

Bicycle Mail Delivery in Braunschweig

by Siegmur Peschke (2002)

One hundred years ago, bicycles were a technological innovation. For a time, they disappeared from delivery service, but today they are once again indispensable in postal delivery. In Braunschweig, 129 out of 164 mail carriers currently use a service bicycle.

The first uses of bicycles as a means of transport at the Braunschweig post office date back to the turn of the century. At that time, however, they were not used for urban mail delivery, but rather for emptying mailboxes and for rural mail routes. The chronicle of the Braunschweig post office notes that the then head of the post office, Director Kulmann, personally accompanied rural mail carriers on their trial rides. These journeys must have been quite adventurous, as there were neither paved roads nor bicycle paths.

In the Beginning Was the Tricycle

Tricycles were the first vehicles used by the Braunschweig postal service for telegram and express deliveries, as well as for emptying mailboxes. Only two years later, when bicycles were needed for express and rural delivery, they were replaced by two-wheeled bicycles. This change was not welcomed by rural mail carriers, as they had to give up their horses and wagons and lost a valuable source of additional income. Without horse-drawn mail wagons, they could no longer transport passengers and earn extra money.



Rural mail carriers of the Braunschweig post office around 1925 before departing for delivery. In the background are parcel carts for horse-drawn operation. Photo: Archives Peschke

Technical Details

There were precise ideas about the bicycles used for mail delivery. In 1899, Senior Postal Directorate Secretary Klär wrote about the “use of the bicycle in postal and telegraph services”:

“The modern bicycle consists of 1,200 parts. The main components are the frame, the saddle, the front and rear wheels, the chain, and the ball bearings. The frame, to which all other parts of the vehicle are attached, must be made from seamless steel tubing, which should only be sourced from reliable rolling mills; otherwise, durability cannot be guaranteed. The practical usefulness of the bicycle was achieved through pneumatic rubber tires, the invention of which is attributed to the British veterinarian Dunlop of Dublin.”

Even at that time, bicycles already featured the chain drive still in use today, as well as machines in which the drive was transmitted by a shaft running through the lower frame tube, transferring power from the crankshaft to the rear axle.



Telegram delivery workers in the courtyard of the Braunschweig post office. Photo: Archives Peschke

However, it was not only the technology and use of the bicycle that were regulated. Training the personnel was also essential. The Imperial Post Office in Berlin issued "Regulations for the Use and Maintenance of Postal Bicycles." It stated:

"To protect against the hardships of weather, riders were equipped with 'cloaks' (pelerines) made of waterproof material and gaiters made of canvas." The Imperial Post Office also recommended that "those junior officials who have only recently learned to ride a bicycle should be gradually introduced to regular service over a period of one to two months, in order to avoid excessive strain on the heart, especially in the first weeks. It is necessary to give the heart muscle time to adjust to the increased workload."

On June 23, 1999, the *Braunschweiger Zeitung*, in its column "News from Yesterday," recalled an accident that had occurred 100 years earlier at the Hagenmarkt. An assistant postal worker collided with a woman while riding a transport tricycle, causing her injury. The dangers have remained until today: mail carriers who deliver by bicycle are constantly exposed to risks in traffic, especially since they carry heavy loads. In the past year, 19 accidents involving bicycle mail carriers occurred in the Braunschweig city area, some resulting in serious physical injury. In many cases, weather conditions such as ice and snow were to blame.
