

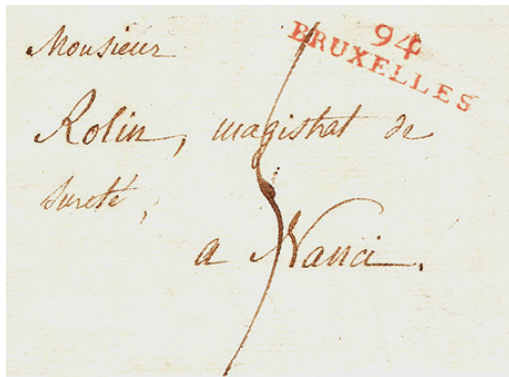
Fabulous Firsts:

Belgium, July 1, 1849

by John F. Dunn

Early Postal History

According to the late M. Moen, the eminent Belgian philatelist, the postal history of Belgium dates back to 1776, when the Chevalier Paris de l'Epinar, a Frenchman living in Brussels, propounded some very advanced views to the then Governor of that



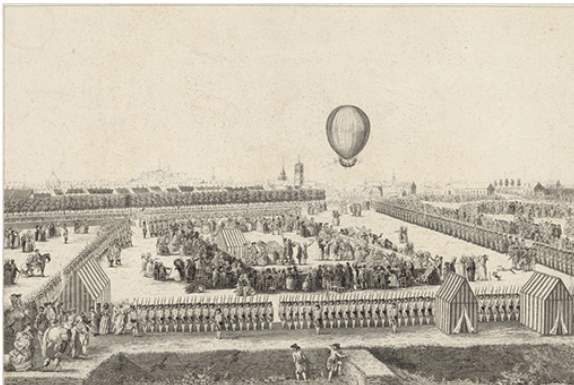
1803 Stampless cover with "94 Bruxelles" handstamp

City on the subject of postal reform. His scheme, which only extended to the collection and delivery of letters in and within a radius of six miles of Brussels, embraced several points, upon the importance of which Rowland Hill placed particular emphasis some 63 years later.

Among these was a proposition that the public should be invited to prepay their letters by some kind of stamp—"au moyen de marques a ce destinee" [by means of marks for this purpose]. He also made a proposal that any number of sheets of paper which did not together exceed a certain weight, should be considered a single letter—a matter which was so long a stumbling block to English post-office officials when post reform was being discussed in 1839. Again he urged that circular letters, sent in considerable numbers, should be passed through the post at a low rate of postage.

Needless to say the Chevalier was much in advance of his times and the Procureur-General of Brabant, to whom his scheme was submitted rejected it for several reasons. He said that "a petty post could only thrive in such large centres as London or Paris, and must needs languish in a small city, such as Brussels, in which the notables could send round their correspondence by means of their servants. That therefore an organization of the kind could only lead to the propagation of libel, pasquinades and other ribaldry, which might be circulated without the authors running the risk of being discovered; a state of things which was certainly rather to be discouraged rather than promoted. And finally, even admitting the necessity of the proposed scheme, its direction should be confided to a man of acknowledged worth, and not to a dratted foreigner". Which only goes to show that though a man may be a prophet in his own country, it does not necessarily follow that he will be looked upon as such in a foreign one.

Postal reform was not the most daring of Epinar's efforts. On August 26, 1785, he accompanied the famous aeronaut Jean-Pierre Blanchard in a balloon flight in France, from Lille to Servon, 7-hour flight covering a distance of 157 miles. Seen here is an artist's rendering of the launch in Lille. JFD.



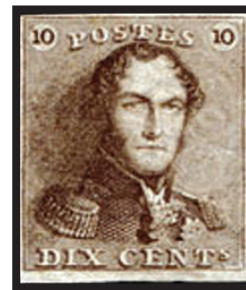
Apparently the subject of postal reform was shelved until in 1840. Great Britain led the way by introducing penny postage and issuing postage stamps. Such a far reaching reform attracted the attention of foreign governments everywhere and it was not long before Belgium was considering the application of this system to its own postal organization.

On the 12th February, 1841, therefore, Mr. L. Bronne, at that time Inspector of the Central Administration of the Belgian Post Office, was sent to London to investigate the English system. Mr. Bronne was strongly impressed with the advantages of Sir Rowland Hill's scheme and recommended his government adopt a similar one and issue adhesive stamps or stamped envelopes for the prepayment of postal charges. Mr. Bronne, himself, thought more favorably of the envelopes than the stamps and, in fact, designed an envelope for the use of the Belgian Post-office. Mr. Bronne's report led to the appointment of a special commission by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was at that time also Minister of Public Works, on April 10th, 1841, to make a thorough enquiry into the matter. This commission reached no decision and after prolonging matters for some years the merchants of Brussels became impatient and appointed a second commission who were charged to agitate for postal reform based on a uniform rate of 10 centimes.

Even then matters were not unduly hastened, for more than two years elapsed before the Postal Reform laws were passed by the Belgian Senate on December 24th, 1847. These laws provided for uniform charges for letters of specified weights sent certain distances and specified that postage stamps should be issued for franking letters. Although this law was dated December 24th, 1847, it required another enactment, dated the 22nd April, 1849, to bring the system of prepayment into actual use, and the employment of stamps did not commence until the first day of July following.

The First Issue.

The first issue of stamps for the Kingdom of Belgium comprised but



two values—10 and 20 centimes—but they were quite sufficient for a postal system into which conventions with foreign countries scarcely entered. The 10 centime stamp paid the postage on a single



letter (i. e., one weighing not more than 10 grammes or about 1/2 oz.) for distances not exceeding 30 kilometres (about 18-3/4 miles), while the 20 centimes paid the postage for distances beyond 30 kilometres within the confines of the kingdom. The charges for heavier letters were fixed at 20c for those weighing more than 10 and less than 20 grammes; 40c for those weighing more than 20 and less than 60gr; 60c for those over 60 and less than 100gr, and 20c for every additional 40 grammes or fraction thereof.

The new law came into force on July 1st, 1849, and although stamps were sold at many post-offices for a few days prior to that date they were not good for postage until the day officially decreed.

A Royal Decree dated June 17th, 1849, announced the stamps as follows :-

MINISTRY OF PUBLIC WORKS.

At the request of our Minister of Public Works, we have decreed and do decree:-

1. That stamps of 10 and 20 centimes be issued to prepay the postage on letters.
2. That the said stamps bear Our portrait; that there be inscribed upon them the word POSTES, together with an indication of their value, which will be repeated in figures.
3. That they be sold by the officials of the Administration of Posts.

Our Minister of Public Works is directed to carry out the orders given by this decree.

Given at Brussels, June 17, 1849

(Signed) LEOPOLD

By the King

The Minister of Public Works, (Signed) H. Rolin.

On the day of the publication of this Decree the Minister of Public

20c blue with numeral 24 cancel on cover to Charleroi with July 1, 1849 Brussels handstamp—the First Day of Issue—with same day arrival seal on the back.



Works addressed the following circular to the postmasters of the Kingdom:—

The tax collectors will shortly receive the first supply of postage stamps, the quantity being based upon their presumed requirements for one month, and they will take pains to supply, without delay, the distributors under their orders, so that the sale of these stamps can commence, throughout the kingdom, on the 25th of June.

In order to facilitate this sale there will be sent to the collectors, with the present circular, a considerable number of announcements, which they will be instructed to send out immediately to merchants and other persons who habitually use the postal service. It will, however, be necessary to inform buyers of these stamps that they will not be valid before the 1st of July, the date fixed for the introduction of the new method of prepaying postage on letters. It is also to be understood that every letter forwarded up to midnight of the 30th June will be subject to the tariff fixed by the law of Dec. 29, 1835; and that this rate shall be collected, whatever may be the time of its actual arrival at its destination.

I hope I may count upon the zeal and activity of the postal agents in the execution of the measures which are expected to assure the success of the postal reform; and that they will, above all, take advantage of every opportunity of bringing its advantages to the notice of the public.

I desire also that the agents and officials of every grade be permitted to read these instructions, and that their attention be called particularly to the regulations concerning postage stamps.

Having seen that the Royal decree was properly published, and having issued full instructions to the postmasters, it only remained for Mr. Rolin to instruct the public on the use of the new postage stamps, which he did by means of a Ministerial Notice dated June 18th, 1849, viz.:-

The Use of Postage Stamps. Prepayment of letters by means of stamps.

In order that the public may not be subjected to the annoyance caused by the present means of prepaying letters, the Administration will cause to be sold, at the rate of 10 and 20 centimes, stamps with which letters may be franked within the interior of the kingdom, without its being necessary to pay the amount of the postage in actual coin at the post offices.

These stamps consist of a small engraving of the King's portrait, together with an indication of value in words and figures; they will be printed on paper of which the back is provided with a light coating of gum.

The value of each stamp may also be known by its color and the color of the printing upon it; brown is used for the 10 centimes stamp, and blue for the 20 centimes.

To frank a letter all that will be necessary is to moisten the gum at the back of a stamp, and then affix it to that part bearing the address. It may then be put into a letter-box without further formalities.

The two stamps forming this issue are among the most artistic of the world's postal issues and are deservedly

A circa 1860 Belgian letter box; next column, Sc. 2508, a 2011 Stamp Day Issue



popular in consequence. The design is simple and shows a three-quarter face bust of King Leopold I in military uniform, reputed to be a very good portrait of the wise old monarch. Above the portrait the word "POSTES" is curved, at the foot is the value in words, and in the upper angles are small circular discs containing numerals of value. The background is formed of lines slanting from right to left and at the right side a scroll pattern is introduced into the shading.

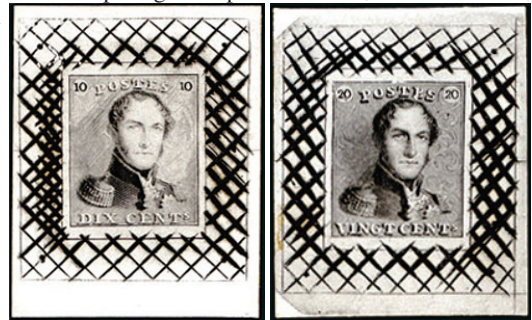
Although the designs of the two stamps forming this issue are almost exactly alike, yet there are small differences which prove conclusively that two separate dies were engraved. The position of the small labels of value and the arabesque ornamentation on the background present the most patent differences.

Who engraved the dies for these two stamps? Mr. W.A.S. Westoby says "The engraving of the dies was entrusted to M. Jacques Wiener, a Belgian engraver, who submitted proofs of more than one design."... a statement in which M. Moens concurs. Mr. Leavy goes a little farther and tells us—

"On August 7th, 1848, a contract was made by the Belgian Government, with Jacques and Leopold Wiener, to furnish dies and all necessary machinery for the printing of postage stamps; Jacques Wiener, who at that time was the leading engraver and medallist of the world, had just returned from a trip to England, made especially to study the process of stamp-making as carried on at that time. On October 28, 1848, the proof of the first Belgian stamp, that of the 10 centimes, was approved and accepted by the Government, and on November 17, 1848, the design for the twenty centimes was submitted and approved."...

It would appear that Jacques Wiener, clever and accomplished medallist that he was, thought it was best to entrust the actual engraving of the dies to those pioneers in postage stamp manufacture, Messrs. Perkins, Bacon & Co., and that Mr. Robinson, an employee of this firm, was commissioned to produce the required dies.

The original dies were engraved on steel in recess and the plates were made and the stamps printed in the usual manner for line-engraved work. From the dies transfer rolls were made upon



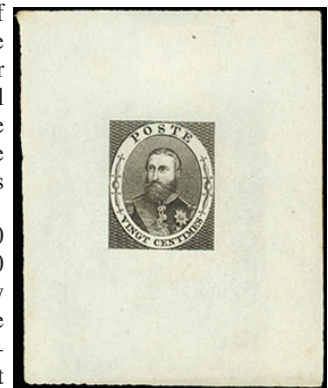
10c and 20c Black essays completed by Robinson with guilloché cross hatching, on chalky, extremely rare thick white paperboard

which the designs appeared in relief but whether there was more than one impression of each design on the transfer rolls we cannot say. These transfer roll impressions were then applied to the plate under heavy pressure so that the design once more appears in recess, as on the original die itself.

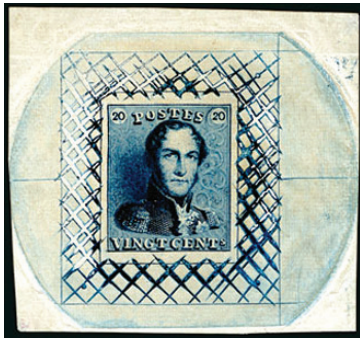
Each of the plates consisted of 200 subjects arranged in two panes of 100 each (ten rows of ten), placed side by side. Mr. Leavy says the plates were made of copper—a statement we are inclined to doubt in view of the fact that specimens are rarely found showing appreciable wear of the plate considering the comparatively large numbers printed.

It seems more probable that as the English system was so carefully studied and copied that the plates were of steel.

The paper used for the stamps of this issue was, like that of the early British stamps, hand-made. It was manufactured by Olin Bros., of Brussels, and like all hand-made paper varied considerably in thickness. This paper



1849 First Issue 20c unadorned essays on wove paper



Left, reprinting of 1882 of the corner of the 20 centimes in greenish blue on layer with guillochis, on very rare thin glossed paper; right, reprinting of 1882 of the corner of the 10 centimes brown purplished on thin layer paper with dry guillochis.

was watermarked with a device consisting of two letters "L" interlaced; one, of course, being in reverse in relation to the other. These letters were enclosed in a single-line rectangular frame and the devices were so adjusted that one full design was apportioned to each of the two hundred stamps on a sheet. These little devices were made by hand by twisting wire into the desired shapes, consequently no two are exactly alike and some of the variations are quite striking. The designs were seen on the special screen used in making the sheets of paper and as the wet pulp was spread on the screen the devices were pressed into it and formed the watermarks we see in the finished stamps. Each sheet of paper was also watermarked in the margins with an inscription in doublelined capital letters, about 7 mm. high reading as follows: - "MINISTERE DES TRAVAUX PUBLICS" across the top of the sheet and in reverse at the bottom, and "BRUXELLES BELGIQUE POSTES" at each side reading upwards at left and downwards at right. This inscription means "Ministry of Public Works, Brussels, Belgium, Posts" and as these inscriptions were only 2-1/2 mm. distant from the outer edges of the watermarked devices it frequently happens that stamps from the outer rows of the sheet show small portions of the letters.

The interlaced L's were placed side ways in the rectangles and Mr. Leavy has made the interesting discovery that those in the left pane have the heads of the letters to the right, while those in the right hand pane have the heads of the letters pointing to the left. This arrangement

was quite ingenious for, as Mr. Leavy points out, in printing "the paper could be placed upon the plate in any of four ways, normal, reversed, inverted or inverted and reversed, without affecting the relative position of the watermark which would always have the heads of the L's to the left in the left pane and to the right in the right pane. In examining stamps for the watermark we look at them from the back so that the watermark appears reversed, and when the interlaced L's show the heads to the right it indicates a stamp from the left pane while the heads to the left indicate a stamp from the right pane."

The stamps were printed at the Stamp Works in Brussels, situated at that time in the basement of a modest house in the Rue Lateral, under the personal supervision of Jacques Wiener. Both Mr. Bouvez and Mr. de Bont agree that there were three separate printings, made in May and September, 1849, and April 1850, and while both agree as to the numbers in the last printing their total for the other two are at variance, though presumably they were obtained from official sources. The reader may, there fore, take his choice, for we give the quantities according to both writers:-

	Bouvez	de Bont
1st printing 10c	1,600,000	1,450,000
1st printing 20c	1,500,000	1,150,000
2nd printing 10c	3,000,000	3,000,000
2nd printing 20c	2,800,000	3,600,000
3rd printing 10c	800,000	800,000
3rd printing 20c	500,000	500,000

Both these writers also assert that the first printing was on thick paper, the second on wove (though as all this paper was wove we do not see how this can differ from any of the other) and the third on fairly thin paper. We

hardly think that either author can have any real grounds for making these positive distinctions, for anyone in the least familiar with the process of paper manufacture knows that in the hand-made variety the paper is made sheet by sheet and the very nature of the process makes it a matter of impossibility to obtain uniform thickness. The texture of the paper, therefore, is no guide at all in distinguishing printings.

Both values provide an extensive range of shades of which brown, grey-brown and reddish brown may be said to be the predominant colors of the 10 centimes, and deep blue, blue and milky blue of the 20 centimes, with all sorts of intermediate tints. That any special shades can be definitely assigned to any one of the three printings is, in our humble opinion, still a case of "not proven". Mr. Leavy gives an interesting synopsis of the various causes which tend to make shade variations, viz. :-



10C Brown left pane with side margin



10c Brown-sepia in horizontal strip of six (positions 125 to 130 of the right pane) with wide sheet margin



The largest recorded franking of the Belgium first issue 10c on cover and one of the most outstanding first issue covers in existence, with the 1849 10c grey brown, eight singles, tied by bureau de perception "25" on 1850 (19 July) folded letter to Mons (20.7), showing "Charleroi" c.d.s. and "Après le départ" straightline handstamp both in red adjacent, an 80 centimes rate franking for a letter weighing 20-60 grams for a distance over 30 kilometers.



20c Blue variety with scratch on "O" of "POSTES", position 20 with right sheet margin

those found on the 10c are of a particularly striking character and can easily be seen without the aid of a magnifying glass.



10C Brown-gray, upper right corner margin block of six with L watermark new state, positions 9-10, 19-20, 29-30, the stamp of position 30 [lower right] a variety with extra lines in the bottom lettering and margin.

"First chemical action; engraved plates are cleansed of ink by being washed with a weak solution of potash, and there were no doubt many times when the solution was stronger than necessary, which would chemically affect the color of the ink when the plates were re-inked, imparting a grayish tone to the brown and a greenish tone to the blue. Second: uneven dampening of the paper when placed upon the plate, causing decided variations in the depth of tone of the color and sometimes a spreading of the ink giving a tinted appearance to the paper. Third: chemical action due to the substance of the gum used on the finished stamps, which was of two marked qualities, one a heavy white glue which turns opaque and milky under the action of water, the other a thick yellow gum almost insoluble in water. Fourth atmospheric influence, varying degrees of oxidisation."

All students of line-engraved stamps are acquainted with the fact that in rocking the transfer roll on the plate mistakes were sometimes made. An impression would be misplaced, erased, and another impression made in the correct position. In erasing the wrong impression—which we imagine frequently meant merely impressing another over it in the correct position—traces were often left which show in the print stamps, these varieties being generally known as "shifts" or "shifted transfer"; though a more correct description is re-entries.

A number of interesting varieties of this character occur in connection with both the 10 and 20 centimes of this first issue of Belgium. Some of



20c blue wide sheet margin block of four, positions 8-9 and 18-19 of board II.