

EARLY G.B. SIMPLIFIED

An Explanation of The Changes in Early Postage Stamps and Cancellations of Great Britain

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NOT many weeks go by without my receiving some query about our early line-engraved postage stamps. A large proportion of these queries concern the plating of the perforated 1d. issues, in which I am particularly interested, but from time to time a writer asks the reason for this or that change in the 1d. or 2d. value.

When asked recently by a philatelic society for a talk on early stamps of Great Britain, I seized the opportunity to discuss the reasons for the changes in our stamps and cancellations during the period 1840 to 1864, and incorporated into my display stamps and postmarks illustrating the troubles and difficulties the Post Office and the printers met with in those early days, since a number of the changes are due to these. This article is based on that talk.

Public clamour for uniform Penny Postage caused the temporary measure of uniform Fourpenny Postage to last only from December 5th, 1839 to January 9th, 1840. In spite of more than 2,600 suggestions made in the August 1839 Treasury Competition, the Uniform Penny Postage day duly arrived on January 10th, 1840, with no stamps available, and the later negotiations very wisely provided for the supply of "gummed labels" printed by the bank-note printing firm of Perkins, Bacon and Petch. Until sufficient of these had been printed, most large offices used handstruck markings to show the prepaid penny charge. Many of these consisted of "PAID" (or "Pd") and "1d." (or "1") with, in some cases, the office name. Others had merely some variety of "1d." or "1". A limited number of offices employed also similar twopenny and fourpenny handstruck marks for letters over half an ounce in weight. To illustrate how quickly some offices brought these Uniform Penny Post marks into use, I have a Hertford example of January 19th, 1840. Red ink was generally used for all the handstruck marks.

Adhesive labels issued

It was found possible to bring the 1d. black postage stamps into use on May 6th, 1840, but the 2d. blue ones were not available until a few days later. Also available for use on May 6th, 1840, were the 1d. and 2d. envelopes and letter-sheets (in black and blue respectively for the two values) designed by William Mulready, R.A. and engraved by John Thompson. It was Rowland Hill's opinion that they would appeal to the public more than the adhesive stamps. However, these envelopes and letter-sheets were lampooned by prominent artists, such as Hablot Knight Brown ("Phiz"), the brothers Doyle, John Leech and William Spooner, and series of caricatures were published by Messrs. Ackermann, Fores, Hume and others. As a result, they were replaced by envelopes with an embossed head of Queen Victoria—in pink for the penny value in January 1841, and in blue for the twopenny value in April 1841. A similar penny letter-sheet appeared in March 1844. All these embossed items of postal stationery had blue "Dickinson" safety threads.

The 1840 1d. black and 2d. blue stamps were printed in permanent inks, consisting of linseed oil and zinc-white, with lamp black and Prussian blue respectively as colouring matter.

Varying amounts of the latter caused the shades found in the 2d. stamps. The permanence of the ink worried the postal authorities, as they were obsessed not only with the fears of forgery, but also with the idea that cancellations might be removed and the stamps re-used. During 1840 a number of experiments—usually known as the Rainbow Colour Trials—were carried out, aimed at the use of fugitive inks and of a cancellation ink that could not be removed without damage to the stamps.

It was decided from these experiments to change the colour of the penny stamp to red-brown, and printings in that colour began in the last days of December 1840. As this was before the time when reserve plates were kept at Somerset House for emergency use, the plates first used for the printings in the new colour were those previously employed for the 1d. blacks and still capable of being used, viz. Plates 1, 2, 5, 8, 9 and 10. In addition, Plate 11 was registered later in the next month.

Plate 11—an emergency

Experiments had also shown that black ink gave greater security against removal and the subsequent re-use of postage stamps. At the end of August 1840 an experiment was made in the London Local Post with diluted printer's ink, although it was obviously not entirely suitable for cancellations on black stamps. Before the red-brown printings began, an improved black ink was also tried and approved. In late January 1841 the postal authorities found that the stock of 1d. black stamps was exhausted. There were sufficient red-brown stamps printed, but only an inadequate amount of the new black ink was available. They did not wish the new stamps to be cancelled in the old unsuitable colour. Recourse was, therefore, made to a limited provisional printing of 1d. black stamps from Plates 1, 5, 9, 10 and 11. The inclusion of Plate 11 accounts for the scarcity of stamps in black from it, as it had previously been used only for the new-coloured stamps.

Black and red shades

The colour of the black 1840 penny stamps did not lend itself to wide variations in shade, though a grey element appears in printings from worn plates, and, it has been suggested, sometimes from the body colour needed to give binding qualities to the black ink. The new 1841 penny stamps during their long life provide, however, a wide range of shades. The ink used for them was composed of rose-pink, cochineal, prussiate of potash, carbonate of potash and oil. The mixing was not done in the exact and scientific manner used today, and the work was carried out in conditions lacking modern heating and lighting. When these factors are realised, the existence of the numerous shades is easily explained.

The "White Lines" 2d. blue

A second 2d. Plate was registered in July 1840. When a third plate was needed early in 1841, a distinction was made by the inclusion on the stamps of a white line below "POSTAGE" and another above "TWO PENCE". The same feature appeared on the stamps of Plate 4, which was put to press in early 1850.

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Early Cancellations

There had been a few distinctive Maltese Cross cancellations, and in 1843 a series with the numbers 1 to 12 in the centre had been introduced at the London Chief Office, apparently as a check, when necessary, on the work of the various stampers. In general, however, the Maltese Cross cancellations were practically identical, so that if the accompanying date-stamp was poorly impressed there was no evidence of the office of origin. It was also objected that these cancellations were light and small. Various suggestions were made for an improved design. Finally, that of Mr. Francis Abbott, of the G.P.O., was adopted. His plan was to allot a number to each of the important offices in (1) England and Wales, (2) Scotland, (3) Ireland, and to have the number allotted to each office included in its obliterators. Bars were added around the number to give a heavier and larger cancellation, and these formed an oval for English and Welsh offices, a rectangle for Scottish offices, (4) a diamond for Irish offices. These numbered cancellations were introduced in 1844. Very similar bar obliterators with the number in a diamond frame were made for the stampers at the London Chief Office (Inland Section) and in a circular frame for those at the Chief Office of the London District Post.

Nine years later, in 1853, the disadvantage of impressing a separate cancellation and a separate date-stamp was overcome by the use of duplex postmarks combining the two. The shape of some of these has led to their becoming known as "Spoon" cancellations. Later, double obliterators were introduced with separate date and numbered portions side by side instead of joined into one postmark.

"Alphabets" of the Check Letters . . .



ALPH. I.	ALPH. II.	ALPH. III.	ALPH. IV.
SMALL.	LARGER,	TALL &	ABNORMALLY
1840.	BROADER,	SLENDER.	LARGE.
To 1851.	& HEAVIER.	1856,	1861.
	1852 To 1856.	To 1864.	Pl. 50.51.

In order to make the work of a forger harder, all postage stamps, from the beginning in May 1840, had had check-letters in the squares at the two lower corners. It was thought that the presence of an abnormal number of stamps with the same lettering would soon be noticed. The printed sheets of stamps consisted of 20 vertical rows of 12. The letters in the south-west corners ran, therefore, from "A" to "T" downwards and those in the south-east squares from "A" to "L" across. The check-letters of this series are known as belonging to "Alphabet I". With Plate 132 in 1852 a series of punches with broader, more uniform and rather larger letters were introduced. These are known as "Alphabet II" letters.

. . . and the "Archer" perfs.

This check-letter change has been mentioned because of its link with a change of far greater importance. All the postage stamps already referred to were imperforate, and their separation had been a source of trouble to postmasters, postmistresses and the public. Private attempts at pin perforation and rouletting by hand had even been made. In October 1847 a business man, Henry Archer, brought to the notice of the Post Office the rouletting machine he had invented. After tests with it, he was asked to have two more machines made. These two rouletting

machines, one with spur wheels and the other with blades, proved a failure. Among other faults in the process of the work, they wore the table under the sheets of stamps. Archer then invented another machine which perforated small holes between the stamps. After numerous trials and after certain improvements had been carried out, it was decided in 1853 that the machine should be purchased, Archer being given £4,000 for his rights.

The stamps used for Archer's demonstrations and for the official tests of this perforation machine were mainly from Plates 92 to 101 of the 1d. red-brown. Having acquired Archer's patents, the Government gave orders for suitable machines to the firm of David Napier & Sons. Some trials were made with the machines when supplied, but stamps from these trials (S.G.16c) are rare. On January 28th, 1854, officially perforated stamps came into use. These bore the Alphabet II type of check-letters introduced in 1852 for the 1d. imperforate stamps, whereas those used in Archer's rouletting machines and in the experiments with his perforating machine came from plates with Alphabet I check-letters. In that way it is possible to distinguish the experimental stamps from the much commoner later official issue.

Perf. 16 and perf. 14

Perforation was soon applied also to the 2d. stamps of Plate 4 and there, as in the case of the 1d. stamps, there were 16 perforated holes to 2 cm. It was found that this number of holes tended to weaken the paper so much that the sheets of stamps were inclined to break in handling. It was, therefore, decided to reduce the number of holes to 14 for the same 2 cm. space. It is likely that what are known as Government Trial Perforation Perf. 14, Alphabet I, stamps, from Plates 74 and 113 (S.G.16d), came from official perf. 14 trials in 1854.

The new perforation was introduced in January 1855 for the 1d. stamps and in early March 1855 for the Plate 4 2d. stamps. By this time, that plate was badly worn from its long use, and it had a short life with the 14 perforation.

The 1d. Perf. 16 stamps, for same reason as the 1d. red-brown imperforate stamps, come in a range of shades from yellow-brown to plum, while naturally the range is more limited in the shorter-lived 1d. Perf. 14 stamps. Shades occur also, as before, in the blue of the 2d. stamps. When perforating was introduced, the impressions rocked in on the plates were still not in perfect alignment nor with equal spacing. In consequence, many of the early perforated stamps were off-centre, vertically or horizontally, or both, and extreme cases of misperforation can be found. Well-centred and lightly-cancelled specimens are not easy to find. Poorly-centred specimens occur also even in later perforated issues.

Blued papers

The slight bluing or some 1d. black stamps—the bleuté paper variety (S.G.2a)—was due to small impurities in the paper. When fugitive inks were introduced in 1841, the use of prussiate of potash resulted in much more pronounced bluing of the paper. The necessary damping of the sheets caused the bluing as a rule, to become uniform, but if such diffusion did not take place, the bluing was naturally deepest when the ink was thickest. On the stamps, the Queen's face was more lightly printed than the background work and the result, in such cases, was an outline of the head or in the most pronounced type a clear white head surrounded by blue. Such varieties are known as "Ivory Heads". When these are shown at philatelic meetings and exhibitions, examples on imperforate stamps are almost invariably displayed, but "Ivory Heads" occur also on the 1d. perforated stamps, and I have seen some particularly fine specimens from Plate 185, perf. 16.

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The Embossed "High Values"

The use of strips and blocks of low-value stamps on registered letters, and letters to the colonies and foreign countries, was awkward, especially on small-sized private envelopes. When it was decided to produce stamps of higher value than 2d., recourse was had to embossing. At Somerset House the embossed envelopes and letter-sheets that replaced the mul-ready designs were already being produced, and the Mint coining presses there could be used for the preparation of the dies. Embossed 1s. stamps were issued in September 1847, followed by the 10d. value in the next year. Embossed 6d. stamps were also added in March 1854. The stamps of the first two values had two blue Dickinson safety threads in the paper, while the 6d. ones had a "VR" watermark.

The embossed stamps were impressed by hand, one at a time, so that poor spacing, and even overlapping occurred. The stamps did not lend themselves to perforation, and their production was lengthy and troublesome. When the demand for such stamps increased, it was decided to allow the firm of De La Rue & Co. to produce the higher-value stamps by their cheaper surface-printing method, and their first postage stamp—a 4d. value—appeared in 1855. Perkins, Bacon & Co. continued to print, by line-engraving, the lower-value stamps until their contract expired at the end of 1879.

A link between the line-engraved and the surface-printed stamps is provided by Henry Archer's "Prince Consort" surface-printed essay of 1850-51.

Line-Engraved Die II

The next changes involved the original die and watermark. During 1854 it was noticed that the former was showing signs of wear and that, in consequence, the life of the plates was decreasing. A transferred impression of the die was taken, on which the Queen's head was retouched, and also the lines deepened, by the engraver, William Humphrys. This has become known as Die II. A fresh series of numbers was given to the plates on which the new die was used.

Plate I of the new series was registered on January 15th, 1855. The stamps of this plate and those of the subsequent plates up to Plate 21, which was registered on June 8th of the same year, all bore the Alphabet II check-letters. The perforation 14 had only just been introduced when the earlier plates of the group were put to press and some perf. 16 combs were still in use. Stamps of the first 15 plates from Die II can, therefore, be found with the 16 and with the 14 perforation, while stamps

from the other six plates, viz., Plates 16 to 21, occur only with the 14 perforation. In these 1d. stamps and those that followed them from later Die II Plates, also on blued paper, there was a range of shades. The Die change did not affect the 2d. stamps when Plate 5 was registered in June 1855. Stamps from it can be found with both the perforations but, naturally, specimens with the 16 perforation are rare.

Small and large watermarks

As another precaution against forgery, all the postage stamps from the 1d. blacks onwards had had, in addition to the check-letters, a watermark consisting of a small crown. In 1854 the decision was made to change to a larger and more visible crown. The new watermark came into use towards the end of the first half of 1855. Stamps from the first 15 of the new Die II plates exist Perf. 16 with the Large Crown watermark and stamps from all the first 21 such plates Perf. 14 with the Large Crown watermark. The stamps from Plate 5 of the 2d. stamp also exist in both perforations with the new watermark, those with the disappearing 16 perforation being rare.

Alphabet III

Simultaneously with the registration of Plate 21 Die II came Plate 22 starting a series of new taller check-letters, which have become known as Alphabet III letters. As had happened in Alphabet I and II, there were variations in certain letters. Plates 23 and 24 followed, but were transferred to the reserve plates and re-numbered Reserve Plates 17 and 18, new Plates 23 and 24 being laid down later in 1855. The Small Crown watermark was still in use when some of the stamps from early Alphabet III plates came into use, and examples with that watermark can be found from Plates 22 to 27. Such specimens are, of course, scarce, this being especially so in the case of Plate 27.

White papers

In the description of "Ivory Head" varieties mention has been made of the blueing of the paper. White paper examples do occur among the 1d. imperforate and early perforated 1d. stamps, and the occurrence of such in the second half of 1856 may well, at the very start, have been equally accidental, but in the last months of the year, undoubtedly, there was a definite attempt to eliminate the blueing. The experiments appear to have included attempts to find suitable fugitive inks without the use of prussiate of potash; attempts to neutralise its action by other agents; and other trials with new inks.

Late in 1856 white paper stamps are to be found, but are far from common, as the method of producing them, apparently, was not reliable and so the experiments were continued.

In the early months of 1857 new shades on blued paper appeared. These included plum shades; others of somewhat similar shades but with a greater red element; and various shades of orange.

The use of agents to neutralise the effects of the prussiate of potash appears then to have led to a yellowish or cream toning of the paper, the stamps being at first in orange-brown or orange-red shades. Then the red element seems to have been increased, and the results included a bright red shade and other shades practically identical with the later rose-red stamps of July 1857. Printings in light and pale rose on the toned paper must, however, have been larger.

In April 1857 stamps in the pale rose shade began to appear on white paper. These, sometimes with a more pinkish element and sometimes with quite a "washy" appearance, continued for a time, but gave way by the July to what are known as the rose-red stamps on white paper (S.G.40 and 41), thus closing the period of what is usually called the Transitional Shades.

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An example of an "Ivory Head" Embossed 10d. Prince Consort Essay.



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Alphabet III 1d. stamps from Plates 22 to 48 are known on blued paper and are always perf. 14. Specimens on blued paper from Plate 48 are rare. Rose-red stamps on white paper were produced, in all, from Plates 27, 33, 34, 36-39, 41-52, 55-68, and Reserve Plate 17. The perforation was normally 14, but perf. 16 had, even in 1857, not quite vanished, for towards the end of the year a reserve perf. 16 comb was put into use for a short time in error or perhaps to fill some emergency. Rose-red stamps with that perforation have been found from Plates 27, 34, 36-38, 42-49, 52, 55-60.

Plate 6 of the 2d. stamp was put to press in May 1857. It had Alphabet III check-letters and, unlike Plate 5, the stamps from it do not occur with the Small Crown watermark. Its period of use overlapped the short period of use of the reserve 16 comb. Such examples are, however, scarce in comparison with those with the usual perf. 14.

Last chance for "economy" specialists

It may be well to point out that the rose-red 1d. stamps, perf. 14, are now the only early line-engraved British stamps available to the collector of limited means who desires to specialise in such stamps. The rose-red and deep rose-red stamps are still catalogued (unplated) at 2d. and 6d. respectively, and specialist dealers can still supply examples from the common plates at a reasonable price. With the publication of Stanley Gibbons's "Specialised Great Britain" catalogue of Victorian stamps, and the interest it has aroused, it is unlikely that this situation will remain for long.

Alphabet IV "Provisional" Printings

The final change was to what is called the Plate Number series. For the first time the number of the plate producing it was shown on each stamp. For even greater security, the design of these stamps included check-letters in all four corners, those at the top being in reverse order to those at the foot. This lettering was in sans-serif capitals, not used previously.

Work on the production of these stamps began in early 1858, but it was a lengthy process to produce the necessary number of plates, especially as a number of the early ones had been rejected because of faults. To fill the gap until the new plates were ready, in 1864, it became necessary in 1861 to put Plates 50 and 51, mentioned among the rose-red plates, into use. In 1856 the experiment had been made on these two plates of having the check-letter hand-engraved on the plates instead of being punched in. These hand-engraved letters are said to belong to Alphabet IV. This experiment was considered unsatisfactory, and the method was not continued. Plates 50 and 51 had been kept from then in reserve, but rose-red printings were now made from them in the wait for the Plate Number stamps. In the next year Reserve Plates 15 to 17 were similarly pressed into service. Reserve Plates 15 and 16 which had been laid down in 1855 had Alphabet II check-letters, whereas Reserve Plate 17 (the original Die II, Plate 23) had Alphabet III check-letters, some of the distinctive early type.

The Plate Number Group included not only 1d. and 2d. stamps, but also ½d. stamps for the reduced charge on newspapers and printed matter and 1½d. stamps originally prepared for another change in postal rates that did not come into being. The stamps of this group were the last of the line-engraved series and continued to be produced until the contract of Perkins, Bacon & Co. ended in 1879.

The printers' difficulties included, of course, troubles which led to fresh entries, double and re-cut check-letters, re-cut and extended frame-line, etc., but these lie outside the scope of this article.