

THE BRITISH
POSTAL
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& ARCHIVE



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Solihull

Newport Pagnell
Bucks.



PENNY BLACK 175

Commemorative Pull-out

My dear Elizabeth
Salisbury
December 30 1824

I am inclined to answer
to you immediately if you
wish as you desire, and with very
kind regards for the family you are all,
wrote at this particular season of
the year in the place that
I am a great expert in
in what you have ordered on the
my consumption — the price
is not more than I expected indeed
may become down in the amount of the
mentioned — But the price of the arms
last I thought it would have been
at least than I thought I ought to
and what was not actually necessary
I thought it was in my mind
I thought it was in my mind

This page: A cross written letter sent from Cornwall to Lincoln, a distance of 289 miles, in 1815. Copyright The British Postal Museum & Archive
Cover image: Penny Black used on the first day of issue 6 May 1840. Copyright Royal Mail courtesy of The British Postal Museum & Archive
Back cover image: Notice to Postmasters about the Penny Black. Copyright Royal Mail courtesy of The British Postal Museum & Archive

Penny Black 175

Today we take for granted being able to go into a shop or Post Office to buy a stamp or to post a letter into a conveniently located pillar box. But it hasn't always been that way.

Before 1840 the stamp as we know it didn't exist. Mail was paid for by the recipient, and how much it cost depended on how far it had travelled, with extra charges incurred for things such as additional sheets of paper. This made sending letters far too expensive for the average person, as one letter could cost the equivalent of 12 loaves of bread, a sacrifice few could afford to make.

However, as has been the case throughout history, many found ways to circumvent these charges. Cross written letters were not uncommon, with people who had run out of space rotating the sheet and continuing their message over the top of what they had already written, saving the charge for an extra sheet of paper. Coded letters were also popular with families and friends. By devising codes they'd know the meaning of the message from a symbol or word on the front and could refuse the letter without payment. For the more well connected, or persuasive, citizens, passing letters to a local MP, who had free franking, was also an option. However, this caused quite some outrage. As Jane Austin jokingly notes in her novel Mansfield Park.

"Edmund tells Fanny that she doesn't need to pay for post as his dad sits on parliament-it's frank-ly a disgrace"

Defrauding the Post Office put profits at risk. Coupled with the prohibitive costs to poorer citizens, the system clearly wasn't sustainable. Something had to change.

PETITIONS

FOR AN UNIFORM

Penny Postage

LIE HERE FOR SIGNATURES.

(FORM OF A PETITION.)

To the Honourable the Lords Spiritual and Temporal [or, the Commons, as the case may be] in Parliament assembled:—

The humble Petition of the Undersigned [to be filled up with the Name of Place, Corporation, &c.]

SHEWETH,

That your Petitioners earnestly desire an Uniform Penny Post, payable in advance, as proposed by Rowland Hill, and recommended by the Report of the Select Committee of the House of Commons.

That your Petitioners intreat your Honourable House to give speedy effect to this Report,

And your Petitioners will ever pray.

MOTHERS & FATHERS that wish to hear from their absent Children!
FRIENDS who are parted, that wish to write to each other!
EMIGRANTS that do not forget their native homes!
FARMERS that wish to know the best Markets!
MERCHANTS & TRADESMEN that wish to receive Orders and Money quickly and cheaply.
MECHANICS & LABOURERS that wish to learn where good work and high wages are to be had! *support* the Report of the House of Commons with your Petitions for an **UNIFORM PENNY POST**. Let every City, and Town, and Village, every Corporation, every Religious Society and Congregation, petition---and let every one in the Kingdom sign a Petition with his name or his mark!

THIS IS NO QUESTION OF PARTY POLITICS!

LORD ASHBURTON, a Conservative, and one of the richest Noblemen in the Country, spoke these impressive words before the House of Commons Committee:—"Postage is one of the worst of our Taxes; it is, in fact, taxing the conversation of people who live at a distance from each other. The communication of letters by persons living at a distance is the same as a communication by word of mouth between persons living in the same town!"

"Sixpence," says Mr. BREWIN, "is the third of a poor man's income; if a gentleman, who had £1,000 a year, or £3 a day, had to pay one-third of his daily income—a sovereign, for a letter, how often would he write letters of friendship? Let a gentleman put that to himself, and then he will be able to see how the poor man cannot be able to pay sixpence for his letter."

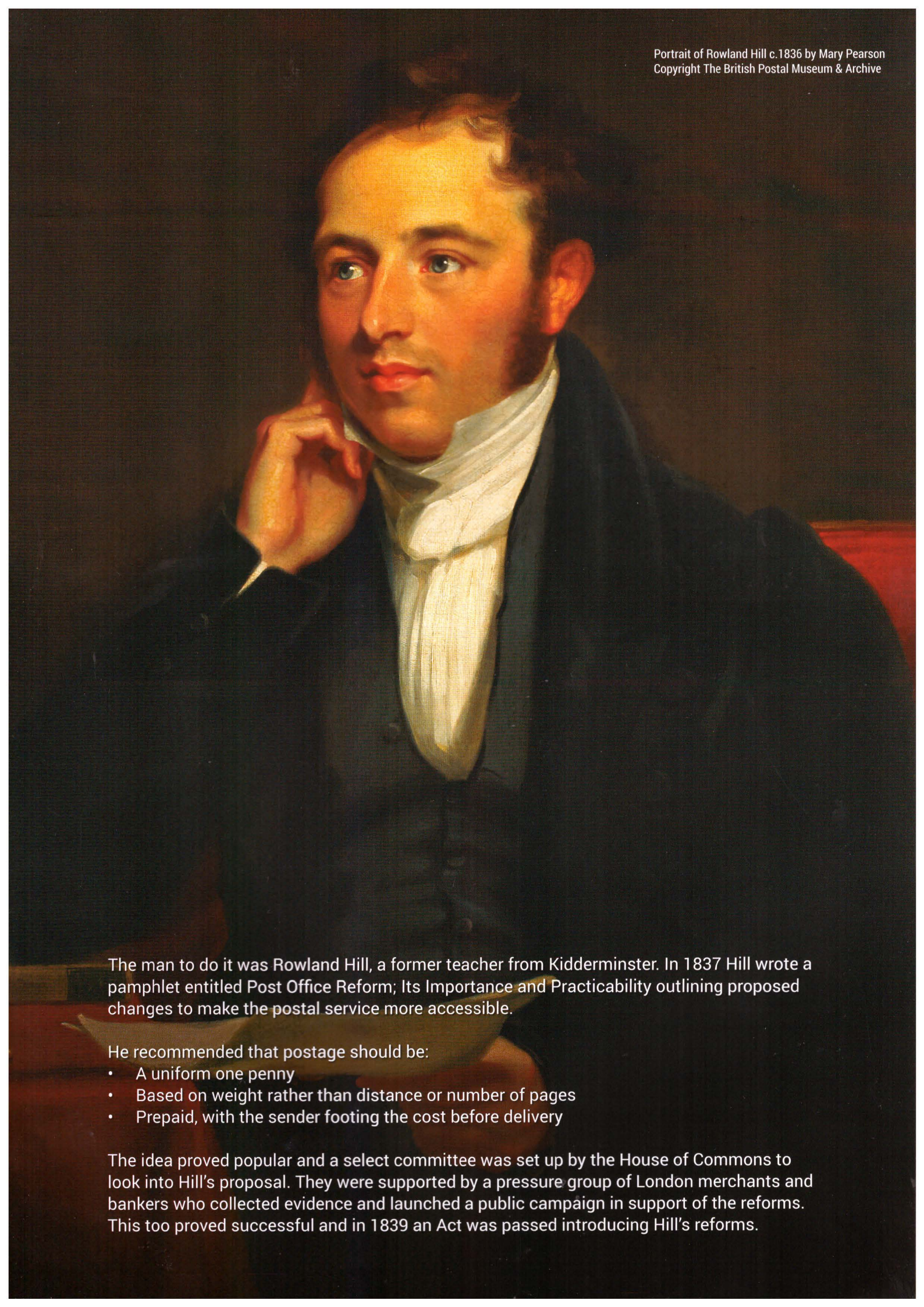
 **READER!**—If you can get any Signatures to a Petition, make two Copies of the above on two half sheets of paper; get them signed as numerous as possible; fold each up separately; put a slip of paper around, leaving the ends open; direct one to a Member of the House of Lords, the other to a Member of the House of Commons, LONDON, and put them into the Post Office.

Whiting, Strand, London.

May 1839 Propaganda poster of the Mercantile Committee for Postage. Copyright Royal Mail courtesy of The British Postal Museum & Archive

Revolutionising the postal system

The 1830s was a time of great social reform in Britain, as people began to speak out on unfair and outdated laws and systems. The Whig government was attempting to pass electoral reform and bills, such as the ten hour bill restricting child working hours, were being championed to improve the lives of everyday people. The apparent rise of social responsibility created the prime climate for the reform of the postal system.

A portrait of Rowland Hill, a man with dark hair, wearing a dark blue coat and a white cravat. He is looking slightly to the left of the viewer, with his right hand resting on his chin in a thoughtful pose. The background is dark and indistinct.

The man to do it was Rowland Hill, a former teacher from Kidderminster. In 1837 Hill wrote a pamphlet entitled *Post Office Reform; Its Importance and Practicability* outlining proposed changes to make the postal service more accessible.

He recommended that postage should be:

- A uniform one penny
- Based on weight rather than distance or number of pages
- Prepaid, with the sender footing the cost before delivery

The idea proved popular and a select committee was set up by the House of Commons to look into Hill's proposal. They were supported by a pressure group of London merchants and bankers who collected evidence and launched a public campaign in support of the reforms. This too proved successful and in 1839 an Act was passed introducing Hill's reforms.

Private and confidential.

POST OFFICE REFORM;

ITS IMPORTANCE

AND

PRACTICABILITY.

BY ROWLAND HILL.

PRIVATELY PRINTED,
BY W. CLOWES AND SONS, STAMFORD STREET.

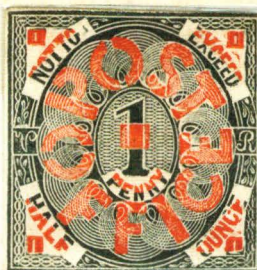
1837.

Implementing postal reform

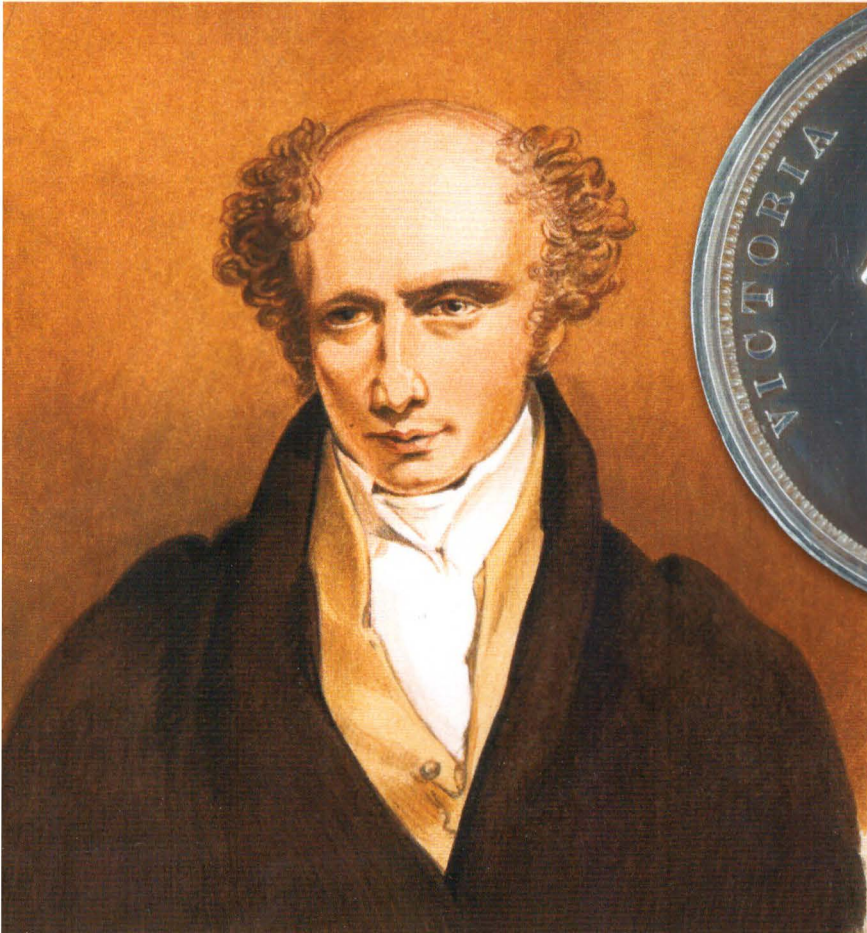
Hills' reforms were implemented in two stages. Firstly on 5 December 1839, in order to familiarise both Post Office staff and the public with the changes, letters began to be charged at 4d as long as they weighed up to half an ounce. This applied to letters being sent anywhere within the UK and led to an immediate increase in the volume of mail and, in turn, the decision to implement a second stage reducing the rate again to just 1d on 10 January 1840, even though the means of prepayment – later to be known as the stamp – were not ready.

In another revolutionary step Queen Victoria led the way in ending free franking by relinquishing her own privileges. As a result of these changes there was an immediate increase of almost 100% in the number of letters posted.

During this time plans were being enacted for the introduction of the stamp. In September 1839 the public were invited to submit ideas to implement Hill's idea of prepayment through a competition run by the Treasury. One of the entries, that of James Chalmers, a postal reformer from Dundee, suggested the idea of stamps cancelled with the place and date of postage. Hill was taken by this stating they would be "as beautiful a specimen of fine art as can be obtained". He went on to propose that the image used should be that of Queen Victoria. This was not just patriotism on the part of Hill, but also a security mechanism. The Post Office was greatly concerned by the possibility of forgeries or the reuse of stamps which would affect profits. The image of the Queen's head was deemed one where minute differences in reproductions would be readily detected. These would then be over printed with a cancellation as suggested by Chalmers to prevent reuse.



Treasury competition entries by Charles Whiting.
Copyright Royal Mail courtesy of The British Postal Museum & Archive



Portrait of William Wyon by C. Abbott. Copyright The British Postal Museum & Archive



Wyon's City medal 1838. Copyright Royal Mail courtesy of The British Postal Museum & Archive



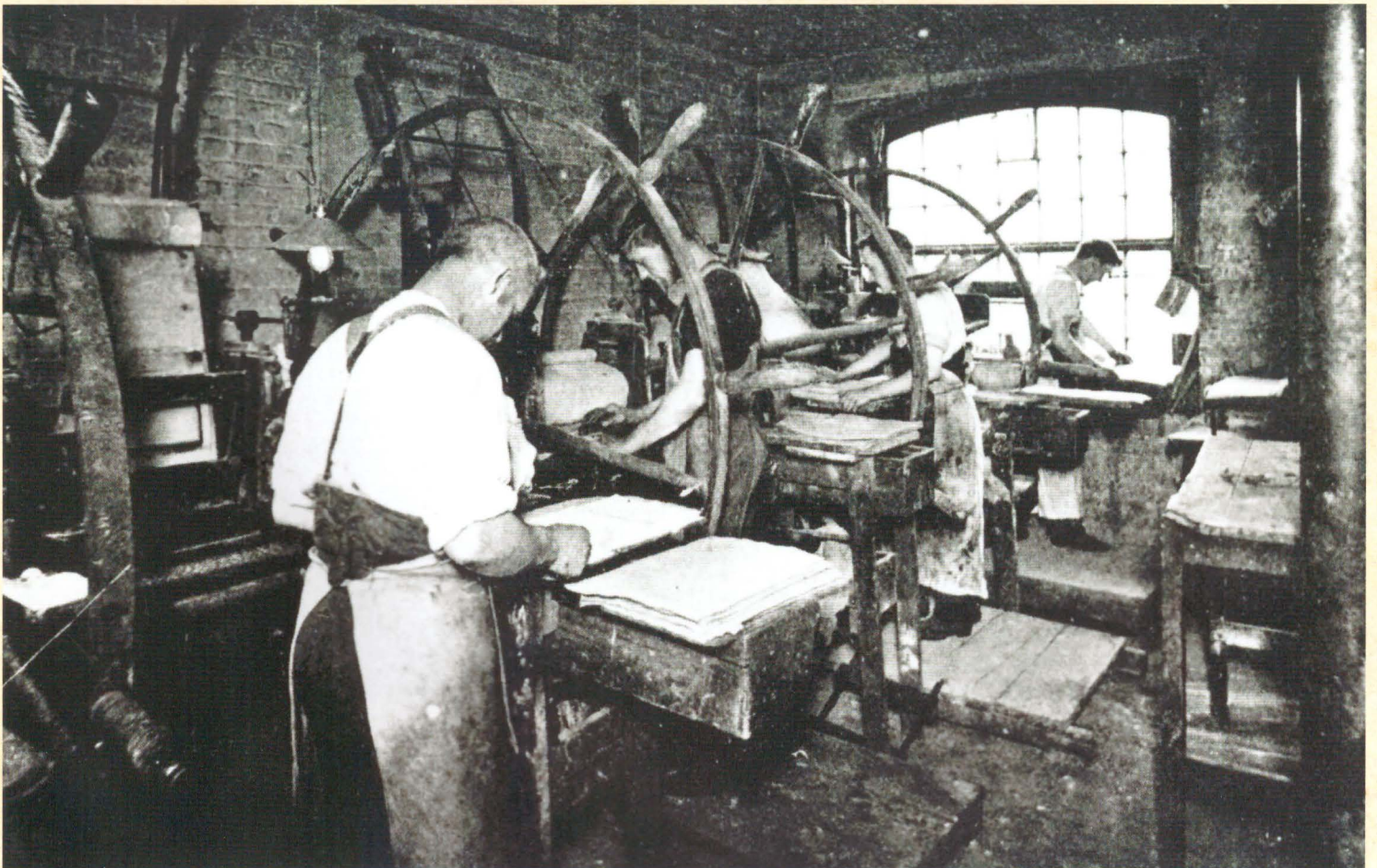
Portrait of Charles Heath. Copyright The British Postal Museum & Archive



OLD ORIGINAL.

The Old Original master die from which all Penny Black printing plates were made. Copyright Royal Mail courtesy of The British Postal Museum & Archive

The image, drawn by Henry Corbould, was taken from that on the Wyon medal – created to celebrate Victoria's first visit to the City of London after her accession to the throne. Despite being an image of the Queen at age 15, it continued to be used on stamps for the entirety of her reign. Surrounding the Queen's head was a pattern of engine turning, a security feature used on bank notes, as added protection against forgery. With the design complete engraver Charles Heath was given the task of engraving the dies for the stamp. Words were added to the top and bottom of the central portrait to say 'POSTAGE' and indicate the value. Star-like ornaments were engraved in the top corners, with the bottom corners left blank for the insertion of variable letters as an extra security feature. The finished engraving was transferred by means of a roller to create a copper printing plate of 240 impressions (240d = £1). Variable lettering from AA to TL was punched into the bottom corners by hand. Printing then took place on flat-bed printing presses worked by turning a large hand wheel.



The printing presses used for the stamps.



PRICE 1^d Per Label, $\frac{1}{2}$ Per Row of 12. D... Per Sheet. Place the Labels above the Address and towards the RIGHT HAND SIDE of the Letter. In Writing the Back be careful not to remove the Cement.

PRICE 1^d Per Label, $\frac{1}{2}$ Per Row of 12. D... Per Sheet. Place the Labels above the Address and towards the RIGHT HAND SIDE of the Letter. In Writing the Back be careful not to remove the Cement.

Registration sheet of plate 1 of the Penny Black - 15 April 1840
Copyright Royal Mail courtesy of The British Postal Museum & Archive



Single Penny Black and Two Penny Blue stamps. Copyright Royal Mail courtesy of The British Postal Museum & Archive

This created the Penny Black, the world's first stamp. The basic design was also used to create the twopenny blue for letters weighing over half an ounce. From the day it came into circulation on 6 May 1840 to the end of January 1841 over 68 million Penny Black's had been printed, around 6 million of which survive today.

The Penny Black changed the world

This small piece of paper changed forever the way that people not just in Britain, but worldwide, communicated with each other and led the way for the many developments that have followed it.

TO ALL POSTMASTERS.



GENERAL POST OFFICE,

April, 1840.

I BEG to inclose you two Specimens of the Penny and Two-penny 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 on 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 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 Pen in the usual manner.

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

By Command,

W. L. MABERLY,

SECRETARY.

*Circulated through the
Bokenham Office
Apr 27. 1840*