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Book Reports

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NPL Periodicals Revisited GREAT BRITAIN'S FIRST POSTAL STATIONERY

Wayne Menuz

Editor's Note: Many of the Library's shelves are lined with periodicals, often overlooked but containing some pretty interesting philatelic stories and information. It's worth your time to become more familiar with our periodical collection; you might be surprised by what you find. The following article, reprinted by permission, comes from Postal Stationery (Vol. 34, #2; March-April 1992), the journal of the United Postal Stationery Society. It details a little known chapter in postal history just before the first official postage stamps were released.

This article is not about the 1d black and 2d blue Mulready envelopes and lettersheets that were issued on May 6, 1840 at the same time as the famous "penny black" adhesive stamps. The reason requires a bit of history.

Rowland Hill's radical proposal to the British Post Office to charge a small price for each letter by weight, rather than charge by distance and number of pieces of paper, was adopted effective January 10, 1840. Prepaid postage stamps and stationery were only one element, though of course the main one remembered by philatelists. This reform also presented the golden opportunity to abolish the free-franking privileges enjoyed and constantly abused by members of Parliament and various government officials. After January 10 every individual (including Queen Victoria!) had to pay postage – franking was reserved for government agencies rather than individual people.

Meanwhile, the swift adoption of the new postal rate system left the Post Office far behind schedule for printing adhesive stamps and postal stationery for the public, which were not issued until three months later. During this interval, the public paid cash. But, not government officials.

Perhaps to soften the blow for members of Parliament, consisting of the House of Lords and the House of Commons, they were informed that as a temporary measure they would be the first persons to have "Stamped Envelopes" which would be offered for sale for 1d and 2d, for ½ oz and 1 oz letters respectfully. Therefore postal stationery envelopes were hurriedly made using ordinary type (the elaborate designs being created for the general issues to prevent forgery were considered unnecessary for gentlemen in Parliament).

On January 16, 1840 these stationery envelopes were issued, the first prepaid postal items showing printed denominations issued anywhere in the world. Those who contend the 1818 “Cavalini” lettersheets of Sardinia were the first ignore the fact that they were issued to collect a revenue tax for the private carriage of letters – they show a denomination, but did not prepay postage. Likewise, the “AQ” lettersheets of Venice used 300 years ago did not prepay public postage, and of course do not express a denomination. The Sydney, NSW lettersheets of 1838 are the world’s first true prepaid postal issue for the general public, but the stamp design does not show its denomination. Just as with the stamps and stationery for the general public finally issued on May 6, the use of these envelopes was optional, as prepayment in cash was also acceptable, and more commonly done, initially.

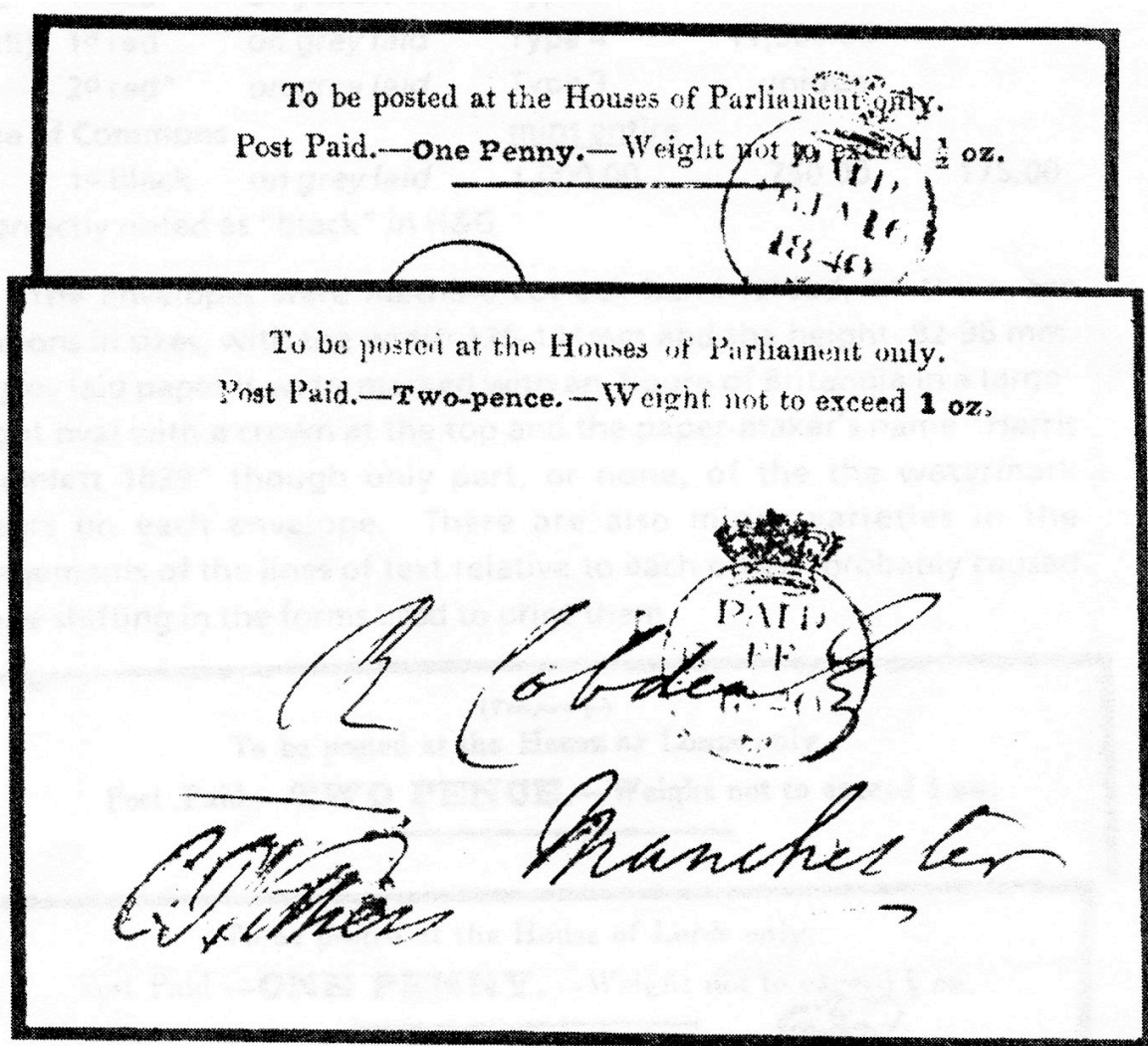


Fig. 1 – HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT ENVELOPES

Top: Type 1 – line under text

Bottom: Type 2 – no line under text

There were three distinct forms of these envelopes. The catalog numbers below are from the *Higgins & Gage* catalog with added unlisted items shown in parenthesis. There are no prices in

the H&G catalog, so below are shown an average of various auction realizations from the past few years. *[Editors note: prices are pre-1992.]*

House of Parliament					<u>used entire</u>	<u>used front</u>
DB 1	1d	black	on grey wove	Type 1	\$1,700.00	300.00
DB 1a	1d	black	on grey laid	Type 1	1,700.00	300.00
DB (1B)	1d	black	on grey wove	Type 2	RR	
DB 2	2d	black	on grey laid	Type 2	15,000.00	
House of Lords					<u>used entire</u>	<u>used front</u>
DB 3	1d	red	on gray laid	Type 3	\$4,700.00	550.00
DB 3a	1d	red	on yellow wove	Type 3	5,500.00	650.00
DB (3B)	1d	red	on grey laid	Type 4	11,400.00	
DB 4	2d	red*	on grey laid	Type 3	unique	
House of Commons				<u>mint entire</u>		
DB5	1d	black	on grey laid	1,000.00	750.00	175.00

*incorrectly noted as "black" in H&G

The envelopes were machine cut but hand folded, so there are variations in sizes, with the width 125-141mm and the height 83-96 mm. The grey laid paper is watermarked with a figure of Britannia in a large upright oval with a crown at the top and the paper-maker's name "Harris & Tremlett 1839" though only part, or none, of the watermark appears on each envelope. There are also minor varieties in the arrangements of the lines of text relative to each other, probably caused by type shifting in the forms used to print them.

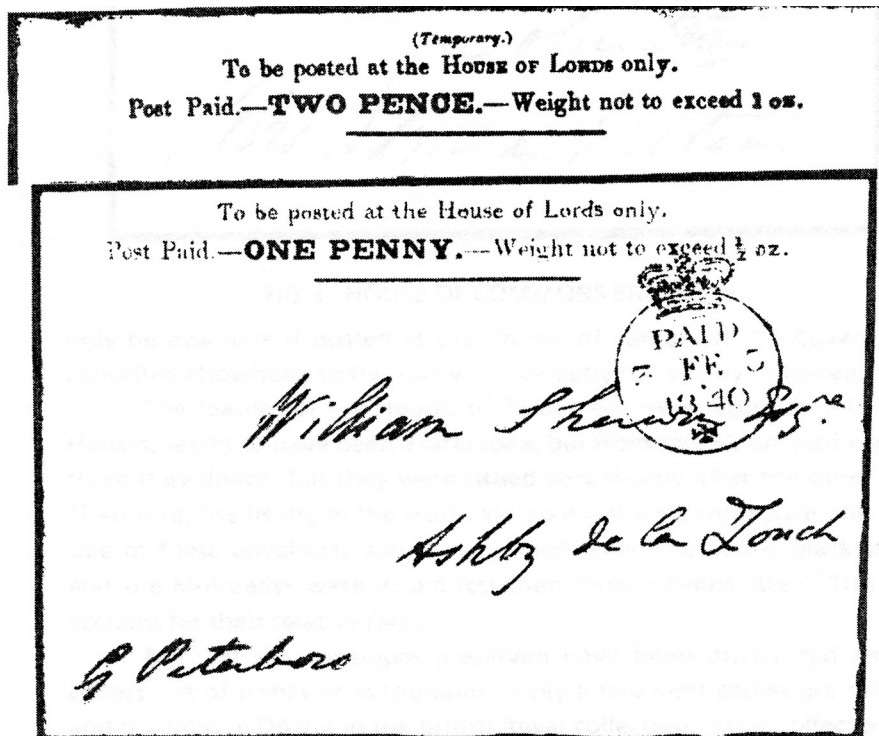


FIG. 2 – HOUSE OF LORDS ENVELOPES

Top: Type 3 – "(Temporary)" above text, and "House" with "E"
 Bottom: Type 4 – no "(Temporary)" above text, and "House" with "e"

On January 17 the following notice was posted in *The Times*: “Post office Regulations – Houses of Parliament - Arrangements have been made by which Members of Parliament will be enable to post letters written at the House of Commons without the difficulty which would occur in paying 1d with each letter. Covers will be sold to Members at the House, on payment of the postage; but such covers will only be available if posted at the Houses of Parliament.” Covers exist cancelled elsewhere, so this rule was obviously not strictly followed.

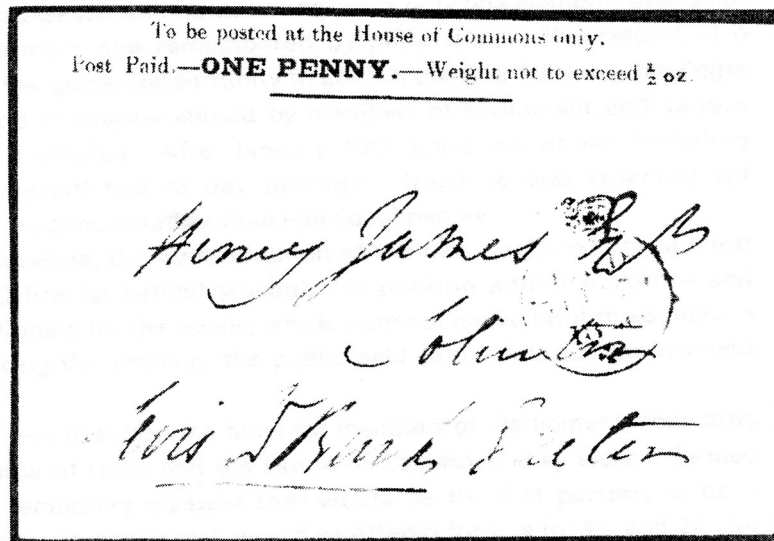


FIG 3 – HOUSE OF COMMONS ENVELOPE

The reason for the houses of Parliament issue, applicable to both Houses, seems to have been a later idea, but from cancels on used copies, there is evidence that they were issued very shortly after the other two. Therefore, the listing in the H&G catalog is not a chronological one. The sale of these envelopes was discontinued when the penny black stamp and the Mulreadys were issued less than three months later. This may account for their relative rarity.

Most of the envelopes preserved have been discovered among collections of franks or autographs. Only a few mint copies are known, and the unique DB 4 is in the British Royal collection. Most collectors are unaware of these unusual issues because they are usually only offered at auction, but keep looking at old piles of “stampless covers” as you may find a rare and valuable item of postal stationery.