mail, on this evidence, is poorly managed at this operational level and (ii) if the situation encountered in this sorting office is typical of the "regular" sorting scene, then the industrial action mentioned earlier, comes as no surprise

PART 2

Background:

Myron Partnership, leading UK practitioners in Corporate Coaching and Organisation Development, first approached Royal Mail Executive Management, in March 2009 to engage in a discussion on the role of values and culture in sustaining successful organisations against a background of issues particularly related to ongoing and troubled management vs unions negotiations and strike actions over modernisation of the Royal Mail business

Within a week **Myron Partnership** had received a two-line response from Executive Management from another part of Royal Mail Group stating “We have no need for your services at present”. Strike action continued intermittently thereafter especially in the Greater London area affecting deliveries across the whole of the UK

During November and December 2009 the Union took further industrial action. The threat that postal services pre Christmas could not be guaranteed induced direct intervention in the dispute from the UK Business Secretary of the UK Government, Lord Peter Mandelson, as it was clear that internal negotiations and those held at ACAS were in trouble

Furthermore, and to outsiders such as **Myron Partnership**, the issues at the heart of the dispute appear to have little to do with orthodox industrial relations but revolved around the different values and beliefs held by both sides. Very different values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours were at the heart of the problems experienced between Royal Mail and the Communications Union at the negotiating table and in the very public spat being played out in the UK media

Myron Partnership holds the view that misaligned values between people divide groups whereas shared (or common) values bring people together. Similarly divergent beliefs, which are driven by underlying values, divide groups while aligned beliefs bring people together

There is an increasing and compelling volume of evidence from around the world that clearly identifies that shared values, leading on to a shared common (or core) purpose, brings improved levels of cooperation, efficiency, effectiveness and cost savings to an organisation



Applying to work with Royal Mail:

Christmas is a time when the Royal Mail system comes under extreme pressure through sheer volume of cards, letters, packages and parcels being posted at home and abroad. Consequently the Royal Mail takes on large numbers of 'Christmas Casuals' – temporary workers to help full-time Royal Mail employees handle the workload

After investigation in how to apply, one of the partners at **Myron Partnership** went through the online registration process during late October 2009

After successful completion of the online registration process the next stage involved a face-to-face interview. This was organised online with registration completed approximately one week later for an interview in early November

Myron Partnership deliberately set about testing the initial contact process by turning up at the interview without some of the necessary documentation requested by Royal Mail. An interview was refused unless full documentation was available. Using the telephone number provided by the staff at the interview centre, a second interview date was agreed for a week later at the same venue in Scotland's 'Central Belt'

This time armed with a complete set of documents – a five-page Christmas Casual Registration and Security Checks Consent Form, a recent passport-sized photo, Passport and a photocopy of the individual's passport key details (front page and photo page), hard copy and photocopy of a utility statement, a letter and photocopy of any correspondence with HMRC selected in this instance – the interview took place against a clear opening statement on arrival that all vacancies had been filled and that interviews were proceeding adding individuals to a 'resource pool' i.e. a waiting list of potential people should those already qualified and contracted not turn up for work

Firstly, a series of form filling broadly related to health and availability had to be completed before being seen face-to-face by an interviewer of which there were about ten sitting behind desks in an open space configured room. All details were correlated by the interviewer against a clear and defined checklist. A Personal Declaration to Royal Mail Group had to be signed by both the interviewee and the interviewer. A pair of contract documents was then provided for signature by the interviewee, one of which to keep. With all these schedules signed, the cover letter was issued by the interviewer confirming, "...The pre employment documentation [you] provided at the recent registration session complies both with our licensing and legislation obligations"

The interviewer asked if there were dates or times that the interviewee couldn't work. The interviewer was provided with a complete list of dates where work could not be undertaken due to existing meeting schedules. The interview concluded by being told to expect a phone call in due course that would assign a work pattern at the Hermiston Gate sorting office site on the outskirts of Edinburgh. The wait began....

Call Up:

Two weeks later, in the late morning, a phone call was received asking if a work pattern could be started that evening, early in the first week of December. Existing meeting schedules prevented doing so on this occasion. A second phone call the following morning offered an afternoon shift – a date previously provided at the interview stage as being ‘unavailable’. An alternative evening shift was then offered and accepted starting at 2200 hours, finishing at 0600 hours the following morning and running through from that evening to Christmas Eve with the exception of Saturday evenings

The location turned out to be different from that anticipated at Hermiston Gate. Instead the work would take place at a temporary sorting office at the old Motorola factory at the Pyramid Business Park, Bathgate, just off junction 3a of the main motorway between Edinburgh and Glasgow, the M8. The caller from Royal Mail had no idea of directions or contact numbers to location as she was calling from the English Home Counties

She had no idea what facilities were available on site or about what constituted appropriate work dress

So...we were off....

The First Shift:

Getting to the Bathgate site was easy. On arrival at the business park about 20 minutes before the shift start there was no signage indicating where to go or park. Through guesswork and by asking at the security hut at the selected ‘overflow’ car park it was established it was the right place. The security person asked if “Manpower or Royal Mail”? On stating the latter, instructions to sign-on in the office were issued. The office was an entrance lobby to the old factory about 100 yards down a small doglegged path behind and to the right of the security hut. A Royal Mail manager was waiting to issue a temporary work pass to the site (without a photo on it – although supplied at the interview) and a fluorescent orange work vest with the Royal Mail logo on the back. Having signed in, instructions were given to go down to the seating area at the bottom of the ‘factory’ and wait

The workspace was an old Motorola mobile phone assembly factory closed during the early 2000’s after the Internet bubble burst with its knock on effect on economies around the globe. In effect the factory is a huge open space not unlike a small aircraft hangar. Approximately 200 meters long by 60 meters wide, concrete floored, and about 30 meters high with five or six loading bays immediately to the left of the main work area separated by a wall with three openings equally spaced down its length. At the very bottom end of the area is a glass-partitioned area with two small offices to the left and a carpet tiled open-plan area with trestle tables, chairs, two water cooler dispensers, various microwaves, toasters, kettles, a large water boiler, and several rows of closely packed lockers

There were about 80 people sitting around the various tables. Numbers looked to be about equally split between the fluorescent yellow vested Manpower people and those of the Orange vested Royal Mail

The First Shift (continued):

There appeared to be about five Royal Mail managers on duty clearly identified by the blue shoulder insert with a white Manager printed on their Orange vest. Three men and two women. At approximately 2150 hours the previous shift piled into the waiting area taking their belongings from the lockers and leaving immediately and as fast as possible

At 2200 hours one of the female managers shouted instructions that were only partly intelligible telling those assembled “to go to where they were working last night”. Anyone on their first shift “should stay where they are until given instructions on what to do and where to go”

About 10 minutes later one of the male managers instructed the five ‘first-nighters’ to move towards and sit in front of a television by the offices and to watch the 25 minute health and safety video containing information about ‘do’s and don’ts’ while sorting the mail

The video was, by the look of it, an expensive production stressing common sense issues. Following the video another male manager sat down stating, “I’m the manager in charge here irrespective of what the others think. The lady you met at the front door is my wife – so now you know who’s really in charge”. An interesting introduction to Royal Mail management style....

A Brochure was then given to the five with time to read it. The first page has a blank space into which a contact telephone number should have been inserted – it wasn’t!

The manager was adamant that anyone not wearing a pass should be challenged. Fluorescent jackets had to be worn at all times while on site

Comments were made about security and what happens when theft occurs. There were people working on site who were part of the Royal Mail security team working amongst the sorters. Even the managers didn’t know who they were. “Any unusual behaviour should be reported to any manager immediately for further investigation”. If anyone was caught stealing from parcels – instant dismissal and 100% definite prosecution. “Royal Mail’s security people have greater powers than the police to search your home”

The five were then taken out onto the sorting floor, to a specific postal area for sorting ‘Flats’ (larger enveloped letters), small packages and parcels. Without further ado the team of five were then left to their own devices to work out what to do and what happens from thereon

The floor and work areas:

What the floor space was separated into and how it worked from top to bottom of the floor space was never explained. Initial impressions suggested that the work area was segmented into various aspects for sorting in a progression made from one end to the other of the total floor space. Incoming mail at the end nearest the waiting room and outgoing mail at the other end

The floor and work areas (continued):

To the centre and right of the area nearest where the five had been waiting (or now known as the rest area) was covered with hundreds of Yorks (a wheeled light-weight, open sided metal framework with a fibreglass, wooden or plastic base about 5 feet high, and 3 feet square) full of unopened sacks of mail. To the immediate left were several contraptions (we came to know these as frames) holding long nylon bags where some sort of sifting appeared to have been going on. None were manned at this point. We learnt that these areas were called OP1 and OP2. What OP meant was never explained even when for a short period work was done for an hour or so to help clear a backlog of unsorted mail

The assessment of these areas indicated that it was an area where the first genuine sift of mail took place. From what could be ascertained during the short period working to help clear a backlog, the mail was from everywhere in England above a line from Kings Lynn to Southampton, from all over Scotland, and excluded Wales. The frames allowed the mail to be sorted into what was presumed to be the main sorting depots in England – Plymouth, Luton, Liverpool, Truro, and Preston - for example. Everything for Scotland was sorted into post district labelled Yorks – Perth and Dundee, Falkirk and Kirkcaldy, Edinburgh Town – for example as found in the ‘stacks’ waiting to be sorted at the bullpens or bullpits

Beyond that, in the centre of the floor was an area where bags were opened or ‘cut and split’ and dumped into Yorks that had cardboard liners with raised bases. These Yorks were labelled with a rough area identity for the next round of sorting attached to the top and rear of the metal framework so that the sorters could identify if it was relevant to their area of sorting. To the left was an area for sorting large parcels into postcode areas. To the right an area where more unsorted mail was ‘stacked’ until it could be opened and distributed into the sorting areas called bullpits or bullpens

Beyond the area of cutting and splitting was an area of U-shaped bullpits or bullpens consisting of a group of between 16 and 25 cardboard lined Yorks facing inwards towards the centre each with a post code area visible on the rear covering a specific postal district or postal area. To the left were Perth and Dundee postcodes, followed as progression towards the top end of the work floor by Falkirk and Kirkcaldy postcodes, then Edinburgh town (i.e. Central Edinburgh) and finally the greater Edinburgh area. To the right were Glasgow and all west coast postcodes

In between these bullpits was an area where the cut and split bags were placed for each team to collect full but unsorted Yorks of mail

Right at the far end of the work floor was an area for mis-sorts (spelt here as it is in the Royal Mail) where mail that had been sorted into the wrong postcode district was sent for re assignment to the correct postcode district. To the right of this area, almost in the centre of the floor was a ‘stacking area’ where sorted mail in Yorks was left before being put on lorries for the next stage of distribution and sorting

The floor and work areas (continued):

The system of sorting is very simple - a team member wheeled Yorks with an appropriate post-code taken from the unsorted area to the relevant bullpit. The mail was then sorted by postcode into the relevant Yorks in the bullpit. When a York in the bullpit was full (probably with several hundred small packages), a team member needed to find an empty York to replace the full one. The full one was then labelled with the relevant postcode and wheeled to the top end of the work floor and left in a marked area where it would be collected and placed onto a lorry taking the mail to the next geographic area for onward sorting and delivery. The 'new', empty York was appropriately labelled and placed back into the vacant space in the bullpit

In addition to the post coded Yorks there were three additional Yorks, one for large parcels which would be sorted elsewhere, one for mis-sorts where letters and packages with postcodes not relevant to the bullpit were placed for re-sorting by another team, and one labelled Frame where more rural but relevant postcodes to the bullpit were sorted, again usually by another team

Communication between managers and the casual workforce was almost invariably by shouting from a distance. The language was mostly obscene with the 'F' and 'C' words being used singularly or in combination almost at every other word in a sentence. Remarkable bearing in mind the mixed male and female workforce

The workers:

The temporary or 'casual' workers were a really interesting and mixed group of people. Professionals between assignments and projects, the unemployed - both short and long-term, tradesmen and women affected by the downturn in house building, the retired, semi-retired, students, the disabled, and people with several part-time jobs trying to make ends meet

There were three workforces operating three shifts 0600-1400 hours, 1400-2200 hours and 2200-0600 hours daily allowing the sorting to take place twenty-fours a day for the duration of the Christmas run-up

Although warned about the determined prosecution of anyone found thieving, over twenty people we found to be doing so in the first fortnight and instantly dismissed. Security people and Royal mail Managers became very visible for a short period of time

A Reporter from the News of the World Newspaper worked on the Edinburgh area postcodes and posted a double page spread on the Sunday before Christmas about the Royal Mail and its sorting office at Bathgate. Embarrassment all round for Royal Mail and its local managers - and an increase in security on the Monday evening

A typical nightshift:

A typical nightshift lasted eight hours starting at 2200 hours and ending at 0600 hours the following morning, with, for Royal Mail staff, a forty-five minute break at 0200/0215 hours. Manpower workers had two thirty-minute breaks at 0100 and 0400 hours

On arrival and sign-in, collection of a pass and a fluorescent Orange jacket (both of which had to be left behind at the end of every shift) allowed you into the sorting area. Outer coats and food for the 0200/0215 hours break were placed in empty lockers as they became available as the shifts changed

Invariably it was down to the shift workers to move off to their workstation on time and in effect get on with the sorting. Only on two occasions after the initial 'first-night' was there some form of communication made before the shift started. One on the second night telling people to leave the keys for the lockers behind so the incoming shift had somewhere secure to store their effects and to impose a 'curfew' at 0500 hours stopping people going outside for 'a smoke'. The other was on the last night telling the workforce what they would be doing specifically that evening as it was different from all previous nightshifts – sorting mail-order catalogues

The first eight nights went by quite uneventfully. During the eighth night a Royal Mail Manager went round the floor asking if workers would work a ten-hour shift (2200-0800 hours) on the Saturday evening. He needed sixty people. Most agreed to do so. The Sunday reverted back to an eight-hour shift. During that evening however the same Royal Mail Manager asked for volunteers to work a twelve-hour shift (1800-0600 hours) on the Monday evening. Fewer Volunteers this time but sufficient to make it happen – about forty people all told. The Tuesday evening reverted to eight hours and again with volunteers the next three evenings went to twelve-hour shifts

A request did go out for volunteers to do another twelve-hour shift on the Saturday before Christmas. There was an almost universal "No chance" after working 160 hours in thirteen days!

During the middle weeks of sorting, when volumes were at the highest, it was noticeable that managers from the previous or following shift would be on site for the shift change over – something that was not obvious during quieter periods. Several of these managers were badged on their Orange fluorescent vests with a black shoulder flash as coaches. No evidence of coaching was seen but plenty of reorganisation of the work floor to suit the incoming shift. Much to the annoyance of the outgoing managerial teams who put things back to the way they were when they got back to work their next shift....

Dependent on the attitude of the sorters – all of whom at Bathgate were 'casual' workers – determined the speed of sorting. Observation highlighted that there was much meandering and what can only be described as skiving by the Manpower workers in particular. Its remarkable how practised people are or quickly become at finding ways of not doing what they are employed to do!

A typical nightshift (continued):

A team – usually four or six to a bullpen or bullpit – could sort four to six Yorks at a time, in effect one each. Several teams shared one or two Yorks between them being very courteous in letting their colleagues take mail before they did....the impact on speed of sorting is obvious. A rough estimate would be that the better teams sorted three to four Yorks to every one of the ‘less efficient’ teams. On one evening at the height of mail volume, one of the better teams cleared over 80 Full Yorks containing roughly between one hundred and four hundred flats, parcels and small packages (dependent on the package size) each in a single eight-hour shift

The Frame was used for doing an initial sift of mail to relevant but outlining postcode areas within a postal district. Most Frames were separate from the bullpens or bullpits. An Alt a smaller wheeled contraption with an elasticised base could be found next to the Frame once more for mis-sorts. One team suggested it would save time and effort if the Frame relevant to their sorting were incorporated into the bullpen. It took three days for approval to be given and another one for the approval to be implemented. Sorting speed increased

Sorting speed increased even though the Frame postcode layout was clearly a ‘Royal Mail Special’ – not alphabetical or straight forward numerical – but a mix of both. The time wasted trying to find some postcodes in the larger frames had to be seen to be believed

Collection of full Yorks from the top of the work floor progressed with ease with full Yorks being loaded onto articulated lorries. However the ‘dispatching manager’ would appear quite regularly as the evening wore on to take partially filled, even virtually empty (four packages on one occasion) Yorks to fill up a trailer

First Class mail was supposed to be given priority. Most evenings First Class mail appeared around midnight and was generally sorted as soon as it came onto the sorting floor. On several occasions however Yorks full of First Class mail was found buried in the Yorks waiting for sorting – on one evening it was estimated it was two days old

The Teams:

By and large it appeared that the Royal Mail team members ‘gelled’ very quickly with very little, if any’ discernable conflict or aggravation. The level of emotional intelligence that sprung up was remarkable with the task at hand being managed, by and large, collaboratively, effectively and with efficiency. Some teams obviously worked at different paces and with greater accuracy than others, but over all teams worked

There was no obvious leader and follower. Everyone pulled his or her weight equally with necessary decision making being made on a similar basis. Conflict only arose once when one individual was being particularly stupid about placing parcels into the frame for which he was taken to task. The issue passed quickly and didn’t reoccur

The Teams (Continued):

The team the writer was engaged with were all complete strangers as the group of ‘five first-nighters’ described above. By the end of the first evening they were displaying all characteristics of a supportive team that continued for the entire working period from early December through to Christmas. This ‘gelling’ was perhaps made easier by the fact that no one had any authority, or any direct ‘relationship’ to the Royal Mail organisation. The only common factor was that Royal Mail was paying for the hours worked!

It was noticeable that the same levels of EI were not achieved by some of the Manpower teams where it was clear there were individuals working to their own agenda – i.e. skiving when and wherever possible

The Goodbye:

On the last but two evening, at the beginning of the night shift, all the ‘casual’ workforce was called together and told by one of the managers – not the boss from the first night (though he was there) - that the following night would be their last night sorting mail. As a consequence as the mail was sorted and moved on, all the bullpens or bullpits were dismantled; the Yorks broken down and stacked in the rear of articulated lorries parked at the loading bay, and in effect the work area cleared. Towards the very end of the last night shift the workers were told that they were need the following night and could they come in. Most had already made alternative arrangements as this was now Wednesday evening before Christmas – so the night shift finished on the morning of Christmas Eve.

It got to 0500 hours on the morning of Christmas Eve when the much reduced workforce of about 30 people were told to “Go and enjoy your Christmas” – and that was that. Clothes collected from lockers and away everyone went!