



Philatelic Foundation Analysis Leaflet

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The British Penny Black (with Particular Emphasis on The Removal of Cancellations)



TO ALL POSTMASTERS.

GENERAL POST OFFICE,
Edinburgh, 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 the 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,

EDWARD S. LEES,

SECRETARY.

From the very first postal issue, the removal of cancellations has been a cause of some consternation and considerable monetary loss to postal officials as well as to collectors. That first issue, the Penny Black of Great Britain, is the subject of this Analysis Leaflet, but much of what is stated is equally applicable to other issues.

Although the possibility of removed cancellations is not discussed in the general letter sent to all Postmasters (reproduced above), the subject was nonetheless on the minds of Post Office officials.

In his diary for April 24th, 1840, Rowland Hill notes, "Wrote to Maberly (Secretary of the Post Office) to call his attention to the power of Creosote to wash out the Post Office Stamp, and enclosed a specimen of red ink by Perkins and Co. (Editor's note: printers of the Penny Black, actual name Perkins, Bacon & Co.), which is free from this objection."(1) Hill's optimism was short-lived, as it was soon discovered that the red "Maltese Cross" cancellations could in fact be cleaned off.

Early official experiments with canceling inks and the possibilities of removing them chemically came at the end of May 1840. On June 27th we find Rowland Hill writing, "All who have professed to be able to remove the red ink obliteration have been requested to try their hands on the black ink, and have given it up." Then a significant statement: "I shall prepare a report on the subject of obliteration, and propose to adapt (sic) a light colour for the penny stamps."(1) Obviously, Hill's thinking was that if the black canceling ink were to be adopted, the color of the stamp would have to be changed. Black on black would not do.

This thought process becomes clearer on July 21st, when Hill writes, "Mr. Donovan, a chemist of Dublin has succeeded in removing not only the red, but the black ink obliterating stamp...we are therefore at sea again."

All sorts of canceling inks were tested. at times with amusing results. We find comments from Hill such as "Watson's ink will not do, it resists all attempts to remove it, but, unfortunately, it in time destroys the paper..." and, about an ink to which a volatile oil had to be added, "...they cannot bear the smell at the P.O."(1)

As many philatelists know, eventually a decision was made to replace the world's first stamp--the one penny black--with a one penny red brown, issued in 1841.

The point in all of this is that if some individuals could not resist the temptation of removing cancellations for the sake of saving one penny's postage in 1840, does it not become even more tempting for stamp "doctors" to attempt to turn a used stamp into one that appears to be a much more valuable unused variety? Can philatelists really protect themselves from purchasing such material?

Even the experts are challenged by unused British Penny Blacks. The aging process alone will tend to take its toll on any marking. Fortunately, although aging and stamp doctors continue to work on cancellations, there are ways in which the buyer of a stamp can take precautions.

Given the natural tendency to give much closer attention to a stamp in direct relation to its increasing value, experts have refined their techniques for examination for possible removed cancellations.

Continuing to use the British Penny Black and its replacement penny 'red' as examples, The Philatelic Foundation has received sufficient copies of each to show a pattern. The results of our findings for all stamps submitted to date (not including copies on cover) are as follows:

	Penny Black	Penny Red
Decline opinion	1	0
Not genuine	2	1
Genuine, but regummed	5	0
GENUINE, CANCEL REMOVED	16	0
Genuine	<u>57</u>	<u>14</u>
Total submittals	81	15

The findings on the Penny Black are self-evident. Fully 20% of all stamps submitted have been found to have undergone attempts to remove the cancellations. Going further, if we exclude from the total submissions above those Penny Blacks (27) that were submitted as used (for expertizing as to condition, plate varieties, etc.), then the 16 stamps that underwent cancellation removals constitute almost 30% of all stamps submitted. On the other hand, although the sample size is much smaller and the value differential much less, it is still revealing that not one Penny Red submission was found to have undergone removal of a cancellation.

Checking for Removed Cancellations

What methods can the philatelist use to determine if a stamp might have had a cancellation removed? Although we should caution collectors and dealers that these tests are not always conclusive and that expert opinion may be needed at times, there are some considerations to keep in mind, as follows:

1. The "temptation factor" will narrow the field considerably. If a stamp has a narrow used/unused price differential or if the color(s) in which it is printed would clearly reveal a cancellation, or removal attempts, the likelihood is that the stamp is a low-level candidate for doctoring. The possibility can't be ruled out, but it is unlikely.
2. Regumming is a tipoff that other tampering may have been applied to the stamp. Included in the "cancel removed" count above are five stamps that were also found to have been regummed. (To prevent count duplication they are included in the cancel removed category only.)
3. Cancellations can be removed by a variety of means, including erasure, scraping, and chemical removal. Methods of detecting such attempts include ultraviolet light or close surface examination under magnification for surface scrapes or for signs of washed cancellations and handling of the stamps to detect a stiffness caused by washing or the odor of bleach or other chemicals.

As noted, these methods may or may not be conclusive. The British Penny Black was the first stamp subjected to attempts to remove cancellations, but it has by no means been the last. If the philatelist has any doubts and if the used/unused value differential is significant, submission to an expertizing service such as that provided by The Philatelic Foundation is advisable.

1. Robson Lowe, The British Postage Stamp of the Nineteenth Century. (London, The National Postal Museum, 1968).