

SYNOPSIS

GREAT BRITAIN POSTAL REFORM 1837-1840

This period is considered the most important in philatelic history; it changed the postal world, with concepts still in use today. This unique exhibit illustrates all rates during the period and includes many items which are the only ones recorded.

Postal rates were based on the mileage a mail coach traveled on designated post roads. Existing postal rates had been established in 1812, when Britain was at war with France and the United States. Rates were unrelated to the postal system's expenses and were known as a "tax on speech". The general public could not afford the rates; therefore, the cost was borne mainly by businesses.

The first rate reduction was for a letter on a post road, from four pence to two pence for distances of eight miles or less. This was dramatic but limited in scope.

Public outcry demanded that any letter traveling eight miles or less, without regard to being on a post road, should also be reduced to the two pence rate. This introduced a new concept of distance, not related to post roads.

The next concept and rate reduction involved charging a

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PATHWAY TO THE PENNY BLACK

Postal rates were determined by the mileage that a mail coach travelled on designated post roads.

Existing postal rates were implemented in 1812 when Britain was at war with France and the United States. Rates did not reflect actual costs of the postal system and were regarded as a “tax on speech”. Consequently, the high charges rendered personal correspondence unaffordable for most individuals, leaving businesses as the primary users of the system.

The first rate reduction was from four pence to two pence. It affected only a few people living 8 miles or less apart on a post road.

Public dissatisfaction prompted a second reduction to two pence for any letter sent up to 8 miles or less, without regard to a post road. A novel concept of distance, independent of post roads.

The third reduction was more novel, using the concept of the shortest distance a letter would travel on public roads, without regard to post roads. The letter still traveled on the mail coaches, but at a reduced rate.

Following extensive deliberation and analysis, the Uniform Four Penny Post was introduced. Letters weighing up to one-half ounce could travel to anywhere in Britain for a fixed charge; four pence. Lower rates were accepted. Designed as a trial, this system lasted only 36 days, but effectively demonstrated that the post office and the system could handle the expected increased volume of mail.

The final stage of reform resulted in the introduction of the Uniform Penny Post. Stamps and stationery had been approved, but were not ready for distribution.