Fabulous Firsts:

British Penny Black, May 6, 1840

by John F. Dunn

Portions of this article are taken from an article by Philip Ward in the Mekeel's Weekly of January 1, 1940.

History:

Great Britain # 1

The Post Office of Great Britain as a state monopoly dates from the time of Queen Elizabeth I, who reigned from 1558 to 1603, although it was not fully established until 1609, and more than two centuries later that Britain became the first nation to issue postage stamps. This took place a few years after Queen Victoria acceded to the throne and began her reign of more than 63 years.

That year, 1837, was an important one in the events leading up to the issuance, on May 1, 1840 for use starting May 6, 1840, of the world's first postage stamp, the British Penny Black; for it was in 1837 that the father of the first postage stamp, Sir Rowland Hill, published a pamphlet promoting penny postage and the use of a postage stamp to pay for it.

Hill first started showing a serious interest in postal reform in 1835. At that time the need for postal reform was obvious. Not only were the rates complex and the handling of the mail cumbersome—every letter needed to be recorded. In addition, most of the mail was sent unpaid, with the postage cost to be collected from the recipient. At a time when Britain was becoming a far-flung commercial empire, such a system simply did not work.

One of those in government who were aware of Hill's interest in postal reform was Robert Wallace, a member of Parliament, who was a leading advocate for postal reform. According to Rowland Hill's autobiography, Robert Wallace was "One who was in the field more than two years before I began my investigations."

Wallace began campaigning for postal reform in 1833 and was a principal witness for the Commission of Revenue Enquiry into the Post Office from 1835 to 1836; it was by his deciding vote as Chairman of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Postage in 1838 that the original proposals for cheap postage were recommended to Parliament.

In 1836 Robert Wallace asked Rowland Hill to study the subject further and submit a proposal, which Hill did on January 4, 1837, in the form of a pamphlet, "Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicability". Following a review of this pamphlet by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Thomas Spring-Rice, and a meeting with him, Hill was asked to integrate certain changes into a supplement that he supplied on January 28, 1837.

Hill's most impactful proposals were:
• the prepayment of postage, which would lead to a significant reduction in the handling of mail—including the need to log in each piece;
• the use of postage stamps or letter sheets to evidence prepayment;
• and the abandonment of a complex set or rates based on distance in favor of a uniform set of rates based on weight.

Despite vocal opposition from some members of Parliament, with the support of British commercial interests all of these proposals were accepted and included in the Penny Postage Act that was passed and received Royal Assent on August 17, 1839. At that time Hill was given a two-year contract to run the postal system.

On December 5, 1839, a uniform postage rate of four pence was introduced, and on January 10, 1840, this was reduced to 1p—and led to a tremendous increase in the mail revenue, partly from an increase in volume and partly from the elimination of free franking privileges and mail fraud, including the practice of coding messages on the outside of mailed pieces so that the recipient could read the coded message, then refuse to accept and pay for that piece of mail.

Preparation and Production

Although it was not known at the time, even as action was beginning on postal reform including the use of postage stamps, the design was being created for that first stamp.

On November 9, 1837, Lord Mayor's Day, the young Queen Victoria visited London for the first time since her accession to the throne, on June 20 of that year. For Lord Mayor's Day and the visit of the Queen a medal was struck bearing on one side (shown) a portrait of Victoria at the age of 15, before her accession to the throne. This portrait and medal was done by William Wyon, the chief engraver of the mint.

Once the Penny Postage Act received Royal Assent in August 1839, work on a design and stamp began, with an invitation in the London Times of September 6, 1839, by the Lords of the Treasury for submissions from the public of suggestions and proposals as to the manner in which the stamp could be best brought into use. Such proposals had to be sent on or before October 15th and the points which the Lords considered of greatest importance were:

1: The convenience as regards public use.

2: The security from forgery.

3: The facility of being checked and distinguished in the examination at the Post Office, which must of necessity be rapid.

4: The expense of production and circulation of the stamps.

Approximately 2,700 communications were received, but none were deemed to be entirely satisfactory. From them, four were selected, by Mr. Cheverton, Mr. Henry Cole, Mr. C. Whiting and Messrs. Perkins, Bacon & Co.

The final design was taken from a water color drawing submitted by Rowland Hill, showing a portrait of the Queen facing the left as a center motif—the portrait being the Wyon Medal portrait. The die was engraved by Frederick Heath, reportedly with the assistance of his father, Charles.

Henry Cole, who also had been active in promoting the adoption of the Penny Postage was appointed to assist Sir Rowland Hill at the Treasury, in working out the details of this system, but in his own words, "My principal work, in fact, became the superintendence of the production of the three forms of stamps which it had been resolved to adopt namely an adhesive stamp to be attached to any letters, envelopes, and a stamp to be embossed upon paper of any kind sent to the Stamp Office."

For the production of the "adhesive stamp to be attached to any letter," Cole approached Messrs. Perkins, Bacon & Petch (afterwards to become Perkins, Bacon & Co.) of London. They already were noted bank note engravers and a natural choice to produce the first postage stamps.
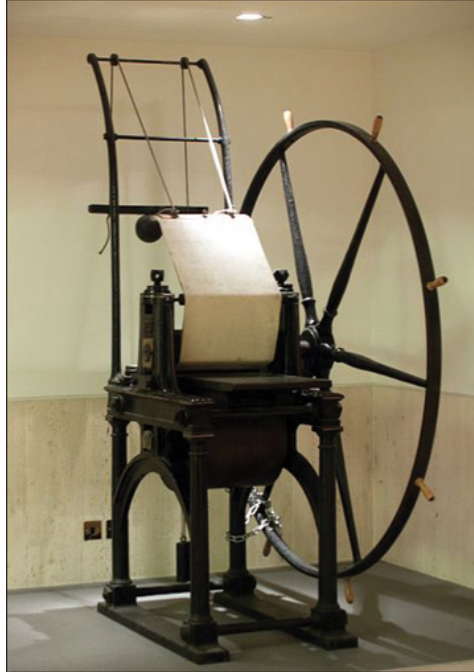
On December 3, 1839 they submitted their proposal and quotation. They proposed to engrave steel dies, transfer them to the necessary plates and print them in the quantities wanted at eight pence per thousand stamps, exclusive of paper which was to be furnished by the Treasury. As it was expected that the quantity ordered would be large, no charge was to be made for the dies and plates. The engravers stated that they could commence printing a month after receiving the contract and could print 41,600 labels per day from each press and could double the amount if necessary by working at night.

Jacob Perkins, the founder of this English firm, was a native of Massachusetts, where he had been an engraver for several years. In coming to England he brought with him knowledge of several discoveries which were new to bank note engraving in Europe.

These included a mastery in hardening and softening steel which enabled him to engrave on steel and to transfer figures from hardened steel to soft steel— the intaglio method of engraving—thus multiplying the number of plates with identical subjects.

He also introduced an elaborate style of ornamentation by means of geometrical lathe-work that also became part of the first stamps' design.

The plates were designed to print sheets of 240 stamps (12 horizontal by 20 vertical) which sold at exactly £1 per sheet. In the four sheet margins were to be found the notation: "Price 1d Per Label. 1/- [that is, 1 shilling] Per Row of 12. £1 Per Sheet. Place the Labels ABOVE the Address and towards the RIGHT HAND SIDE of the Letter. In wetting the Back be careful not to remove the Cement."

Above, the surprisingly small and simple Jacob Perkins' press that printed the Penny Black;

In the margins in the four corners of the sheet were the plate numbers 1 to 11 as exactly eleven plates were used to produce the penny black. As plate 1 was used before hardening it soon became worn, was retouched and in many parts retrans-

Left, a March 1840 die proof in black on India paper taken after the top and bottom labels had been engraved, but with the four corners blank. Right, an approved Perkins Bacon die proof with the top corner ornaments and "1 / OLD ORIGINAL" engraved below, in black on wove paper.

Above, a complete sheet of 12 in lilac-rose on thin white wove paper, one of the "Rainbow" color trial printings. The upper right corners were removed to avoid postal use.

Below, a Fugitive Ink trial in shades of red, mauve and red-brown, with pencil notations of color and paper used next to each, also with top row, "Fugitive Inks printed without oil." and above the other rows, "Fugitive Inks printed with oil."

ferred. Impressions from the first stage of this plate are designated as 1a and impressions from the rejuvenated plate as 1b. The stamps were line engraved on white paper, watermarked with small crown and issued imperforate.

The corner markings on each stamp are of particular interest. The two upper corners contained star-like ornaments, and as the plate consisted of 20 rows by 12 columns, position letters were placed in the bottom ornaments for each stamp, with the lower left letter for one of the 20 rows (A through T) and the lower right letter for one of the 12 columns (A through L). Thus, "A A" was used for the stamp at the top left, moving across to "A L" for the upper right stamp, moving down and across until we come to "T L" for the bottom right.

In this IJ/JK block of four, we see the stamps from the stamps from the 9th and 10th rows and the 10th and 11th columns.

For the 1858-69 issue and subsequently, when letters were used they also were used in the top corners, with the letters reversed from the bottom positions. This was done to prevent the cutting in half of stamps that had been canceled only on the left or right side and reusing them.

The color of the stamp was changed less than a year after the Penny Black was issued. It was found that the black color meant that a black cancel could not be used and that the red ink used instead sometimes could not be seen and could be washed off. So the Penny Black was replaced by the Penny Red on February 10, 1841. The black canceling ink that could then be used was easier to see and harder to remove.


This "V R" Official (Sc. O1) corner margin piece shows the "V R" (Victoria Regina) letters instead of ornaments in the top corners and a (A in this case) instead of a plate number

A Cancellation Trial from early June 1840 1d showing a row of four with the stamp impressions in deep lilac brown and "Ax860" cancels, endorsed by Joshua Bacon for various chemical treatments that had altered the color of the stamps and stained the paper.
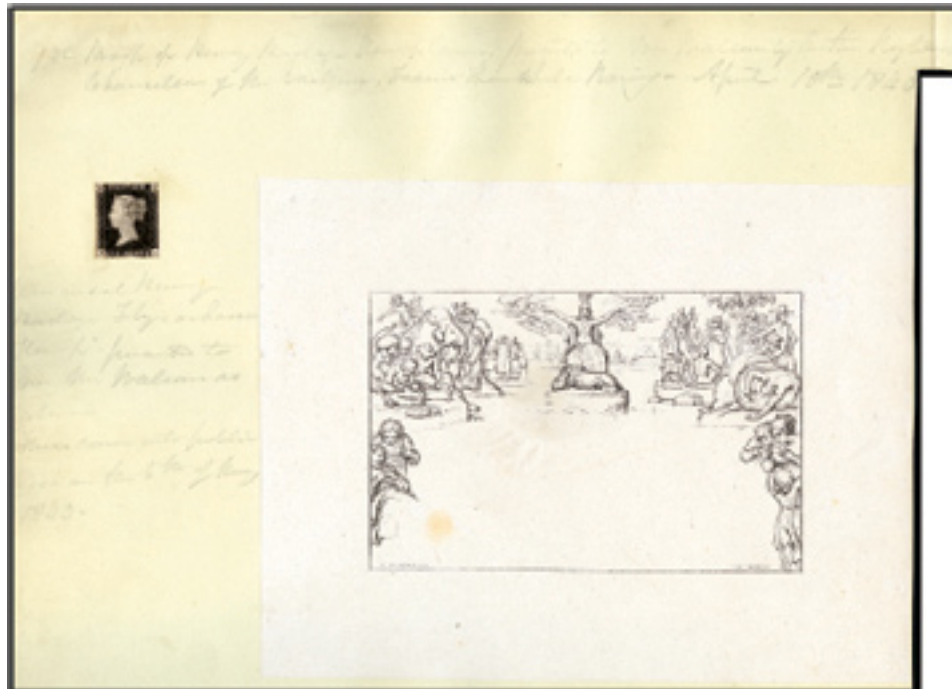
The Earliest Dated Penny Black in Existence, this unique document from the archive of Robert Wallace is a die proof of the Mulready envelope, without value tablet, printed in black on India paper, mounted on stout paper along with an unused Penny Black from plate 1a, lettered AI, with endorsement in pencil by Robert Wallace MP: "1st Proof of Penny Postage Stamp Cover(?), presented to Mr. Wallace by the Right Honourable Chancellor of the Exchequer, Francis Thornhill Baring, April 10th 1840." along the top, with "Universal Penny Postage Fly or Loose Stamp, presented to me as above (the 10th April). / These came into public use on the 6th May 1840" below the Penny Black.

The Penny Black affixed comes from the plate completed on April 8th 1840, which was put into production on April 11th and officially registered on April 15th. This stamp, from the first row of the sheet, quite probably comes from the first sheet printed. April 10 was the day when the Mulready design was approved by the Council of Royal Academicians.

Issued Stamps and Covers

A part sheet showing a portion of the instructions for use of the stamps.

The prepaid letter sheets, with a design by William Mulready, were distributed in early 1840. These Mulready envelopes were not popular and were widely satirized. (Ac-

One of the many caricatures of the Mulready envelope, this one by Thomas White.

cording to a brochure distributed by the National Postal Museum, now the British Postal Museum & Archive, the Mulready envelopes threatened the livelihoods of stationery manufacturers, who encouraged the satires. They became so unpopular that the government used them on official mail and destroyed many others.

In May 1840, the Penny Black postage stamps were distributed. While the stamps came into use on May 6, 1840, they were placed on sale with the Mulready envelopes and wrappers on May 1st.

Entries in the journal of Sir Rowland Hill are of interest.

"May 1st. Stamps issued to the public today (in London) for the first time. Great bustle at the Stamp Office."

"May 2nd. £2,500 worth of stamps sold yesterday."

"May 6th. Stamps came into use today. Cole went to the P.O. reports that about half of the letters were stamped."

A rare combination usage of the Penny Black and the Mulready enveloped used on May 6, 1840, the official first day of use for both. The stamp is tied by a red Maltese Cross cancel, and the reverse of the Mulready entire (not shown) has a "C MY-6, 1840" backstamp.

While May 6th may be considered the day of issue covers are known used earlier. In his January 1, 1940 article, Philip Ward wrote, "While in London in 1937 we recall seeing a portion of the Royal Collection of King George V at the invitation of Sir Edward Bacon and noticed a cover

The fabulous "May 2nd" cover, with the Penny Black used to prepay postage on May 2, 1840, four days before the official date on which they were to be used.

It actually is affixed to a Mulready envelope that was turned inside out. Upon receipt, the addressee then turned it back and used the Mulready on May 4, still two days before the declared date on which it was to be used. If you look closely, to the left of the 2 MY cancel, you can see some of the red bleed-through from the Maltese Cross on the Mulready side.

mailed on the 5th. The letter called attention to the new stamp and mentioned that it was not supposed to be used until the 6th. The postal clerk evidently thought the same thing for the stamp was not canceled."

A "V R" Official stamp used on an entire dated June 10, 1840, tied by a red Maltese Cross cancel. The piece had been cut from the entire, but was rejoined.

The largest known used multiple of the Penny Black, a block of 18 with a Maltese Cross cancel on each stamp. On page 8 we show a part sheet of 24 unused. There are complete sheets in existence, but they are owned by the British Postal Museum.