

# The King's and Queen's Messenger passport

## A look at Britain's most mysterious passport

by Tom Topol

**King's and Queen's Messenger passports are extremely rare. No, they're not a bogus or fantasy travel document, and yes, they're a real thing! Read on for some history about this most unusual travel document.**

The Corps of Queen's Messengers are couriers employed by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). They hand-carry secret and important documents to British embassies and consulates around the world. Many Messengers are retired army personnel. Messengers generally travel in plain clothes in business class on scheduled airlines, carrying an official case from which they must not be separated – it may even be chained to their wrist.

The safe passage of diplomatic baggage is guaranteed by the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and for reasons of state secrecy the diplomatic bag does not go through normal airport baggage checks and must not be opened, x-rayed, weighed, or otherwise investigated by customs, airline security staff, or anyone else for that matter. The bag is closed with a tamper-proof seal and has its own diplomatic passport. However, these special rules do not cover the Messenger and the Messenger's personal luggage, so although the diplomatic bag, covered by the passport, is not checked, the Messenger and the Messenger's own luggage go through standard security screening.

### History

With the first record of Royal Messengers dating back to 1199 in the reign of King John, their trials and tribulations throughout the ages are a magnificent story to tell. The first recorded King's Messenger was John Norman, who was appointed in 1485 by King Richard III to hand-deliver secret documents for his monarch. During his exile, Charles II appointed four trusted men to convey messages to royalist forces in England. As a sign of their authority, the King broke four silver greyhounds from a bowl familiar to royal courtiers and gave one to each man. A silver greyhound thus became the symbol of the service. On formal occasions, the Queen's Messengers (QMs) wear this badge attached

to a ribbon and on less formal occasions many Messengers wear ties with a discreet greyhound pattern while working.

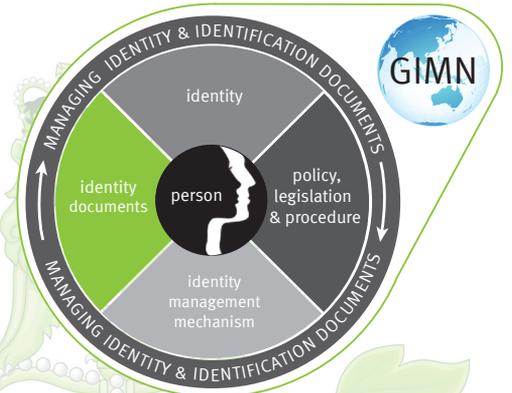
#### Figure 1:

*A William IV period King's Messenger Badge, a silver gilt and enamel-crowned badge with painted coat of arms encased in glass within 'Honi soit qui mal y pense' garter, silver-gilt backplate with silver greyhound pendant and blue silk neck cravat.*

The Messenger role was particularly hazardous from 1795. With France at war with most of Europe, including England, the Messenger's role became not only important but also dangerous. A Messenger traveling through France was highly vulnerable. Andrew Basilico was a Messenger sent to Europe to deliver a package. This involved travelling through France. With the threat of the Messenger being caught, the dispatch was written on a small corner of a sheet of paper. Basilico was caught and the French, on opening the package, only found bundles of plain paper. Basilico, knowing he was about to be caught, had eaten the corner of the dispatch. He was later exchanged for a French General.<sup>[1]</sup>

Another interesting tale concerns a Messenger who was to escort a prisoner back to London. He ended up taking the prisoner home. His wife dutifully cooked a meal for the three of them. With no guards, the husband and wife were obviously taking a considerable risk and slept with a loaded pistol – not the sort of work you would volunteer to take home today! The prisoner is likely to have been a gentleman or officer rather than your usual rogue.

At the National Archives, one can also find lists of the dates of appointment, deaths, pensions received, the number of years' service and names of those who died



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**Figure 2:**  
A King's and a Queen's Messenger passport.

in service. For example, Andrew Basilico was appointed on 5 October 1782 and retired after 31 years' service on 7 December 1813 with a pension of £266 13s 4d (£18,300 today). He died on 28 August 1824 leaving his wife a pension of £75 (£5,160 today).

### Famous Messengers

A Queen's or King's Messenger passport is the 'Blue Mauritius' for passport collectors. Some years ago, I was able to acquire an excellent King's Messenger passport from 1941 after negotiating with family members for over two years! These passports are extremely rare, and I have seen only this one in more than fifteen years of research and collecting old passports.

One of these King's Messengers was Paul Simpson. On 2 August 1947 he was on Flight CS59 from Buenos Aires to Santiago carrying diplomatic mail, when the British South American Airways flight disappeared in a snowstorm, with its 11 occupants. The Lancaster airplane, 'Star Dust', was found 53 years later in 2000. Among the grisly remains scattered on the glacier over a radius of more than a mile were three human torsos, a foot in an ankle boot and a hand with fingers outstretched. They were in a remarkable state of preservation; freeze-dried by icy winds, the remains had not suffered bacteriological decay. In Britain, the news led to a hunt for surviving relatives.

The most famous recent King's Messenger was Sir Park Goff, who died in 1939. He was appointed honorary Messenger at the beginning of the First World War, and between 1914 and 1916 he crossed the Channel 80 times, the North Sea 30 times, the Mediterranean 22 times, the Black Sea four times, and the Caspian twice. Of those 730 days, he was at home only 22!

### Modern-day Messengers

In 1995, a Parliamentary question put the number at 27. Modern communications have diminished the role of the QMs, but as original documents still need to be conveyed between countries by 'safe-hand', their function remains valuable. A Freedom of Information request to the FCO shows that the approved number of QMs is 19, with this not having changed within ten years as of April 2015. The current number in service as of this date is 18, with 16 of these being employed full-time and two part-time. The departmental headcount is 19.

Here are some details of parliamentary questions from 2015 and 2005:

- *How many QMs are currently employed by the FCO, and how has this number changed over the last ten years?*

QMs are employed through open and fair competition under Civil Service guidelines. The approved headcount for QMs is 19, which has not changed for the past ten years. At any point, the actual number may change.

- *What is the salary of a QM?*

The salary is based on that of a C4 officer, (salary band £25,200 - £33,200).

- *What are the costs of the QM Corps in the latest fiscal year?*

The cost of QMs in the latest available fiscal year is £592,500.

- *What requirements are there to qualify as a QM?*

The essential skills incorporate the requirements of a C4 Officer, which include:

- ability to work independently or as part of a team;



**Figure 3:**  
Paul Simpson's King's Messenger passport from 1941.

- willingness to work overseas for extended periods;
  - flexibility to travel at short notice (sometimes long and arduous journeys);
  - understanding of the complexities of escorting, or transportation of, Protectively Marked Material or sensitive materials;
  - ability to think quickly on your feet;
  - ability to remain calm under pressure (occasionally extreme pressure).
- *What are the current ages and genders of the QMs?*  
All QMs are male with an age range of 40-70.
  - *What training do QMs receive and are they ever armed?*

QMs receive the core training of a C4 Officer, induction, mentoring, security, IT and SAFE training. The last part of the request can neither be confirmed nor denied.

- *What is the job description of a QM?*

The supervision, safe custody, and carriage of classified material between the FCO London and UK overseas missions, and between missions. The role involves a large amount of travel and long periods away from the UK, often in difficult areas and areas of extreme weather. The role deals with varying levels of authority in many different countries, calling for a strong and independent nature that is able to diffuse confrontational situations to protect the material carried.

- *Have QMs died within service, as known in modern records?*

No.

*Author's remark: Three Silver Greyhounds have lost their lives since 1945 and all in air crashes. One of those killed was Paul Simpson (see above).*

In an older request on the topic from 1995, Lord Fanshawe of Richmond asked Her Majesty's Government: What is the total number of staff employed in the Queen's Messenger Service; the cost of Messengers travelling overseas and administering staff in the United Kingdom; the total cost as a percentage of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Vote; and will they give an assurance that there are no plans to replace the service with a secure fax or similar system?

Answer from 23 June 1995 by Baroness Chalker of Wallasey:

The balance of Queen's Messengers is currently 27, including a superintendent and two Messenger escorts. The 1995/6 estimate for the cost of travel overseas is £2.25 million. Staff administration costs for 1995/6 are estimated to be approximately £780,600. The total cost of the service as a percentage of the 1995/6 FCO vote is 0.25%. The Cabinet Office Protective Security Review of 1993, covering security policy and practices, has prompted the FCO to look at how dispatch of mail to overseas posts is carried out. As part of this exercise, the FCO is also looking at the future structure of the Queen's Messenger Service.

So, we can see that the total cost of the Queen's Messenger Service went down from £780,600 in 2005 to £592,500 in 2015: a significant reduction of 24%.

On 9 October 2017, the FCO held an event to recognise the historical dedication of our current and retired QMs. With a history dating back 900 years, from medieval times to today's digital age, the QMs continue to serve a critical role: delivering information around the world with their safe hands. During the event, the FCO Services Chief Executive, Danny Payne, said: "Discretion, courage and determination are attributes that have served Royal Messengers throughout the ages, not to mention a bit of quick thinking. It is these steadfast, resilient traits that are required in today's contingent of Queen's Messengers racing across time zones and travelling 250,000 miles each per year. Today they remain critical to our diplomatic efforts."<sup>[2]</sup>



#### References

- 1 <https://history.blog.gov.uk/2014/03/25/the-silver-greyhound-the-messenger-service/>
- 2 <https://www.fcosservices.gov.uk/news-and-events/news/horse-plane-celebrating-queens-messengers/>

*Photographs from the author's archive*  
<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

