

# The Cover Story

## IN THE BEGINNING..... by John Letter

“The very first stamp was the Penny Black”

“Everybody knows that”

“Well did you know.....?”

Sounds like a Geico Insurance ad - but there is a lot to learn about the advent of the first alleged adhesive. I thought I would take a little time to tell what I have learned about this famous stamp and to debunk some of the myths. The ‘godfather’ of the world’s first postage stamp was of course Rowland Hill – he appears as **Picture 1 on the Front Cover**.



### THE FIRST STAMP IN THE WORLD?

Not quite - actually both the Penny Black [Figure 1 & 2 on the Front Cover] and the Tu’penny Blue [Figure 3 on the Front Cover] were issued on the same day so, at best the PB was in a tie for first place! Both the 1d black and the 2d blue show the same classic design. “Great Britain” does not feature in the design – this practice of omitting the country’s name is still in force today and was officially recognized and permitted by the Universal Postal Union at a later date in recognition of Britain creating such a simple and reasonably priced method of improving communication.

### RARITY?

Some folk believe that the PB must be very rare because of the price that it commands. However - **rare the Penny Black is not** – look at the numbers below.....

Plate ID	Quantity Produced	Scott Value
<b>1a</b>	10,052,400	\$300
<b>1b</b>	Included in 1a number*	\$325
<b>2</b>	7,659,120	\$325
<b>3</b>	4,768,800	\$425
<b>4</b>	8,701,760	\$350
<b>5</b>	8,616,480	\$325
<b>6</b>	9,095,040	\$325
<b>7</b>	8,137,680	\$350
<b>8</b>	7,180,320	\$450
<b>9</b>	3,840,000	\$525
<b>10</b>	1,920,000	\$800
<b>11</b>	168,000	\$4,500
<b>Total number produced 68,808,000</b>		
<b>*Were there two plates? - #1a &amp; #1b?</b>		

**Nearly 69 MILLION STAMPS** produced in a nation where the population was between about 27 to 30 million (a large percentage of whom could not read nor write!). Penny Blacks are certainly not rare! Many collectors believe that plates 1a and 1b were separate plates – this is not so..... Plate one became damaged through excessive wear and rough handling and needed a complete refurbishment. The repairs produced many

identifiable changes from the original but nevertheless it was the same plate. It is quite possible that the workers on the printing works floor did not understand just how to handle the plates and caused much of the damage. The plates were made of inferior material, when compared to what we have today, and they were susceptible to excessive wear.

## **BACK TO THE STORY – THE DEMAND**

**Figure 2 on the Front Cover** shows how close the stamps were placed – the gap here is about a millimeter (four hundredths of an inch -- 0.04”). The **demand** is always there from most collectors, even if they collect “seashells on stamps” they still want to own a penny black. This is only part of the story. The real problem for each of us is to find a really good looking stamp with four even margins, a clear postmark, no defects or thins and no scuff marks. The search for the fabled ‘4 margin VFU example’ soon proves that there are relatively few of them about. This is in part due to how close the stamps were placed to each other on the printing plates, while at the same time they had to be cut apart with rusty scissors or knives in poor light, probably from an oil lamp or low wattage bulb hanging overhead and possibly swinging in the draft. Let’s face it - a stamp with no margins paid the same letter rate as a 4 margin copy as far as the post office worker was concerned. Early on when folk collected stamps they hung them on a length of thread by piercing a needle through each stamp. Therefore many, many inferior Penny Blacks are available for \$15 to \$50 a piece – just poor space fillers.

## **MAY 6<sup>th</sup>, 1841 - WAS THIS THE DAWN?**

The stamp was issued to London post offices on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1840 for release to the general public on May 6<sup>th</sup>. This is the date we all celebrate as the first time an adhesive stamp was used. However a number of British provincial post offices, Bath for one, jumped the gun and sold some as early as May 2<sup>nd</sup>!

## **HISTORY**

Up until this time, letters were sent free of charge to the sender, but the postage was calculated on the number of sheets and the distance travelled. The addressee had to pay to receive the letter at the end of its journey. In the early 1800’s, a letter going from London to Edinburgh cost one shilling and 1 ½ pence – a very large sum back in those days. To send a letter anywhere inside Great Britain cost the equivalent of close to two weeks wages! Now the Scots have a reputation for holding onto their money, but all the Brits were not too far behind them when it came to frugality! Therefore many a son, working far from home, would periodically send letters to his mother (or other kin), who could not afford to pay the postage. Mom refused to pay and the letter was kept from her. Despite the wringing of her hands, Mom was secretly delighted because she knew by the very presence of the letter, that she refused to pay for, that her beloved son was OK. Also in those days many people had to go, at short notice, where their Masters/employers ordered them & there was no way of letting other people know where they had gone, nor when they would return. Therefore many letters went undelivered, wasting much time and costing the Post Office vast amounts of cash!

## **SOMETHING HAD TO BE DONE!**

It was in 1837 that Rowland Hill proposed the reform of the PO and one recommendation was that pre-payment should be introduced at a reasonably priced, universal post rate. A receipt for payment would be in the form of a hand stamp applied directly to the exterior of the letter. Most letters in that time were formed of folded sheets sealed closed with wax. When Hill’s reform won the approval of parliament time had to elapse while the **penny black and tu’penny blue** were manufactured. However, due to the lower cost of postage, in the period from September 1839 to February 1840 letter transmission in Great Britain increased by 120%. That’s huge! Eventually sufficient stocks of adhesives were built up that the PO was able to replace hand stamps with the adhesives. One early problem was that most postmark inks were black & therefore not easy to see against the black of the stamp.

[continued on Insert 10.2014b]