

Yesterday in Mekeel's: **The British Penny Red**

By Bertram W. H. Poole

(From Mekeel's Weekly, April 5, 1937, with images added)



The official notice to Postmasters, announcing the availability of the 1841 1p red and 2p blue, with Specimens attached.

Next to the famous Penny Black—the mother of all adhesive postage stamps—few British stamps are more popular than its immediate successor the Penny Red. The stamp was in use from 1841 until 1880—a period of nearly forty years—and during that time it appeared in many varieties. It was at first issued imperforate, then perforations were introduced, a change was made from small to large Crown watermarks, and the original die had to be retouched, producing the variety known as die II.



1840 1p Plate 1c position M D, red printing with large margins, central black Maltese Cross cancel

Altogether 450 plates were made, and something like [13.4 billion] stamps were issued. The same die was used as in producing the similar stamp in black; indeed the stamps in red form part of the same series, the plates being numbered in rotation after those employed for the one penny in black. Thus the first plate made and put to press exclusively for the 1p red was numbered plate 12 though a supply



1841 (Jul 7) large envelope from York to Sheffield with 1841 1d red plate 1 positions PB-TC block of 10 tied by black Maltese Cross cancels. This is the largest 1d red plate 1 block on cover



Plate 11 1d red, letters J C with clear Maltese Cross cancel in red



1841 (May 18) Wrapper from Hastings to Lubeck with 1841 1d red plate 12 AA/BC (state 1) block of six cancelled by black Maltese Cross cancels.

of the red stamps was printed from plate 11. The plates were made in the same way; there was the same number of stamps (240) on the sheet; and the paper employed, with small crown watermark, is exactly like that used for the black stamps. The paper employed was the same during the entire period this variety was in use, being handmade at Faircroft & Co.'s mills near Northampton.

Being handmade, the paper varied in thickness, and the "thicks" and "thins" had to be mixed so that the weight of each ream of 500 sheets was the same.

Until the year 1854 all the penny red stamps were imperforate and were printed on the small crown watermarked paper. Over 160 different plates were made, all so exactly similar that it is not possible to identify the stamps from each one. However, advanced specialists are able to identify many of the individual stamps from the varying sizes and positions of the corner letters. Two quite distinc-



1d Rose-Red plate 48 AA/GL mint o.g. block of 84 from the top of the sheet, showing full inscription at top with plate numbers.

tive sizes may be found, designated large and small, and as the letters were inserted by hand-punches they may be found in all sorts of positions in the corner squares. Guide-lines, hair lines, double transfers and plate flaws all help in the identification of individual stamps.



1d Red plate 22 DE/EF imperforate block of four from the Neale's Steam Press experimental printing on un-gummed paper

The paper on which the stamps were printed is greyish white, but owing to chemical action started by the printing ink, most specimens will be found discolored blue to a greater or lesser extent. Stamps with the paper quite white are very uncommon. Some may be found with only a faint tinge of blue and on others the paper is such a deep and even blue that it is hard to believe this was not its original color before printing. Occasionally the paper where the ink was not thickly applied—the portrait and corner letter

blocks—did not turn blue or as blue as the other portions. Thus on the back of many stamps the portrait appears white with a blue margin around. These specimens are known to collectors as “ivory heads”.

A whole range of shades may be found. The color originally proposed was red—hence the popular name of “penny red” by which these stamps are generally known. The color ultimately chosen was red-brown and this may be considered the normal shade. However, there are many variations, some of them quite striking, such as brick-red, rose-red mine, orange-red, plum as well as and deep tints.

An interesting error occurred on plate 77, the first stamp in the second row being lettered “B” only instead of “B-A”, the right hand corner letter block being perfectly blank. The error is of considerable rarity and, curiously enough, the first copy discovered was not known until about 1904. Since then a few others have turned up. The error was noticed and rectified and the plate was re-registered as 77B. As in the case of the penny black, varieties with double corner letters may be found and one well worth looking for has an inverted “s” in the lower left corner. A number

of double transfers are known, one of the finest showing the lower portions of the words "ONE PENNY" in the gutter above "POSTAGE".

Specimens showing various stages of wear of the plates are comparatively common while inverted watermarks seem quite scarce.

Until 1854 these stamps were all without perforation, but in that year, as a result of Henry Archer's various experiments, practical perforating machines were available. The first machines had a gauge of 16, but these were not in use very long. It was found that these small punches so closely spaced had a



1d red-brown, plate 143 RK, die I, alphabet II, perforated by experimental "Treasury Roulette", with London numeral "17" cancel



1d Red plate 41 TA-TE mint o.g. strip of 5 from the lower left corner, showing marginal inscription and plate number

tendency to split the steel bed-plates of the machines and furthermore the stamps themselves separated too readily. In March, 1855, therefore, a change was made and 14 punches were placed in the space of two centimetres and this 14 gauge remained standard for British stamps until about 1911. This change of perforation was made gradually and it would appear that one of the 16 machines was in use as late as January, 1868.



1d red FL with margin showing inscription and broken perforating pins variety at top and bottom in the same place

The paper used from 1841 until about 1855 was watermarked with small crowns exactly like those shown in the black stamps. In the latter year, however, a change was made to a crown of considerably larger size and more ornate. No further change of watermark was made during the long life of this stamp.

The original penny black die was used until November, 1854, and altogether 204 plates were made from it. Towards the end of 1854 it was noticed that, owing to the great amount of wear to which the die had been subjected, it failed to make lines of sufficient depth so that the plates not only wore very quickly but the impressions from them were not always all that could be desired by printers proud of their work. It was therefore, decided to construct a new die or matrix, and for this purpose a reproduction of the original was entrusted to Mr. William Humphreys, an engraver of high repute and skill, to

be retouched. Humphreys deepened the lines, somewhat altering the shading on the face and hair and the profile of the nose, and the eyelid was made more distinct. It will be noted the original die was not touched though it was never used again, for from January, 1855, onwards all plates were made from the new die. The original is known as die I and the new one die II, the latter being the variety Scott calls "re-engraved". As a rule it is not a difficult matter to identify impressions from the two dies. Those of II have a more finished appearance, especially as regards the shading around the eye, the band at the back of the ear, and the curve of the nostril.

Early in 1864 an important change was made in the plates by the insertion of plate numbers, in small uncolored numerals in the engine turned frame work at the sides. This was done by engraving the required figures on the roller impression before it was hardened. At the same time letters were introduced in the upper corners in place of the "stars"



1d Red, plate 204 A G, imperf imprimatur, top margin showing inscription "ards the RIGHT H"



From imperf imprimaturs [approved proofs], left to right, we see the 1d Reds: plate 140 AG showing inscription "heet. Place the"; plate 1 AI, showing inscription "etter In Wetting"; plate 176 AJ showing inscription "Back be c"; plate 25 AK showing Gothic letter "K" and inscription "reful not to rem"; [reserve] plate R1 position A L with top right corner margin with inscription "ve the Cement." and plate number.

that had hitherto appeared. These letters were the same as those in the lower angles of the stamp but reversed. Thus a stamp with the letters "B-D" at the bottom would show "D-B" at the top. A change was also made in the shape of these corner letters. Up to now Roman capitals had been used, but with the introduction of the plate numbers sans-serifs capitals were employed. All the stamps of this series are perf 14, die II, and have the large crown watermark. This alteration is said to have taken place with plate 69 but no specimens are known to exist. Plate 70 was never brought into use but specimens, probably from an imprimatur [approved proof] sheet, are said to be known. Plate 71 was the first issued to the public and plate 225 was in use when the stamps were ultimately withdrawn from use in 1879. All intervening plates were used except 75, 126 and 128, though plate 77 is exceedingly rare. (See page 8.)

Plate 116 exists imperforate, a sheet in this condition being issued to the Cardiff post office early in 1870. Owing to this fact it is generally known as the Cardiff penny. Plate numbers 79, 81, 86, 90, 92, 93, 97, 100, 103, 104, 107, 108, 114, 122, 136, 146, 158, 164, 171, 174 and 191 are all known imperforate and used, but there is no reason to believe any of these are legitimate errors. It is far more likely that they are from imperforate imprimatur sheets.



A genuine 1p red Plate 77 stamp, from the Royal Philatelic Collection.



A 27 Nov 1865 cover sent by Victor Hugo from Guernsey to his publishers in Brussels franked with what was purported to be three completely genuine examples of this iconic stamp, but which has been declared as not genuine by some experts, and genuine by others.

For a comprehensive defense of this cover we refer you to:

<http://www.glenstephens.com/snaugust09.html>

and to:

<http://1dplate77.com/1dplate77/index.html>

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