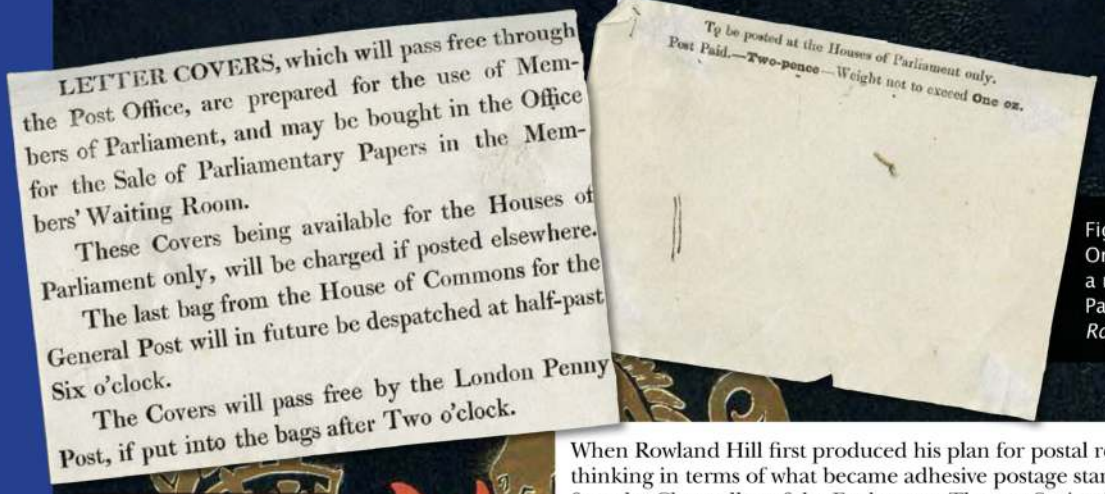
Creating the Penny Black

By Douglas N Muir

175 years ago this month the world was introduced to a certain 'slip of paper' that was to revolutionise postal systems around the globe. As we mark this important milestone for the Penny Black, Douglas Muir, Senior Curator Philately at the British Postal Museum & Archive, charts the road to its introduction as well as the other methods of prepayment of postage put in place to meet Rowland Hill's postal reform.



LETTER COVERS, which will pass free through the Post Office, are prepared for the use of Members of Parliament, and may be bought in the Office for the Sale of Parliamentary Papers in the Members' Waiting Room.

These Covers being available for the Houses of Parliament only, will be charged if posted elsewhere.

The last bag from the House of Commons for the General Post will in future be despatched at half-past Six o'clock.

The Covers will pass free by the London Penny Post, if put into the bags after Two o'clock.

To be posted at the Houses of Parliament only.
Post Paid.—**Two-pence**—Weight not to exceed **One oz.**

Fig 1 The page from the President's Order Book dated 16 January 1840 with a notice and proof of the Houses of Parliament envelope. *Image copyright Royal Mail, courtesy of the BPMA*

Fig 2 Portrait of William Mulready. *William Mulready by John Linnell. oil on panel, 1833. © National Portrait Gallery, London*

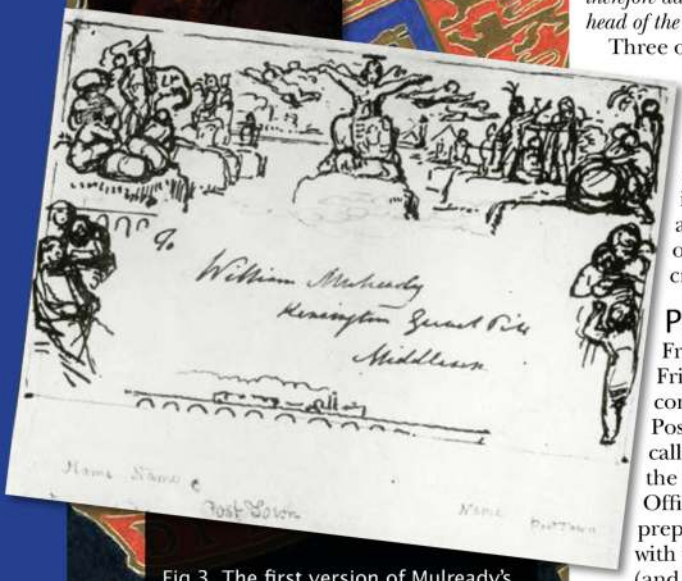


Fig 3. The first version of Mulready's 'highly poetic' drawing, complete with tug. *Image copyright Royal Mail, courtesy of the BPMA*

When Rowland Hill first produced his plan for postal reform in January 1837 he was not thinking in terms of what became adhesive postage stamps for prepayment of postage. In fact, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Thomas Spring Rice, to whom he had submitted his plan privately, had to ask Hill to clarify his ideas on prepayment. Even then, it was only in response to a question when he was summoned to give evidence to the Commission of Inquiry into the Post Office that he made his famous suggestion, almost as an afterthought, of using 'a bit of paper just large enough to bear the stamp, and covered at the back with a glutinous wash' which someone might attach to the back of a letter. From this sprang the adhesive postage stamp which was to revolutionise the world's postal systems.

In a previous article, the campaign which resulted in Hill's ideas being accepted has been documented. This campaign was followed by a competition run by the Treasury, overseen, and judged, by Hill. In his report on that competition, dated 6 December 1839, Hill stated that, with regard to the design of any "stamp" for prepayment, he quite agreed with Mr Oldham, one of the competitors, that it should be:

'as beautiful a specimen of fine art as can be obtained; also that there is nothing in which minute differences of execution are so readily detected as in a representation of the human face… I would therefore advise that either in the embossed or in the engraved part of the Stamp or perhaps in both, a head of the Queen by one of our first artists should be introduced'

Three or four methods of prepayment were proposed as a result of the Treasury Competition. Confusingly, Hill and Henry Cole (the main characters involved in their implementation) referred to them all without distinction as 'stamps'. The methods were: stamped paper; covers or envelopes; a variation of covers which became letter sheets; and labels or 'appliqués'. These just so happened to coincide almost precisely with what Hill had previously suggested in June 1839 in a letter entitled 'On the Collection of Postage by means of Stamps' printed and circulated by the Mercantile Committee. No one seems to have commented on this judicious selection at the time. But it would take a while for these to be created. In the meantime uniform penny postage came into being.

Parliamentary envelopes

Free franking for Members of both houses of Parliament ended on 10 January, a Friday, the day uniform penny postage became a reality. Those MPs were clearly concerned about their own importance, and the new necessity of taking letters to the Post Office with cash for prepayment, for on the following Monday (13 January) Hill called on the Speaker of the House of Commons at the behest of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He immediately arranged with the Speaker and other Parliamentary Officers 'for a sort of stamped cover for the use of the Members & had specimens prepared at the Stationary [sic] Office'. The following day arrangements were settled with postal officials and on 16 January, the first day of the new session of Parliament (and remarkably swiftly!) this notice was circulated to Members:

'LETTER COVERS, which will pass free through the Post Office, are prepared for the use of Members of Parliament, and may be bought in the Office for the Sale of Parliamentary Papers in the Members' Waiting Room.

These Covers being available for the Houses of Parliament only, will be charged if posted elsewhere.

The last bag from the House of Commons for the General Post will in future be despatched at half-past Six o'clock.

The Covers will pass free by the London Penny Post, if put into the bags after Two o'clock.'

A copy of this notice can be found in the President's Order book in the BPMA archive under that date, together with what is probably a proof example of one of the stamped covers—a 2d. envelope with the wording 'One oz.' instead of the normal '1 oz.' (*Fig 1*). This was the first form of 'stamp' to be brought into use to implement Hill's reforms. MPs were informed that the letter covers might be bought at the office for the sale of parliamentary papers in the Members Waiting Room. They were sold at the cost of the postage but could only be used if posted at the Houses of Parliament. Details of how these were to be dealt with at the Post Office are noted on 17 January, again in the President's Order book, with the remark that 'This duty will be confined to the Inspector of Franks.'—who would otherwise now presumably have nothing else to do.

Crude in appearance, the envelopes were hand-folded and thus varied in size; the inscriptions were printed letterpress after they had been made up. There were two basic varieties at 1d. and 2d. simply inscribed 'To be posted at the Houses of Parliament only. Post Paid.—[value in words]—Weight not to exceed [½ oz. or 1 oz.] with only one example known at the 4d. rate, and that may have been a wrapper. Later in January there were separate envelopes for the House of Lords and the House of Commons.

Some 260 examples of these parliamentary envelopes have now been recorded in a new book (*Ref 1*), a remarkable figure. There are many more types, and far more examples than previously thought. It will be interesting to see this reflected in the next edition of the specialised catalogue. The period of validity ended with the introduction of the Mulready stationery on 6 May.

The Mulready stationery

Until 1840 the use of envelopes was virtually unknown in Britain. This was obviously because the extra cover constituted another sheet and therefore normally doubled the cost of postage. Now with postage being charged by weight there was no such restriction.

In his report on the Treasury Competition entries Hill had included a sketch by Henry Cole providing a layout and idea for the design of what became the lettersheet. This showed groups of people with a small globe and a ship in the distance. Such symbolism is clearly carried through to the final design.

About the same time, in December 1839, Henry Corbould brought his own design to Henry Cole. Now in the Cole papers in the Victoria & Albert Museum, this featured a central Britannia flanked by Mercury, the messenger of the gods, and Ceres, goddess of tillage and corn, resting on a horn of plenty. On the reverse is a sketch of the head of Queen Victoria, a feature also recommended by Hill in his report. Although they may have regretted this later, neither Cole nor Hill can have found this pleasing (possibly because of the lack of international symbolism). For the next day, at the behest of Francis Baring, now Chancellor of the Exchequer, Cole approached William Mulready (*Fig 2*).

Fig 4. The original woodblock of the Mulready design created by John Thompson in January 1840. *Image copyright Royal Mail, courtesy of the BPMA*

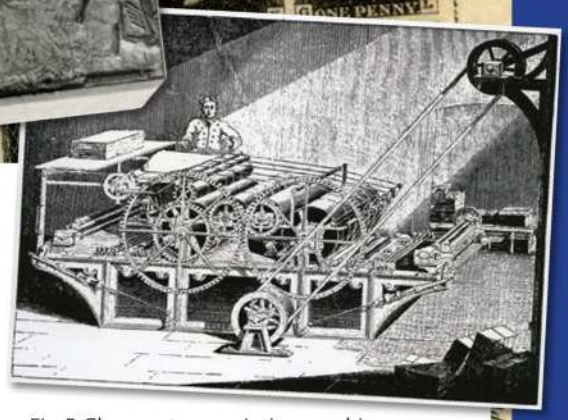


Fig 5 Clowes steam printing machine, on which the Mulready was printed. You can just see a boy's hand removing the printed sheet from the middle of the machine. *Image copyright Royal Mail, courtesy of the BPMA*

Mulready was Irish, his family having moved to London by 1792. Despite poor beginnings he became a successful landscape and genre painter (though strangely unskilled with people's faces, as could be seen in an exhibition of his work at the V & A in 1987). Nevertheless, he was elected RA in 1816. Although he tried hard to disguise his Irish origins he had a wild nature and flaming temper and his wife had left him in 1809. He now interpreted Cole's ideas and three days after their first discussions produced a sketch which Cole described as 'highly poetic', though it is unclear if this is a commendation.

The sketch retained Corbould's central Britannia but then had her send out cherubic messengers to all corners of the Empire, reflecting the global groups in Cole's original drawing. Elephants indicated India and a group of native Americans seems to have been taken from Benjamin West's drawing of William Penn's much earlier treaty with them. At the foot of the drawing a small steam tug is chugging across an aqueduct (*Fig 3*). After some discussion the steam tug and aqueduct were removed and the cherubs became angels. At the time it was not noticed that one of these had only one leg, though this was added when the drawing was presented to Baring.

When a proof of the design was shown to Queen Victoria Mulready added a commentary (remarkably twee, almost Dickensian in attitude—and most certainly of its time) which must have reflected the original ideas of Cole and Hill:

'This Design is intended to convey the idea that the measure it assists in carrying out, emanated from Great Britain, and that it is a very wide spreading benefit, facilitating our friendly and commercial intercourse with remote lands, and bringing, in a manner, our separated brethren closer to the sick beds and cheerful firesides of home'.

Production

Henry Cole had known John Thompson, perhaps the foremost wood engraver of his day, since March 1838. Apprenticed to Robert Branston (senior), another great engraver, he aimed to imitate or rival the effect of metal in engraving black metal-like lines in wood. Yet he was also an experienced metal engraver. Cole approached him about the design initially and then asked him to make enquiries as to how the envelopes and lettersheets should be printed. As a result, he suggested that they should be printed from stereotype plates created from a brass original which he would create. It was agreed that William Clowes would be the printers, though there were reservations about their ability to produce the stereotype plates without Thompson's supervision.

As primarily a wood engraver, Thompson began his work by chiselling out the design on a block of boxwood, complete with names of artist and engraver, and including the value legend—POSTAGE ONE PENNY—all standing proud (*Fig 4*). This now resides in the collections of the BPMA but only, once authenticated, after having been kept by its original owners in a centrally-heated flat which caused the wood to dry out and crack. Extensive and expensive restoration had to result.

Thompson then began the arduous task of engraving the brass master die, again with the lines in relief but with a hole for the value tablet. This took three months in all. Stereotype casts were made from the brass die by Clowes and these were then picked by Thompson before being made up into printing formes. Clowes had some 20 steam presses and there is a remarkable illustration of one of them just showing the hands of a second boy operator in the centre of the machine removing the printed sheets (*Fig 5*).

On sale from 1 May in London were two types of lettersheet and envelope, 1d. and 2d.

each, being sold at slightly higher rates. As is well known they were greeted with ridicule and a large number of caricatures were produced, often lampooning Mulready's Irish origins or the angel with one leg.

Mulready was incensed; Hill was sad. In his diary for 12 May the latter noted:

'I fear we shall be obliged to substitute some other stamp for that designed by Mulready, which is abused and ridiculed on all sides. In departing so widely from the "lion & unicorn" nonsense, I fear that we have run counter to settled opinions & prejudices somewhat rashly. I now think it would have been wiser to have followed established custom in all the details of the measure where practicable. The conduct of the public, however, shows that although our attempt to diffuse a taste for fine art may have been imprudent, such diffusion is very much wanted.'

The stamp eventually substituted was an embossed medallion from a die by William Wyon.

Stamped paper

The embossed medallion was originally intended to be used on paper sent in by the public to be stamped. Hill naturally turned to William Wyon, one of a distinguished family of engravers and medallists (*Fig 6*). In 1816 he had been appointed to a post in the Royal Mint, becoming Chief Engraver in 1828. His heads were described as having 'both force and delicacy' and were always admirable in terms of likeness.

Fig 6 Portrait of William Wyon by Clive Abbott. *Image copyright Royal Mail, courtesy of the BPMA*

Fig 7 Wyon's first die for the medallion stamp. *R M Phillips Collection* (Reduced)

Fig 8 1838. Wyon's 'City' medal in silver. *R M Phillips Collection*

Wyon began work on the die about 11 December 1839 and later added the diadem to the Queen's head. He then supplied this first experimental die to Charles Whiting for an engine-turned background to be added and proofs to be taken. There were problems with the proofing and it was not until 25 January 1840 that the first die facing left without a pendant curl to the hair was ready (*Fig 7*). Wording surrounding the head read 'POSTAGE 1 D: HALF OZ': but this was to be changed to 'POSTAGE ONE PENNY'. Arguments arose between Wyon and Whiting as to who was responsible for the poor reproduction and Whiting produced his own version with the head facing right, no diadem and a pendant curl to the hair.

Problems were to continue with a series of different dies and the medallion was not ready to be introduced with the other 'stamps' in May. The idea of a stamping-to-order facility was formally abandoned in October, not to be introduced until 1855, but the Wyon medallion was not lost. Eventually, it replaced the Mulready design on envelopes in 1841.

Adhesive labels

At the same time as work was commencing on the envelopes and lettersheets, and Wyon was working with Whiting on the embossed medallion, Cole approached Perkins, Bacon & Petch and asked them if they could engrave steel dies less than one inch square for the labels. They had already been in contact over his designs for the Treasury Competition earlier in the year. On 14 December 1839 the printers wrote to confirm that they would prepare a die ¾ inch square:

Fig 9 Henry Courbould's drawing for the Penny Black. *Reproduced by gracious permission of Her Majesty The Queen to whom copyright belongs*

'to be composed of the best Engraving of Her Majesty's Portrait which we can get executed by the best Artist, to be surrounded by white and black line Engine-turned work … and the appropriate wording – for the sum of Seventy-five Guineas.'

Hill replied that they should submit a sketch before beginning the work and that the Queen's head was to be drawn from Wyon's City medal. The so-called 'City' medal commemorated Queen Victoria's first visit to the City of London in November 1837 (*Fig 8*). It was based on a sketch originally drawn in 1834 when Princess Victoria was only 15. Perkins Bacon then commissioned Henry Corbould, who had worked for them before, to make the drawing, for which he was paid £12.

Fig 10 Portrait of Charles Heath by Clive Abbott. *Image copyright Royal Mail, courtesy of the BPMA*

Such a drawing exists, almost exactly ¾ inch square as required, with a central drawing of the head of Queen Victoria surrounded by wording— POST OFFICE · ONE PENNY · HALF OUNCE. This is now in the Royal Philatelic Collection (*Fig 9*). Unfortunately, it was annotated decades later by Rowland's son Pearson Hill—'Original sketch for the postage stamp. *(by Wyon)*' [my emphasis]. This has caused considerable confusion. Given its size, and what happened next, it is certainly the original sketch. But it is not by Wyon, who had nothing to do with the process of creating the design for the label and was at this point working on the embossed head of the Queen for the medallion stamp. Other drawings in the Cole papers, also with later notes, are equally wrongly described as being by Wyon. Old men forget and in this case have confused the author of the drawing with the creator of the basis of the design.

Happily, there are other drawings by Corbould of the head of Queen Victoria for comparison, sketched two years earlier. These are now in the Phillips Collection, though wrongly ascribed to the design process for the 1d. black. These drawings are very similar in style to that for the adhesive label making authorship by Corbould extremely likely.

In the Cole papers is an example of engine-turning with a paper silhouette of the Queen's head pasted on it and exactly the same wording. Again the size is almost exactly ¾ inch square. It is clearly based on the previous sketch. On 31 December either or both of these sketches was shown to Hill who made detailed amendments.

'The length of the die to be one sixteenth of an inch more, equally divided between top and bottom, and one sixteenth of an inch more to be taken at the bottom so as to insert in black letters without an underground, the words Half oz. One Penny'

Hill also noted that 'Certain letters to vary with each stamp to be placed at the top behind the head. and calculated the layout of the sheet to be of 240 stamps (12×20).

At the printers an impression of the engine-turning first selected for the background was taken and, on a roller, the space for the head was cleared. This was then transferred to another piece of flat steel which became the first actual die. In his authoritative work on the printing of the line-engraved stamps E D Bacon states: 'The die was then handed, with the drawing made by Henry Corbould, to Charles Heath (*Fig 10*) for the engraving of the Queen's head.'

Charles Heath was a well-known engraver of book illustrations. His atelier, however, employed several assistants and pupils who may have done most of the work. One was his son Frederick who is often credited with the actual engraving of the postage stamp die. Whoever was involved there is no documentation detailing the work and progress can only be seen in surviving proofs (*Fig 11*). First, the face was faintly outlined and the diadem drawn in. Then the engraving of the face followed. At the foot was added the legend 'POSTAGE ONE PENNY' in sans capitals and this first die was completed by mid January 1840. Unfortunately, both background and Queen's head were too light to transfer well and so the die was rejected.

A new die was now urgently required. For the engine-turning a different selection was made with a darker background and again a space for the head was cleared on a roller. This work is believed to have been carried out by George Rushall, an engraver with the printers. Today, this experimental die still exists on the reverse of the piece of steel used to engrave the final master die for the 1d. black, the 'Old Original' (*Fig 12*). To compare both dies a small plate of five examples of each was created and proofs in dark blue taken. One very attractive example is in the Phillips Collection and from this the considerable improvement of the new die can be seen (*Fig 13*).

On 16 January 1840 a completely new die, largely based on the experimental die, was sent to Charles Heath again for the Queen's head to be engraved. On 20 February it was returned with the comment 'If that does not transfer well nothing will.' It did. This new die bore simply the Queen's head and the background engine turning, but no lettering or legend. A proof of this stage was sent to Queen Victoria for her approval (*Fig 14*). An autograph letter came back expressing her 'high appreciation' of the stamp as it then was.

As on the Wyon City medal it shows Queen Victoria wearing the famous and beautiful diadem made in 1820 for the coronation of King George IV. Set with 1333 diamonds with a pearl base it bears the national emblems of the rose, thistle and shamrock alternating with crosses pattée. It can also be seen on the Wilding portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, the Machin sculpture of the Queen and most recently on the new effigy for the coinage unveiled this year.

It had already been agreed that stamps in the sheet should bear variable lettering. This was to read A A to A L horizontally and A A to T A vertically in the sheet. At the end of February 1840 watercolour sketches were made for Hill to show the effect of crosses in the upper corners, the space for the lettering in the lower corners and to indicate the colours proposed for the 1d. and 2d. stamps. One pair of these is in the Royal Philatelic Collection and a slightly smaller pair is in the Phillips Collection.

The upper crosses and wording ('POSTAGE' at the top and 'ONE PENNY' at the bottom) were added by engraving at the beginning of March as reflected in proofs again in the Phillips Collection (*Fig 15*). The first plate was produced from this die.

Fig 11 Die proofs showing progress of the first die of the 1d. black. *R M Phillips Collection*

Fig 12 A proof of the experimental die, now on the reverse of the 'Old Original'. *Image copyright Royal Mail, courtesy of the BPMA*

Fig 13 A comparison of the first and experimental dies. *R M Phillips Collection*

Fig 14 A die proof of the head section, of which Queen Victoria expressed 'high appreciation'. *R M Phillips Collection*

Fig 15 Die proofs showing stages of the final die of the 1d black. *R M Phillips Collection*

The original design was engraved in reverse on a die of soft steel (*Fig 16*). This was then hardened in a furnace. A soft steel roller was put in a transfer press and rolled under great pressure over the hardened die until the design was transferred to the roller. Sunk lines on the original die now became lines standing proud on the roller. We have no transfer rollers from this period but the same process can be seen on photographs of transferring the image of the Castles high values in the 1950s (*Fig 17* and *Fig 18*). In its turn the roller was hardened and from this 240 reproductions of the design were laid down on to a soft steel plate. This first plate was still without letters in the bottom corners and a proof was taken in this state on 1 April 1840.

Fig 16 The 'Old Original' master die of the 1d. black. *Image copyright Royal Mail, courtesy of the BPMA*

Fig 17 Creating a recess printing plate (1)—transferring an image from master die to roller (using a 1955 Castles engraving). *Image copyright Royal Mail, courtesy of the BPMA*

Fig 18 Creating a recess printing plate (2)—transferring the image from transfer roller to plate (using a 1955 Castles engraving). *Image copyright Royal Mail, courtesy of the BPMA*

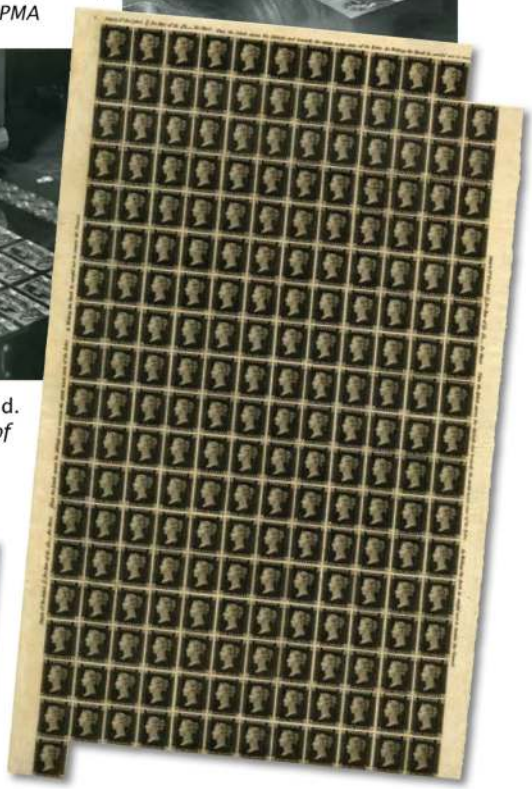


Fig 19 A registration sheet of plate 1 of the 1d. black. *Image copyright Royal Mail, courtesy of the BPMA* (Reduced)

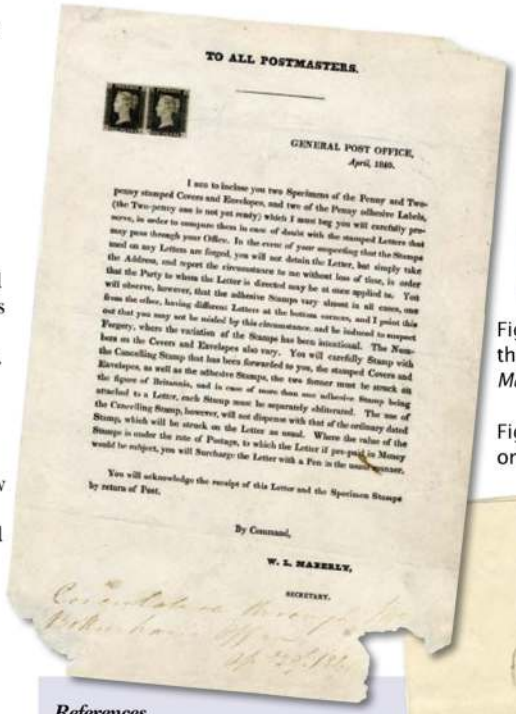
Lettering was now punched in to each stamp image by hand. It is this which makes not only every stamp in one sheet of 1d. blacks different, but also every stamp from each of the 11 plates used.

Printing began on 11 April at Perkins, Bacon & Petch's works in Whitefriars Street rather than their premises in Fleet Street, on flat-bed printing presses worked by a large diameter hand wheel, an invention of Jacob Perkins. By early May the printers were producing some 600,000 stamps daily on five (later six) presses working night and day. In all, there were 11 plates used for the 1d. from which over 68 million Penny Blacks had been printed by the end of January 1841. The collections of the BPMA include the proof sheet, eight registration or imprimatur sheets (*Fig 19*), and two VR 1d. black registration sheets. The VR 1d. black was intended for Government use, but this was never put into practice. There was also a proposal for a 2d. VR stamp. Not all plates are represented in the collections and some are both before and after hardening. For some reason, no registration sheets have survived of the first two plates of the 2d. blue.

The paper used was manufactured by hand by Wise of Rush Mills in Northampton. Sheets bore 240 small crown watermarks so placed that each stamp would fall on one watermark. This security paper was made under the supervision of an officer of the Stamps and Taxes Office.

At the end of April 1840 a notice was sent out to postmasters informing them of the new labels and envelopes and attached were two 1d. blacks from the first printing. It was noted that the 2d. blue was not yet ready (*Fig 20*).

The 1d. black stamp and the Mulready stationery went on sale in London on 1 May 1840 but were not valid for postage until 6 May (*Fig 21*). The 2d. blue was available on the 6th. The image of the stamps was immediately popular, unlike the Mulready design. The world's first adhesive postage stamp, it became iconic and a symbol of the age, rather like the present-day Machin sculpture which in many ways reflects it.



TO ALL POSTMASTERS.

GENERAL POST OFFICE,
April, 1840.

I am to inclose you two Specimens of the Penny and Two-penny stamped Covers and Envelopes, and two of the Penny adhesive Labels, (the Two-pency one is not yet ready) which I must beg you will carefully preserve, in order to compare them in case of doubt with the stamped Letters that may pass through your Office. In the event of your suspecting that the Stamps used on any Letters are forged, you will not detain the Letter, but simply take the Address, and report the circumstances to me without loss of time, in order that the Party to whom the Letter is directed may be at once applied to. You will observe, however, that the adhesive Stamps vary almost in all cases, one from the other, having different Letters at the bottom corners, and I point this out that you may not be misled by this circumstance, and be induced to suspect Forgery, where the variation of the Stamps has been intentional. The Numbers on the Covers and Envelopes also vary. You will carefully Stamp with the Cancelling Stamp that has been forwarded to you, the stamped Covers and Envelopes, as well as the adhesive Stamps, the two former must be struck on the figure of Britannia, and in case of more than one adhesive Stamp being attached to a Letter, each Stamp must be separately obliterated. The use of the Cancelling Stamp, however, will not dispense with that of the ordinary dated Stamp, which will be struck on the Letter as usual. Where the value of the Stamps is under the rate of Postage, to which the Letter if pre-paid in Money would be subject, you will Surcharge the Letter with a Fine in the usual manner.

You will acknowledge the receipt of this Letter and the Specimen Stamps by return of Post.

By Command,

W. L. MAXELLY,
SECRETARY.

Fig 20 The notice to postmasters informing them of the 1d. black. *Image copyright Royal Mail, courtesy of the BPMA*

Fig 21 A first day cover of the 1d. black posted on 6 May 1840. *R M Phillips Collection* (Reduced)

Exhibition at the BPMA

From 6 May for three months, and coinciding with the Europhilex exhibition at the Business Design Centre, Islington, there will be a display of some of the main items in the story of the 1d. black at the BPMA in Freeling House. These will include one of the registration sheets and the 'Old Original' die and will also show how the Royal Mail miniature sheet being issued for the anniversary came about.

The BPMA Post & Go machine will have a special underprint for the length of the exhibition. It is intended that this feature the Maltese Cross.

Douglas Muir is the author of *Postal Reform and The Penny Black: A New Appreciation*, still available from the BPMA online shop.

References
Ref 1 Huggins, A. & Klempka, E. Great Britain: The 1840 Prepaid Parliamentary Envelopes

Acknowledgements
GSM would like to thank the National Portrait Gallery for the use of the William Mulready oil on canvas portrait shown in this article.