# 175th Anniversary of the Penny Black

## By Edward Klempka

Edward Klempka looks at early useage 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

# POST OFFICE REGULATIONS.

On AND AFTER THE 10th January, a Letter not exceeding HALF AN OUNCE IN WEIGHT, may be sent from any part, of the United Kingdom, to any other part, for ONE PENNY, if paid when posted, or for TWO PENCE if paid when delivered.

THE SCALE OF RATES,

If puld when posted, is as follows, for all Letters, whether sent by the General or by any Local Post,

Not exceeding & Ounce, but not exceeding 1 Ounce

Twopence. 1 Ounce ..... 2 Ounces Fourpence.

Ditto 1 Ounces 2 Ounces Sixpence.

Ditto 2 Ounces ... 3 Ounces Sixpence.

and so on; an additional Two-pence for every additional Ounce.

With but few exceptions, the WEIGHT is limited to Sixteen Ounces. If not paid when posted, double the above Rates are charged on Inland Letters.

COLONIAL LETTERS. If sent by Packet Twelve Times, if by Private Ship Eight Times, the

FOREIGN LETTERS.

FOREIGN LETTERS.

The Packet Rates which vary, will be seen at the Post Office. The Ship Rates are the same as the Ship Rates for Colonial Letters.

As regards Foreign and Colonial Letters, there is no limitation as to wight. All sent outwards, with a few exceptions, which may be learnt at the Post Office, must be paid when posted as hereicolare.

Letters intended to go by Private Ship must be marked "Ship Letter." Some arrangements of minor importance, which are omitted in this Notice,

Some arrangements of minor importance, which are omitted in this Notice, may be seen in that placarded at the Past Office. No Articles should be transmitted by Post which are liable to Infury by
No Articles should be transmitted by Post which are liable to Infury by
being stamped, or by being evalued in the Bage.
It is particularly requested that all letters may be fully and legibly
addressed, and posted as carly as convenient.

elys ... Livesell, Lordon,



GENERAL POST OFFICE, Edinburgh, April, 1840.

I am to inclose you two Specimens of the Penny and Twopenny stamped Covers and Envelopes, and two of the Penny adhesive Labels,
(the Two-penny 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 out any Letters are forged, you will not detain the Letter, but simply take
the Address, and report the circumstance 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 his
from the other, having different Letters at the bottom corners, and I point his
out that you may not be misled by the circumstance, and be induced to suspect
Forgery, where the variation of the Stamps has been intentional. The Nunbers 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
Exvelopes, 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 Pen in the usual manner.

You will acknowledge the receipt of this Letter and the Specimen St

By Command,

EDWARD S. LEES

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.



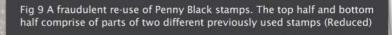
Fig 6 Envelope franked with 16 Penny Black stamps printed from Plate 1a. The strip of eight Penny Blacks (above) was added on top of the orginal two strips of four (left) to pay for redirection (Reduced)



all with corner letters PC; Plate 1a and Plate 1b printed in black; Plate 1b printed in red-brown

Fig 7 Three stamps from Plate 1,

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

