

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

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This is a service provided free to the elderly of Harpenden. Their local Christmas cards are collected and delivered by the Cubs. It began in 1984 as a project for my own Pack, 9th Harpenden Everest. Each Cub collected cards from elderly people known to them, and those on a list provided by St Mary's Church adjacent to our HQ. In addition, a post-box was placed at a residential home in the centre of the town. Amongst those present on the first occasion was John Currie, father of two of the Cubs. He has been crucial ever since, seeking out new streets, maintaining the list of rounds and helping with the sorting, two Saturdays before Christmas. Deliveries are the next day. The highest number of cards was 4348 (in 1997).



In 2002 I became District Commissioner and the service transferred in 2003 to a District footing, the sorting operation moving to the 10th's HQ. Post boxes were placed in most residential homes and Cubs still collected cards from elderly relatives, friends and neighbours. 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.

Deliveries begin at 9.30. By 1pm everybody is expected to have finished and all are invited for drinks and mince pies. In the afternoon what, for me, is the best part starts: delivering the undeliverable. We pride ourselves in getting every card to its correct destination and only rarely do we fail. The telephone directory helps solve some of the problems, but after that it's on to the street and down to some serious detective work. Here is just one example. 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. 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. Sometimes we get lucky, sometimes the hunt takes longer!

Notable occurrences include the following.

- In 1992 parents were invited to include their own cards at 10p each to raise money for the Scout Association's "Promise Appeal".
- 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.
- In 2012 we proved that we were proper postmen: one of the Cubs got bitten by a dog. 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 delivery day 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. Almost always the local newspapers publish a report. 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 and parents greatly enjoy participating, the elderly rave about it, the Mayors come along to support, often helping with the sorting – and I get to be a postman. It's a win-win-win.