

Chapter 1

THE ORIGIN OF PERFIN

The origin of perfin starts with the Oxford Union Society of Oxford, England, who provided stationery and postage to its members without charge. As the use of postage stamps grew, the Society sought to reduce losses in the postage stamps that could not be accounted for. One must keep in mind that in the 1850s, a person could sell Penny Red stamps back to the Post Office or use them to pay a bill. At that time, five stamps would buy a good meal.



Overprint



Underprint



Early Perfin

In 1859 permission was granted by the Post Office for the Society to have postage stamps overprinted with the letters of 'O.U.S.' between two wavy lines. In 1869, the Society was instructed by the Post Office to have its overprint transferred to the back of the stamp to fall into line with the practice adopted by business firms in 1867. Several firms approached the Post Office for permission to overprint their own stamps and the Post Office raised no objection, providing the overprint was applied to the back of the stamps so as not to deface the image of Queen Victoria.

Perkins, Bacon & Company – the stamp printers – applied the underprint before the sheets were gummed and in the same coloured ink that was used for printing the stamps. The firms that applied for authorization for the underprint were: J & C Boyd & Co., 7 Friday Street, London – February 1867; W.H. Smith & Sons – April 1867; Copestake, Moore, Crampton & Co. – November 1867; Oxford Union Society – January 1870; and Great Eastern Railway - 1873.

It is apparent that the majority of firms were more concerned with preventing theft of their unused stamps than with the stamps being postally misused. There are a considerably greater number of unauthorized underprinted stamps that were printed on top of the gum. These could not be identified as to owner after being placed on an envelope as the underprint would blur, if not totally disappear, after the gum was moistened. One survey of these unauthorized printings showed 4 types of overprints and 30 underprints. With the recognition by the Post Office of the perforating procedure, permission to use the underprints was withdrawn in 1882. Note that the Post Office approval to use overprints was reinstated in 1903.

Joseph Sloper patented his first machine, a cheque protector, in 1858. In 1868, he patented a machine for puncturing railway tickets. Apparently, Copestake, Moore, Crampton & Co., - wholesale drapery warehousemen who were using Sloper's cheque protector - had a case of larceny of their stamps by an employee. In October 1867, the firm asked the Post Office for permission to perforate incoming stamps immediately upon arrival with the initials 'S.C.', which were the initials of the senior partner, Samson Copestake. The stamps purchased by the firm from the

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Post Office were underprinted as mentioned before, but some stamps that were received in payment for small sums were unmarked in any form. The Postmaster General granted permission for the underprinting on the incoming stamps but ignored the request for permission to perforate the stamps.



Early GB perfin cover

After several more requests by Copestake, Moore, Crampton & Co., Mr. Sloper became involved and had further difficulties in obtaining permission to perforate stamps. Eventually, on March 13, 1868, the following letter was addressed to Mr. Sloper.

General Post Office
13th march 1868

Mr. Sloper,
Sir, - The Postmaster-General has had under consideration your letter of the 27th ultimo, and His Grace desires me to inform you that, under the circumstances, he will not object to the perforation of postage stamps in the manner described by you, with a view to protect merchants and others, as far as possible, from the theft of the stamps used by them.

I am, sir,
Your Obedient Servant
R. Parkhurst

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It was not, however, until March 1, 1869, that the Post Office advised its Postmasters that Sloper's security system of perforating stamps with the firm's initials had been approved. This was done in the Post Office bulletin of that date:

POSTAGE STAMPS

In consequence of representations made to the Post Office by various firms that their Postage Stamps are purloined by persons in their employ, the Department has recommended that the name or initials of the Firms, etc., be perforated through the stamps so that, inasmuch as the Sale of such stamps would be thereby rendered difficult, the temptation to steal them might be lessened or altogether removed.

Postmasters will take care not to purchase any postage stamps thus marked which may be offered to them for sale.

Most likely, no one realized that Mr. Sloper still had a patent for the perforating machines and, as such, he was entitled to a monopoly for at least four years. His business expanded as a result, and he began to do business throughout Britain and the continent.



1873 Photo of Joseph Sloper

Mr. Sloper's first patent expired on August 13, 1872. By 1873, the competition was becoming active. The leading competitors were Den Fisher, London stationer and Francis Hancock, printer and stationer. In the beginning, the perforating cost was free after an initial cost for manufacturing the die or dies was paid. Free perforating was offered because these firms received 1% poundage, the term used to describe the commission paid by the Post Office for the sale of Postage. It was apparently sufficient revenue to keep the perforating of stamps popular with many firms. In this position, some perforating machines were sold outright to stamp users, but most of the firms preferred to perforate on order so that they could confirm their poundage income.

On November 26, 1877, the Post Office announced that effective December 1, 1877, the 1% poundage allowed stamp vendors on all stamp purchases would be discontinued. This came as a severe blow to the revenue of the firms who perforated stamps, but who were not Postmasters.

The Postmasters continued to enjoy the poundage up to June 30, 1879, at which time a maximum poundage income of £400 per year was set. This latter order primarily affected the Postmasters who were perforating stamps. Mr. Sloper, for example, had his poundage income reduced by about £600 per year. The result

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was several hard years for the firms perforating stamps on order. Such firms, to make up for the loss of the commission began to charge for all stamp perforating, thus putting the burden on the user. Despite these initial financial difficulties, the use of perforated stamps became much more popular as time went by.

In 1872 Belgium authorized the use of perfins for security reasons. In 1878 Germany, France, Denmark and Switzerland also approved their use. New Zealand approved the perforating of stamps, postcards, and newspaper wrappers in 1883. The first United States perforating machine was produced in 1887; however, the U.S. Post Office did not sanction the use of perfins until 1908.

Joseph Sloper received U.S. Patent No. 155340 on September 22, 1874, for "invented improvements in perforating-stamps for producing perforations (grouped to represent marks, letters, figures or devices) through paper and other materials". Benjamin F. Cummins and John Stenwall Jr. of B.F. Cummins Company of Chicago, IL, patented their first perforating-stamp on August 20, 1889. The April 9, 1908, U.S. Postal Bulletin permitted the perforating of postage stamps with letters, numerals or other marks for identification purposes only. Any use of perfins in the United States prior to 1908 was limited, although the machines to make them were available well before that time.

In Canada, stamps were perforated for identification as early as 1887. The Canadian Post Office acknowledged the existence of perfins in 1895, stating that it had no objection to the practice of perforating stamps with initials of the individual firm using them. It was not until 1910 that the Post Office ordered that the perforations must be approved prior to their use, and that the perforations not exceed specified limits.



Earliest reported perfin cover sent to Canada