

The Penny Back

By Emmanuel GPS with Wikipedia's help.



The Penny Black was the **world's first adhesive postage stamp** used in a public postal system. It first was issued in Great Britain on May 6, 1840. It features a profile of Queen Victoria. In 1837, British postal rates were high, complex and anomalous. At the time it was normal for the recipient to pay postage on delivery, charged by the sheet and on distance traveled. By contrast, the Penny Black allowed letters of up to half an ounce to be delivered at a flat rate of one penny, regardless of distance. The idea had at least been suggested earlier in the



Austrian Empire [now Slovenia], Sweden, and also perhaps Greece.

When the young Queen Victoria was presented with the idea, it was explained to her and shown a sheet of this stamp. Her first reaction to this innovation was very negative. She was allegedly heard to say: "This is utterly disgusting; you mean people will lick my face?"

The portrait of Victoria was engraved by Charles Heath and his son Frederick, based on a sketch provided by Henry Corbould. This portrait of Victoria remained on British stamps until her death in 1901, although by then she was 81 years old. All British stamps still bear a portrait or silhouette of the monarch somewhere on the design. They are the only postage stamps in the world that do not indicate a country of origin; the monarch's image symbolizes the United Kingdom. A two-penny stamp printed in blue [toepence blue] covering up to an ounce was issued a week later on May 8, 1840.



The Penny Black lasted less than a year. A red cancellation was hard to see on the black design and the red ink was easy to remove; both made it possible to re-use cancelled stamps. Stamps were also used as currency allowing people to purchase flour, bread & other staples. In February 1841, the Treasury switched to the Penny Red and began using black ink for cancellations instead, which was more effective and harder to remove.

The stamps were printed in imperforated sheets to be cut with scissors for sale and use. The total print run was 286,700 sheets, containing a total of 68,808,000 stamps. Many were saved, and in used condition they remain readily available to stamp collectors [about \$100.00 on eBay]. The only known complete unused sheets of the Penny Black are owned by the British Postal Museum.

EmmanuelGPS@gmail.com, a native Frenchman, is a past Director and life member of <https://www.rotaryonstamps.org/> and the lead person of the Inverness (California) stamp club where he resides. He owns every one of the stamps shown in this article.