

# Collecting the Victorians

## 3. The Embossed Issues, 1847-1854

At the beginning of this series I mentioned that some of the scarce Victorian stamps are rather expensive in price, and that you could confine your collecting interests to separate studies of any of the specified groups. This month we come to the distinctive Embossed stamps, introduced in 1847 when 1s values and, later, 10d and 6d denominations, were required to prepay the postage on colonial and foreign letters or on registered domestic items. We come also to the 'crunch' – the cost of these fine old stamps today, when demand is increasing in pace with inflation.

The current catalogue prices for the Embossed issues are admittedly prohibitive, especially for the unused stamps, rated at or above the £1,000 mark. However, the postally used Embossed Stamps can be found (if you shop around) for considerably less than the quoted prices for these stamps, which average about £100, according to shade, number of the die and condition. This prospect brings them within the province of the collector who appreciates fine material and is prepared to make an occasional substantial purchase – building up a small but valuable collection.

The origins of these stamps can be traced to the appearance, early in 1841, of the first embossed envelopes, replacements for the ill-fated 'Mulready' envelopes and letter-sheets. As with the envelopes, the primary die for the embossed stamps was engraved at the Royal Mint by William Wyon, its Chief Engraver, who had already made his mark with the commemorative City Medal of 1837, which provided the image of the Queen's head for the Penny Black and Twopence Blue. Wyon – who was virtually the designer and who had submitted an original design for the 1s stamp with the embossed head and octagonal format of the issued stamps early in 1847 – produced three working dies for the 1s green, two of which were used in 'printing' the stamps at Somerset House.

The stamps were embossed on Dickinson paper with silk threads (without watermark), and they were imperforate – placed so close together by the operatives striking the impressions, one at a time, that wide, clear margins were the exception rather than the rule. They were issued on 11 September 1847, and similar procedures followed for the 10d

brown for which four of the six manufactured working dies were brought into use. The initials 'WW' and the die numbers were indicated (on all values) at the base of the bust, and again the stamps were produced on Dickinson paper, as indeed were the original embossed envelopes, as a precaution against forgery. Issued 6 November 1848.

The 6d mauve, also known in shades of lilac, purple and violet, and regarded as the best-produced of the three embossed stamps, appears belatedly on 1 March 1854, on paper without the silk threads and watermarked 'VR'. The 10d stamp was withdrawn in 1855, and the 6d and 1s stamps in 1856, having been replaced by the De La Rue surface-printed denominations. Many of the 10d and 1s stamps were used on letters to the Colonies, and some fine covers exist, notably in the R M Phillips Collection at the National Postal Museum.

JAMES WATSON

## Letter to the Editor

Dear Sir,

I was browsing around the Stamp Shops in the Strand, London a few short years ago trying to find the early issues of French Art Maxi Cards.

The French Post Office issued a startling innovation in November 1961, when the first engraved Art series appeared. Very large stamps, miniature masterpieces in themselves depicting their heritage of Paintings, Stained Glass windows and Tapestries.

Very soon the pattern was copied by a number of East European countries who vied with the French in the issue of large Art stamps.

The French Maxi-cards are enlarged colour reproductions of the stamps and were hand-stamped with the First day of issue. Unlike our British Post Cards the maxi cards were not issued by the French Post Office. Nevertheless they are much sought after collectors items and as with our own early issue of cards are unobtainable to all but a very few collectors.

Having had no particular luck in my search for the missing early issues of French Art Maxi Cards, I happened to notice a dealer who was