

Charles and Frederick Heath: The Original Whodunit

By Adrian Keppel

For many years, it has remained a bit of a mystery as to who actually engraved the world's first postage stamp, the Penny Black; was it Charles Heath or, in fact, his son, Frederick, who created this world-famous icon? Adrian Keppel puts on his detective hat and examines the published evidence for both sides.

Is artistic talent hereditary? When one looks at the familial relations between a good number of stamp engravers, one would most certainly reach that conclusion. It seems only a little while back that I reported here in *Gibbons Stamp Monthly* on father and son Karl and Karl Jr Bickel, the Swiss engravers. In France we've had father Gaston and son Pierre Gandon who dominated the stamp catalogues for decades, although here fortunes were reversed, in that it was the son, rather than the father, who was the more influential artist. More recently, to change the gender monotony a bit, we have seen daughter Sophie Beaujard following in the footsteps of her famous engraving father Yves.

But the very first of these familial pairs were father Charles (Fig 1) and son Frederick Heath (Fig 2), who are both linked to having engraved the world's first postage stamp: the Penny Black (Fig 3). They stem from a family with three generations of highly skilled engravers. Their history started with James Heath (1757–1834), who was a famous senior engraver of the Royal Academy. His son Charles (1785–1848) became well known for his involvement in introducing steel dies for security printing, replacing the usual copper ones, as this increased the lifespan of the printing plates enormously. He also rode the waves when literary and art annuals became hugely popular, engraving many plates for them and even editing his own *The Keepsake* annuals (Fig 4). Two of Charles' sons, Frederick (1810–1878) and Alfred (1812–1896) also became engravers in their turn. They continued

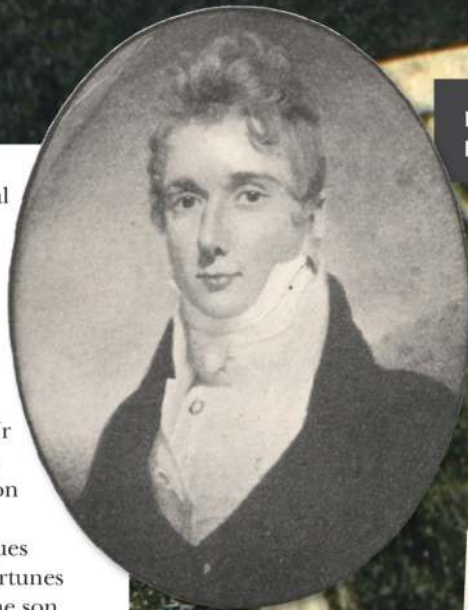


Fig 1 Miniature portrait of Charles Heath, painted in 1822 by Andrew Robertson



Fig 2 A photograph of Frederick Heath



Fig 3 The Penny Black

the family business of engraving for art annuals, even though the popularity of these dwindled during their lifetime (Fig 5).

In philately, it is only Charles and Frederick who are of importance, and it is precisely this famous pair which has been bothering me for years now. Who exactly was it who engraved the Penny Black? Was it Charles? Or Frederick? Or maybe both? Do we know?

At first glance, it seems that philatelic literature happily contradicts itself

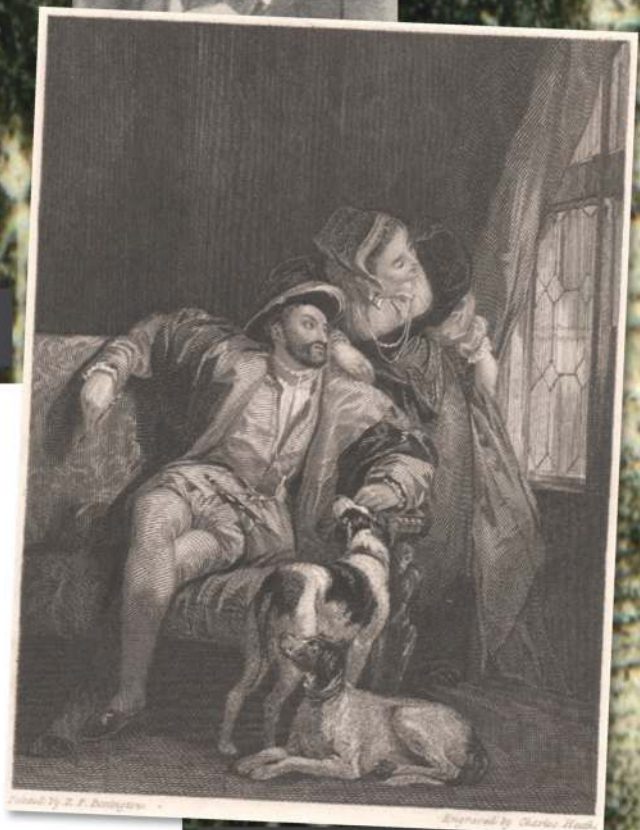


Fig 4 Charles' engraving of *Francis the First and his Sister*, published in *The Keepsake* of 1830



Fig 5 Frederick's engraving of Lady Jemima, published in *The Keepsake* of 1842

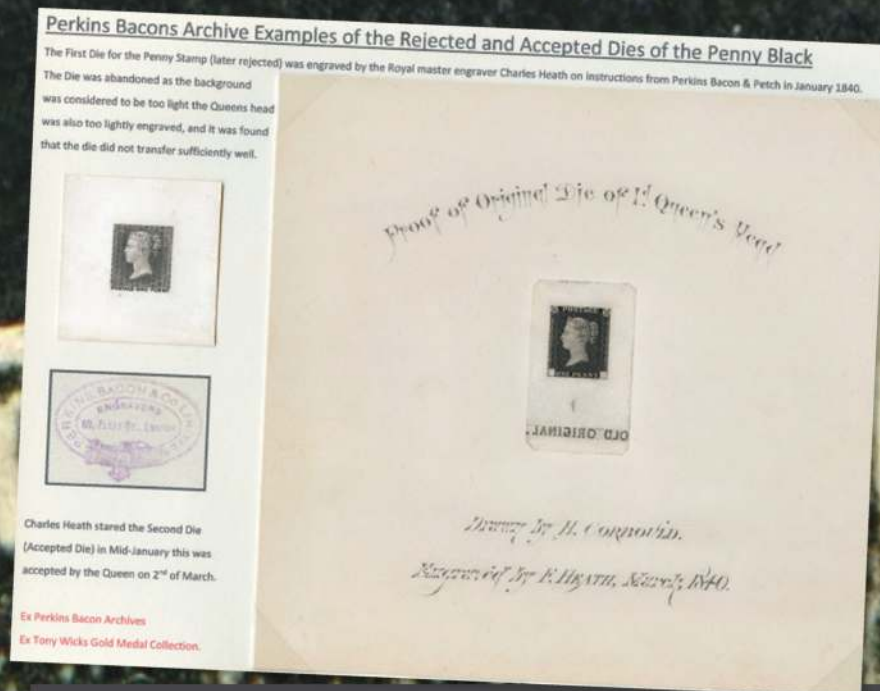


Fig 6 The advert showing the proof annotated 'Engraved by F. Heath' and attributed by the previous owner to Charles Heath. Image courtesy of Mark Bloxham

time and again. This culminated in an advertisement I saw the other day for a famous proof of the 'Old Original' of the Penny Black, annotated: 'Engraved by F Heath, March 1840.' Alongside was the write-up of the former owner on the album page, stating that: 'Charles Heath stared (sic) the Second Die (Accepted Die) in Mid-January this was accepted by the Queen on 2nd of March' (Fig 6).

As an ardent admirer of stamp engravers and their art, I felt it was time I got to the bottom of this, and see if I could find out whom we could credit with having engraved the Penny Black.

The London Philatelist

I figured a good way to start would be to trawl through the archived *The London Philatelist*, the journal of the Royal Philatelic Society London. The first mention of the engraver of the Penny Black occurred in 1894, when the Earl of Kingston discussed 'Humphrys' retouch of the one penny Great Britain, 1854. Charles Heath is mentioned as the engraver, without any further clarification; as a given. This was typical of the early days. Further mentions in 1907, 1933 and 1936 by various authors show exactly the same information.

There is only one entry where the author actually reasons why Charles is stated to be the engraver. In 1895, Sir Edward Bacon read a paper entitled 'The Queen's Head'. This was an article from 1852 in which not only the production process of the Penny Black was explained in detail, but it also commented on the engraver. In *The*

London Philatelist of 1895, volume four, it says that '...the die for the 1d. adhesive was engraved by Mr. Charles Heath, and not by Mr. Frederick Heath, who received the payment for the work'. This, I may add, were the words of the writer of this piece, not necessarily of Sir Edward Bacon.

I managed to find an article entitled 'The Queen's Head' online, written by William Henry Wills and James Hannay, originally published in the magazine *Household Words* on 21 February 1852. It does indeed devote all its lines to the production of the Penny Black, so it must be that very article Sir Edward Bacon read. And yes, it does mention Charles Heath a few times. In fact, what the article states is: (having just prepared the background) 'A portion was then scraped out in the rude shape of a head; and over this, Mr. Heath executed his exquisite vignette'. A little further along we find: 'The security against forgery lies in the engine-turning on the "basis" or ground, on which the head is done; in the great excellence of Mr. Charles Heath's design; in the exquisite beauty of its execution...'. Thirdly, a final word on the engraving: 'It took Mr. Heath a fortnight's hard work to engrave, on the original steel die, the profile which is the progenitor of all the rest'.

And there we have it. While the article does describe in depth the whole process, there is little hard evidence to find which might persuade one to think it really was Charles who engraved the die. Unfortunately for Mr Wills, one of the authors, the online version of his article is accompanied by two fairly elaborate biographies of the two authors, in which Mr Wills is described as a journalist of little education who seems to have acquired knowledge by wide reading. This makes one wonder where he got the philatelic information from and whether any of it stems from original research, especially when both biographies do not mention any philatelic credentials whatsoever.

Fred J Melville

No, if we're looking for something a bit more substantiated, we need to turn our attention to the writings of Fred J Melville. Melville entered the fray in 1909 with his booklet *Great Britain: Line-engraved Stamps*, which was reviewed in *The London Philatelist* of 1909 (volume 18). Interestingly enough, Melville takes the aforementioned article by Wills and Hannay as the basis for his treatment of the creation of the Penny Black, though adding 'details since ascertained'.

Taking the bull by the horns, Melville begins by saying that the engraving has been variously attributed to both Charles and Frederick, and blames 'apparent confusion between the authorities' for this. Citing a number of publications professing that Charles was the engraver, he eventually comes up with his trump card proving the opposite: an entry dated 7 April 1840 in Messrs. Perkins, Bacon & Co's books stating that Frederick received payment for this or similar work. Only to weaken his argument by saying that it has been pointed out that Frederick may only have been given a receipt for the amount on his father's behalf.

But Melville has more tricks up his sleeve. A die proof exists with the manuscript annotation: 'Engravers Proof by Fredk. Heath after Drawing by Henry Corbould, F.S.a.' (Fig 7). This note on the proof, which at the time was still owned by the family, is in the handwriting of Henry Corbould's son, Edward Henry Corbould. This seems important because not only was Edward Henry closely related to those actively involved in producing the Penny Black, he is also very closely related to Frederick Heath, as they both went on to create the 5s. New South Wales coin design stamp of 1861 (Fig 8).

If nothing else, this proof seems to prove that Frederick was at least involved in the engraving of Victoria's portrait on the stamp. Apparently, according to later members of the Heath family, Frederick used to assist his father in his later years, when the latter was suffering from failing eyesight.

The Heath family

Melville repeats his arguments in a subsequent publication of his, *Chats on Stamps*, published in 1911, adding that (according to a Mrs Haywood, related to the Corboulds and a niece of Frederick Heath) '...there has never been any doubt among the older members of the family that Frederick was the engraver and not Charles...'

And so it was high time to find more quotes or information regarding the Heath family. In 1993, John Heath wrote a three-volume book on the engravers family, entitled *The Heath family engravers 1779-1878*. It is volume two, describing the lives and works of Charles Heath and his two engraving sons Frederick and Alfred Heath, to which we must direct our attention.

Admittedly, the bulk of the book is about Charles, and only one chapter deals with both his sons. The six measly pages of this particular chapter are aptly subtitled the 'End of an Era'. Only one paragraph deals with Frederick's philatelic credentials, stating that he had '...prime responsibility for engraving the master roller die which was to produce the first postage stamps in 1840...'. It then goes on to mention the New South Wales coin stamp again, and the Great Britain 1870 ½d. (Fig 9), for which Frederick engraved yet another Queen Victoria profile. There is actually an illustration of a Penny Black in the book, which is captioned 'Engraved by Frederick and Charles Heath, 1840.'

Another booklet written about the Heath family, this time by George W Smith, entitled *James Heath, Engraver to Kings and Tutor to Many*, again gives most credit to Frederick, saying it is 'probable that the dies for the Penny Black were entirely



Fig 7 The Penny Black proof annotated 'Engravers proof by Fredk Heath'. Image courtesy of David Feldman Auctions



Fig 8 In 1861 Frederick engraved Edward Henry Corbould's coin design stamp for New South Wales



Fig 9 Frederick engraved the profile of Queen Victoria for the ½d. stamp of Great Britain issued in 1870

his work, under the supervision of his father'. After all, that was how it worked in those days: Charles supervising his employees, with his name usually ending up on the finished product, even though he wasn't always involved in the actual engraving or had been assisted with the engraving by a number of others.

An Australian aside

Interestingly, though not strictly related to the subject in hand, Smith also mentions Frederick's other stamps, those being the 1870 Great Britain ½d., the New South Wales coin stamp and the New South Wales diadem issue of 1856 (Fig 10). But he goes on to say that Frederick probably also engraved the 1856 'Queen on Throne' stamps of the Australian state of Victoria (Fig 11). As far as I know, this is the only source linking Frederick (or any engraver for that matter) to this particular stamp.

Unfortunately, the author is no longer with us, so inquiries as to his sources can no longer be made. But seeing that Smith had been given access to the privately produced records of the Heath family, dating from 1913, it could be argued that he was well informed. If true, it is another link with New South Wales because proofs exist of the 'Queen on Throne' design with the colony's name being New South Wales rather than Victoria. Seeing that New South Wales never ordered any such stamps, it is presumed this was a mistake in the making, upon discovery of which, the die had to be changed by erasing the name and value, and replacing it with more appropriate information. Even

the New South Wales reprinted die proofs, which Perkins Bacon produced in the late 19th century and which don't feature the Australian state's name, can still be distinguished by the fact that the space left for the name is much larger than that on the eventual stamps for Victoria (Fig 12).

A clue from De La Rue

In 1964, *The London Philatelist* included an article on the De La Rue surface-printing dies. While this has no direct bearing on the Penny Black die, the authors write:

'The publication of the De La Rue History has established the fact that, contrary to the belief previously held, the well-known engraver Jean Ferdinand Joubert de la Ferté was commissioned by the Board of Inland Revenue to engrave the die for the Great Britain Fourpence of 1855 for a fee of one hundred guineas, just as Frederick Heath was employed by the Board to engrave the die for the One Penny Black in 1840.'

The actual book, *The De La Rue History of British & Foreign Postage Stamps*, does not clarify this any further, merely stating that: 'It will be remembered that in the same way Rowland Hill (...) engaged Frederick Heath to engrave the Queen's Head for the One Penny black in 1840.'

Bringing home the 'bacon'

As is so often the case, once one starts delving into a certain matter, more and more information comes to light. And so, when I thought I had somewhat exhausted all possibilities, I came across Bacon's *The Line-Engraved Postage Stamps of Great Britain Printed by Perkins, Bacon & Co.* Published in 1920, it was billed as the definitive book on their stamp production between 1840 and 1880, with use of the Perkins Bacon records and with full cooperation of its managing director, James Dunbar Heath.

For the first time, we find information about actual documents of the day, which shine a bit more light on the question. What we have is letters to and from Charles Heath which makes it clear he was closely involved with the project, being asked to 'have it engraved' and to give his 'personal attention' to it. Other letters mostly deal with the sending and receiving of the dies. This includes a letter, now in a private collection, with the line 'If that does not transfer well nothing will,' alluding to the Heaths having had to engrave a second die after the first one was deemed too light (Fig 13 and Fig 14).

All other documents available support the case for Frederick. We find, for example, that Heath's first name is not mentioned in the contract of January 1840, which states '...by the said Act they are also authorised for printing (...) said Stamps and have approved of a design for such



Fig 10 The engraving of the New South Wales 'Diadem' issue of 1856 is also by Frederick Heath



Fig 12 The die proofs of the Victoria 'Queen on Throne' issue betray the printer's error in preparing the dies for New South Wales, with a larger space for the colony's name

Stamps, the same being a fine steel plate Engraving by Heath...'. Bacon, known for his thorough research of artists, writes in *Notes and Queries of 1884* that: '...as he feared his eyesight was not good enough for such fine work, he (i.e. Charles) handed it over to his son Frederick...'

Frederick's work is referred to in two letters from Perkins Bacon. One is written to Frederick himself, in 1870, in which Frederick is asked for a new engraving for the ½d. stamp, asking for the queen's head to be 'slightly reduced from that you formerly engraved'. This is obviously a reference to his portrait done for the Penny Black. A second letter, written by Perkins Bacon to the Board of Inland Revenue in May 1878, mentions the recent passing of the artist who engraved The Queen's head on the postage stamp, which can only be a reference to Frederick, who had passed away in April 1878.

Conclusion

All in all, it becomes clear that Charles was closely involved, in a supervisory role, as was often the case in those days when he took on any type of engraving work, but that it must have been Frederick who did the actual engraving. The existing documents refer to it, contemporary figures and family members confirm it, as do the various proofs with annotations to that effect.

'Elementary', said he...



Fig 11 George Smith's book is the only source linking the 1856 'Queen on Throne' issue of the Australian state Victoria to Frederick Heath



Fig 13 The original die of the Penny Black was deemed too light and was not adopted



Fig 14 The second die for the Penny Black, now known as Die I, was much improved and adopted

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