



EP.E80 Comprehension: Non-Fiction Set 12

GL ASSESSMENT / CSSE 11+ Entrance English (GL Assessment / CSSE style) · Calculators not allowed ·
about 48 minutes

Total Marks

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Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / ____

Answer ALL questions. Show all your working.

Mail Rail: The Railway Beneath London's Streets

Original non-fiction text written for Revision Library.

For most of the twentieth century, hidden more than twenty metres below the busy streets of central London, a secret railway carried millions of letters and parcels every single day. There were no passengers, no windows, and no daylight: only small, driverless electric trains rattling through narrow tunnels in the dark.

The Post Office Railway, later nicknamed Mail Rail, opened in 1927 after almost twenty years of planning and construction. Engineers had grown frustrated watching horse-drawn carts and delivery vans crawl through London's ever-worsening traffic, so they proposed something radical: a miniature underground railway built purely to move post, running six and a half miles between Paddington in the west and Whitechapel in the east.

The trains themselves were barely large enough for a person to sit inside comfortably, which was exactly the point; they were never designed to carry passengers, only mailbags. At its busiest, Mail Rail moved around four million letters a day, gliding silently beneath some of London's most famous streets while the traffic above crawled along, entirely unaware of what lay beneath.

"People are always astonished to learn how long it operated," explains Dr Isla Ferguson, a transport historian who has studied the railway for over a decade. "For seventy-six years, Mail Rail quietly kept the city's post moving, through the Second World War, through strikes, through decades of change on the streets above. Almost nobody who used the postal service ever gave it a single thought."

Despite its long service, Mail Rail was finally closed in 2003. Royal Mail decided that transporting post by road had become considerably cheaper than maintaining a private underground railway, its stations, and its ageing fleet of trains. For over a decade afterwards, the tunnels sat silent and unused, visited only occasionally by engineers checking that the structure remained safe.

In 2017, however, a short section of Mail Rail reopened to the public for the first time in its history, as part of a new postal museum built above one of its old depots. Visitors can now ride a small train through part of the original tunnel network, experiencing, in miniature, the same dark, narrow passageway that once carried the nation's letters. Some historians argue that the railway should never have closed at all, pointing out that London's road traffic has only grown worse since 2003; others maintain that reopening even a short stretch as a visitor attraction was a fitting way to preserve a genuinely remarkable piece of engineering history.

1 According to paragraph 1, roughly how far below London's streets was the railway built?

(Total for Question 1 is 1 mark)

2 Find and copy the phrase from paragraph 1 that shows the trains had no crew driving them.

(Total for Question 2 is 1 mark)

3 Give the meaning of each of the following words as they are used in the passage.

(a) 'frustrated' (paragraph 2) (1)

(b) 'gliding' (paragraph 3) (1)

(c) 'ageing' (paragraph 5) (1)

(d) 'preserve' (paragraph 6) (1)

(Total for Question 3 is 4 marks)

4 In what year did the Post Office Railway open?

(Total for Question 4 is 1 mark)

5 How many miles did the railway run, and between which two places?

(Total for Question 5 is 2 marks)

6 Explain why, according to paragraph 2, engineers proposed building the railway.

(Total for Question 6 is 2 marks)

7 Why, according to paragraph 3, were the trains 'barely large enough for a person to sit inside comfortably'?

(Total for Question 7 is 1 mark)

8 Which word class best describes 'silently' as it is used in the phrase 'gliding silently beneath some of London's most famous streets' (paragraph 3)?

(a) Choose the correct word class.

(1)

- ☐ A) Noun
- ☐ B) Adjective
- ☐ C) Adverb
- ☐ D) Preposition

(Total for Question 8 is 1 mark)

9 Look at paragraph 3: 'which was exactly the point; they were never designed to carry passengers, only mailbags.' Explain the function of the semicolon in this sentence.

(Total for Question 9 is 2 marks)

10 According to paragraph 3, roughly how many letters a day did Mail Rail move at its busiest?

(Total for Question 10 is 1 mark)

- 11** Explain the effect of the writer's description in paragraph 3: the trains 'gliding silently' while the traffic above 'crawled along, entirely unaware of what lay beneath'.

(Total for Question 11 is 3 marks)

- 12** Explain the effect of the writer including a direct quotation from Dr Isla Ferguson in paragraph 4.

(Total for Question 12 is 3 marks)

- 13** According to paragraph 4, name two events or periods during which Mail Rail continued operating.

(Total for Question 13 is 2 marks)

- 14** In what year was Mail Rail finally closed?

(Total for Question 14 is 1 mark)

- 15** Explain, according to paragraph 5, why Royal Mail decided to close Mail Rail.

(Total for Question 15 is 2 marks)

16 Look at paragraph 5: 'For over a decade afterwards, the tunnels sat silent and unused, visited only occasionally by engineers checking that the structure remained safe.' Is this a simple, compound or complex sentence?

(a) Choose the correct sentence type.

(1)

- ☐ A) Simple
- ☐ B) Compound
- ☐ C) Complex
- ☐ D) Minor

(Total for Question 16 is 1 mark)

17 In what year did part of Mail Rail reopen to the public?

(Total for Question 17 is 1 mark)

18 Look at paragraph 6. Why might visiting the reopened section give visitors a genuine sense of what the original railway was like?

(Total for Question 18 is 2 marks)

19 How does the writer structure the final paragraph of the passage to present a balanced view of Mail Rail's closure and reopening? Refer to the order of ideas in your answer.

(Total for Question 19 is 3 marks)

20 Identify the connective used in paragraph 6 to introduce the reopening of Mail Rail after the closure described in paragraph 5, and explain its effect.

(Total for Question 20 is 2 marks)

- 21** What is the writer's main purpose in this article, and how do the facts, dates and quotations used throughout help to achieve it?

(Total for Question 21 is 4 marks)

- 22** Using evidence from across the whole article, explain what impression the writer creates of Mail Rail's importance and legacy.

(Total for Question 22 is 3 marks)

- 23** Explain one way in which the writer's chronological structure, moving from the railway's opening in 1927 to its closure in 2003 and its reopening in 2017, helps the reader understand the article.

(Total for Question 23 is 2 marks)

- 24** 'Mail Rail should never have closed.' Using evidence from the whole article, explain to what extent you agree, referring to both viewpoints given in the final paragraph.

(Total for Question 24 is 4 marks)

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Question 1

- **B1** More than twenty metres
- **Answer: More than twenty metres below the streets.**

Question 2

- **B1** driverless electric trains
- **Answer: driverless electric trains**

Question 3

- (a) **B1** Meaning close to 'annoyed or impatient because of being unable to change or improve a situation'
- **(a) Answer: annoyed and impatient at being unable to improve a situation**
- (b) **B1** Meaning close to 'moving smoothly and quietly, without effort'
- **(b) Answer: moving smoothly and quietly, without effort**
- (c) **B1** Meaning close to 'growing old, becoming worn through age'
- **(c) Answer: growing old and becoming worn through age**
- (d) **B1** Meaning close to 'to keep something safe from harm, decay or loss'
- **(d) Answer: to keep something safe from harm, decay or loss**

Question 4

- **B1** 1927
- **Answer: 1927.**

Question 5

- **B1** Six and a half miles
- **B1** Between Paddington and Whitechapel
- **Answer: Six and a half miles, between Paddington and Whitechapel.**

Question 6

- **B1** They were frustrated by horse-drawn carts and delivery vans crawling through London's worsening traffic
- **B1** They proposed a miniature underground railway built purely to move post, avoiding the traffic problem
- **Answer: Engineers were frustrated by delivery vans and carts crawling through London's worsening traffic, so they proposed a miniature underground railway built purely to move post, avoiding the traffic entirely.**

Question 7

- **B1** Because the trains were built only to carry mailbags/post, not passengers
- **Answer: Because the trains were built only to carry mailbags, not passengers.**

Question 8

- (a) **B1** C
- **(a) Answer: C) Adverb**

Question 9

- **B1** Identifies that the semicolon links two closely related independent clauses (each of which could stand alone as a sentence)
- **B1** Explains that the second clause develops or explains the idea introduced in the first, without needing a conjunction
- **Answer: The semicolon links two closely related independent clauses, without a conjunction; the second clause explains and develops the idea introduced in the first.**

Question 10

- **B1** Around four million
- **Answer: Around four million.**

Question 11

- **B1** Identifies the contrast between the smooth, silent movement below ground and the slow, unaware traffic above
- **B1** Explains that 'gliding silently' suggests the railway's quiet efficiency
- **B1** Explains that 'entirely unaware' emphasises how completely hidden and unnoticed this remarkable system was, adding a sense of wonder
- **Answer: The contrast between the trains 'gliding silently' below and the traffic that 'crawled along, entirely unaware' above emphasises the railway's quiet efficiency, and shows how completely hidden and unnoticed this remarkable system was, adding a sense of wonder for the reader.**

Question 12

- **B1** Adds authority/credibility, since she is an expert (a transport historian) who has studied the railway closely
- **B1** Makes the information feel more personal and engaging for the reader than a plain statement of fact
- **B1** The specific detail within the quotation ('seventy-six years') emphasises how impressively long the railway operated, making the claim feel more vivid and convincing
- **Answer: Including an expert's direct words makes the information more credible, since Dr Ferguson speaks from years of research into the railway; her specific detail about 'seventy-six years' of service also makes the achievement feel more vivid and impressive to the reader.**

Question 13

- **B1** The Second World War
- **B1** Strikes (or 'decades of change on the streets above')
- **Answer: The Second World War, and periods of strikes.**

Question 14

- **B1** 2003
- **Answer: 2003.**

Question 15

- **B1** Transporting post by road had become cheaper than maintaining the underground railway
- **B1** This included the cost of maintaining the stations and the ageing fleet of trains
- **Answer: Royal Mail decided that transporting post by road had become considerably cheaper than maintaining the underground railway, its stations and its ageing fleet of trains.**

Question 16

- (a) **B1** C
- (a) **Answer: C) Complex**

Question 17

- **B1** 2017
- **Answer: 2017.**

Question 18

- **B1** Visitors ride through part of the original tunnel network, not a copy or model
- **B1** They experience 'in miniature' the same dark, narrow passageway that carried the nation's letters, giving a direct, authentic connection to the past
- **Answer: Visitors ride through part of the actual original tunnel network, experiencing 'in miniature' the same dark, narrow passageway that once carried the post, giving them a direct and authentic connection to the past.**

Question 19

- **B1** Identifies that the paragraph opens with positive/celebratory content (the museum, the chance to ride a train through the tunnels)
- **B1** Identifies that this is followed by two opposing expert viewpoints: some historians think it should never have closed, others feel reopening a short stretch was fitting
- **B1** Explains the effect, e.g. presenting both viewpoints one after another allows the reader to weigh up the debate for themselves, giving the article a fair, balanced conclusion
- **Answer: The paragraph opens by describing the new museum and the chance to ride through the original tunnels, then sets out two opposing expert viewpoints: that the railway should never have closed, and that reopening a short stretch was a fitting solution. Presenting both views one after another allows the reader to weigh up the debate for themselves, giving the article a fair, balanced conclusion.**

Question 20

- **B1** Identifies the connective 'however'
- **B1** Explains its effect, e.g. it signals a contrast between the railway's closure and the surprising, more positive news of its later reopening
- **Answer: The connective is 'however'. It signals a contrast between the railway's closure in paragraph 5 and the more positive, surprising news of its later reopening.**

Question 21

- **Level 1** (1): Basic identification of purpose (e.g. to inform), with little or no use of evidence.
- **Level 2** (2-3): Clear identification of purpose with relevant supporting evidence from the text.
- **Level 3** (4): Well-evidenced explanation of purpose, showing how specific facts, dates and quotations build the writer's case across the whole article.
- **Indicative content:**
 - Purpose is to inform readers about Mail Rail's history, and to convey admiration for a remarkable, largely forgotten piece of engineering
 - Precise dates (1927, 2003, 2017) and figures (six and a half miles, four million letters a day) give the article factual authority
 - The historical detail (built to escape traffic, survived the Second World War) creates a sense of scale and achievement
 - The expert quotation from Dr Isla Ferguson adds credibility and a human perspective to the historical facts

Question 22

- **B1** Identifies that the writer presents Mail Rail as a genuinely impressive feat of engineering, largely unnoticed by the public it served
- **B1** Supports this with reference to specific detail, e.g. it moved around four million letters a day for seventy-six years, 'almost nobody... ever gave it a single thought'
- **B1** Explains that the closing paragraph, describing the museum and the ongoing debate about its closure, suggests the railway's legacy is still valued and discussed today
- **Answer: The writer creates the impression that Mail Rail was a genuinely impressive feat of engineering that operated almost invisibly, moving around four million letters a day for seventy-six years while 'almost nobody... ever gave it a single thought'. The final paragraph, describing the museum and the ongoing debate about its closure, suggests its legacy is still valued and discussed today.**

Question 23

- **B1** Identifies that the chronological structure lets the reader follow the railway's whole story in a clear, logical order
- **B1** Explains the effect, e.g. it builds towards the final debate about whether the closure was the right decision, which only makes sense once the reader understands the full history
- **Answer: The chronological structure lets the reader follow the railway's whole story, from its opening to its closure and reopening, in a clear, logical order. This builds towards the final debate about whether the closure was right, which only makes full sense once the reader understands the complete history.**

Question 24

- **Level 1** (1-2): States a viewpoint with little or no justification; minimal or no textual reference.
- **Level 2** (3): Gives a clear opinion supported by relevant reference to at least one viewpoint from the text.
- **Level 3** (4): Gives a well-reasoned, developed opinion that engages with both viewpoints from paragraph 6, supported by precise textual evidence.
- **Indicative content:**
 - Case for agreeing: London's road traffic has 'only grown worse since 2003', suggesting the underground railway is needed more than ever
 - Case for disagreeing: Royal Mail found road transport 'considerably cheaper', and the reopened section already preserves the railway's history for visitors
 - Either viewpoint is acceptable if supported by precise evidence from the text
 - Reward answers that weigh the historical/practical value of the railway against the financial reality described in paragraph 5