

# 'Hen and Chickens'

from *The Philatelic Year*  
by the National Museum

PERHAPS the most exciting acquisition during 1991 was an example of the so-called 'Hen and Chickens' or centre-cycle, used to deliver packets and parcels in the 1880s. It was transferred to the Museum from the public relations unit of London and South East from a store in Lewes.

The 'hen and chickens' or 'hen and chicks' is so-called because of its appearance. Between four small wheels is one large wheel which is connected by a crank and steering handle which is connected by a Hooke's joint to the axles of the four small wheels. A flexible frame consisting of two jointed fork bars surround the main wheel and pivot on the crank axle. As the frame is composed of two forks jointed near the crank, the front or back wheels may be lifted off the ground, or may be set so that all the wheels run. Brackets above the small wheels supported a large basket at each end for carrying correspondence and packets and over 50lb in weight could be carried without making the machine run heavier. The machine was employed to cope with the increased loads which rural postmen were called upon to carry following the introduction of the parcel post in 1883.

This centre-cycle had been invented and patented by Edward Burstow, a well-known Horsham architect. It was exhibited in May

The 'Hen and Chickens' or, more accurately, the centre-cycle was the most splendid of the Museum's acquisitions during 1991. It was used during the 1880s to deliver parcels.



Above: Maurice Williams (Chairman, Australia Post) with the NPM 'Hen and Chickens'

1882 at the Westminster Aquarium, London (now replaced by Central Hall) and at other exhibitions. As a first experiment some six cycles were used by the postmen and messengers of Horsham from October 1882, and they were returned daily to Burstow's yard for any necessary repairs, oiling and storage. In November of the same year it was demonstrated at the National Postal Congress being held in Eastbourne.

However, the Head Postmaster of Coventry (the centre of cycle manufacture) was dismissive of the Horsham initiative and, despite being used successfully for some time in Horsham and the surrounding rural area, the experiment was allowed to cease.

One machine was used by a boy messenger and the other postmen on rural posts to Faygate, Itchingfield, Slinfold, Warnham and Rusper. The boy messenger was Albert Chitty and he and the other postmen wrote a letter in November 1883 to Edward Burstow testifying to their great satisfaction with the machines. They had "no hesitation in saying the Centre-Cycle is vastly superior in every respect to any other wheel machine, running exceedingly easy when heavily loaded, and the best yet invented, having most successfully answered all the requirements for our purposes."



Below: 'Hen and Chickens' in use at Horsham in 1882

