

The postal stationery cut-out Colin Baker describes an unusual collection of covers



A Penny pink stamp dated 11 October 1848, cut from a Post Office envelope and used in 1859.

SOONER or later most philatelists get side-tracked away from their main collecting themes. This is probably just as well when you consider how difficult it can become searching out those last few items to complete just one or two album pages. I'm one of those people who wander off the main path, and one area that has fascinated me for the last few years is the use of stamps cut from postal stationery.

When stamps were first introduced by the Post Office in the 19th century, they were looked upon as tokens or receipts for the payment of postage.

To the Post Office, it made no difference if a stamp was printed in a sheet of 240 or singly on an envelope or lettersheet. It simply indicated that postage had been paid. Individual post offices and main sorting offices were rigorous in cancelling or obliterating all stamps, and so the possibility of a postal stationery stamp being re-used was so remote that it did not influence the decision to allow their use as cut-outs. Thus the cut-out was born.

However, the use of cut-outs in the first 30 years following the introduction of stamps was limited to those cut from envelopes or lettersheets that had either been spoiled, or perhaps delivered by hand. It follows that there are a limited number of letters which have survived for us collectors today.

When prepaid postcards and newspaper wrappers were being considered in 1870, the Post Office became worried that with the increase in the number of items passing through the post, many of these would miss being cancelled. There were even plans to use perforating devices to cancel postcards in bulk, such were their concerns. They decided that, following the introduction of postcards and newspaper wrappers from 1 October 1870, stamps cut from postal stationery would no longer be acceptable for the prepayment of postage.

Of course, this did not stop some people from continuing to try to use cut-outs. Some writers would carefully cut around the stamp so that at first glance it is difficult to see whether it is a normal item of postal stationery or a stamp cut from one. Others were less careful and made simple, square cuts, not worrying that this made the cut-out glaringly obvious. Whichever method they used, generally they were successful and their envelopes passed through the sorting office unnoticed. But occasionally cut-outs were spotted by eagle-eyed postmen and a charge made on the item.

By the beginning of the 20th century cancelling machines were in general use, handling and cancelling many more items of post than had been possible previously. The Post Office was confident that once again all stamps were being cancelled and, following pressure from the public, on 1 January 1905 the use of stamps cut from postal stationery was again allowed.



From top: Four STO stamps with advertising rings, used by the philatelic dealer William Lincoln, 1910; Three Edward VII stamps neatly cut to shape to pay the foreign letter rate of 2½d, 1905; and a pair of 2d George V stamps printed cou-bêche and used by H Edgar Weston, 1915.

In the first few years following the relaxation of the ban, a large number of envelopes and postcards were sent through the post, being paid with cut-out stamps. One can imagine the public searching through their cupboards and desk drawers for any unwanted stationery, particularly from the Queen Victoria period which they suspected would soon be invalidated. Some of the stamp dealers of the time used cut-outs when writing to their clients, while others had STO stamps specially printed to be used as cut-outs.

A dealer who took the use of cut-outs to extremes was H Edgar Weston. He must have been persuasive, as he convinced Somerset House officials to print embossed stamps in sheets of 48 with the central two rows cou-bêche (neck to neck). He used these on envelopes in as many different ways as he could imagine, fixing single stamps, pairs of cou-bêche stamps, blocks and different values, most of them being sent back to himself for later resale.

During the First World War Weston arranged for Lieutenant Commander Ralph L Clayton to post some of his covers from the battleship HMS *Queen Mary*. Mail from ships during this period was struck with a 'dumb' canceller, which obliterated the stamps with a group of lines, but gave no information about the ship or the date of posting, in case the mail fell into enemy hands. Unfortunately for Weston, in 1916 HMS *Queen Mary* became caught up in the Battle of Jutland off the Danish coast, and was sunk by



From left: 2d postage paid in cut-out stamps, which have been disallowed and double postage due applied, 1922; a pair of 1d stamps from the sheet gutter prepared for and used by H Edgar Weston in 1920; and a commercial cover sent from Barclays Bank to Canada in 1960 with a cut-out taken from a 1957 registration envelope.

enemy fire, taking some of his covers to the seabed. Commander Clayton also lost his life in the battle. However, many of Weston's special envelopes had already left the ship, and these often appear for sale today.

Weston also persuaded an army officer, Lieutenant Colonel A S Bates to post some envelopes from the front in France. At the time, postage for the armed forces on active service was generally free, but Weston adorned his envelopes with blocks of stamps cut from his specially prepared sheets. The base post office in France was suspicious of these stamps, suspecting them to be forgeries, and refused to cancel them. Arriving in London they were recognised for what they were, and many were cancelled with ink that Weston likened to having been applied with a brush. Other envelopes had the stamps crossed through with blue crayon. Weston's protests to the Post Office about these cancellations fell on unsympathetic ears, but he eventually decided that as these were official cancellations, they were a novelty.

Weston's fun and games came to an end in May 1916. The authorities were suspicious of the number of high value stamps in multiples and blocks passing through the post, particularly from areas of conflict where our armed forces were under constant attack. The Postmaster General finally acted, and refused to execute any more warrants for embossing sheets of stamps, but Weston had already amassed quite a few sheets of embossed stamps and was able to create many more covers over the next few years.

This is not the end of the story, for after the Second World War Weston managed to create new items of postal stationery. He persuaded the stamping office, now in Harrow, to print King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II letterpress stamps in abnormal positions. This gave him tête-bêche stamps in pairs or groups of four that were later turned into lettersheets and posted from various post offices, some with added local stamps. The Post Office must have realised what he was doing, but chose to ignore it.



Although there were plenty of stamp dealers using cut-outs to create philatelic oddities, there was also a genuine use of cut-outs by the public and by commercial organisations who were simply paying postage with these stamps, having no other motive in mind.

I think one of the nice aspects of this part of the hobby is the collecting of postal stationery which has been uprated with stamps cut from similar items. Some spectacular items have been created in the past, either deliberately or inadvertently, where the cut-outs have been cut to shape and almost look as if they have been printed onto, rather than stuck to, the paper. In exact contrast to the period when cut-outs were banned, one occasionally finds an envelope posted in the 20th century which has been incorrectly surcharged by an over-eager postman. But in general cut-out stamps were accepted and passed unchallenged through the post.

Perhaps by the 1920s the public had used up all the unwanted stationery cluttering their offices, or possibly the First World War changed everything. Whatever the reason, the use of cut-outs gradually declined between the wars. It is difficult to find items used in the King George VI period. At the start of our present Queen's reign, once again the use of cut-outs became more common, with many covers being artificially created by collectors. Even so there were still plenty of individuals and companies using this facility to avoid wasting unwanted stamps from expensive postal stationery.

However today, with so little postal stationery on sale anymore, cut-outs are becoming a thing of the past. It is still permissible to use stamps cut from postal stationery, and occasionally a collector or dealer will use them. So rather than create our own philatelic oddities, we will have to be satisfied with collecting those items that were sent through the post years ago. Alternatively we could find some other little avenue to wander down when our main collection nears completion ●

A cover by Oswald Marsh, who traded from Norwood, London, with a King George VI 1½d cut out, 1940; and a 20p air letter stamp used on an inland letter sent to the author, 2001.

Colin Baker is the co-author of *Collecting British Postal Stationery* – reviewed here in March. He has written many articles on postal stationery for the *Bulletin*.

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