



THE POSTAL SERVICE IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Great Britain was the cradle of the Industrial Revolution, and by 1840 led the most powerful empire on earth. The railways were being developed rapidly. Economic development relied very heavily on record-keeping and written communication. However, the latter activity was badly hampered by a postal system created in pre-industrial times (largely for official correspondence) which was complicated to manage and expensive to use. Postage was paid by the person to whom the letter was addressed, and was calculated by counting the number of sheets in each letter, the distance it travelled and the method of transport used. The Post Office was therefore at risk of not being paid, having provided the service, should the addressee refuse to accept delivery. Indeed, campaigners for postal reform published a tear-jerking poster of a mother refusing delivery of a letter addressed in her son's handwriting, because she could not afford to pay the postage, while receiving the essential information that her son was still alive (at least, at the time he wrote!). Further, certain types of mail had to be carried free, including newspapers, and most mail from members of both Houses of Parliament. Members of both Houses abused their privilege by autographing letters for their constituents and others, who thereby benefited from the free postage.

The postal system was crying out for reform, and in December 1839 Rowland Hill introduced a totally new system for calculating postal rate, based solely on the weight of the item posted. The rates were also substantially reduced. Starting in January 1840, a letter weighing up to one ounce would be carried anywhere in the United Kingdom for one penny (5/12p). A little later, on the 6th May 1840, prepayment of postage was introduced, by means of the famous Penny Black and 2d blue postage stamps. The colour of the 1d black was changed, less than a year after its introduction, so that the postmark could be seen more easily. However, use of the post had increased so much that some 72 million penny stamps had been issued before the colour was changed. Nevertheless, the precious method of payment, by the addressee, continued to be allowed until 1853, when prepayment by means of postage stamps became compulsory.

At the same time as stamps came into use, pre-stamped postal stationery was also introduced. The use of envelopes had been discouraged under the previous system of charging, because it counted as a further sheet and therefore liable to additional postage. The original envelope design (the 'Mulready') proved disastrously unpopular, and after a short period was replaced by an envelope carrying an embossed medallion head of Queen Victoria.

In 1854, the perforation of stamps became general. Previously they had had to be cut individually from the sheet with scissors. The penny red-brown previously imperforate, continued in use until 1880, when a new design was issued. This only lasted about

18 months, however, before being superseded by the Penny Lilac which remained on sale until 1902. More examples of this type were probably issued than any other stamp in the world. Total printing figures are not known, but it ran into billions, and the stamp is still very common today.

Sources:

1. *International Encyclopaedia of Stamps*, 1970, Ed. James Mackay
2. *Stamps & Stamp Collecting*, Frantisek Svarc, Red International Books Ltd, 1993

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May 2004