

A Christmas Challenge

Almost 200 years ago – hot on the heels of the Industrial Revolution – innovation and process improvements resulted in an overhaul of the United Kingdom’s postal system. The changes saw the introduction of the world’s first adhesive postage stamp, the Penny Black.

The new system was championed by the educator and social reformer Rowland Hill, with support from Henry Cole, a public servant and inventor. It made postage accessible to the general public, greatly increasing the volume of mail being sent (which offset the lower cost of postage) and facilitated commerce and free trade.



The Penny Black was introduced shortly before Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* – his tale aimed at communicating to employers that they have a responsibility for their people. In an era when child labour was rampant, the Penny Post enabled seasonal greetings to be shared, bringing a little warmth to those who previously may have gone without.

The same year that Dickens’ Christmas rebuke was published, Henry Cole produced the world’s first printed Christmas Card, with a print run of a thousand cards. That first printed Christmas Card featured images of the poor being given food and clothing as a family celebrates – so the message of caring for others and charity is clear.

Charity is a humanitarian concept not a religious one (although many religions highlight it, for example, *dāna*, *sadqah*, and *zedakah*) and, as such, the message is universal. It has been criticised by some, such as Oscar Wilde, as a way for the givers to feel good about themselves. However, avoiding zero-sum games is part of what excellence is about so benefiting ethically from helping others aligns with excellence.

Excellence requires organisations to deliver results for all stakeholders – this includes society. True charity is not about giving people handouts, it’s about helping to make the world a better place for all. So, as the year draws to a close, considering how to spread a little of the joy of Christmas in an effective and altruistic way is both charitable and excellent.

One win-win example of how the world can be made a better place is the story above of how the introduction of affordable postage made it possible for the general public to send mail while also boosting free trade and commerce. Nowadays, online communications have impacted postal systems and to look after the environment people have largely switched to digital Christmas Cards but the impact of the Penny Black lasted until recently.

The traditional principle of Christmas is community. The Christmas Challenge for us all is to find a way to make things better for our communities. Write it in a card, send it to ourselves to hold ourselves accountable, and act on it before this time next year.