

# Collecting the Victorians

## 2. The Penny Reds, 1841–1879



Britain's famous Penny Blacks had a comparatively short life – that perhaps is one reason why they are becoming extremely scarce in fine condition and why, by the time you read this, a fine used 'Black' with good margins may fetch well over a hundred pounds. The Penny Red, actually in varying shades of red-brown, was introduced on February 10 1841 (printed from the original 1d black plates), and issued later that month printed from new plates. The reason for the change of colour was that some black stamps could quite easily be cleaned after use, the obliterations or postmarks removed and the stamps used again. This fraudulent practice was made more difficult by the introduction of 'red' stamps and black (instead of red) cancellations.

The Penny Reds are perhaps the most popular with collectors, and certainly the most common, of all Victorian stamps. They were in use, in various forms, for almost 40 years – accordingly a collection can be made of them, simple or specialised to taste, at moderate cost. In fact the scope of your collection can be linked to one or other of the three relevant Gibbons Catalogues – *Collect British Stamps*, a simple checklist listing the basic stamps, including the 1d red plate-numbers; the annual *British Commonwealth Catalogue*, which contains a more detailed listing with numerous varieties, shades, postmarks etc.; and, for the advanced collector, the *GB Specialised Catalogue, Vol 1–Queen Victoria*, which contains a vast amount of detailed information about dies, 'alphabets', plates and varieties.

Steering a middle course between the extremes of simplicity and the highly specialised, we can segregate the 1d reds into three convenient groups which, for ease of reference, I have designated A, B and C. Using the *British Commonwealth Catalogue* as a guide, we see that there are numerous permutations (under B especially) of dies, perforations and watermarks, but there is no cause for alarm or despondency! Identifying the stamps is all part of the fun of collecting.

**A (1841 on).** The first 1d reds were imperforate and, like the 'blacks', had letters in the lower corners (only) and bore the Small Crown watermark. Perforation came much later, following the

experiments and trials by Henry Archer and the Government. As mentioned earlier, the red stamps were first printed from the 'black' plates but, as distinguishing them requires a knowledge of the original plates and their idiosyncrasies, I would group all the imperf. 1d reds together, including all the different shades you can find. These plates were manufactured from the original 'black' die of 1840 – Die I. The paper was normally 'blued' (having a bluish tinge) due to the presence of prussiate of potash in the printing ink of the paper.

**B (1854–1857).** The first perforated 'Reds'. Again on more or less blued paper and, at first, with the Small Crown watermark, printed from Die I plates. Perforation alternated between perf 16 and perf 14 while, in 1855, a strengthened and retouched Die II was brought into use: the differences are indicated in the B.C. catalogue. Stamps bearing the Large Crown watermark appeared in May 1855; paper no longer 'blued' in November 1856.

I append a summary of the 1854–1857 1d reds:

*Perforated. Blued Paper.*

Small Crown wmk. Perf 16 Dies I and II  
Perf 14 Dies I and II

Large Crown wmk. Perf 16 Die II  
Perf 14 Die II

*Perforated. Paper not blued.*

Large Crown wmk. Perf 16 Die II  
Perf 14 Die II

**C (1858–1897).** Letters in all four corners. Large Crown watermark. Die II. Perf 14. Still easy to obtain and popular because of the different plate-numbers – 71 to 225 (152 in all) – which appear in the side frames of the stamps. Plate 77 is of the greatest rarity (the original plate was found defective and rejected after a few stamps had been printed from it), and plate 225 is another scarce one.

Interesting postmarks – on the stamps, on 'piece' and on those delightful small envelopes of the period – and some of the listed varieties will greatly enhance your 'Penny Reds' collection. Issues of the Twopence Blue stamps developed on similar lines and could form a separate study. The 1d Venetian red in a new design appeared in 1880 – but that's another story!

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