

THE PENNY BLACK

The story of the first postage stamp



It's hard to imagine a letter without a stamp, or at least it's hard to imagine a letter being delivered without a stamp, but before 1840, stamps were not required to get a letter to its destination. In 1837, however, a man proposed to reform that and in doing so, he changed the way the world thought about mail.

Affordable postal service in England started back in 1680, initiated not by the English government, but by an entrepreneur in London named William Dockwra. On April 1 of that year, Dockwra established the Penny Post, which delivered letters within London and a 10-mile radius around the city. People paid a penny when they received the letter. Until that time, there was only a single place in London where people could receive their letters, but the Penny Post soon offered collections at nearly 600 locations within London, and attempted delivery several times a day.

The idea proved popular, but not foolproof. People often were not at home when the mail was delivered, or refused to accept the letter. Dockwra had bigger problems, though. He had applied for and been given a patent for the service, but the profits from the government-operated General Post Office had been granted to the king's brother, the Duke of York (who would later become King James II). Dockwra was required to surrender his patent and pay £2,000 in compensation.

Because of its success, the Penny Post made lots of enemies. Couriers and porters assaulted the Post's messengers, tore down advertisements and committed other acts of violence against the service they saw as unfair competition. Members of the Whig Party used the Penny Post to distribute

anti-Catholic and seditious newsletters they couldn't send through the General Post Office, to try to stop the Duke of York from becoming king.

As a result, the Penny Post was taken over by royal authorities in 1682 and became part of the existing General Post Office. From that point on, the postal rates gradually increased as the monarchy used the profits from the Government Post Office and the London Penny Post to pay for several wars with France. At one point, it cost what many would consider a day's wages to send a letter across London.

This went on for more than a century, and as a result of the mounting public complaints, a Committee of Enquiry was set up in 1835. This is when an educator and inventor by the name of Rowland Hill came forward with a crazy idea: a prepaid stamp that cost only a penny.

Previously, Hill had inherited his father's private school, Hazelwood, and set about reforming it with progressive ideas. Hazelwood provided a model for public education for the emerging middle classes. The school, which Hill redesigned, included innovations such as a science laboratory, a swimming pool and forced-air heating. In a pamphlet explaining his school's theories, Hill argued that kindness, instead of caning, and moral influence, rather than fear, should be the predominant forces in school discipline. The idea was that students would gain sufficient knowledge, skills and understanding to allow them to continue self-education throughout their lives. The school became an international model and cemented Hill's reputation as a reformer.

His next project was reforming the postal system. One story asserts that Hill became interested in postal reform when he saw a poor young woman who could not afford to pay to receive a letter sent to her by her fiancé.

Besides the rising price of postage, the existing postal system was rife with mismanagement and fraud. Coded information often appeared on the cover of the letter so that the recipient could get the information from the front and then refuse delivery to avoid payment. In addition, postal rates were complex, depending on the distance and the number of sheets in the letter.

Hill, in his 1837 pamphlet, *Post Office Reform: its Importance and Practicability*, pointed out that most of the costs in the postal system were



Opposite page: Rowland Hill

Right: A sheet of Penny Black stamps

Below: A letter with a canceled Penny Black stamp. At the time, envelopes weren't widely used, so it was just a piece of paper folded up and addressed on the back.

not for transport, but for laborious handling procedures at the origins and the destinations. Costs could be reduced dramatically if postage were prepaid by the sender. To prove prepayment, Hill proposed the use of adhesive stamps (such stamps had already long been in use to show payment of taxes). In addition, Hill suggested lowering the postage rate to a penny per half ounce, without regard to distance. That would constitute a sizable drop in the cost of postage, but Hill argued that if common people were given the means to use the postal system, the increased volume would more than offset the slash in price.

Hill's ideas were not universally accepted. The postmaster, Lord Lichfield, denounced Hill's ideas as "wild and visionary schemes." Secretary to the Post Office William Maberly said, "His plan appears to be a preposterous one."

But merchants, traders and bankers saw in Hill's ideas a path to making the post less corrupt and a better tool for trade. They convinced Parliament to let Hill try his system for a two-year trial, starting in 1839.

Hill immediately held a competition to design the first stamp. There were some 2,600 entries, but none was considered suitable. Hill endorsed a depiction of Queen Victoria's profile based on a design that William Wyon had created for a medal to celebrate her first visit to London earlier that year. Hill worked with artists and engravers to refine the portrait, develop the stamp's intricate background pattern and prepare the design for printing in an attempt to foil forgeries. He also made the decision to print the design in black.

Initially, Hill specified that the stamps should be 3/4-inch square, but



he altered the dimensions to 3/4-inch wide by 7/8-inch tall to accommodate the writing at the bottom. The word "POSTAGE" at the top of the design distinguished it from a revenue stamp. "ONE PENNY" at the bottom showed the amount prepaid for postage.

The two lower corners showed the position of the stamp in the printed sheet, from "A A" at top left to "T L" at bottom right. The sheets consisted of 240 stamps in 20 rows of 12 columns. One full sheet cost 240 pence or 1 pound; one row of 12 stamps cost a shilling.

The "Penny Black," as it came to be called, went on sale May 1, 1840. It allowed letters of up to a half ounce to be delivered at a flat rate of one penny, regardless of distance. It was an immediate hit (it probably didn't hurt that Queen Victoria celebrated her 21st birthday that month). Over the next year, 70 million letters were sent. Two years later, the number of letters sent with a penny stamp had more than tripled. (Despite its popularity, it took decades for the new postal system to make as much money for the government as it had before it had decreased the price of postage to a penny.)

The decision to place stamps in the upper right-hand corner was made because more than 80 percent of London's male population was right-handed, and it was believed this would help expedite the cancellation process.



Despite the Penny Black's popularity, it lasted less than a year. At the time, cancellations were in red and difficult to see on the black design. Because the red ink was easy to remove, it was possible to re-use canceled stamps. In February 1841, the Penny Red was introduced; it was the same design printed in red ink. The post began using black ink for cancellations, which was more effective and harder to remove.

The prepaid stamps and system of low and uniform postal rates were so well regarded that other countries soon followed suit, including Brazil and the United States. In short order, the system was in use all over the world.

And that's how a little piece of paper with an image of a queen changed the world. Being first has its privileges, too.

Because of its historical significance, the United Kingdom was exempted by the Universal Postal Union in 1874 from the rule stating that a country's name had to appear on its postage stamps in Latin letters. A profile of the reigning monarch continues to be the only requirement for identification of Britain's stamps. **PR**