

THE HARPENDEN CHRISTMAS POST (Updated 11/12/17)

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This is a service provided free to the elderly of Harpenden since 1984. Their Christmas cards are collected and delivered by the Cubs to Harpenden, Batford and Redbourn.

When I was Cub age myself I used to help with the “proper” Christmas post. Royal Mail laid on extra staff and transport to deal with the load. The key to my involvement was the transport, a *Bere Regis* coach. Having been something of a bus anorak (probably

passed on from my father being a founder member of the Dorset Transport Circle) (I’ve almost grown out of it by the way), I was extremely keen to help out and simply asked the postmen if I could come with them. I did, all over Weymouth. Mum and Dad were happy, the postmen were glad of a runner, and no questions were asked. Would that happen these days? I think not! I’ve often said that what you do between the ages of 8 and 10 can have a major influence on your future, which is why I found leading Cubs so rewarding. Anyway, the seeds for the Harpenden Christmas post had been sown.

I came to Harpenden in 1979 and helped with, then led, the 9th Harpenden Everest Pack from 1980 until 2002. The idea for the card service was born in 1984. Each Cub would collect cards from elderly people known to them, and those on a list provided by St Mary’s Church at Kinsbourne Green, adjacent to our HQ in north Harpenden. It worked out at 4 to 6 house-visits per Cub, and was confined to residents of north Harpenden. In addition, a post-box was placed at James Marshall House (then a residential home in the centre of the town) in mid November and I collected the cards from there. On Saturday 15th December 1984, the sorting office at 9th HQ opened and the operation began. My diary says that we started at 6pm, which rather astonishes me bearing in mind the amount of work to be done. Not until 1988 do my records show that we started in the morning, as we do now. By then we were delivering more than 2000 cards. Amongst those present was John Currie, father of two of the Cubs. He has been crucial to the scheme ever since, seeking out new streets, maintaining the list of rounds and helping with the sorting, especially with deciphering the writing on some of the envelopes. As time went on, some of those who lived near Kinsbourne Green moved to other parts of Harpenden. It was my job to visit them, whilst the Cubs and their parents stayed closer to home. I do so to this day and I am saddened every year when somebody else “drops off the list”.

Four weekends before Christmas, notes were delivered confirming that the service would be running again. Three weekends before Christmas, a Cub called and asked whether there would be any cards. Two weekends before Christmas the cards were collected and sorted on the Saturday, and delivered on the Sunday, leaving a spare weekend just in case of impossible weather (a contingency which has never yet been needed). The highest number of cards was 4348 (in 1997), all handled by the one Cub Pack. There was a three-

line whip, mind you, and generally around 30 families of the 36 were involved over the crucial weekend, and all of them in the earlier weeks. I remember getting very cross with those who pulled out at the last minute! In later years, valuable help came from the 10th Harpenden.

In 2002 I became District Commissioner and no longer had a direct hold over Everest Cubs and their parents. In 2003 the service transferred to a District footing and the sorting operation moved to the 10th's HQ, which has a large car park, plenty of tables, and a Trevor Brotherton (RIP 2008), who had all the tables and chairs set up and the heating doing its thing before I arrived. Post boxes were placed in various residential homes and Cubs were invited to collect cards from elderly relatives, friends and neighbours in the town. Some did, some didn't. The number of cards fell to a low of 2298 in 2005 as we adjusted to the new system, but rose thereafter, reaching 3118 in 2015, the 32nd year of the service. We have the capacity to deal with more and will attempt to do so.

Sorting is quite an operation. The cards are counted, placed in plastic boxes from which a team of four removes them and postmarks them. In the early days the stamps comprised embossed resin pads, made by John, which were pressed onto an inkpad and then used to stamp "9th Harpenden Cub Scouts Everest Pack" as neatly as possible in the top right-hand corner. Eventually more modern self-inking stamps were used and the message now reads "Harpenden Cub Scouts Merry Christmas". A special stamp was produced for the 25th and 30th anniversaries, along with badges which could be worn on the uniform. Once postmarked, Cubs place them in a box on a chair labelled with the letter of the alphabet corresponding to the initial letter of the target street. The chairs run round three sides of the room and behind them are tables manned by parents. The parents take the cards from the boxes and sort the cards into streets and then into number order within the streets. Once this is done and checked, an elastic band is put around each street pile. Then out comes John's list of rounds. I sit at the control table and start calling the streets in the correct order for Round 1. As soon as I call a given street name, the parent on the table with that street hands the pile to a Cub who brings it to the control table. At least two leaders help me check that every card in the pile is correct. The round number and street number (order within the round) are written on to the top card, and John puts them together to make the rounds. When I've called the final street of the final round, there are always some piles left on the table. Many are for Redbourn, which I sort at home and then deliver myself on Sunday, but there are always a few Harpenden ones that were missed when I called them. John and I infiltrate these into the rounds after everybody else has gone home. We also break the rounds down as necessary to match the number of people who we expect to turn up for delivery, which is the number of people who have said that they will, minus ten percent!

On the Sunday, deliverers are expected at 9.30 sharp. The rounds, with maps, are all laid out on tables and a Cub and his/her parent(s) pick the one they want and have their details (name, Pack, phone number, round number, street numbers) recorded. Some come early in order to try to procure the most convenient round. Some come late and (rarely) miss out altogether; more often they catch another delivery team and split the round. By 1pm everybody is expected to have finished and either phoned in to say they had a clean round

or returned “undeliverable” cards. All are invited for drinks, mince pies and biscuits. Most come.

In the afternoon what, for me, is the best part starts: delivering the undeliverable. This used to involve me, a parent and two or three Cubs, but the advent of the requirement for child seats in cars led to me doing it by myself. We pride ourselves in getting every card to its correct destination and only rarely do we fail. It starts by going through lists of problems, and how they were solved, in previous years. There are always repeat offenders, but always new ones. The telephone directory helps solve some, but after that it's on to the street and down to some serious detective work. Here is just one example, from 1989. The card was addressed to Mrs Dryburgh, 59 Piggottshill Lane. The last odd number in Piggottshill Lane is 49, so we tried there, feeling quite optimistic. No luck, but we were told that there were more Piggottshill Lane houses beyond the roundabout (which we knew!), so we double-checked these but they were all numbered in the hundreds. Number 39 were out. Number 58 didn't know the addressee but, while we were talking to them, a white van drew up just down the road with “Dryburgh Painting and Decorating” on the side. This was the addressee's son, come to visit Mum. Answer, 54 Piggottshill Lane. Sometimes we get lucky, sometimes the hunt takes longer!

We always get a few cards that are outside our stated ambit. If there is manpower we deliver those for nearby villages and hamlets, but those we've had for Bristol, Bolton, Cornwall, Cumbria, County Galway, London, Teignmouth, Winchester, South Africa, USA and New Zealand had stamps put on them and were left in the capable hands of Royal Mail.

Notable occurrences include the following.

- In 1992 parents were invited to include their own local cards at 10p each to raise money for the Scout Association's “Promise Appeal”.
- In 1999 I was at a meeting overseas during the crucial weekend and John led the operation.
- In 2003 the St Albans Observer published an article about the service before the event (we asked them not to), and we were inundated with requests!
- In 2005 it was the day of the Buncefield explosion. Many tiles were off the roofs of the houses in Redbourn and the pall of thick smoke formed a forbidding backdrop. Fortunately the wind was blowing it all away from Redbourn.
- In 2012 we proved that we were proper postmen: one of the Cubs got bitten by a dog whilst delivering his very first card. He went to hospital but there was no lasting issue. Gilwell was advised and the risk assessment reviewed!
- In 2014 the door shutters at HQ jammed on the Sunday morning and Jonathan Finch had to be called out of bed with his tool box to get us in. He succeeded just in time!
- In 2017 it snowed very heavily on delivery day. Whilst the majority of cards was delivered on the day, delivery continued until the following Sunday.

There are many Scout postal services but this remains the only one I know of which is a free service for the elderly. Nonetheless, in spite of requesting that donations are not

given, many insist. This finances refreshments, consumables such as elastic bands and new equipment such as the post markers – and stamps to South Africa etc. It has also led to a useful reserve just in case, heaven forbid, it should all go horribly wrong one year and we need to put stamps on!

Over the years the service has generated good publicity. Almost always the local newspapers publish a report. In early years this was often on the front page, but gradually crept inside. In 1994, 1997 and 2009 we were interviewed for Three Counties Radio. In 1998, 2002 and 2003 Anglia News did excellent TV reports. Radio Verulam ran an interview in 2016 and 2017. 2003 was particularly memorable as, whilst they were filming, they were told by their base that Saddam had just been captured. We were probably amongst the first to know!

Many people have helped over the years. Apart from John I should single out Trevor Brotherton, Jo Busby, Andrew Sully, Kev Merridew, Mark Denton and, in more recent years, the Harpenden and Wheathampstead District SASU, Andrew Dadswell and Jackie Agg.

The Cubs greatly enjoy participating, their parents seem to also, the elderly rave about it (I have an extraordinary pile of “thank you” cards), the Mayors are always enthusiastic and usually come along to support on the Saturday, often helping with the sorting – and I get to be a postman. It’s a win-win-win.