

# 175th Anniversary of the Penny Black

By Edward Klempka

Edward Klempka looks at early usage of the Penny Black, as well as its replacement, the 1d. red-brown—the printing of which commenced in December 1840.

The development of the postal services had been somewhat haphazard. Prior to the introduction of the Penny Post, postage rates were generally calculated based upon the number of miles a letter had to travel and the number of sheets contained in the letter. One large sheet of paper would be charged a single postage whilst two small sheets would attract double postage. The introduction of the uniform Fourpenny post on 5 December 1839 created a flat rate for letters less than half an ounce of 4d. irrespective of the distance they had to travel. On 10 January 1840 this rate was reduced to one penny. The postal rates were set out in a postal notice dated 7 January 1840 (*Fig 1*).

The new rates were available if the letters were prepaid; letters posted unpaid were charged double the rate of prepaid letters, the charge to be collected upon delivery.

## The world's first stamp

Rowland Hill, who was a businessman, had published a pamphlet called *Post Office Reform* which advocated the introduction of lower postal charges which would be uniform within the inland postal system. It was his task to oversee the introduction and operation of the Penny Post. In order to operate an efficient postal service, it required the introduction of postage stamps, to act as a receipt for postage paid and to be affixed to the letter to demonstrate that it had been prepaid.

Two different Penny Blacks were designed. One had the letters VR contained in the upper corners (*Fig 2*) and was to be used by government departments. Although designed, printed and circulated, these 'VR' stamps were not officially issued.

## Day of issue

On 6 May 1840 the Penny Black postage stamp was issued and a postal notice (*Fig 3*) was circulated to all postmasters. This notice had affixed to it two copies of the Penny Black and two copies of the Mulready penny envelopes and lettersheets, together with two copies of the Mulready two pence envelopes and lettersheets. The public took an instant dislike to the Mulready stationery greeting it with ridicule, derision and abuse. The postage stamps were somewhat better received and a few covers used on 6 May 1840 have survived. These are the world's first 'First Day Covers' and represent the first prepaid postage stamps ever to be issued. Rarely, the Penny Black can be found used on the first day upon Mulready stationery. The illustration at *Fig 4* is of the One Penny Mulready used on 6 May 1840 with a Penny Black postage stamp, a truly extraordinary item and surely the icon of first day philately.

Fig 1 Post office regulations announcing the introduction of the Penny Post on 10 January 1840



Fig 2 A Penny Black with letters VR in the upper corners that was intended for official use but not officially issued

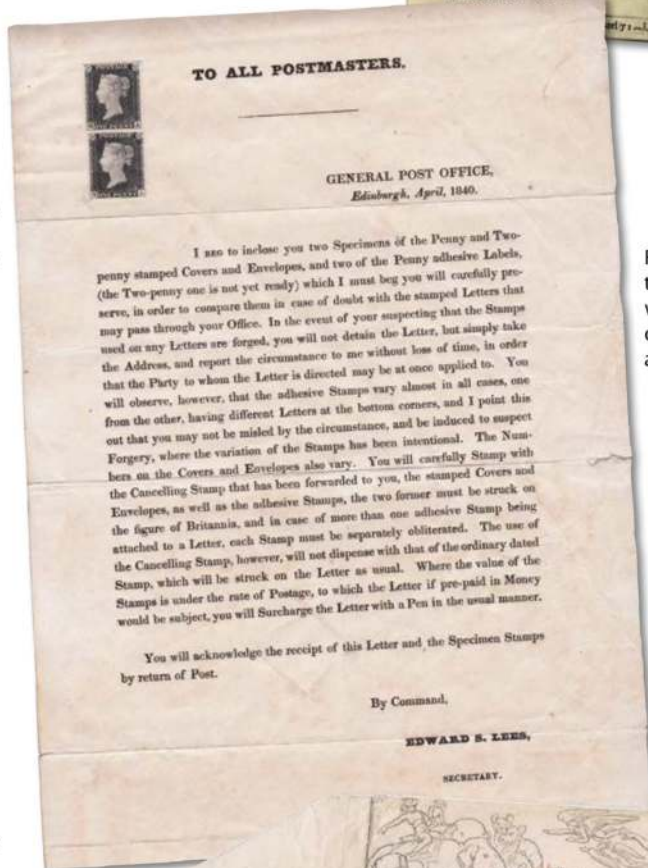


Fig 3 Postal notice to all postmasters with two copies of the Penny Black affixed to it



Fig 4 One Penny Mulready lettersheet used on 6 May 1840 with a Penny Black, a double first day cover. By kind courtesy of Mark Bloxham (Reduced)





Fig 5 A One Penny Mulready lettersheet uprated with the addition of three Penny Black stamps; total franking of 4d. paying postage of up to two ounces (Reduced)

The Penny Black paid inland postage up to a letter weight of half one ounce; the next half ounce required an additional 1d. postage. Thereafter further postage of 2d. per ounce was required. Fig 5 shows a One Penny Mulready lettersheet uprated by the addition of three Penny Black stamps, paying 4d. postage for a letter weight of up to two ounces. Fig 6 shows a letter franked with eight Penny Blacks paying postage of up to four ounces, initially posted from Manchester to Glasgow where it was redirected to Edinburgh and postage prepaid by a further eight Penny Black stamps. This cover is the largest known franking of a Penny Black cover cancelled with a red Maltese Cross, a total of 16 stamps.

### Printing and plate repairs

The Penny Black was printed in sheets containing 240 impressions. Each stamp had its own position on the plate, identified by letters in the lower corners. The top row corner letters commenced with the letters 'AA' and ended at the 12 column with letters 'AL'; the second row commenced with letters 'BA' and ended with 'BL'. This lettering system continued throughout the sheet until row 20 was reached with the corner letters commencing with 'TA' and ending 'TL'.

In all, 11 plates were used for the printing of the Penny Black but some of these plates (1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 10 and 11) were also used to print the 1d. red-brown which was issued in February 1841. This gives rise to the same stamp being printed in both black and red-brown ink. These 'matched pairs' are highly sought after by collectors.

If an impression became weak or damaged, it was repaired by re-entry. Plate 1 quickly became worn and the entire plate was re-entered giving rise to two states of this plate, commonly referred to as Plates 1a and 1b (Fig 7). Some of the stamps were re-entered, giving rise to two further states 1c and 1d. The two latter states are only found printed in red-brown.

Plates 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 11 were also repaired but to a lesser extent than Plate 1. Collectors prize stamps that exist in their original and re-entered states, especially those which show badly re-entered impressions resulting in doubling of the printed design.



Fig 6 Envelope franked with 16 Penny Black stamps printed from Plate 1a. The strip of eight Penny Blacks (above) was added on top of the original two strips of four (left) to pay for redirection (Reduced)



Fig 7 Three stamps from Plate 1, all with corner letters PC; Plate 1a and Plate 1b printed in black; Plate 1b printed in red-brown



Fig 8 The fraudulent re-use of a Penny Black stamp. The cover is endorsed 'this stamp has been used before' (Reduced)

Fig 9 A fraudulent re-use of Penny Black stamps. The top half and bottom half comprise of parts of two different previously used stamps (Reduced)

### Fraudulent re-use

Almost as soon as the Penny Black was issued, Rowland Hill became concerned about the potential fraudulent re-use of the stamps. The black stamp was particularly well printed by Perkins Bacon, utilising a line-engraved technique which was difficult to reproduce and therefore to forge. Few if any serious contemporary forgeries exist.

The Post Office instructions required the stamps to be obliterated, and therefore cancelled, by the use of a Maltese Cross type handstamp which had been covered in red ink. It was the removal of the red ink and the 'piecing' of stamps that concerned the Post Office. Revenue was being lost by the red ink being removed and the stamps being re-used (Fig 8) or by the stamp being 'pieced'—that is the utilisation of two or more parts of different stamps that had not been properly cancelled. Fig 9 illustrates a usage whereby the top and bottom halves of the stamp are from two different stamps which had not been properly cancelled.



Experiments took place during 1840 to find a more suitable stamp to prevent its fraudulent re-use. A small plate of penny stamps with 12 impressions was produced to be used for experimental purposes.

The stamps, referred to as 'rainbow colour trials' were used and printed in several colours in order to test the ease by which the cancellations could be removed. Fig 10 illustrates the penny stamp printed in blue and red-brown. Both stamps have had the cancellations removed to establish if the stamps were capable of re-use.

The Post Office decided to change the colour of the one penny stamp from black to red-brown and change the colour of the ink used to obliterate the stamps from red to black. The new printing from the plates that had been used to print the Penny Black commenced in late December 1840.

Plate 5 was printed in red and black prior to extensive repairs being made to it. Consequently stamps printed in black can be found in a repaired state after the initial printing in red had been made. Stamps from Plates 8 and 10 were printed in red prior to the extensive repairs undertaken for the red printing. These printings in red-brown are referred to as the 'pre provisional printings'. Fig 11 illustrates a block of 16 1d. red-brown stamps printed from Plate 10 which had also been used to print stamps in black. A number of these stamps show the 'O' flaw (the 'O' in 'One' appears shaped as a 'Q') as a small printing was made in red-brown prior to the plate being repaired and the 'O' flaw corrected.

### Rare combinations

The stamps printed in black were left in post office stocks to be used. Once supplies were exhausted, they were replaced by stamps printed in red-brown. Penny Blacks and 1d. red-browns used in and after 1841 are found obliterated with the black Maltese Cross. Unusually, some post offices continued to obliterate the stamps utilising red ink, giving rise to rare combinations. Plate 11 printed in black but cancelled in red are especially rare and all stamps printed in red-brown and cancelled with red Maltese Crosses are scarce.

The change from stamps printed in black to stamps printed in red-brown produces some colourful combination usages. Fig 12 illustrates a letter originally posted in April 1841 with a Penny Black (Plate 5) redirected and postage paid with a 1d. red-brown (from black Plate 10).

The Penny Black postage stamp, the first of its kind, issued in 1840 and printed in red-brown later that year, is an absolute must have for philatelists. Its iconic status as the first stamp will remain and collectors will continue to adore the beauty of its design and recognition as the world's most collected stamp.



Fig 10 Rainbow colour trials used to experimentally test how easy it was to remove the cancellation. Penny blue, deep red-brown and red-brown



Fig 11 A number of stamps in this block of 16 printed in red-brown from the pre provisional printing from the Penny Black Plate 10 contain the 'O' flaw

Below: Fig 12 Combination usage of Penny Black and 1d. red-brown

