

What are all those little holes I see on some of my stamps?

By Dave Parsons

More than likely they are Perfins. Perfin is a condensed form of **PER**forated **INI**tials or **PER**forated **INS**ignia. Perfins are a number of small holes in a distinct pattern applied to stamps by private businesses or governmental agencies as security against theft. A less common and less accurate term for these formerly used in Britain is "Spifs" for "Stamps Perforated with Initials of Firms and Societies."

WHY PERFINS? For many years, postage stamps could be used for payment of small bills and could be cashed on presenting them at a Post Office. This naturally led to the risk of the stamps being stolen.

However, the Post Office would not accept stamps that had been perforated, thus reducing their value if stolen. In addition, unlike previous security methods such as under-printing, the original owner of the stamp could still be identified even if the stamp were used as postage.

WHO STARTED THIS? The invention of the perfin is credited to the British inventor Joseph Sloper who, after much effort, finally persuaded The Post Office to allow the perforation of British postage stamps. The official authorization was given on 13th March 1868.

However, the original idea had been suggested by Sir Henry Bessemer in 1832. At the time, the world's first postage stamps were still 8 years away and hence the application was only for the protection of the revenue stamps of the time.

WHEN WERE PERFINS FIRST USED? The earliest known cancellation on a perfin is currently November 1868, with the earliest cover being dated 5th January 1869. Indeed, dated copies from the late 1860's are not common.

A characteristic of the earliest perfin dies is the arrangement of the letters, which are arranged to avoid puncturing The Queen's profile.

The United States came late to the practice of stamp perfins, first authorizing their use April 9, 1908.

HOW ARE PERFINS CREATED?

Stamps were perfined by pressing a prescribed die into the stamps usually with a manually operated perforator. Of commercial perforators in both the U. S. and U. K., the last of the companies producing such machines, the Cummins Perforator Company and the Chainstream Ltd. are no longer in business.

HOW MANY PERFINS EXIST? 24,653 different perfin designs had been catalogued on British postage stamps ALONE by the end of 2017, more than for any other country, and new dies are being regularly discovered. It is thought that around 25,000 different dies may exist. Over 1,300 different perfins can be found on the 1d Red, which illustrates just how quickly the perfin became a popular method of protecting stocks of stamps (the 1d red being withdrawn in 1880, 12 years after perfins were introduced).

Approximately half of GB perfin dies have had their user identified. More perfin users are still being identified as time goes on.



Cummins No. 52 Postage Stamp Perforator
SAEGUARDS THE POSTAGE STAMP ACCOUNT

Marks stamps at the rate of from 300 to 500 per minute

Capacity Per Stroke
3 or less initials on each stamp, (20 stamps each stroke, size of 1, one sheet thick)
4 initials on each stamp, (10 stamps each stroke, size of 1, one sheet thick)
5 initials on each stamp, (10 stamps each stroke, size of 1, one sheet thick)
6 initials on each stamp, (10 stamps each stroke, size of 1, one sheet thick)

SPECIFICATIONS
Maximum height.....10 1/2"
Maximum width and table.....4"
Length of base.....12 1/2"
Width of base.....12"
Length of handle from center of press.....10 1/2"
Size of table.....14 1/2" x 12"
Net weight.....22 lbs.
Shipping weight.....30 lbs.
Size of shipping box.....24 1/2" x 14 1/2" x 14 1/2"
Finished in Black Enamel and Nickel.

The Perforations made by this machine conform to the requirements of the Post Office Department, U. S. Holes not over 1/32 inch in diameter. Total space not over 1/4 in. square.
The stamps are perforated in half sheets lengthwise. They lie flat on a plate flush with the die and are pushed forward by the operator one row at a time. A marginal guide properly locates the perforation on each stamp. The handle is raised by a spring and its stroke is short and quick—suitable for rapid work.

CUMMINS PERFORATOR CO.
4740 RAVENSWOOD AVENUE CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

In the United States over 6400 perfin patterns have been identified. Plus, there are many 1000's more from over 200 other countries. Germany has over 12,000 perfins and Austria and France each have 3,000.

WHAT IS THE SMALLEST GB PERFIN? The smallest perfins known are simply 3 holes in a row. An example of a Rothmans perfin is illustrated.



WHAT IS THE LARGEST GB PERFIN? In terms of the number of pins, the title must go to the design used by Humber & Co. Ltd which consists of over 130 pins.



WERE ONLY POSTAGE STAMPS PERFINNED?

Revenue and telegraph stamps were equally open to theft and hence such issues also turn up perfinned. The official authorization to perfin Foreign Bill and Inland Revenue stamps was given on 27th June 1870.



ARE PERFINNED STAMPS STILL USED? In later years, many firms switched to using postage meters. In addition, current postage rates are worth only a fraction of their 1860's values in real terms. The need to use perfins has thus greatly diminished. However, a few perfin users still remain, the majority being used by local councils. It has been reported that the Universities of Indiana and Iowa use perfins today.

In recent years, philatelic perfins have appeared that don't serve a real security purpose, used by philatelic organizations and individual perfin collectors.

WHAT ARE PERFINNED STAMPS WORTH?

As a general rule, a perfinned stamp is viewed by dealers as a damaged stamp and could be valued at 10% - 20% of catalog. However, to a perfin collector it is the perfin die itself that tends to be the main interest, so high value stamps may drop to a lower percentage than the more common stamps. A good illustration of this can be found with the 1d red issues, where the value of a perfin on a common plate is higher than without the perfin, yet little more is paid for the scarcer plates.

Perfinned stamps on cover are worth more when the cover identifies the user of the perfin. A perfin on a cover with no user identity is of less interest, although such covers can still provide useful information such as the place and date of use and the addressee may provide clues as to the user's trade.

There are of course particular dies that are worth a premium, some due to true scarcity or others being more desirable such as elaborate designs. There is no publication that can be used to value individual dies.

HOW DOES ONE ORGANIZE A PERFIN COLLECTION? They can be collected in different ways:

1. Collect different perfin dies for a single issue
2. Collect the same perfin across many issues
3. Build an assortment of covers for one perfin, tracing changes for a business
4. Collect topical perfins. i.e. Railroads, banks, stores, manufacturers
5. Collect different insignias, designs

IS THERE A WAY TO CATEGORIZE THESE PERFINS? Yes, there are catalogs and guides for various countries. For now we'll look at what's available for Great Britain and U.S. stamps.

For British stamps, the Perfin Society (<http://www.angelfire.com/pr/perfinsoc>) publishes [The Gault Catalogue of Great British Perfins](#).

All known perfins on GB stamps are allocated a Perfin Society catalogue number. These catalogue numbers are used throughout the Society's publications. Clearly a life size illustration is the easiest way to describe a perfin, but a system for describing perfins using only text has been developed.

This procedure can be applied to an older Penny Red.

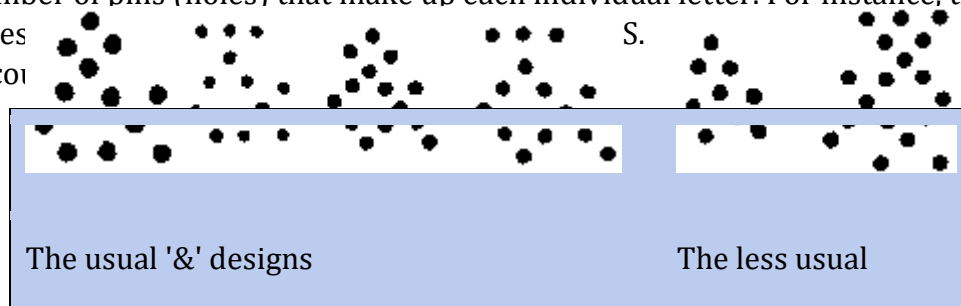
1. A forward slash is used to denote a new line in the perfin. A one-line perfin might look like, H&S, but one spread over 3 lines would be represented as H/&/S.



2. The height of the capital letters in millimeters is measured.

3. Record the number of pins (holes) that make up each individual letter. For instance, the Penny Red above has 12 holes

This gives a pin count



4. The final step is to examine the shape of the ampersand '&' character that frequently appears in perfin designs. For our example, the third pattern from the left is a match and is a Type III. The classification system for ampersands is detailed in the Society's "Tomkins" catalogue.

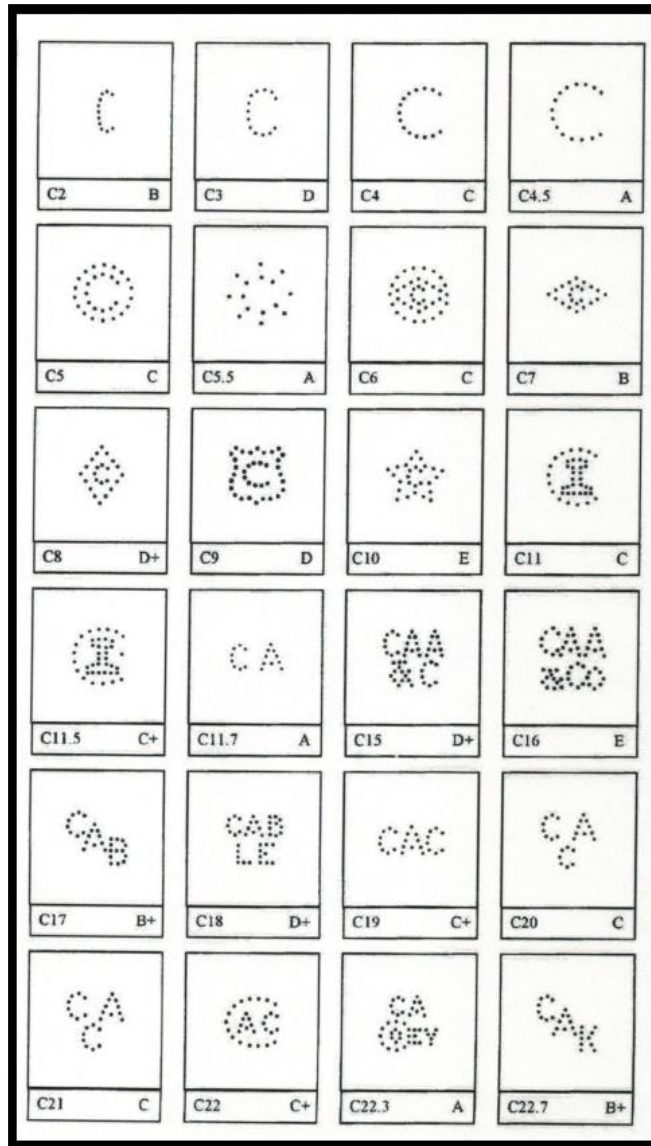
Using these properties, it is possible to uniquely identify the majority of perfins.

Hence for our Penny Red the classification would be H&S 12,14,10 Hgt:5 & type III. H&S was used by Hatcher & Sons.

For U.S. stamps there is the Perfins Club (www.perfins.org) an APS affiliate founded in 1943. The Perfins Club attempts to establish some base criteria for trading perfins although values may not necessarily apply to selling perfins.

Perfin patterns are rated on a scarcity scale from A to F. An A rate is given to patterns where there are ten or less copies known to exist. The B+ rate is given to patterns where there are 11-20 copies known. The B

rate has 21-40 copies known; C+, 41-80 copies known and C rated perfin are often found in collections of 2400+ different patterns. The D+ rating is considered above average in rarity and D patterns are considered average in rarity, in that they are found in collections of 1,200-24,00 different patterns. The E rate is considered to be common and the F rate is found in practically all collections. There is no reference catalog assigning a \$ value to each of the 6,400 + U.S. perfin patterns. However, for the practical purpose of trading duplicates with other collectors, an unpublished value scale has developed; F=10¢, E=15¢, D=25¢, D+ = 50¢, C=\$2, C+=\$4, B=\$8, B+=\$16 and A=\$30. Based on this generally accepted value scale, collectors are comfortable trading two C's for a C+, two C+'s for a B, two B's for a B+ or two B+'s for an A.



A sample page from the Club's catalog with ratings looks like:

SUMMARY: For some collectors, their collecting interests have been stymied when they reach a point where acquiring missing pieces is too expensive or out of budget range. Collecting perfin can be an inexpensive way of collecting more stamps and perhaps learning some history along the way. Perhaps maybe when we see an interesting perfin pattern we might hold on to it rather than toss it in the junk box!

Dave Parsons is a member and his collecting interests include U.S. used and BOB, Mint U.S. Commemoratives, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, South Africa and Liberia.