Exploring Early British Line-Engraved Stamps

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Have you ever dreamed of having a complete worldwide postage stamp collection? Well, it is possible to achieve this — as long as you establish an early enough “cut off” date for your collection — say, February of 1843, just before the first Swiss Canton stamps for Zurich were issued. Then, with only four basic stamps to collect, your collection might fit onto a single index card, which even Marie Kondo, the famous de-cluttering expert, might approve. The stamps, of course, are the early British line-engraved issues of 1840–41, beginning with the Penny Black.

While I’m not a specialist collector of early British line-engraved stamps, I do have a real weakness for early classic stamps, and they don’t get any earlier or more classic than these, the world’s first four stamps. Examples from my representative worldwide collection are shown in Figure 1 along with their original issue dates. Each of these has an unusually wide top margin that shows clear traces of the stamp above, giving a good idea of how these stamps were spaced on the imperforate sheets. Because the margins between these stamps are relatively tight, finding nice four-margin examples is difficult; there is a premium for those.

Early British line-engraved stamps offer built-in advanced security features against forgery, including a finely-engraved portrait with engine-turned background, watermarking, and corner letters, making them perhaps the safest of all early classic stamps for collectors to purchase. With a total face value of just sixpence (about 12 cents in U.S. currency at the time), they would have been a remarkably astute investment at the British post office, since their current combined 2019 Scott catalog value (in unused condition) is over $51,000. In used condition they are much more affordable, but not inexpensive.

However, there is some good news for the collector on a budget. In the year 2000, the Royal Mail borrowed the original Perkins-Bacon printing press that was used to print the 1840 Penny Blacks from the British Library’s philatelic collection, and for the first time used this to print highly accurate engraved reproductions. For this, the Royal Mail chose a printing plate that had been created in 1979 by a collaboration between the printers Bradbury Wilkinson and the National Postal Museum, using an original penny stamp die from their collection. Inspection shows this to be Die II, a version of Die I that was retouched in 1855 after it became worn, and which became the die used for perforated Penny Reds.

Perkins-Bacon made the first reprints of the Penny Black back in 1865. It is said that when younger members of the royal family began collecting stamps, there was difficulty finding spare copies of the Penny Black for them. In any event, plate 66, which had been used to print imperforate Penny Reds and had been withdrawn from service, was used to print four sheets of stamps in black on paper with a Large

Figure 1. Examples of the world’s first four stamps with issue dates, from the author’s collection.
For the Royal Mail’s modern reproductions in 2000, unlike the original line-engraved stamps, corner letters were not added to the plate. The Penny Black reproductions were printed from this plate on special handmade paper, with the recurring words “PENNY BLACK REPRODUCTION” on the back. The Royal Mail sold the reproductions in blocks of four for £5 in a special presentation pack at London’s international stamp exhibition. Incidentally, at the same show, attendees could view a demonstration of the printing of these reproductions on the original Perkins-Bacon printing press. One of these mementos is shown in Figure 2. Since an original unused block of Penny Blacks is currently valued at $145,000, these would seem to be a bargain.

Unlike hand-engraved primitive stamps where every stamp on the sheet is different, each image in the Penny Black block shown in Figure 2 is identical, since the design was transferred to the plate by a single roller die that was in turn produced from an original hardened die. However, on the original printing plates for early British line-engraved stamps, corner letters were always hand-punched into each of the blank corners at the bottom to finish the plate. This began with AA at the top left of the sheet across the top row, to AL at the right, and so on until all 20 rows of the sheet of 240 stamps — down to TL at the bottom right — were labeled. Thus the position of each stamp on the final printed sheet was clearly marked — a very significant aid for plating them.

Some collectors try to find Penny Blacks with their initials on them. Mine would be PH, but since I’m not a big fan of either monogrammed shirts or towels, I wasn’t planning to make a special effort — although I did find my initials on a stamp at the right side of the largest known block of Penny Blacks in the world. The block now lives in the Reginald M. Phillips collection at The Postal Museum in London, so I’ll know where to go to visit it if I should feel the urge. Besides the joy of collecting stamps with your own initials, however, there is real philatelic importance to the corner letters on these stamps. Since the letters were hand-punched onto each printing plate, their position and orientation vary, making it possible to distinguish between different plates, if one has enough detailed information for comparison.

In principle, this makes the plating of early British line-engraved stamps feasible even for a non-specialist like me, since identifying the position of each stamp on the plate is almost trivial. The problem then becomes dealing with the number of different plates that were used for printing each stamp.

But First, a Note about Color

However, before getting deep into plating, why were changes made to the Penny Black and Two Pence Blue stamps less than a year after they were introduced in May 1840? The answer, it seems, had to do with concerns about how easily unscrupulous individuals could remove cancellations so the stamps could be reused, thereby cheating the postal authorities. Interestingly, the Royal Philatelic Collection boasts a Penny Black that “had been cleaned and put through the (postal) system three times.”

Initially the 1840 stamps were canceled with red ink using a Maltese Cross, but officials quickly found that this red ink could be removed, so the cancellation ink was changed to black in February 1841. Clearly the folly of using a black ink cancellation on a black stamp occurred to the postal authorities, as around the same time the color of the penny stamp was changed from black to various red-brown shades — dubbed the Penny Red. Furthermore, a somewhat fugitive ink was substituted for printing the Penny Reds, making it even more difficult to remove cancellations without destroying the stamp. Similarly, the blue ink used for the Two Pence Blue stamp was also changed to a more fugitive type, and white lines were added above and below the portrait to distinguish the change and make it somewhat easier to see black cancellations.

Typical Cancellations

Since Penny Blacks are among my favorite stamps, I find them difficult to pass up if they seem both interesting and affordable. Shown in Figure 3 are some examples of these with Maltese Cross cancellations. From top left to bottom right, note the following: a heavy multiple strike in red; a heavy but offset single cancellation in red — well-positioned, as it misses both the portrait of Queen Victoria and corner lettering; a much lighter cancel in red; and an unusually clear but defacing cancellation in black ink. Note that the Penny Black on the right with the black Maltese Cross cancellation has LL

Figure 2. A block of four of the 2000 Royal Mail engraved reproductions of the Penny Black, printed using the original Perkins-Bacon press and a new printing plate created from an original stamp die, sans corner letters (from the author's collection).
corner lettering, showing that it was from the right side of the stamp sheet, although unfortunately it has been closely trimmed at its right margin.

A similar situation is shown for the 1840 Two Pence Blues in Figure 4, but because these are more expensive and scarcer stamps I have fewer examples. Note that the Two Pence Blue on the left with the red Maltese Cross cancellation has AL corner lettering, showing that it was from the top right corner of the stamp sheet. While there is an ample margin at the right side of this stamp, unfortunately — in spite of its being a corner margin copy — it was closely trimmed at the top. The 1840 Two Pence Blue at the right in Figure 4 has a clear but defacing cancellation in black ink.

Fun with Plating

When it comes to plating the imperforate British line-engraved stamps, I’m definitely on the lazy side of the spectrum. However, since the (usually) difficult task of identifying the plate position of each stamp has already been done by the thoughtful folks who designed the corner lettering, I’m willing to give plating a try. In the case of the British line-engraved issues, the real problem is how to determine which of the different plates was used to print any particular stamp.

My favorite stamps to use for this analysis are of course the Two Pence Blues (both issues), since only two plates were used for each of the types shown in Figure 1. These are easy to distinguish by various features without even needing to examine corner letters for details. Of my three examples of the 1840 Two Pence Blue, the CG example in Figure 1 and the AL stamp (red cancel) in Figure 4 are both from Plate 1; the FH with black cancellation in Figure 4 is from Plate 2. The single 1841 Two Pence Blue with white lines shown in Figure 1 is from Plate 3.

Plating Penny Blacks is significantly more challenging since twelve plates are involved, namely Plates 1a and 1b, followed by Plates 2 through 11. Here, it actually becomes necessary to study small differences in the position and orientation of each of the corner letters and compare them to known examples — an arduous process. For this task, various online versions of the famous Charles Nissen plating guide, *The Plating of the Penny Black Stamps of Great Britain, 1840,* can be very helpful. Using one of these (an example is shared below under Further Reading), plus other considerations, my opinion is that the Penny Black in Figure 1 is Plate 8, and those in Figure 3 are (from top left to bottom right) Plates 2, 3, 4 and 2, respectively.

I should note that the initial printing plates for both the Penny Black and 1840 Two Pence Blue were unhardened, whereas all later plates used for British line-engraved stamps were hardened.

As for plating the Penny Reds, I’m struggling to find a better (or more encouraging) word than “hopeless.” Here, a good place to start is identifying which portrait die type and corner letter alphabet was used for your stamp. I can do this part successfully; my mint Penny Red, the one shown in Figure 1, is die I, alphabet I, the same as for the Penny Black stamps. This feat of analysis limits the possibilities down to a mere 127 different printing plates!

As a budding philatelist, I’ve read heroic stories about the plating of early U.S. stamps and the almost fanatical devotion of some philatelists who painstakingly work through each of the different plates of the 1¢ Franklins or 3¢ Washingtons of 1851 without the benefit of any corner letters. This level of devotion is not for me, and I’m left in awe of this philatelic tour de force. However, this may remind some of the story about Huey Long, then the Governor of Louisiana, who was visiting the state mental hospital and encountered one of the inmates who told him “You’re going to like it here.”
Happy Birthday, Penny Black
(and Two Pence Blue)

In closing, I’ve often wondered why the 1840 Two Pence Blue was issued two days after the Penny Black — a decision that has left it somewhat neglected and certainly over-shadowed by its near-twin sister. Frankly, I like both. To paraphrase Rodney Dangerfield, pick the wrong birthday and “you just can’t get no respect.” This has always seemed very unfair to me somehow, and having two daughters I know how important it is to be even-handed.

The situation may finally be rectified, at least to some extent. In 2015, the Royal Mail put out a souvenir sheet for the 175th anniversary of the Penny Black, which at long last seems to give the Penny Black and 1840 Two Pence Blue equal billing. A portion of the sheet is shown in Figure 5. Note that both of these stamps carry the same value, paying the standard first class postage rate in the U.K., and thus are similar to U.S. forever stamps.

May 2020 marks the 180th birthday of these fascinating stamps, so get out your philatelic party hats!

References and Further Reading
www.maltesex.com/plating

The Author
Paul M. Holland from Santa Barbara, California is a specialist collector of the Franklin D. Roosevelt era, broadly defined. He also maintains a representative worldwide stamp collection from 1840–1945 with a special fondness for early classic stamps.

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