

The History of Perfins

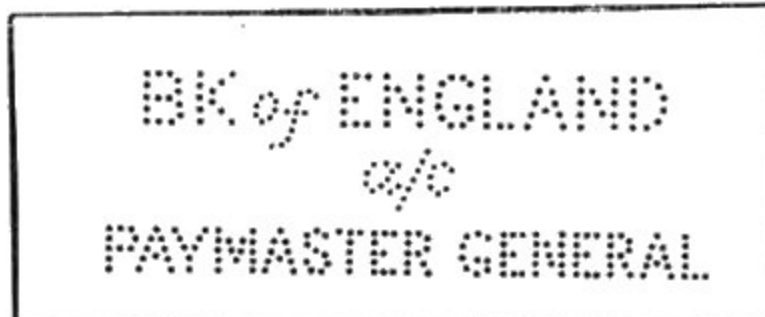
Dave Hill tells the story of Joseph Sloper and the invention of perfins.

Little is known of the personal life of Joseph Sloper, the inventor of perfins, but he was perhaps typical of the self-made, small businessmen of Victorian times. He was born about 1812 and at first traded as a decorator in Oxford Street, London. He later styled himself an engineer and patented a number of inventions, although only his invention of perforation as a means of cancelling or indelibly marking has survived.

In fact he nearly didn't do this either and the course of history might have been irrevocably changed as shown from the pages of the *Sunday Express* during 1945. Even before the invention of the postage stamp the Inland Revenue was often defrauded by the illegal re-use of embossed revenue stamps. In 1832 a young man suggested that they be perforated, then embossed with the date at the time of use. The Inland Revenue were delighted and offered the man the job of carrying the idea to fruition. When he told his fiancée of his plans she suggested that the embossing stamp be fitted with plugs, so doing away with the need for perforation. The simplicity of this so impressed the Revenue that they promptly withdrew the job offer.

The young man, Henry Bessemer, went on to be knighted for his later invention of a steel making process. The Inland Revenue last year celebrated 300 years of the revenue stamp; it has date plugs to this day.

To return to Joseph Sloper, his invention was originally applied to the cancellation of cheques and accounts to prevent them being presented for payment a second time. Later, even the amount in pounds, shillings and pence were perforated, to prevent the forger from changing the amount written on a cheque by a bit of expert penmanship. A patent gave Sloper not only an exclusive right for 14 years to make the perforating



Bank of England cheque perforation.

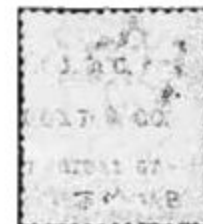
machinery, but the sole right for its use, a virtual monopoly. It was not applied to postage stamps until 1868 but this still allowed Sloper four years before his rights expired.

The postage stamp did, and still does, provide a convenient way to pay small sums; by sending stamps, in with a letter, which the recipient can then use for postage. Even if the chief clerk who opened the post wasn't tempted by the stamps, then the junior clerk might be tempted to steal the few kept for postage in a drawer, or the post boy sent to post letters might remove the stamps and



Oxford University Society overprinted stamp to prevent theft.

throw the letters away. *Gibbons Specialised Catalogue* Volume 1 tells us that the Oxford Union Society were the first to try to combat this in 1859 by printing their initials on the face of their stamps. The Post Office were not keen on the idea but in 1867 told J. C. Boyd,



JC Boyd 'protective underprint'.

warehousemen, they would approve printing their name on the back. This was expensive as it had to be done by Perkins Bacon, the printers of stamps, before gumming. Few firms took up the idea and more firms printed over the gum but this was not secure as it washed off with the gum.

Mention should be made of the earlier idea of a firm's name being placed in a ring around the embossed stamps of postal stationery. This gave a little protection against fraudulent use but was mainly for advertising. Most of the firms who used these and overprints went on to use perfins.

Sloper used the following newspaper cutting to press home his point:

'CHARGE OF RECEIVING 7000 STAMPS

At the Manchester Police Court John Howarth, provision dealer, was charged with receiving from errand

boys and junior clerks in various offices, a large number of stamps in payment for bread and cheese. In a drawer were found 7,820 1d and 2d postage stamps and receipt stamps value £35 19s 2d, some were mint and some had been soaked off letters.

'He was discovered when an errand boy, questioned about the disappearance of two halves of a £5 note in letters, broke down and admitted stealing the letters for the sake of the stamps with which he bought a bun at the accused's shop. Finding the note in the letters, he panicked and hid them in a drain, where police found them. Howarth was sentenced to 5 years in jail.'

Thus the stage was set for Sloper's perfins. Early attempts to encourage use were unsuccessful because the Post Office held that the perforations might be a way of removing the cancellation from the stamp. A second round of negotiations left Sloper with the impression that officials at the Post Office weren't overly troubled by his plans, but when he wrote asking them, in effect, to give unqualified approval to his system, they hurriedly called him back in and told him they did not approve. Sloper wrote again, apologising in florid Victorian style, underlining words and pointing out the concern of 'leading public companies'. As it seemed that Sloper would not be lightly put off, the case was put to two officers, one reporting back in favour, the other against.

Perhaps the Postmaster General's secretary flipped a coin; anyway he



Sloper's letterheading.

recommended that the Postmaster General approve the use of perfin and Sloper lost no time in exploiting the last years of his monopoly. He even tried unsuccessfully to extend it by patenting minor improvements.

Instructions appeared in the Post Office *Guide for Postmasters* not to redeem perfin for cash. Whilst the Post Office remained fairly lukewarm about the idea, when anybody asked about stamp security, they were recommended to Slopers. Sloper was later given a letter recommending perfin to foreign postal authorities and the Inland Revenue.

Sloper became a licensed stamp vendor, which gave him a 1 per cent discount on the stamps he purchased for perforating, this in addition to his charge for perforating increased profits. Such things were common in Victorian times when public servants had the rights of patronage, ie, they could appoint friends or relatives to important jobs, or would even do so for money.



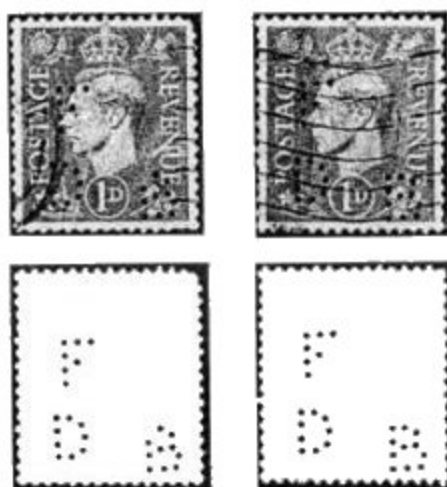
Full name perfin.



Slopers made machines for firms to perforate their own stamps and did other general engineering work. Later they printed firm names on the faces of stamps for receipt purposes. These are subtly different to perfin: they were to prevent

their theft but the Post Office would not permit their use other than on receipts; the Post Office was in fact gathering a purchase tax.

When Slopers monopoly ended in 1872 the first competition came from other stamp vendors like stationers who received a discount on stamps. This



War-time provisional perfin — note varying position of the holes.

discount had been introduced because stationers were worried that the Post Office was taking business from them when stamps were first issued. One of these stationers applied to the Post Office to perforate stamps with the full name 'SUTTON' for a client but the Post Office refused permission on the grounds that it was advertising. The original instructions in the Post Office guide had been badly worded and had resulted in perfin of initials of names. The stationer pointed out that there were many full name perfin already in use and although the Post Office visited many of these firms to try to get them to stop the use of full names, there were so many that they gave up. Full name perfin are keenly collected.

Other competitors with vendor's licences were sub-postmasters; in fact, despite later objections from Sloper and stationers, vendor's licences were withdrawn from all except sub-

postmasters. Competition was so great that large users of perfin were offered the service for free, the discount paid for the perforating. Later, Sloper became a sub-postmaster but had to buy other premises: the city office he had opened was too near an established post office. Eventually even sub-postmasters lost the discount on stamps, which further upset Slopers. They never offered all the services of a post office and indeed this was very secondary to the perforating business. This led to many complaints from the public, still held in Post Office records. These culminated in an argument between a Post Office surveyor and Sloper's son, Percy, who when asked what improvements he was prepared to make and, being told there was no extra money for them, replied 'none'.

One of the reasons the discount was withdrawn was no doubt the case of Braham, a sub-postmaster from Tabernacle Street whose services included perforating stamps. Braham went bankrupt and some of his creditors looked to the Post Office to reimburse them because Braham had used their name and coat of arms on his business stationery. Questions were asked in the House of Commons but the Post Office refused to pay the creditors. It was even suggested that the Post Office take over the business of the perforators but it was thought this would be an unwarranted interference with private enterprise.

In his reply to questioning on the matter the Postmaster General stated: 'I am aware of the bankruptcy in question.'



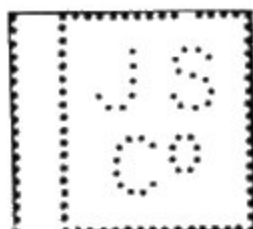
Perforating perfin on 24p and 18p stamps at Reading using Sloper's original machines.

Mr Braham was a Sub Postmaster in Tabernacle Street, EC, who in addition to the business conducted for the Post Office carried on a private business as a perforating press maker and perforator of postage stamps.

'The Post Office does not supply the public with perforated stamps, or sell stamps at other prices than that indicated by their face value or on other than cash terms. Mr Braham's transactions in relation to the perforation of stamps being thus of a purely private character there is no ground for compensating Mr Braham's creditors at the expense of the taxpayer. A Sub Postmaster is required to find security for his fidelity in that capacity but not for debts incurred in his private business.

'So far as the Post Office is concerned no question of prosecution arises.'

This led to surveys of perfin in the post, the results of which are held in the records. In 1906 Slopers perforated over £5,000,000 worth of stamps. Sub-postmasters figured in perfin for many years: even in the 1930s a country town postmaster was warned to stop perforating stamps as a favour to a large firm. Somehow perfin had found their way into the main stamp stock, precisely the situation the rules set out to prevent. This would also interfere with



JS/Co perfin used for publicity purposes, never appeared on stamps.

postmasters' pension rights since they were direct employees of the Post Office.

The indomitable Joseph Sloper died in 1890 from a poisoned finger, no doubt the result of a minor injury at the works. It was left to brother Henry and sons Percy and Eustace to carry on the business. One of their last competitors, Sidney Allchin, sub-postmaster and chemist in England's Lane near Sloper's Hampstead works, was taken over in the 1930s. Although the sub-post office and chemists still remain, the Blitz destroyed the city works along with many perfin dies. This led to perfin's own provisional issues, where different single letter dies were used and the sheets of stamps passed through the machine a number of times to produce the combination of initials required. These can be identified by the variable position of the letters of the perfin.

The Hampstead works had been established in more or less open country in 1875. Even in this, Sloper's irascible character comes out. When the new

railways hemmed him in on three sides he complained of the depredations and unruly behaviour of the Irish labourers building it. He would never allow the entrance to be built up to the level necessary for a nearby bridge over the railway, resulting in a steep ascent still in use today.

Eventually, the almost universal use of franking machines by even the smallest firms resulted in a rapid decline in demand for perfin. Only a few years ago the last works at Hampstead closed and the business was sold to a Reading company who operate at the leading edge of computerised cheque writing technology. They still handle some perfin, and a few private machines are still used. Before Hampstead closed the Perfin Society was able to obtain some of Sloper's records.

The cost of postage still represents a fair sum of money but it seems petty pilfering is allowed or at least not worth guarding against.

Dave Hill is treasurer/secretary of the Perfin Society. He can be contacted at 'Paardeberg', West End, Marazion, Cornwall TR17 0EH. In writing this history he has drawn heavily on the far more complete histories written by Charles Jennings and John Nelson, both past presidents of the Perfin Society. John Nelson's handbook is still in print.