

THEME 3:

The Penny Black

OBJECTIVE:

To identify and describe reasons for, and results of, historical events, situations and changes which occurred related to the Penny Black.

Before the introduction of uniform penny postage in 1840 the system for sending letters in Britain was complicated and expensive. The cost of sending a letter depended on distance and the number of sheets of paper it contained. For example, it cost 1s 1d (one shilling, one pence) to post a letter from London to Edinburgh. A loaf of bread, by comparison, cost one penny. People would try to fit as much news as possible onto a single sheet of paper, folded and fastened with a wax seal.

Letter carriers would collect the fee for postage when they delivered the letter. However, some people would not pay for the letter when it was delivered and instead had it returned unopened. Sometimes it was enough for people to see that their distant friend or relative had addressed the letter,

which meant that they were still alive. People also developed a number of different codes to write on the envelope and would let the recipient know the most important news without them having to pay for the letter. Examples of secret codes included deliberately misspelling a word or double-crossing the letter 't' in order to send a secret message.

Not everyone had to pay the high postage rates. MPs did not have to pay to post letters and there was a lot of misuse of this privilege. Newspapers were also sent free. This cartoon by Henry Cole highlights the unfairness of the old system.

Uniform penny postage meant that it was the same price, one penny, to send a letter that weighed less than half an ounce anywhere in the kingdom. This was a huge reduction in the cost of sending a letter.

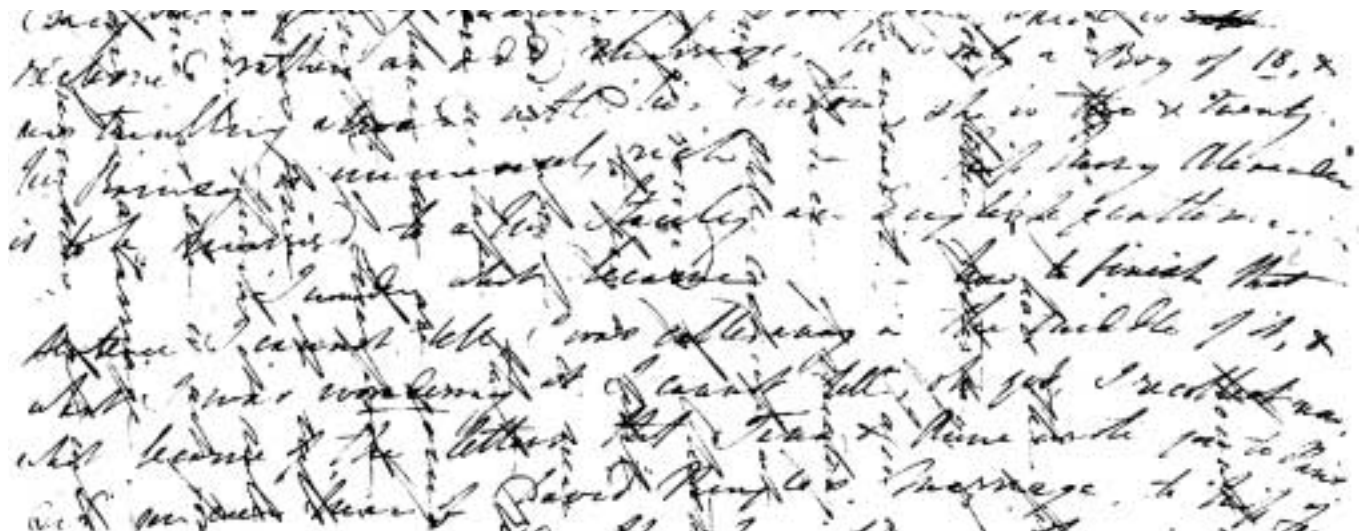


Pre-decimalisation in 1971, the British currency was pounds, shillings and pence. Money was divided into pounds (£), shillings (s. or /-) and pennies (d.). One penny was written as 1d. There were 20 shillings in £1; 12 pennies in one shilling and 240 pennies in £1. The theme of the Penny Black is ideal for investigating Victorian money, how it was written and its value.



A cross-written letter

The introduction of cheaper postage made a huge difference to how people communicated with each other. This activity is designed to help pupils think about what the postal system was like before the introduction of uniform penny post.



Activity 3.1

Why did people write cross-written letters?

facsimile 2

Have a look at the copy of the cross-written letter with the class. There is a version on the website if you would prefer to look at it on a whiteboard.

Discuss some of these questions with the children:

- :: How did people write letters in the early nineteenth century?
- :: How were these letters sealed?
- :: Do you think people used envelopes?
- :: Can this letter be read clearly?
- :: Why do you think people wrote letters like this?
- :: What are the disadvantages of writing letters like this?
- :: What do you think life was like for someone your age in 1827?

Activity 3.2

Pre-Victorian letter writing

Ask the children if they can read the letter. Use the transcript on the next page to help you read it to the class.

- :: What are the main topics that Leonora writes about?
- :: Imagine Leonora writing her letter. What kind of a light do you think she had? Was there electric light or would she have used a candle?
- :: What type of pen do you think she used?
- :: How do you communicate with friends and family? Do you write letters or emails?
- :: What differences can you think of between letters and emails?
- :: Underline or identify examples of how language has changed since Victorian times. Are there any words or phrases we do not use any more?
- :: You could investigate writing with a nib pen and ink.

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The letter starts like this:

Mount Annan. 14th July 1827

My Dear Anne,

I had the pleasure of receiving your long letter yesterday and now take up my pen to answer it. I am sorry that we have so little chance of meeting you but I think you may still cast up at Buxton. We cannot go round by Chester as Papa has promised to pay a visit at Claremont.

Later in the letter, the writer continues:

Does Chester answer your expectations? I suppose you have walked around the City Walls. I mentioned to Tina that you would like to hear from them when they are in Ireland. Poor Herbert Scott died last week – he has had a long illness – his friends are in great distress.

Did you see the Brooks at Southampton? I hear they are there just now. As I have several letters to write I think I must bring this to a conclusion.

Papa and Mama write with me an affectionate dear regards to Mrs. Robertson and best compliments to your aunt and with love to yourself.

Believe me, my dear Anne,

your affect. friend,

Leonora.

Activity 3.3

Reading a cross-written letter

- :: Read through the letter carefully.
- :: Use a highlighter to underline any examples you can find of how language has changed since Victorian times.
- :: Underline any words or phrases you do not understand.
- :: Now you are going to write a cross-written letter.
- :: Use the worksheet to help you plan your letter.

Possible topics include:

- :: writing to a relative who has moved to a city
- :: describing your first day at work in a mill or factory
- :: a daytrip to the seaside
- :: Once you have written a draft, write out your letter in the style of a cross-written letter.
- :: Swap your letter with a partner. Can they read it?



Activity 3.4

Cross-written letter writing frame



Imagine you live in Victorian times.
Think about what your life would be like.

Plan the rough draft of your letter here.

Are you rich or poor?

Where do you live?

Who are you writing to?

What is your letter about?

Place you are writing from:

Date:

Dear:

Sign your letter in Victorian style

- :: Check your rough draft for spelling and punctuation.
- :: Think about how you will write this out as a cross-written letter.

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Postal reform in 1840

The Penny Black was the world's first adhesive postage stamp. The postal reform, marked by its introduction, was the beginning of a new era in communications as postal rates were drastically reduced. Letters were charged by weight, not by the number of sheets of paper or the distance travelled.

facsimile 3

Look at the facsimile 'To all Postmasters' dated April 1840. This introduced Postmasters to the very first Penny Blacks. Look carefully at the language used in this notice. It

contains considerable information about preventing forgery, which links to the activities on page 16.

New postal and transport networks developed thanks to the rise of the railways. As more and more letters were sent, more stamps had to be produced and so there were developments in printing techniques and perforation and envelope folding machines were invented.

| Country | Date postage stamps were introduced |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Britain | 1840 |
| New York local delivery | 1842 |
| Swiss cantons of Zurich and Geneva | 1843 |
| Brazil | 1843 |
| Swiss canton of Basel | 1845 |
| USA | 1847 |
| Mauritius | 1847 |
| France, Belgium and Bavaria | 1849 |

The rest of the world watched the British experiment with pre-paid postage and the idea was soon introduced in other countries during the 1840s. The table below shows which countries introduced postage stamps first.

Rowland Hill was the driving force behind much of the postal reform. He was appointed to oversee the implementation of this reform. He invited the public to suggest ideas about how this prepaid postage should be shown by organising a public competition. There were many different ideas, including prepaid envelopes and designs for stamps. No one entry was the overall winner but Rowland Hill took different ideas to come up with the design for the Penny Black stamp. It was based on an engraving from the Wyon Medal of Queen Victoria when she was fifteen.





Information sheet – The Penny Black

Background Information

The Penny Black was the world's first adhesive postage stamp. It was introduced in Britain in 1840 as a result of widespread calls for postal reform and it marked a turning point in British social history. The Penny Black had a huge impact upon communications because it was the first time that sending letters became affordable for everyone. It is like our own communications revolution of the Internet, email and text messaging.



One of the first letters sent with the new Penny Black stamp.

Problems with the old system

The postal service was extremely expensive because of a number of factors, including the fact that the government deliberately used postage as a tax system. Also, the cost of sending a letter was based on the distance the letter had travelled and the number of sheets of paper it contained. Unlike our present system, it usually had to be paid for by the recipient. This high cost meant that it was difficult for ordinary people to write regularly to each other.

Many people were unable to read or write because there was no national education system until the 1870 Education Act. This lack of literacy was a serious problem since Britain was experiencing mass industrialisation and urbanisation, with many people moving from the countryside to the towns and cities to work in factories. It was difficult for families living far apart to communicate with each other, especially since the cost of sending a letter was a significant part of the weekly wage. For example, the cost of sending a letter from London to Edinburgh was one shilling and one pence, while a loaf of bread would have cost one pence.

Rowland Hill's idea

Rowland Hill, a teacher and inventor, decided to act upon the growing demands for changes to the postal system. In 1837 he wrote a pamphlet calling for reform and in August 1839 his proposal for uniform penny postage became law. One of the first things Hill did was to organise a public competition to suggest the best ways to implement his idea of prepaid post. The Treasury Competition had over 2,600 entries with different suggestions including stamps, seals and envelopes. Up until this

point there had been no postage stamps in existence, anywhere in the world.

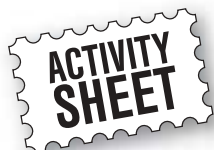
Introduction of Uniform Penny Postage

Uniform Penny Postage was introduced in January 1840 and the stamps went on sale in May 1840. The Penny Black could be used on any letter that weighed less than half an ounce (about 14g), regardless of the number of sheets of paper. This led to the widespread introduction of envelopes. It also led to the introduction of letter scales in people's homes because people needed to check that their letter weighed less than half an ounce.

By the middle of May over 600,000 stamps were being printed a day. These stamps were distributed to post offices in sheets of 240 and then had to be cut by hand with scissors.

The introduction of pre-paid postage made a huge difference to how people communicated with each other in many ways. By the end of the nineteenth century the amount of post being sent had risen enormously.

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Activity 3.5 Preventing forgery

The inventors and supporters of the Penny Black were very concerned about the threat of forgery. This influenced the type of design that was chosen for the stamp. The portrait of Queen Victoria was chosen because people thought it would be easier to detect a forgery of such a famous person. In addition, the stamps had special check letters and watermarks, all designed to stop people from gluing two halves of different stamps together. Stamps were cancelled using the Maltese Cross symbol you can see on the right.



What do you understand by the word 'forgery'?

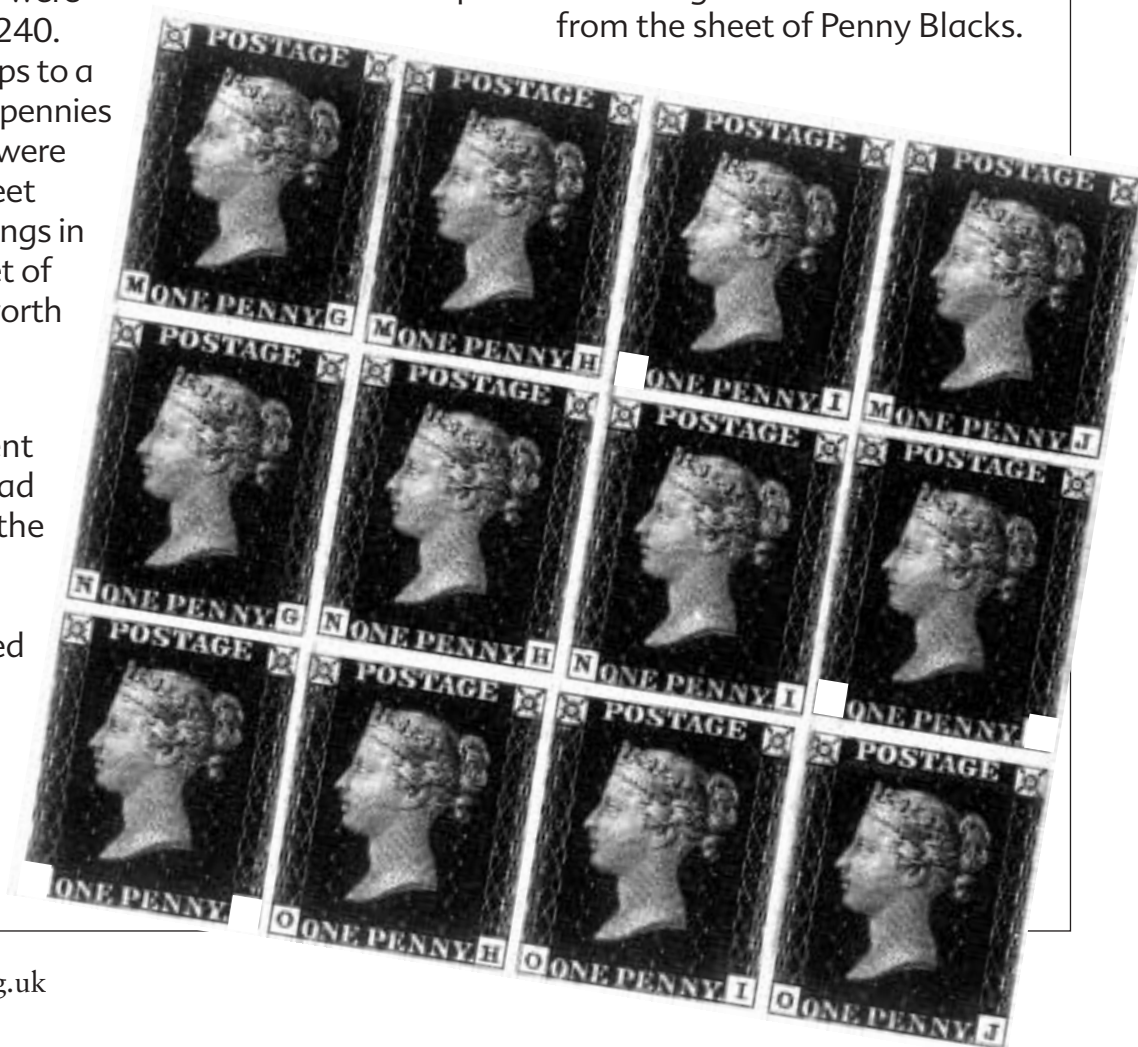
What type of things can be forged?

Exploring check letters

Penny Black stamps were printed in sheets of 240. There were 12 stamps to a row (the number of pennies to a shilling). There were 20 rows on each sheet (the number of shillings in a pound). Each sheet of Penny Blacks was worth one pound.

Check letters were introduced to prevent forgery. Each row had a different letter in the lower left hand corner. The letter along the row stayed the same. Each column had its own check letter in the lower right hand corner that stayed the same.

Complete the missing check letters from the sheet of Penny Blacks.



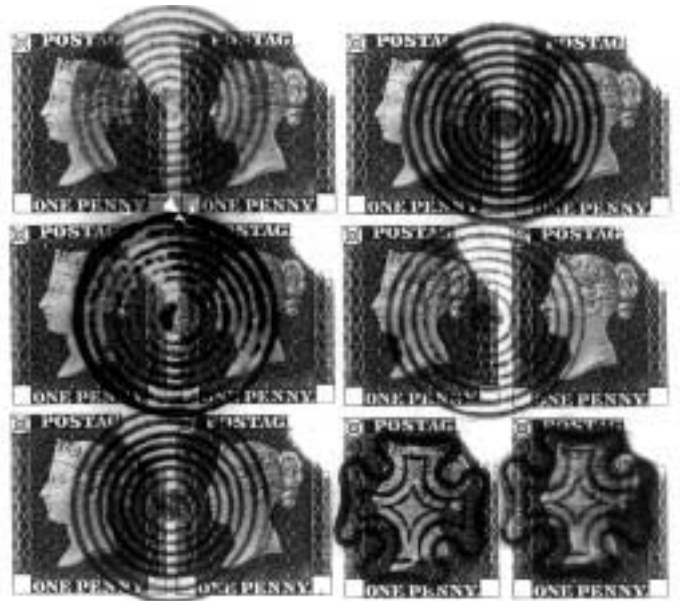


The 'Rainbow Trials'

OBJECTIVE:

To observe how colours separate and be introduced to the idea that colours are formed of different dyes.

The 'Rainbow Trials' took place shortly after the Penny Black was introduced in 1840. Rowland Hill and other Post Office officials were worried that the cancellation marks could be removed with water or different types of chemicals. This led them to try many different types and colours of ink which is why they were called the 'Rainbow Trials'. They were particularly interested in fugitive inks, meaning inks which ran when liquid was applied to them. As a result of these trials the colour of the Penny Black was changed to red in 1841. This was because the only cancellation ink that worked was black, and this would not be effective on a black stamp.



Activity 3.6

Separating inks

The following chromatography activity will enable the pupils to think about the composition of different inks and how colours are comprised. Chromatography is the scientific study of colours. Look at the examples of the 'Rainbow Trials' in the Online Gallery.

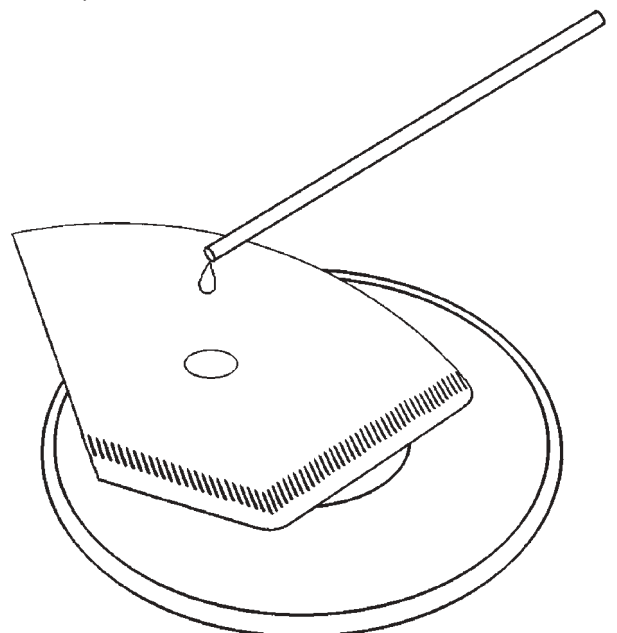
Material needed:

Coloured smartie (brown, green and blue work the best)
Coffee filter paper / blotting paper
Spoon or straw
Plate to rest the filter paper

1. Place the filter paper on the plate.
2. Put a smartie in the centre of the paper.
3. Place a couple of drops of water onto the smartie, using a teaspoon or straw.
4. Repeat until the smartie is fairly wet and the circle of water is about 5cm across.
5. Watch the colours separate.
6. This can be repeated with different coloured smarties.

Explanation:

The heaviest dye particles are dropped the first.
The lightest dyes are carried furthest.



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Printing

Line engraving

One of the challenges faced by the manufacturers of the first postage stamps was how to print sufficient quantities to satisfy the demand of the public.

Until 1854 all stamps were printed by line engraving, a process by which lines were cut by hand into a metal plate from which a print was made. Once the sheets were dry they were gummed and the individual stamps were cut by hand.

A factor that led to the change in the printing process was the introduction of stamp perforation machines in the 1850s. A different way of printing stamps had to be developed as line engraving made it difficult for stamps to be perforated by machine. During the line printing process, the paper was wetted; as it dried the paper shrank which made

mechanical separation of the stamps difficult because the spacing changed. However, all stamps up to the value of 2d continued to be printed in this way until 1880.

Surface printing

In 1855 the printers, De La Rue, introduced surface printing. This was also known as letterpress printing and was a flat, dry form of printing which was compatible with the perforating machines. Surface printing was introduced for the higher value stamps first. Penny Red stamps, for example, continued to be printed by line engraving.

An interesting way to explore this topic with the class is by looking at different types of printing. Polystyrene tile printing is an exciting way for the class to explore the idea of surface printing and design their own stamp.

Activity 3.7

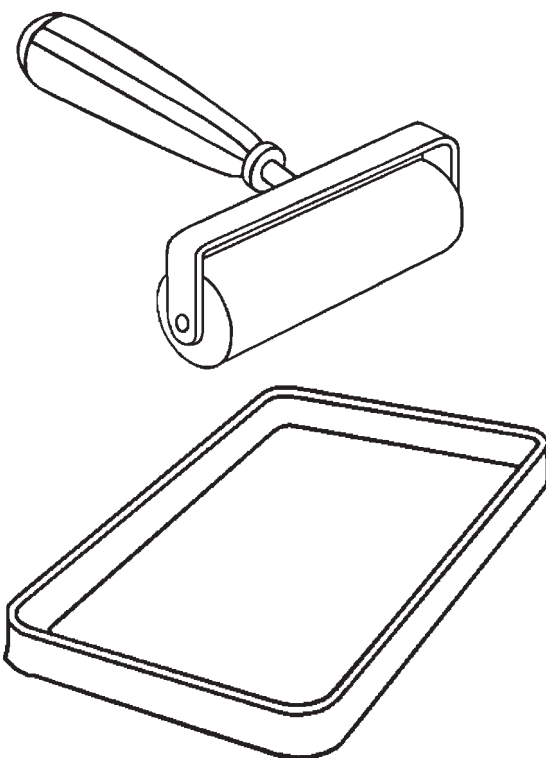
Polystyrene Tile Printing

Ask the children to collect different examples of printed materials from home and school and discuss different methods of printing.

Materials needed:

Polystyrene tiles
Rollers and trays
Paints/ water based ink
Charcoal
Paper

1. Discuss the type of image that would be effective in a print, such as bold outlines and patterns.
2. Develop a rough design and then draw it on a larger piece of paper, using charcoal.
3. Place the paper with the charcoal design face down on the polystyrene tile and use a clean roller to transfer the charcoal outline to the tile.
4. Use a sharp pencil or biro to etch out the charcoal design.
5. Use the rollers to print the image, using a clean roller to press the tile firmly onto the paper.
6. Different colours can be built up by cutting away more of the tile after each print.





Activity 3.8

Design a stamp using printing

- :: Look at the different examples of stamps from the Phillips Collection on the Online Gallery.
- :: Ask the children to bring in a selection of modern stamps that they have collected and discuss the different themes and images they can see.
- :: Talk through the different stages of designing the stamp and help the children to plan their design.
- :: Encourage them to think about the size of a stamp; this is a crucial factor since the children will need to develop an idea that will look effective at a very small size.
- :: Set the class the task of designing their own postage stamps using polystyrene tile printing techniques.
- :: These could be printed at A5 size and shrunk to size using a photocopier or by scanning.

Design brief:

Develop a design for a stamp using a form of printing.

Think about what factors make an effective stamp design.

Choose a theme like Victorian inventions, famous Victorians or another linked topic.

This detail from Penny Black stamp can be used as a template.

Design

The background of the Penny Black was a detailed geometric design produced by a machine called a rose-lathe. Similar machines are still used today to produce the patterns on bank notes. This kind of design is called engine turning.

