



The Wrexham Penny Post



We all know about the Penny Post and the Penny Black (don't we?), but how original were these? As far as Penny Posts go the first in Britain was established in London in 1680, delivering within the Cities of Westminster and London. Higher fees applied to further distances. In 1765 the creation of local penny posts was permitted by parliament and many of these sprang up in towns and cities. But they were still only local. The Uniform Penny Post, across the whole of Britain, appeared in 1840, as part as Sir Rowland Hill's post office reforms.

There are contenders for the position of first adhesive postage stamp from Paris in 1653, Spain in 1716 and Sardinia in 1818. The important point about this concept is that postage is pre-paid by the sender. Without this the cost falls onto the recipient, and they could refuse delivery [perhaps a return to this would have stemmed junk mail and speeding summonses]. What Rowland Hill's postal reforms achieved was a combination of these, with guaranteed delivery and guaranteed payment, at a standard cost across the entire country regardless of distance. Abuses of the existing mail services by all and sundry were eliminated, to the benefit of commerce and individuals.

But where did the idea of an adhesive stamp come from? Originally Hill had talked about pre-paid letter sheets, but soon changed his mind to "a bit of paper just large enough to bear the stamp, and covered at the back with a glutinous wash" in a letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Perhaps he had heard of the plans being made by a penny post service by a local consortium that was being proposed for the North Wales town of Wrexham around 1834.¹ The group was headed by one Thomas Gittins who owned much commercial property in the town, but the good folk of the town needed to find backers for the scheme. Wrexham wouldn't have the volume of mail of a city, but had iron works and coal mines just outside the town, and also a good numbers of breweries, flax dressers and a large weekly beast market. But as soon as one backer was found another would pull out. And this is when the idea of a pre-paid stamp appeared. This would help guarantee revenue for the service and lower the risks to the wavering investors.

So some sheets of stamps were printed. They were unperforated, and had showed the idea for the design; the central feature being the bust of King William IV, seemingly based on that used on the coinage. Whether permission to use this was obtained, or whether it would have been redrawn for a print of the real stamps (an awful amount of extra work). A half penny stamp was also considered and this featured Queen Adelaide. The designs were etched and printed by a young unknown Archibald Crewe², based in nearby Chester. He welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate some new ideas he had. Unfortunately he died soon after and never had the chance to show how he achieved some of the effect used on these stamps. They were printed in sheets of 120, with the columns headed A to J and the rows 1-12. How many sheets were produced is unknown. They were essentially samples, to be cut up and used to demonstrate how the service would operate, and quite probably the design would have been modified. So the print run may have been quite low.

¹ For a vivid description of Wrexham around the time read chapters 61-63 of George Borrow's *Wild Wales*.

² A Sylvanus Crue worked as an etcher in Wrexham in the 18th Century. Archibald may have been a descendant continuing the family trade.

Postage rates were to be one penny within the town, with an extra half penny for addresses just outside the town, like Bersham where Iron Mad Wilkinson had built three blast furnaces³, Minera where lead was mined, and hamlets like Rhosnesi which would soon be swallowed up into the town or the now lost village of Felin Puleston. A two penny stamp was printed for mail to be forwarded onto neighbouring towns like Llangollen, Chester and Oswestry via the stage coach service. The existence of farthing stamps is a mystery. No record exists of their intended purpose, and they seem to show the bust of the King's father, George IV. The smaller design seems, however, to match the other values. They have followed the pattern of alternating the direction that the bust faces between reigns. Two postmen would have been employed, having routes around the town delivering the mail, accepting letters as they went, or picking articles off at designated premises.

But in 1837 two factors doomed this fledgling service entirely. Firstly the King died and so the designs were obsolete and the designer had passed away, but most importantly Rowland Hill published his reforms. Seeing the writing on the wall the proposed service was ditched, and examples of the stamps disappeared.

Most are said to be in the possession of one Harvey Gittins, the great great great grandson of Thomas Gittins, who lives in America. Other stamps that appear are often dismissed as hoax, bogus or fake. Harvey refuses to release his originals for comparison. Why is this? It is said that a curse lies upon the stamps. As previously mentioned the designer died soon after this work (from a surfeit of lampreys), and in 1838 the print workshop mysteriously burnt down. Those involved in distributing and demonstrating the samples all suffered misfortunes over the next few years. Flooded houses, mysterious ailments, unfaithful wives, ugly children, barren cows, amnesia, unexplained disappearances, hauntings, freak accidents involving donkeys and patented steam-powered nutcrackers⁴, bankrupted businesses and even the failure to find a single matching pair in a full sock drawer were blamed on the curse. The only persons immune were the direct line descendents of the chairman of the service.

So where did these examples come from? The answer to that is 'We don't know'. There is a steady trickle of them reaching collectors, but without being able to compare to the known originals they are usually dismissed as fakes. Time has not been kind to these stamps. In a letter dated 1841 the one penny stamps were jokingly referred to as 'the Penny Whites', but the paper has turned a bit brown over the years, so inks seemed to have transformed, and the gum has definitely gone off. The paper may also have become brittle, but at least the mice haven't got at them over the last 175 years. You should have, in this issue, some of each value, some marginal stamps, some pairs and some odd singletons, cut from a small bundle of blocks and oddments kept in a folder. But now you know the background to them you have a choice before you commit them to your album. Assume they are the genuine article and convince yourself the curse is just imagination and hearsay, or label them up as fakes. Either way they have a place in a Cinderella collection.

³ Remains of a wooden tramway here may be from the oldest railway in Britain.

⁴ The donkey and the nutcrackers were separate freak accidents.