

The Penny Black - History's First Postage Stamp

Scott Catalog #1

The Penny Black, the world's first adhesive postage stamp of a public postal system, was issued by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland on 1 May 1840, for use from 6 May of that year. Although all London post offices received official issues of the new stamps, other offices throughout the United Kingdom did not, and continued to accept postage payments in cash only for some time. Post offices in some other localities, such as those in the city of Bath, began offering the stamp unofficially after 2 May.

The idea of an adhesive stamp to indicate prepayment of postage was part of Rowland Hill's 1837 proposal to reform the British postal system; it was normal before then for the recipient to pay postage on delivery. A companion idea which Hill disclosed on 13 February 1837 at a government enquiry was that of a separate sheet which folded to form an enclosure or envelope for carrying letters. At that time postage was charged by the sheet and on the distance travelled.

Postal delivery systems using what may have been adhesive stamps existed before the Penny Black. Apparently the idea had at least been suggested earlier, notably in Austria, Sweden, and possibly Greece.[1]

Hill was given a two-year contract to run the new system, and together with Henry Cole he subsequently ran a competition to identify the best way to pre-pay letters. None of the 2600 entries was good enough, so in the end Hill launched the service in 1840 with an envelope bearing a reproduction of a design created by the artist William Mulready and a stamp bearing a reproduction of the profile of the reigning British monarch, Queen Victoria. There are also references on the record to covers bearing the Mulready design. To this day, all British stamps bear a profile of the reigning monarch somewhere on the design, and are the only stamps that do not name their country of origin.

In 1839, the British Treasury announced a competition to design the new stamps, but none of the submissions was considered suitable. The Treasury chose instead to use a rough design endorsed by Rowland Hill, featuring an easily recognisable profile of a 15-year-old Princess Victoria. Hill believed this would be difficult to forge. The head was engraved by Charles and Fredrick Heath based on a sketch provided by Henry Corbould. Corbould's sketch, in turn, was based on the cameo-like head by William Wyon, that had been designed for a medal used to commemorate the visit of Queen Victoria to the City of London in 1837, the year of her coronation[2][3] The word "POSTAGE" appeared at the top of the stamp, to denote its intended use (revenue stamps had long been used in the UK) and "ONE PENNY." at the bottom, indicating the amount that had been pre-paid for the transmission of the letter to which it was affixed. The background consisted of finely engraved engine turnings. In addition, the two upper corners contained star-like designs and the lower corners contained letters designating the position of the stamp in the printed sheet; "A A" for the stamp located in the top left position, and "T L" for the stamp in the bottom right position. The sheets, printed by Perkins Bacon, consisted of 240 stamps formatted of 20 rows and 12 columns. As the name suggests, the stamp was printed all in black.

Although 6 May was the official first date when the labels were available for the pre-payment of postage, there are known covers postmarked 2 May, due to postmasters selling the stamps from 1 May. Stamps used on letters prior to 6 May should have been treated as un-paid and charged double the rate on delivery. A single example is also known on cover dated 1 May 1840.

The Penny Black was in use for only a little over a year. It was found that a red cancellation was hard to see on a black background. Also, the red ink was easy to remove from the Penny Black, making it possible to re-use stamps, even after they had been cancelled. In 1841 the Treasury switched to the Penny Red and issued cancellation devices with black ink. The black ink, which was much more effective as a cancellation, was also harder to remove. The re-use of stamps with the un-cancelled portions of two stamps to form an unused whole impression continued and in 1864 the stars in the top corners were replaced by the check

letters, as they appeared in the lower corners, but in reverse order.

The Penny Black was printed from 11 plates. However, as plate 1 was completely overhauled due to excessive wear, it is generally considered as two separate plates, 1a and 1b. Plate 11 was intended originally solely for the new red stamps, but a small number were still printed in black. These are now very rare.

The stamps were printed in sheets of 240, unperforated and cut out with scissors.

An original printing press for the Penny Black, the D cylinder press invented by Jacob Perkins, is on display to the public at the British Library in London.

The Penny Black is not a rare stamp. The total print run from all plates was 286,700 sheets with 68,808,000 stamps[4] and a substantial number of these have survived, largely because envelopes were not normally used, letters, in the form of letter sheets, being folded and sealed, with the stamp and the address on the obverse. If the letter was kept, the stamp survived.

The Penny Black is readily available on the collectors' market today; a used stamp in poor condition can cost as little as £10 (\$20). However, because of its significance, this stamp in fine condition is in demand by collectors and therefore not cheap; in 2000, a used stamp cost about £110 (around US\$200), an unused example about £1,600 (around US\$3,000) with prices steadily rising. By contrast, a used Penny Red was £1.50 (\$3).

In addition to the general issue of the Penny Black postage stamps, a similar stamp was produced which had the letters V and R in the top corners replacing the stars. The intention of this issue was that it would be for use on official mail. Following the general public's acceptance of the postage stamps and the ridicule of the Mulready letter sheets which had been produced at the same time, vast supplies of the letter sheets were given to government departments, such as the tax office, for official use. The idea of introducing an official stamp, as such, was abandoned. Only a few postally used examples exist, which probably originated from the Post Office circulars sent out as advance notice that the new stamps would be brought into use. Four are known on cover; all four were cut from their envelopes, but then replaced. However, most of the cancelled examples are from trials which were made for cancellation types, inks, and experiments with their removal. These trials led to the change from black to red stamps and vice versa for the cancellations.

The VR official is stated to have been made from the original master die. However, this cannot be the case as this die still exists with the original stars intact; this is housed in the National Postal Museum in London. It is believed that the master for this stamp was produced from the transfer roller used for the production of plate 1 with the stars removed from the top corners as some impressions show traces of these original stars.

The following page shows the sheet layout of the stamps. This location is identified by one letter on the bottom left and another on the bottom right. The two copies I have for sale are highlighted on this layout.

AA	AB	AC	AD	AE	AF	AG	AH	AI	AJ	AK	AL
BA	BB	BC	BD	BE	BF	BG	BH	BI	BJ	BK	BL
CA	CB	CC	CD	CE	CF	CG	CH	CI	CJ	CK	CL
DA	DB	DC	DD	DE	DF	DG	DH	DI	DJ	DK	DL
EA	EB	EC	ED	EE	EF	EG	EH	EI	EJ	EK	EL
FA	FB	FC	FD	FE	FF	FG	FH	FI	FJ	FK	FL
GA	GB	GC	GD	GE	GF	GG	GH	GI	GJ	GK	GL
HA	HB	HC	HD	HE	HF	HG	HH	HI	HJ	HK	HL
IA	IB	IC	ID	IE	IF	IG	IH	II	IJ	IK	IL
JA	JB	JC	JD	JE	JF	JG	JH	JI	JJ	JK	JL
KA	KB	KC	KD	KE	KF	KG	KH	KI	KJ	KK	KL
LA	LB	LC	LD	LE	LF	LG	LH	LI	LJ	LK	LL
MA	MB	MC	MD	ME	MF	MG	MH	MI	MJ	MK	ML
NA	NB	NC	ND	NE	NF	NG	NH	NI	NJ	NK	NL
OA	OB	OC	OD	OE	OF	OG	OH	OI	OJ	OK	OL
PA	PB	PC	PD	PE	PF	PG	PH	PI	PJ	PK	PL
QA	QB	QC	QD	QE	QF	QG	QH	QI	QJ	QK	QL
RA	RB	RC	RD	RE	RF	RG	RH	RI	RJ	RK	RL
SA	SB	SC	SD	SE	SF	SG	SH	SI	SJ	SK	SL
TA	TB	TC	TD	TE	TF	TG	TH	TI	TJ	TK	TL