

The Victorian Era of British Stamps



There are three main focal points in the history and development of British postage stamps in the 19th century. The first is obviously in 1840 when the world's first adhesive postage stamps were introduced – the Penny Black and the Twopenny Blue. The second important turning point is the introduction of perforations in the early 1850s and the consequent changeover to letterpress-printed stamps, at least for all the higher values. This resulted in a proliferation of designs with little regard to uniformity; thus the third crucial period is the creation of a unified series of stamps in the 1880s, all printed letterpress, which eventually resulted in the designs of the so-called 'Jubilee' issue. All stamps of the period were definitives, no commemoratives being issued until 1924.

A lot has been written about the detail of these stamps, so much in fact that the overall story has become obscured.

A System Ripe for Reform

Before 1840 postage rates were very high and based upon the distance the letter travelled. If it consisted of more than one sheet then the cost doubled or tripled. On the other hand there were a large number of anomalies. Mail to and from members of parliament (both Commons and Lords) was carried free up to a certain number and there were many local postal systems costing one penny for letters posted and delivered within that area. Many detailed charges could be added and so the system was complex, open to abuse and ripe for reform. The postal service was also, in effect, a source of considerable revenue to the government.



Rowland Hill, portrait by Mary Pearson



Treasury Competition entry from James Chalmers. Phillips Collection

Rowland Hill suggested in 1837 that the anomalies and abuses be eliminated and that postal charges be reduced to 1d. Letters would be charged by weight rather than distance and prepaid rather than by the recipient. Methods of prepayment suggested included stamped covers and most famously "a bit of paper just large enough to bear the stamp, and covered at the back with a glutinous wash" which became the adhesive postage label or stamp. After a long cam-

paign these proposals were accepted and became law in August 1839.

To implement them a public competition was organised by the Treasury (the governing body of the Post Office) asking the public for ideas. Some 2,600 letters were received, a few with examples of the method of prepayment proposed, some sent anonymously. These are now known as Treasury Competition entries or essays, though many so-called were never submitted to the competition. Hill's report on the competition used some of the suggestions submitted to reiterate his ideas for prepayment, the "stamps" to be in four forms: lettersheets, envelopes, adhesive labels and stationery handed in by the public to be stamped to order. The last was not to be introduced immediately due to difficulties with the die.

On 5 December 1839 postage rates were initially reduced to a uniform 4d and payment by weight was introduced. This was swiftly followed on 10 January 1840 by a further reduction to 1d for the first half ounce with all free franking (including that of Queen Victoria) being abolished.

The First "Stamps"

At this period the term "stamp" could refer to any printed or impressed form of prepayment, not merely adhesive postage labels. The first "stamps" to come into service were prepaid stationery envelopes for use by Members of Parliament whose free franking privilege had been abolished. This occurred on 16 January 1840 when Parliament reassembled.



*2d Mulready envelope used to Malta with five 2d blues.
Phillips Collection*

For the general public a design was prepared by William Mulready RA for the lettersheets ("covers") and envelopes. It showed a central Britannia bringing the benefits of cheap postage to people at home and abroad. This was engraved by John Thompson and printed in 1d and 2d versions for both types of stationery by William Clowes in Blackfriars, London on John Dickinson's security paper with silk threads. When the design appeared in May it was immediately derided and the subject of a large number of caricatures, so much so that it had to be withdrawn.



More successful was the label, the world's first adhesive postage stamp. It was based upon an engraving drawn upon the City medal by William Wyon featuring the head of a young Queen Victoria. Wyon was the finest medallist of his time and the head of Victoria was chosen as this, and expensive engraving, made forgery more difficult. The die was engraved by Charles and Frederick Heath during January

and February 1840 with a security background of engine-turned engraving. Space for corner ornaments and the value were added and a printing plate was made by rolling the image from the die 240 times (240 pennies making £1). Then individual pairs of letters were punched in on the plate making each stamp different, to prevent re-use.

Printing, in recess (or intaglio), on watermarked paper by Perkins, Bacon & Petch in Fleet Street began in mid April. Once dry the sheets were gummed. The Penny Black (and the Mulready stationery) went on sale in London on 1 May 1840, becoming valid for postage on 6 May. Immediately afterwards the 2d label (the Twopenny Blue) also became available. By the end of January 1841 some 11 plates had been used for the Penny Black from which over 68 million stamps were printed. Two plates for the Twopenny Blue printed almost 6½ million stamps.



Printing the Penny Black at Perkins Bacon & Petch

A canceller in the form of a Maltese Cross was used to prevent the labels being cleaned and re-used. On a black stamp this meant a red cancelling ink but it was found that this could be removed and so exhaustive trials took place with both printing and cancelling inks to prevent this. It resulted in the penny stamp changing from black to red-brown in colour and the cancelling ink from red to black. Essentially the same design, the Penny Red, was to last in various formats and shades from February 1841 until 1879.

The responsibility for the production of all the first “stamps” lay with the Stamps & Taxes Office, later known as the Inland Revenue, and there it remained for the entire Victorian era.

Perforations and Letterpress Printing

From the outset the controlling factors in production were first security, but also cost. That first consideration introduced intaglio or recess printing; the latter brought about its replacement by letterpress or surface-printing.

The success of the engraved 1d and 2d stamps soon led to a demand for higher values, especially for overseas mail or heavier packets. For security reasons these were produced by the Inland Revenue at Somerset House and from 1847 were printed in embossed designs based on a head die by Wyon. Each stamp was impressed individually and so spacing was irregular in the sheets. With the recess printing of the lower values precise spacing was also a problem as the paper was wetted during the printing process. When the paper dried it shrank. As long as the stamps were cut manually

from the sheet this did not matter, but with the introduction of mechanical separation in the form of perforations it meant that such stamps could not be properly centred.

Perforating sheets of stamps so that they could be separated easily was the invention of Henry Archer and trials took place from 1848. His patents were eventually bought by the government and officially perforated stamps went on sale from 1854. The problems with irregular spacing meant that individually embossed stamps were no longer possible. These higher value



Joubert de la Ferté and the first letterpress stamp

stamps were replaced from 1855 onwards with stamps printed letterpress (a dry printing process) by De La Rue Ltd who had printed similar draft or receipt labels for the Inland Revenue two years before. Engraving was by J F Joubert de la Ferté. Despite the problems with variations in shrinkage in the recess-printed low values these continued to be printed by this method by Perkins, Bacon.

From 1855 all stamps with a higher value than 2d were printed letterpress by De La Rue, with new values up to £5 being introduced as required. There were variations in the detail of the designs for each value and the watermarked paper, but there was no overall consistency or unity.

A Unified Series

By the 1870s the volume of mail had increased considerably and with it the demand for adhesive labels. Printing engraved stamps was slower, more expensive and generally more trouble than by letterpress, particularly with regard to perforating.



De La Rue printing premises at Bunhill Row, London E.C. in 1855

In 1879 firms were asked to tender for the low-value stamp contract with printing now to be in letterpress. Those invited included Perkins, Bacon and De La Rue. With the latter's 25 years' experience of printing postage stamps in letterpress it is not surprising that they were awarded the contract. Now (1880), for the first time since the 1840s with Perkins, Bacon & Petch, all British stamps

were printed in the same process by the same firm.

However, the range of design was considerable. There was then a drive to create a unified set of stamps, recognisably belonging together.



1879 designs by De La Rue for a unified series. Phillips Collection

De La Rue produced a series of designs in 1879, the first of which were issued in 1880, and subsequently further unadopted designs with different shapes. After the penny unified stamp came out in 1881, known as the Penny Lilac, a second set of other values was issued in 1883/4 all in one of two colours, purple or green, the only two letterpress inks known to be doubly fugitive. This was a requirement to prevent fraudulent re-use, especially for revenue stamps. Both public and postal workers found the different values difficult to distinguish and so new, more successful designs were

created, also by De La Rue, with a smaller Queen's head set in decorative frames. These were distinguished one from another by colour and design. Some were single colours, some bi-coloured; others were printed on coloured papers. First issued in 1887, the year of Queen Victoria's golden jubilee, they came mistakenly to be described as the "Jubilee" issue. These stamps lasted until the end of Victoria's reign in 1901 and many of the subsequent Edwardian ones were based on the same frames.



Bicoloured essays for the 1900 "Jubilee" 1s stamp, the fugitive colour being in the centre. Phillips Collection.

Recess Stamp Printing

Recess, or intaglio, printing is formed of lines of engraving, hence the term often used – line-engraving. If you pass your fingers over a recess-printed stamp you can feel the ridges of ink on the paper. This is because the ink is held in the recesses of the metal die or plate, the deeper the cut the more ink is retained and the darker the printed appearance. Under pressure the ink is taken up by the paper, which has been previously dampened, to form the printed stamps and it then stands proud on the surface.



The original recess metal die for the Penny Black, engraved in reverse, without corner letters

In traditional recess printing the design is initially engraved in reverse in a soft steel die, which is then hardened. Under great pressure this is transferred to a roller, with the image now right-facing. Once hardened, this roller rocks the image repeatedly on to the printing plate, as many times as are required. Here, the image is again in reverse. From this the print is made, now finally right-facing again, and the sheet is allowed to dry, shrinking slightly in the process.

Letterpress Stamp Printing

In letterpress printing the image is formed of lines and solid areas. There are no ridges of ink on the finished stamp. Thus, the end result has a flat, slightly dull appearance with, under a magnifying glass, a “squeeze” of the ink at the edges of lines or solid areas of colour. Ink lies on the surface of the metal of the printing plate, not in the grooves. As such it is literally squeezed between the metal and the paper. Originally, the process was used for printing type and books, hence the term “letterpress”. (It can be referred to, wrongly, by philatelists as “typography” which, used correctly, means the art, or style, of typefaces or printed material.)

Unlike line-engraving where the design is cut into the metal to make the die, with letterpress the metal of the die is cut away leaving the lines of the design standing up sharply in relief. Often work begins with the head alone. The design is then built up by transferring the head using rollers, and then adding the frame. Proofs are taken at each stage. As with recess printing, the image appears in reverse on the die.



*Proof from a letterpress head die.
Phillips Collection.*

To create a printing forme when the master die is completed the image is multiplied by striking the required number of “leads” (normally 240). These form exact copies (but now of course positive rather than negative) in lead or gutta percha (a form of rubber). They are laid out in the correct format and locked in a frame. The whole is suspended in a solution and, by electrotyping, a metal facsimile is created through the deposition of copper by electrolysis. This electrotype, once again with the image in reverse, is backed by a cast iron plate and used to print. The printing process is completely dry and so the paper does not shrink.

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