

PENNY BLACK PLATES - THE STAMPS, VARIETIES AND USAGE

SYNOPSIS

Scope: This is the story of penny blacks (and reds), the stamps themselves, the many varieties found as a result of mid 19th century printing technology, and examples of their usage, all introduced in plate number order.

Balance: Some plates have much more to say than others. For instance plate 1 was completely re-entered and is today looked upon as two separate plates. It was later used to print red stamps and was also subject to further repairs. Plate 1 is therefore explored in great depth using up the better part of the two first frames. Compare this with plate 3 is at the other end of the scale. It was never repaired, not used for printing in red and had a very short life so there is not much to be said about it and it is completely covered using only a part of one frame. However every plate is explored in as much depth as possible.

Organization: Each plate is introduced with a grouping of typical black stamps from that plate. Varieties and, where they exist, the red stamps follow. Significant in this exhibit are the number of black – red matched pairs. Imperf penny reds were produced from over 160 plates so matching helps to ensure that the red stamp is correctly plated. Interspersed throughout are the 'usages', both blacks and reds are shown on cover often with matching elements, but there is no intent to explore the postal history of the period. Difficult items to find are stamps printed from the repaired plates. Many of these are shown throughout the exhibit, mostly at the end of the plate being studied.

Rarity: I was persuaded by the last judge to view this exhibit to highlight a few (his emphasis) key items. You will find nine mentioned on the title page and these have been framed in red on the exhibit pages. But of course there are many other items worthy of special mention. For instance there are three strips of four blacks in this exhibit in addition to the strip of four on the plate 1 cover highlighted. These are quite rare. Any repaired state stamp should be considered scarce. A grouping I particularly like is towards the end of plate 1. It shows a black 1a, a black 1b, a red 1b and a repaired red (1c) all from the same plate position. Individually not of great scarcity but I have been trying really hard to put another set like this together for over 30 years without success. Perhaps it should be mentioned here that all plate 1 reds are considerably scarcer than plate 1 blacks.

Covers: This is an area where there are great opportunities to show better items. The front of a typical 1d black cover shows a stamp on the upper right cancelled with a maltese cross and nothing else, not very exciting. I show plenty of these but I have also made an effort to show many covers of greater interest. Typical are the adjacent plate 3 pair of covers showing 'penny posts' and 'two-penny posts'. Scattered through the exhibit are further examples. Redirected letters are also of interest. The plate 5 cover redirected using a red plate 10 to redirect is one of the highlighted items, but there is also a very attractive plate 6 cover redirected showing a manuscript 1 indicating a cash payment. Nowhere near the rarity of the plate 5 cover but much prettier than most redirected covers which are usually quite a mess. A key cover is, of course, the highlighted Mulready carrying an added 1d stamp. Finally, take a look at the excerpt from the plate 6 letter from Arundel to Holborn concerning a shipment of gin (top of frame 6) – not rare but it's such finds that help make the hobby fun.

Condition: To my mind condition is an imperative. To this end I have worked hard to ensure all the stamps shown here are four margined and in the best condition available. In one case I didn't quite make it. The first page of plate 9 shows a stamp with part of the marginal marking and what was gained in the margin was lost on the other side – sorry but it's still well worth showing. I believe that virtually all the others meet my standards.

Authenticity: Where certificates are mentioned they may be found tucked in behind the page on which the item is displayed and are available for review by judges.

Reference: In previous synopses I have listed several reference books but the literature is so extensive that for a single succinct source I now recommend just the current issue of the Stanley Gibbons Great Britain specialized catalogue volume 1 – Queen Victoria. It does a good job and it's really up to date.