

Did you notice?

A column for the curious stroller

Séamus Cannon

19. Sir John Lees, Postmaster General

The previous column on post boxes prompted recollection of a local family's association with the Irish postal service in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Two generations of the Lees family acted as Postmasters General and were implicated in a financial scandal involving fraud and embezzlement on a grand scale during their stewardship.



John Lees was born in Scotland in 1737 and came to Ireland in 1767 as secretary to the Viceroy. He was appointed Secretary to the Irish Post Office in 1774 where he was instrumental in organising a postal coach service. He built Blackrock House where his holding extended as far as the site of the Martello Tower at Seapoint. He was created Baronet of Blackrock in 1804. On his death in 1811 he left a very considerable estate to his sons, variously reported as £250,000 and £100,000, remarkable for a man whose salary was £432 per annum! In 1831, a pamphlet was published by P.C. O'Neill, a former Post Office clerk, which accused John Lees of having misappropriated Post Office funds. O'Neill also drew attention to the appointment of John's fourth son Edward as joint Secretary of the Post Office with his father at the age of 18 years! His father was in poor health at the time and his appointment meant that Edward was effectively the acting Secretary. In 1809 Edward was called to account and it emerged that he was in sole control of the entire business of Post Office expenditure. O'Neill's account gave examples of misappropriation, including allowances to the Lees for which they were not accountable. In 1807 alone, the Post Office had lost £50,020. Members of the Lees family and friends received pensions and salaries. The free post for charitable organisations was abused by the reverend Sir Harcourt Lees, brother of Edward and a very active political pamphleteer.

Various parliamentary reports detailed extensive fraud and abuses; embezzlement of private property to 'incredible amounts'; unwarrantable extravagance and waste of public money; the absence of any audit of the Post Office between its foundation in 1774 and 1810. The private houses of officials were furnished at the state's expense including, on one occasion, repair of Lees' piano!

In 1831, Edward Lees, following an inquiry, and despite his protests, was transferred to Edinburgh to manage the Scottish postal system. He died in 1866.

Father and son had managed the Irish Post Office for two generations and accumulated huge fortunes for themselves and their families through fraud and embezzlement. Auditors were outwitted and records destroyed. And they seem to have got away with it! John Lees was buried in Monkstown and is commemorated by a plaque in the Church of Ireland parish church.