

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

letter at the 1812 rates, but computing the charge based on the shortest distance on public roads, not on post roads. In many cases, this resulted in substantial cost reductions. The letters still traveled on the mail coach on the post roads but at a lower rate.

Both the public and businesses desired penny postage. A select committee researched post towns to determine the feasibility of reducing postage rates, to determine if the system could handle the increased volume of mail. After much discussion and research, it was decided to lower the rate to four pence, prepaid or unpaid, for any letter weighing up to one-half ounce going to any point in Britain. Any lower rate was accepted. This was to be a trial period beginning December 5, 1839. After only 36 days, proving the postal system could indeed handle the increased volume. It was considered to be a success. This brought into being the Uniform Penny Post, beginning on January 10, 1840.

The rate was lowered to one penny for any letter weighing up to one-half ounce to any point in Britain. Two new rules were implemented: unpaid letters were charged double to increase efficiency and free franking was abolished to eliminate widespread abuse and loss of revenue. Plans for both stamps and stationery were in progress. They were ready for distribution throughout Britain in late April. They went on sale to the public on May 1, 1840, but were not valid for postage until May 6, 1840.

Bibliography

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PATHWAY TO THE PENNY BLACK

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

Existing postal rates were established in 1812 during wartime with France and the United States. These did not reflect the actual costs of the postal service and were regarded as a “tax on speech”. The general public could not afford the rates; therefore the cost was borne mainly by businesses.

The rate for any letter going 15 miles or less was 4 pence. The first rate concession was for any letter going 8 miles or less, or one stage, on a post road to 2 pence. It affected only a few people living 8 miles or less apart on a post road. A “stage” was the distance between horse changes, normally 8 to 10 miles.

Public outcry brought the second rate concession. It reduced the rate to 2 pence for any letter going 8 miles or less without regard to a post road, a new concept of distance.

The third concession was more novel. It used the concept of the shortest distance on public roads, without regard to post roads. Letters were charged at the 1812 rates for the reduced distance.

After deliberation and analysis, the Uniform Four Penny Post was introduced and designated as a trial to see if the postal system could handle the expected increased volume of mail. Letters weighing up to one half ounce could travel to anywhere in Britain for four pence. Local lower rates were accepted. The trial lasted only thirty-six days, but effectively demonstrated the postal system could accommodate a substantial increase in mail volume.

The final reduction in rates was the Uniform Penny Post. Stamps and stationery were approved, but not ready for issue.

Gray=1812rates Black=Concessions Blue=Important items