

# M is for... Mulready stationery

Colin Baker charts the brief life of William Mulready's illustrated envelopes, commissioned to grace the first ever prepaid stationery of 1840

ONE OF THE INNOVATIONS that came with the postal reforms of 1840 was the introduction of prepaid envelopes and letter sheets; the 1d values were printed in black and the 2d values in blue. These could be used for letters sent anywhere in the UK, weighing up to half an ounce and one ounce respectively.

Neither the envelopes nor the letter sheets were gummed (it would be another five to ten years before that was possible) and they had to be folded by hand and sealed with a blob of wax or fastened with a wafer seal – a small piece of paper carrying a design or message that was stuck over the point of the flap to hold it in place. They were launched on the same day the new 1d and 2d adhesive stamps – the famous Penny Black and Twopenny Blue – came into use.

It was assumed that the convenience of prepaid stationery would make it an instantly popular choice. So, while the printed envelopes and letter sheets were stocked in large numbers at every post office, the adhesive stamps were harder to find – on the issue date of 6 May 1840, there were only limited supplies of the Penny Black and none at all of the Twopenny Blue.

The stationery was illustrated by William Mulready, a talented artist and member of the Royal Academy, influenced by Rowland Hill and Henry Cole (the two men in charge of introducing the postal reforms). 'The Literary World' journal of March 1840 enthused in anticipation: 'The idea, of calling in the powers

of art as auxiliary to the philanthropic agency of the Penny Post, is a happy one'.

The public disagreed – with vigour. The common consensus deemed the prepaid stationery far too ornate. Mulready's illustrations were lampooned by other artists and ridiculed in letters to newspapers. Prepaid envelopes and letter sheets were shunned from the start in favour of the Penny Black, most people



Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3

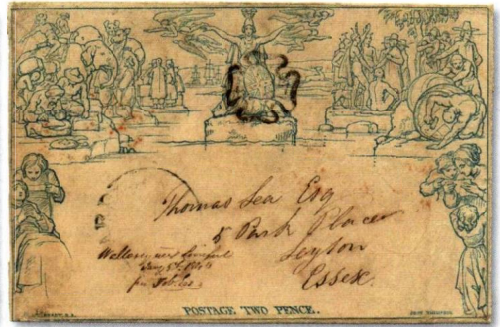


Fig 4

Fig 1 A 1d envelope used on 18 June 1840 and then redirected to Staffordshire. The curved stroke shows a further 1d has been paid for the redirection. On the reverse, in Fig 2, is a small wafer seal which reads 'Dinna Forget' – the writer wanted a reply

Fig 3 A caricature envelope by Southgate, showing how ladies of all classes can receive letters now that postage is only 1d.



Fig 6

Fig 4 The late use of a 2d envelope in 1844.

Fig 5 An opened out 1d envelope for use by the County of Kinross to collect unpaid taxes.

Fig 6 A 1d letter sheet used 27th February 1841, unusually overprinted on the front with the sender's name 'Webb L'pool'.

Fig 7 The same letter sheet opened out, showing information tablets on each side and the engraved 'postage' motif, an anti-forgery device.

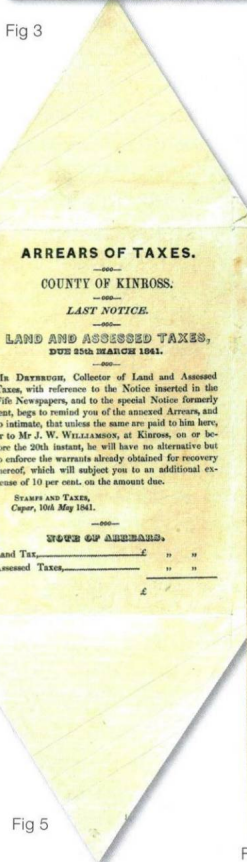


Fig 5

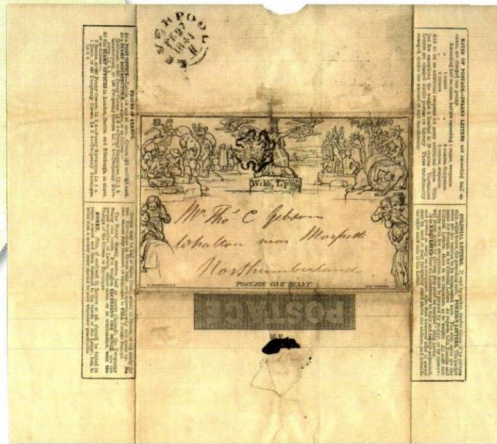


Fig 7

preferring to use plain paper and adding one of the new stamps. Within a few weeks of Mulready stationery being put on sale, Rowland Hill acknowledged that a new design would have to be chosen for the prepaid envelopes.

And that is a story for another letter of the alphabet ●

*Next in Baker's A to Z of Postal Stationery: N for Newspaper Wrappers.*

• *The Postal Stationery Society welcomes enquiries by email at [pss.secretary@gmail.com](mailto:pss.secretary@gmail.com)*