

BY MATTHEW HEALEY

# Postal stationery predates adhesive stamps and offers a deep, rich collecting area

WILLIAM MULREADY'S PICTORIAL POSTAL STATIONERY OF 1840 IS LISTED IN THE SCOTT CATALOGS, BUT OTHER TYPES OF STATIONERY AWAIT DISCOVERY.

Rowland Hill is mostly remembered as the great reformer who gave us the postage stamp. It comes as a surprise to many to learn that he considered adhesive stamps an afterthought: His first innovation for prepaying postage was a simple, printed envelope.

Part of the impetus for postal reform in Britain in the late 1830s arose from the widespread abuse of the franking system, under which members of Parliament had the privilege of sending letters free of charge. Their bad behavior went far beyond posting a few letters on behalf of friends. At the most extreme, members were appointed to company boards so that all of the firm's mail could be delivered free. Such corruption was becoming a serious financial burden to the post office.

As a result, Parliament itself was among the first targets of Hill's reforms. Months before the Universal Penny Postage scheme was rolled out to the public, members of Parliament began using special prepaid envelopes for their outgoing mail as part of a phased introduction of the new system.

The first of these Parliamentary envelopes went into use Jan. 16, 1840, three and a half months before the appearance of the Penny Black and Two-Penny Blue. The

initial type, shown in Figure 1, was inscribed "To be posted at the Houses of Parliament only."

Subsequently, separate types were issued for the House of

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Figure 2. Even though they were ridiculed and shunned by the public at the time of issue, the illustrated envelopes and letter sheets designed by William Mulready have long been popular with collectors and are the only British postal stationery listed in the Scott catalogs. This 1-penny example was used on the first day of issue, May 1, 1840. It was not yet valid for postage, however, so an additional penny had to be paid. *Image courtesy of Spink and Son Ltd.*

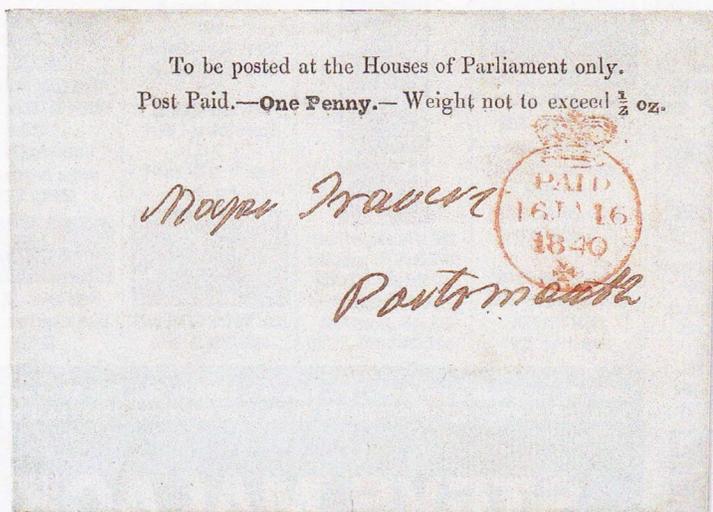


Figure 1. Britain's first prepaid postal stationery in 1840 was this simple printed envelope for use by members of Parliament, who until that time had been notorious abusers of the franking privilege. This example, used on the first day of issue, Jan. 16, was sold recently at a London auction for the equivalent of almost \$12,500. *Image courtesy of Spink and Son Ltd.*



Figure 3. In 1841, Great Britain introduced another type of prepaid postal stationery: envelopes and wrappers with an embossed stamp in the upper right corner. These would endure for 60 years throughout Queen Victoria's reign. Pictured here is a digitally cropped example of the 1d pink with a "Specimen" handstamp, and a 2d blue showing the silk threads that gave it added security.

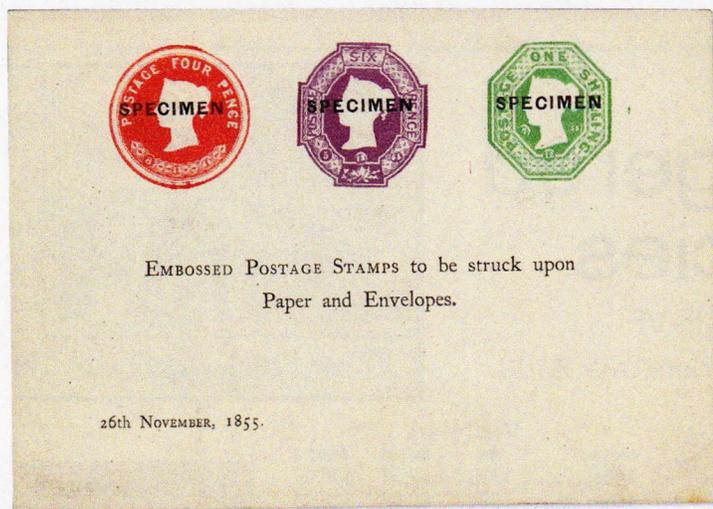


Figure 4. Higher value stamped envelopes were issued in 1855. This official announcement shows specimens of the new 4d design and the 6d and 1sh designs adapted from embossed adhesive stamps. Note the addition of dated slugs to the dies for security.

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Commons and the House of Lords, the latter being printed in red. Largely overlooked by philatelists even today, these early official envelopes are scarce and generally command three- and four-figure prices.

When prepaid postage went nationwide at the beginning of May 1840, Hill fully intended his two varieties of postal stationery to lead the way: letter sheets and envelopes with an all-over decorative design by William Mulready, and envelopes with an embossed stamp by William Wyon in the upper right corner, which would be issued the following year.

The adhesive label, or "fly" as Hill termed it, was a backup option for when those first two choices weren't practical. Somewhat to Hill's surprise, the public rejected the Mulready stationery, shrugged off the embossed envelopes and fell in love with adhesives. While the nascent hobby of philately, born 20 years later, initially embraced stationery cutouts alongside adhesive stamps, collectors soon shunned stationery to focus on adhesives alone. Postal stationery would be left out in the cold for a long time.

Over a century passed before Great Britain's postal stationery finally earned enough respect to merit the publication of a decent reference work, and Alan Huggins' 1970 book, *British Postal Stationery*, remains the definitive source of information. An updated and simplified version, *Collect British Postal Stationery*, co-authored with Colin Baker and illustrated in color, was published in 2007. Though both works are out of print, they can be found fairly readily online.

"It is clear that the stamps printed or embossed on items of postal stationery are in every respect postage stamps and worthy of study as such," intoned the great philatelist, Marcus Samuel, in his foreword to the 1970 edition, noting "facets of interest which sometimes run parallel to those of contemporary adhesive stamps and sometimes are a law unto themselves."



Figure 5. Advertising rings or collars were an experiment in generating additional revenue. Some, such as this digitally cropped wrapper bearing 1sh and 4d stamps with variations on an advertisement for the publishing company Smith Elder, are considered rare.

Samuel blamed "scissor-happy Victorians" for ruining a great deal of postal stationery by cutting out the indicia, which many a latter-day collector has come across at the back of a stock book and ignored due to lack of any catalog information. This is an unfortunate state of affairs, for postal stationery is a deep, rich field offering many avenues for exploration. Nowadays, the general practice is to collect entire items, although cutouts may be tolerated out of necessity.

The only Great Britain postal stationery in

the Scott catalogs are the Mulready items

These were issued, like the first stamps, at the beginning of May 1840, and there are four basic items: 1-penny and 2d envelopes (Scott U1, U2) and letter sheets (U3, U4). The printing colors follow those of the stamps: black for the 1d, blue for 2d.

It was typical of the Victorian reformer's mindset that Hill

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Figure 6. Among the notable innovations in British postal stationery was the practice of stamping to order. Customers could drop off their own paper specifying how it was to be stamped. This resulted in some philatelically inspired combinations of stamps which, though colorful, had little postal use. By the time these examples were produced, the date slugs in the dies had been removed or replaced with florets.

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sought not just to provide a useful commercial amenity but to elevate the cultural sophistication of British society by producing something with real artistic merit. He hired Mulready, a recognized and popular artist of his day, and then took pains to have the grandees of the Royal Academy bless the design before sending it to print.

Though his effort was largely wasted — satirical imitations of the Mulreadys are a rich collecting area unto themselves — this stationery is very much sought after today. It offers numerous avenues for specialization. Examples of the letter sheets with privately added advertisements command a premium, as do examples uprated with stamps on account of enclosures or because they were, contrary to Hill's expectations, mailed overseas.

The letter sheet shown in Figure 2, though slightly aged, is postmarked on the first day of issue: May 1, 1840. There are just four known used on this date, one of which is in the Postal Museum in London. Not valid for postage until May 6, the letter sheet has an additional handstamp at the center indicating that an extra penny was paid.

The other fruit of Hill's reforms was embossed stamped envelopes, which appeared in 1841. Figure 3 shows the first of these, a 1d pink (marked "Specimen") and a 2d blue.

The public soon began clamoring for stamps in higher denominations. Hill advised the authorities to resist this pressure, because he was worried about the risks of fraud and forgery. He knew that any threat to the security of prepaid postage would doom his system.

Eventually public pressure won out, and in 1847 embossed adhesive stamps were issued (Scott 5-7). By 1855, advances in letterpress quality allowed the introduction of so-called surface-printed stamps, and the embossed adhesives were retired.

Except they didn't really go away. Instead, the embossed designs were applied to stationery. Figure 4 shows the official announcement with specimen examples of the new 4d embossed stamp and the repurposed 6d and 1sh stamps. A 3d value would be added to the series in 1859, three years before a 3d adhesive appeared.



Figure 7. This scarce though probably philatelic example of a stamped-to-order envelope was used for a registered letter sent to Hawaii, via San Francisco, in 1898. The 10d embossed stamp was retired in 1855, but it made a comeback first in turquoise on telegraph forms and then in its original brown color on stamped-to-order items such as this cover. Here it lacks the silk threads that were present in the 1848 adhesive issue.



Figure 8. This commercial example of a stamped-to-order parcel label to the Netherlands has two 1sh and a 2d embossed, as well as a Penny Lilac adhesive. The adhesive has the perforated initials (perfin) of the sender, "TP/MC." Though undated, this piece is likely from the 1890s.

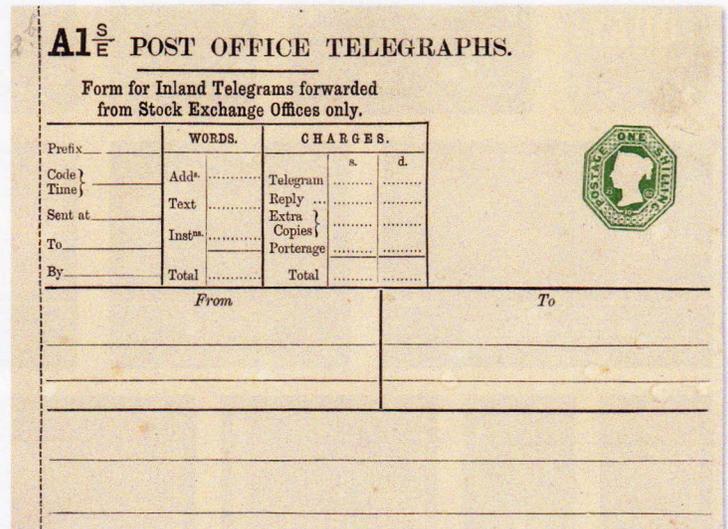


Figure 9. Embossed stamps were pressed into service for a new area when the post office took over United Kingdom telegraphs in 1870. Forms prestamped with the embossed 1sh die, like this digitally cropped example customized for the London Stock Exchange, were not as popular as anticipated, and adhesive stamps were frequently used instead.

Observant readers will notice that the 6d and 1sh stamps differ from the adhesive versions in having three tiny date slugs inserted into each design. These showed the date of stamping and served as an added security feature, in lieu of the watermark or silk threads, respectively, that had provided protection on the adhesive versions.

As had been done with the Mulreadys, sharp minds sought to monetize postal stationery by adding advertising. With the embossed stamps, ads took the form of rings or collars placed around the dies and stamped at the same time. In later years, advertising rings would be add-

ed privately, not always in the same color as the stamp and with varying degrees of alignment around the stamp.

The advertising ring concept never really took off, however, and especially on the higher denominations, these ads are scarce and sought after. The example in Figure 5, with 1sh and 4d stamps together on a large wrapper, is considered rare.

Another important aspect of embossed stationery was the option for the public to bring their own paper for stamping. Anyone could drop off paper (meeting certain specifications) to the Board of

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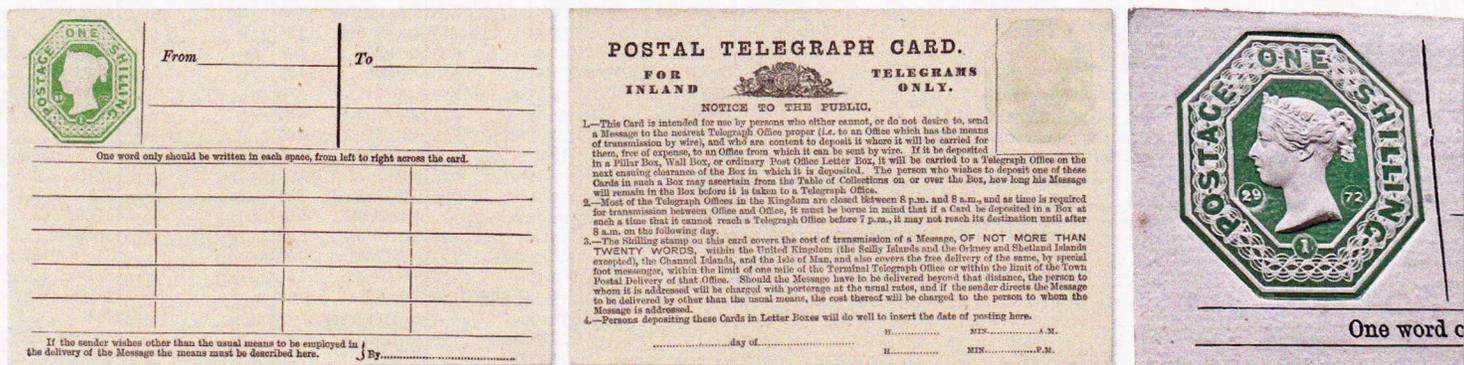


Figure 10. The postal telegraph card was a cute solution for those who didn't live near a telegraph office. The card could be dropped in a pillar box and forwarded for transmission as soon as the mail was collected. The embossing on these cards, which are not rare, was exceptionally bold and beautiful, as shown in the close-up of the 1-shilling green indicia on the right.

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Inland Revenue at Somerset House in London to be duly stamped, even specifying how the stamps should be spaced to allow for subsequent cutting and folding.

In later years, philatelists took advantage of this stamped-to-order system to create colorful combinations of two or more dies, though many of the resulting combinations had little postal necessity. Figure 6 shows an array of such combined frankings. Though colorful, such unused envelopes are likely philatelic creations.

Used examples are harder to find. Figure 7 shows a registered cover to Hawaii with 10d and 1½d embossed stamps, and Figure 8 a commercial parcel label to the Netherlands with two 1sh and a 2d embossed, as well as a Penny Lilac adhesive (Scott 89).

Note that these embossed dies are undated. In the 1890s, that requirement was dropped, and little florets were inserted into the holes where the date slugs had previously been seated.

In 1870, the post office took over the domestic telegraph companies in Great Britain, and postage stamps became valid for telegrams as well. At first, it was thought that embossed stamps would be the norm. Because a shilling was the basic rate for a 20-word telegram, many forms were stamped for this purpose. Figure 9 pictures the upper part of a telegraph form customized for use at

the London Stock Exchange, with a 1sh embossed stamp dated "25 10 1882" (Oct. 25, 1882).

However, most senders seemed to prefer unstamped forms, to which they could add adhesives after writing out their message, as any prestamped form that was spoiled had to be tediously reclaimed. The security loophole of using adhesives, on the other hand, was ruthlessly exploited in the early 1870s by the perpetrators of the infamous Stock Exchange forgeries — but that is another story.

One of the cleverer innovations in Victorian philately was the postal telegraph card, an unused example of which is shown in Figure 10. Unused, these cards

are not all that rare, though only a single used example is known to have survived. Used telegraph forms of all kinds were meant to be retained by the post office and destroyed.

The idea behind these cards, which is explained in the fine print on the back, was that folks living farther away from a telegraph office, and for whom speed wasn't of the essence, could write their message on the card and simply drop it in a pillar box. After collection, it would be hastily forwarded to the nearest telegraph office and transmitted as usual.

The reason I love these cards is that their thick, soft paper causes the embossing to

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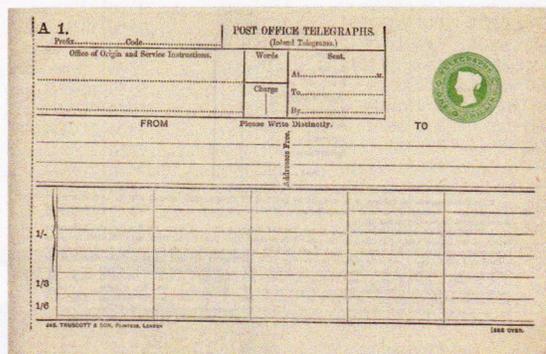


Figure 11. In an effort to make post office accounting more transparent, Parliament in 1875 ordered that separate stamps be produced for telegraph operations. In addition to the adhesive series, a round 1sh embossed stamp inscribed "Telegraphs" was also issued, seen here on an unused form.



Figure 12. Great Britain was one of the first countries to issue postal cards, doing so in 1870, with an elegant letterpress design in mauve featuring a more mature portrait of Queen Victoria. This example, mailed in Bath on the first day of issue, Oct. 1, was sold recently in a London auction for almost \$1,250. Image courtesy of Cavendish Philatelic Auctions.

Figure 13. Under the auspices of the Universal Postal Union, this international postal card bears a country name (something British adhesives have never done) in both English and French. The card was sent Oct. 2, 1879, from Aberdeen, Scotland, to Abo (today known as Turku) in Finland, then still part of the Russian Empire.

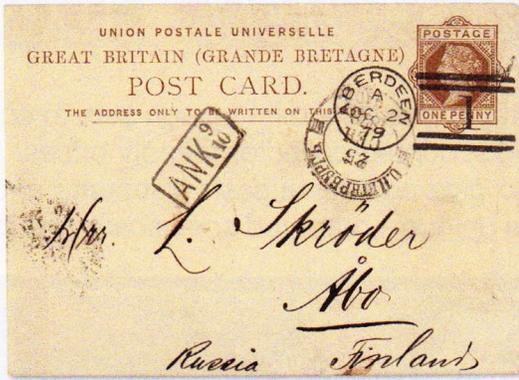


Figure 14. A 3d empire-rate postal card (shown here digitally cropped) featured a full-length portrait of Queen Victoria, unique among British postal issues. This card can be quite hard to find used.

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be especially bold, as the close-up photograph in Figure 10 demonstrates, resulting in one of the most strikingly beautiful objects in all of Great Britain philately.

When the post office briefly issued separate stamps for telegraphs from 1876 to 1881, there was a corresponding embossed stamp, round instead of octagonal, shown in Figure 11 on a complete form. One shilling was the only denomination issued in this series.

Another momentous postal innovation in Britain arrived in 1870: the postal card. Largely in response to public demand, the post office agreed to cut the postage rate for a simple card to a halfpenny, a huge boon to businesses and individuals who needed to communicate only a few words. Exchanging postcards quickly became the Victorian equivalent of today's email.

Figure 12 depicts an example of the first postal card, printed by letterpress, sent from Bath to London on the first day of issue and the first day of the new service, Oct. 1, 1870. Those with an eye for detail will notice that the portrait of Queen Victoria departs from the Wyon profile used on the embossed stamps and all 19th-century British adhesives. This portrait of a slightly more mature queen, by the court sculptor William Theed, was also widely used for British revenue stamps beginning around this time.

Postal cards proved popular and were soon issued for a number of rates, including overseas. Figure 13 shows a 1d card sent from Aberdeen, in Scotland, to Abo, in Finland, then part of the Russian Empire.

The St. Petersburg transit postmark just below the Aberdeen cancel makes it appear the card, mailed Oct. 2, 1879, was received over a week earlier, on Sept. 25. The



Figure 15. Embossing was also used on postal cards such as this 1/2d pink mailed locally in Ipswich in 1884. The blue letterpress imprint is one of several distinct styles found on such cards, all of which epitomize the Victorian typographic esthetic.

discrepancy is due to Russia still using the Julian calendar at the time.

Although the large "1" between bars looks like a surcharge, it is just part of the Aberdeen cancel, denoting that town as first in the alphabetical listing of Scottish place-names assigned their own postmarks.

Tidbits such as this are but one of the joys of collecting entires. Postal stationery is where stamps and postal history meld into one.

In Figure 14 is the digitally cropped indicium of another postal card, for an empire-wide 3d rate. Unusually for 19th-century Great Britain issues, it shows a full-length portrait of Queen Victoria rather than a profile bust.

Embossed stamps also appeared on postal cards, and Figure 15 shows an example of a

1/2d pink embossed stamp. The ornate letterpress imprint reading "Post Card / The address only to be written on this side" is peak Victoriana, one of several styles the post office tried out with this series of cards.

Another unusual category of postal stationery is shown in Figure 16: a certificate of posting, bearing a vermilion pink example of the 1/2d embossed. This is the top slip in a stack of 12, bound together by the metal grommet visible at upper left. I have to confess that I love the quaintness of this item, as well as its plainly utilitarian elegance. This was an experimental issue with a limited release in 1877-78 and again in 1881. It proved more convenient to stamp certificates with adhesives, and the embossed type was abandoned.

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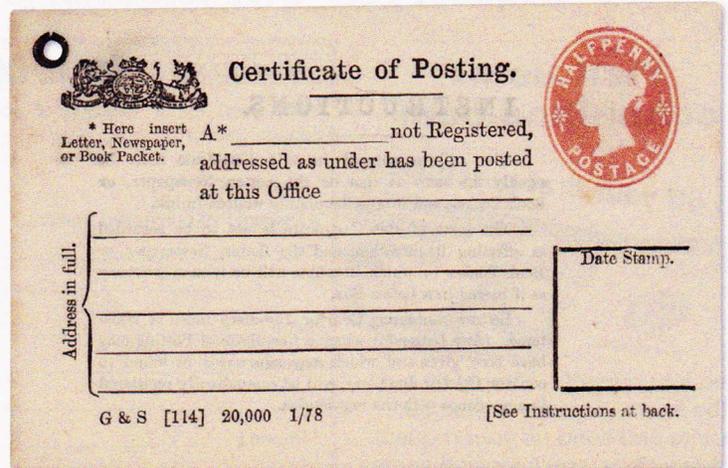


Figure 16. An experimental use of the 1/2d embossed stamp on a certificate of posting, trialed in London and Liverpool in 1877-78. This is the top slip in a stack of 12, fastened with a metal grommet at upper left.

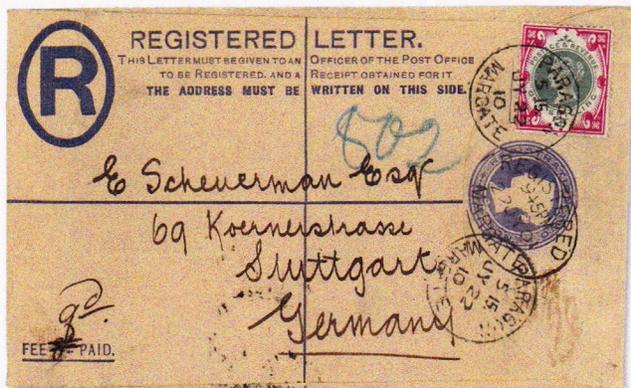


Figure 17. Beginning in 1878, embossed stamps were used to show prepayment of registration fees on special envelopes. A schedule on the back of the envelope showed the additional rates payable for insurance. This comparatively late use, in 1910, is also a scarce solo example of the Queen Victoria 1sh carmine and green adhesive on cover.

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Embossed stamps saw another application beginning in 1878: paying the fee for registering a letter. At first, a regular 2d die was used, applied to the flap of the envelope with an added imprint reading "For registration only." These were soon replaced by a new, circular die inscribed "Registration two pence."

Registered envelopes provide a rich field for specialist study, given all the types of stamps, formats and inscriptions used over the years. One example, shown in Figure 17, is a cover sent to Germany in 1910 — a rather late use for Victorian stamps or postal stationery, which were demonetized in 1915.

The 1sh carmine and green adhesive (Scott 126), a scarce solo use of the stamp, overpays by half a penny the 2½d postage plus 9d extra insurance, while the 2d embossed stamp, positioned sideways on the flap, takes care of the registration.

We tend to take it as gospel that innovation happens mostly in the private sector, but in Victorian Britain that was not always the case. New ideas, wherever they arose, could indeed be adopted by an organization as large and



Figure 18. The letter card was a hybrid product combining the benefits of a letter and a postcard. Used examples typically have the perforated edges torn off, but the example pictured here is intact. Though issued for domestic (inland) use, it could be uprated for overseas postage by adding a 1½d adhesive stamp, as was done here to send to Argentina.



Figure 19. Illustrated envelopes were revived in 1890 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of uniform penny postage. This example was posted at the jubilee exhibition in South Kensington on July 2 and received the special commemorative cancel in use that day. Image courtesy of Cavendish Philatelic Auctions.

conservative as the post office if their merits were clear enough. An example of this is the 1892 letter card shown in Figure 18, which has been uprated for overseas postage by the addition of a 1½d Jubilee stamp (Scott 112).

The indicium follows the design of earlier postal cards, but it is on a sheet of paper folded in half rather than a card. The perimeter was gummed and would be moistened and stuck down by the sender; the recipient would tear off the perforated edges to open the letter. This had the benefit of more privacy (and space) than a postcard, without the need (or weight) of an envelope; indeed, this is the ancestor of the 20th-century air letter or aerogram.

The downside was that tearing off the perforated edges made it tough for latter-day collectors to obtain intact, used examples. The one shown in Figure 18 is an exception, perhaps because of the dampness of its sea voy-

age to Argentina caused the glue to come unstuck easily. The letter is in German and contains a collector's want list of South American stamps.

Britain would not issue its first commemorative stamps until 1924, but in 1890, to mark the jubilee of penny postage, it issued commemorative postal cards and illustrated envelopes. The latter touted progress in the speed of the mails over the previous 100 years and the precipitous drop in postal rates since 1840.

An example of this blue 1d envelope, with a special pictorial cancel applied at the jubilee exhibition in South Kensington, is in Figure 19.

Most collectors are familiar with the overprinted stamps

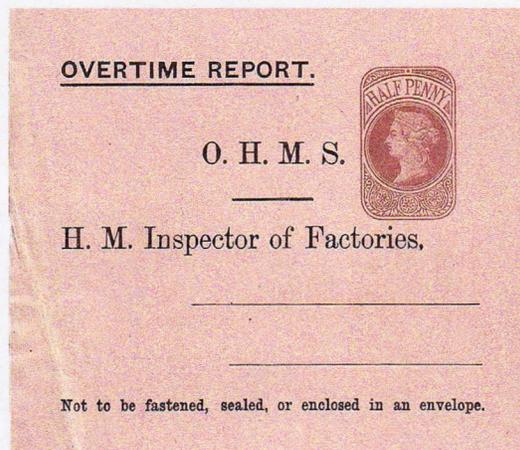


Figure 20. Postal stationery for official use by government departments can be elusive. This digitally cropped ½d wrapper, on special pink paper, was imprinted for use in filing reports by Her Majesty's Inspector of Factories.

issued by various government departments in Britain, but fewer know there were also postal stationery counterparts. Rather than overprinting the indicia, these take the form of utilitarian imprints designating a departmental function, addressee, or both, as well as

Figure 21. A soldier's concession-rate letter sent from a British army post office in South Africa on May 29, 1902, near the end of the Boer War, demonstrates the longevity of the Penny Pink stamped envelope, first issued in 1841.



the abbreviation O.H.M.S. (On Her Majesty's Service). Many of these official wrappers, cards and envelopes are hard to find and expensive.

The halfpenny wrapper in Figure 20, prepared for reports sent to Her Majesty's Inspector of Factories, is further distinguished from ordinary wrappers by being on pink paper. Various colors designated (for example) the Admiralty and other offices.

The final area of Victorian postal stationery is overseas use. Unlike adhesive stamps,

whose extensive use at colonial and foreign post offices I discussed in the *Linn's* issue of Oct. 19, 2020, British postal stationery saw very little use abroad.

One of the exceptions is the cover shown in Figure 21: a Penny Pink envelope, virtually identical to the type first issued in 1841, postmarked at a field post office of the British army in South Africa. It is a soldier's letter, sent May 29, 1902, days before the end of the Boer War.

We think of the current Elizabethan definitives, designed



by Arnold Machin, as having lasted a long time. The Penny Pink, current for more than 60 years, still has the Machins beat.

Figure 22 shows two examples of British postal stationery overprinted for use abroad: a 40-paras surcharge on a 2½d stamp for use in the Ottoman Empire (the stamp is canceled at the British post office in Beirut), and a 4d stamp with two overprints, one designating it as paying registration and one for the colony of British Bechuanaland (now Botswana).

While many collectors, even today, tend to shun postal stationery as not real stamps, I prefer to think of it instead as stamps that are big enough to write on. Next month, I plan to continue this survey with the postal stationery issues of the 20th century. □



Figure 22. Like adhesive stamps, postal stationery was overprinted for use in some British post offices abroad. Shown here are a digitally cropped 40-paras-on-2½d indicium postmarked in Beirut and the 4d registration stamp on an envelope for British Bechuanaland.

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