

# Full and Partial Pre-Cuts in Britain's Line Engraved Stamps



Paul Sarjeant

PaulSarjeantStamps@gmail.com

# Introduction

When postal authorities introduced the first postage stamps in May 1840, they faced a number of technical challenges.

Not the least of these challenges was how to separate individual stamps for use from the printed sheets.

For the first decade, it was up to post office clerks and the purchasers of the stamps to figure out how best to separate them.

By 1850 it was clear that a better solution was needed, and the first official perforation trials were commenced.

The technology was ultimately declared a success and the production of the world's first officially perforated stamps commenced in January 1854.



# Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Introduction*

A particular challenge for users of imperforate stamps was the need to find a cutting implement every time that a stamp was needed.

One solution was to Pre-cut the stamps on a horizontal strip so that they would be easily available when needed.

Stamps could be **FULLY** Pre-cut, or **PARTIALLY** Pre-cut.

Fully Precut Pair



Partially Precut Single



# Fully Pre-Cut Stamps

Some users would pre-cut stamps into a supply of individual stamps.

This usage can only be established when:

- more than one stamp was used, and
- they remain intact on a cover or a piece.



1d Red, Plate 87 'PA' & 'PB'  
'16' Inland, London PM, London to Evesham,  
24 February 1850

# Fully Precut Stamps

Fully pre-cutting stamps into singles meant that users did not have to find a cutting tool every time they wanted to mail a letter.

Fully Pre-cut stamps from the same sheet can be reliably identified if they are on a cover or piece, as shown here.

6 Fully Pre-cut 1d Blacks, Plate 10

Black Maltese Cross Postmark, Witham, 7 April 1841 (ex JB Seymour)



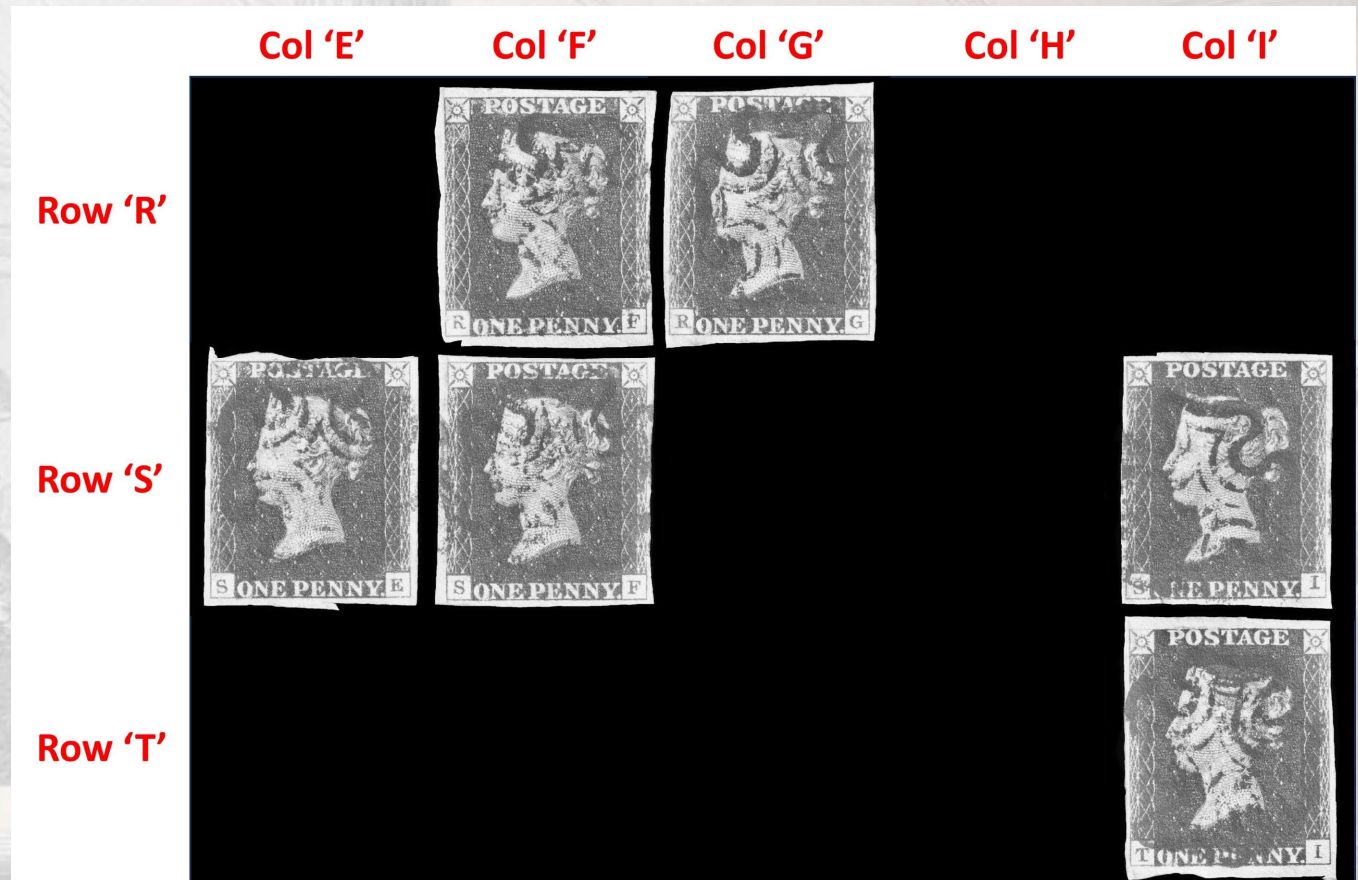
# Fully Precut Stamps

In this example, the stamps:

- are all printed from plate 10,
- are similar in appearance, and
- are from a similar area of the sheet.

Most importantly the edges of the stamps can be clearly matched to show how they were detached from the same sheet, as can be seen here.

6 Fully Pre-cut 1d Blacks, Plate 10  
Re-arranged into their original plate positions



# Fully Pre-Cut Stamps

The stamps on this cover were Fully Pre-cut from row 'R' of a sheet from Plate 6.



1d Black Plate 6 'RG' & 'RF'  
Black Maltese Cross PM, Turriff to Aberdeen, Dated 18 December 1841

# Fully Pre-Cut Stamps

This can be seen in the reconstructed image that shows the matching separation cut lines.

Note that the stamps on this cover were applied in reverse order, that is, 'RG' followed by 'RF'.



# Fully Pre-Cut Stamps

This is the earliest usage found to date of Fully Pre-cut stamps.

Dated May 16, 1840, just 10 days after official postage stamp use began



# Evidence For Row Priority

## *Sheet Layout*

The sheet layout for the 1d line engraved stamps was based on the British currency of the time.

- 12 stamps per row, labelled 'A' to 'L'
- 20 rows, labelled 'A' to 'T'
- 240 stamps in a sheet, labelled 'AA' to 'TL'

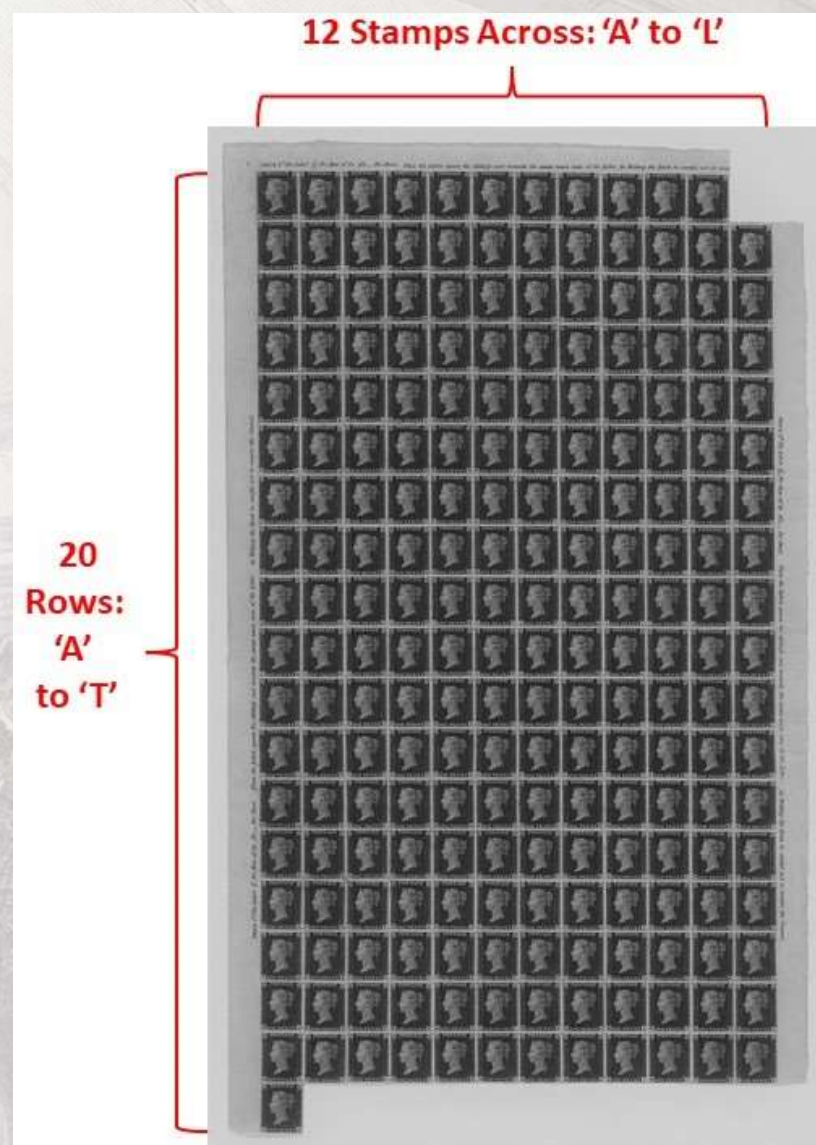
This layout corresponded to the currency in use:

- 12 Pennies (12d) per Shilling (1/-)
- 20 Shillings (20/-) per Pound Sterling (£1)
- 240 Pennies (240d) per Pound Sterling (£1)

For the 1d stamps:

- a row of 12 stamps cost 1 Shilling
- an entire sheet cost 1 Pound

1d Black Plate 1a  
Imprimatur Sheet  
(Copyright "The Postal Museum")



# Evidence For Row Priority *Sheet Layout*

Clear instructions were printed in all four margins of every sheet of line engraved stamps printed from 1840 through 1879.

As shown here, for 1d stamps these instructions read:

*"Price 1d Per Label, 1/- Per Row..."*

This meant that it was clearly advantageous for postal clerks to separate stamps in rows, as opposed to columns or blocks.

1877 1d Red Plate 203 (Die II) Block 'SA-TB'  
Unused, with Marginal Inscription



# Evidence For Row Priority

## *Predominance of Horizontal Strips*

The preferential separation of imperforate stamps into horizontal strips can be seen in the stamps that have survived as multiples.

The proportion of stamps in horizontal multiples (~70%) is noticeably higher than the proportions in either vertical strips (~6%) or in blocks (~24%).

Plate 54



Plate 119



Plate 51



Plate 94



# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

A more novel solution was to prepare a strip of stamps by pre-cutting the margins between the stamps, leaving one or two small connecting tabs to hold the strip together.

When stamps were needed it was a simple matter to remove them from the strip by tearing the tabs.



1d Red, Plate 150 'QF'  
'186' Dublin PM, Dublin to Downpatrick, Ireland,  
29 October 1852

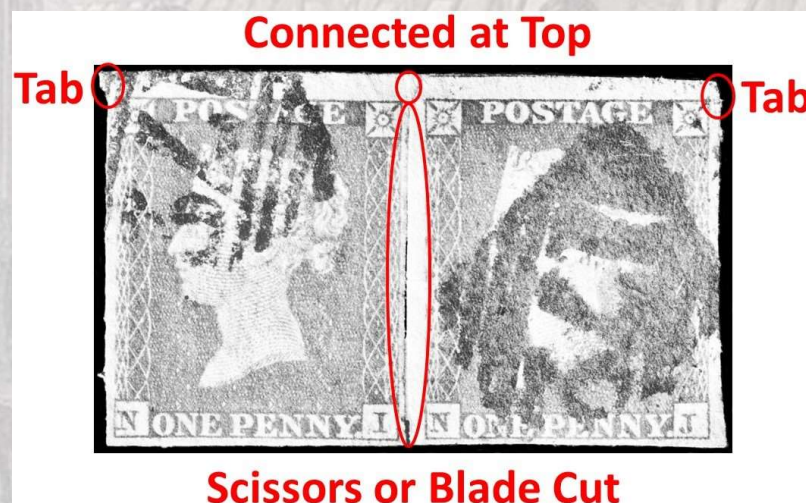
# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Orientation: Bottom Cut*

Partially Pre-cut stamps can be found in 3 orientations, depending on the location of the separating cuts.

The most common are those that have been cut from the bottom, leaving tabs at the tops of the stamps.

1d Red, Plate 164 'NI-NJ'



# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

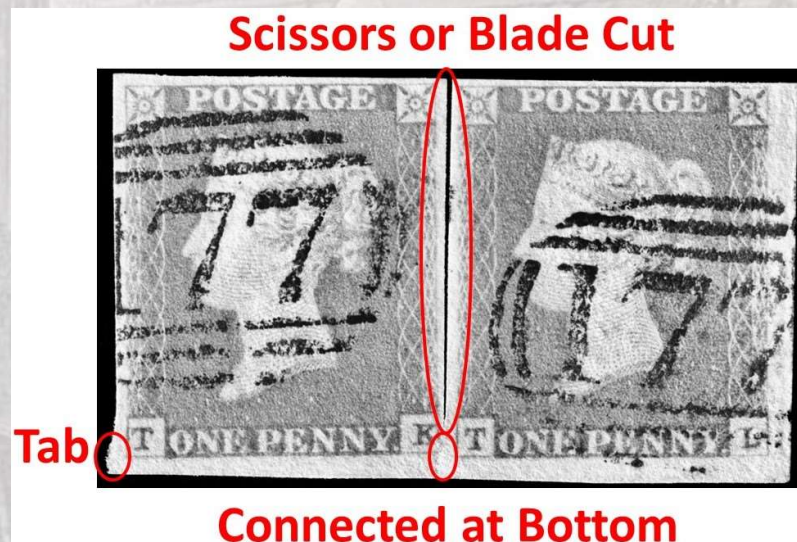
*Orientation: Top Cut*

Although not as common as the bottom cut stamps, stamps can be found that have been cut from the top.

1d Red, Plate 82 'TK-TL'



**Scissors or Blade Cut**



**Connected at Bottom**

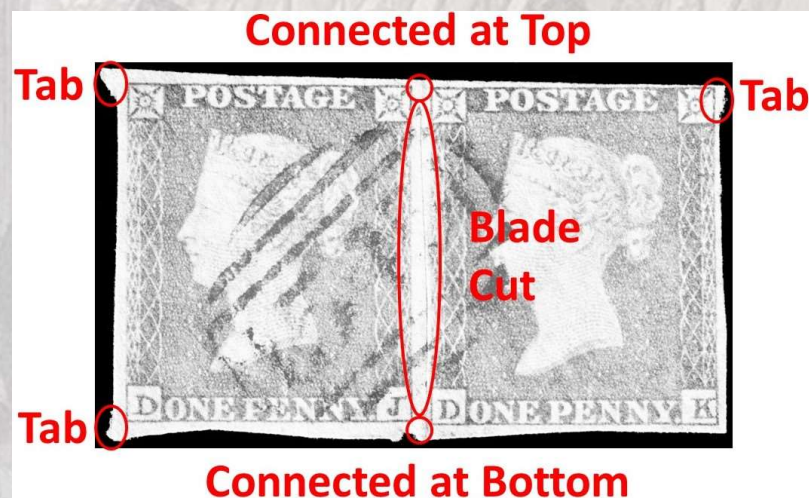
# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Orientation: Centre Cut*

The least common precuts are those that have been cut in the centre, leaving tabs at the top and bottom.

These centre cuts would have to have been made with a blade.

1d Red, Plate 152 'DJ-DK'



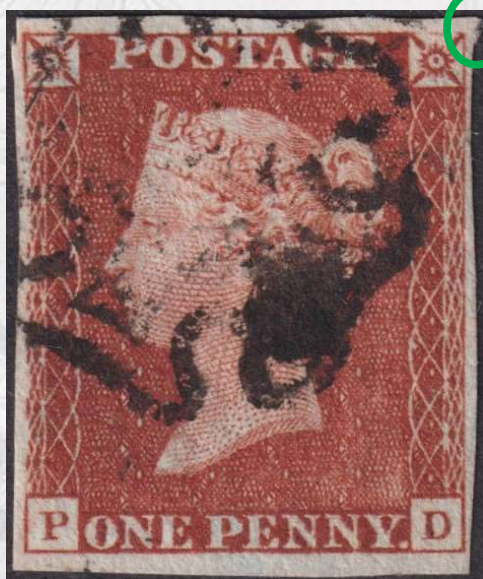
# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Orientation: Singles*

The orientations of single stamps can be determined by the number and location of the tabs.

Centre cut single stamps are uncommon.

Bottom Cut



1d Red, Plate 16 'PD'

Top Cut



1d Red, Plate 66 'RB'

Centre Cut



1d Red, Plate 96 'OH'

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Cut Length / Tab Size*

A wide range of cut lengths and corresponding tab sizes can be found.

Small Tabs



1d Red, Plate 14 'DI'

Medium Tabs



1d Red, Plate 87 'EH'

Large Tabs



1d Red, Plate 72 'IJ'

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Cut Length / Tab Size*

This is such an odd example, with impractically small cuts, that it may well not have been intended to be a “pre-cut”.

1d Red, Plate 102 'QJ-QK'



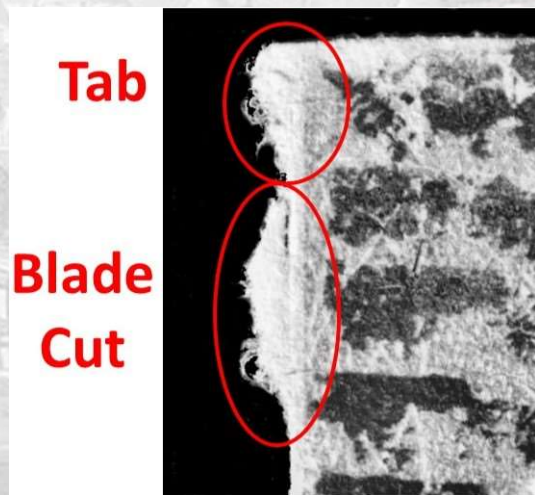
# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Evidence of Blade Cuts*

Evidence of pre-cuts that have been cut with blades is not uncommon.



1d Red, Plate 84 'KG-KH'



# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Foreign Usage*

Evidence can be found of partially pre-cut “foreign” stamps.

This Barbados stamp was cut from the top with tabs at the bottom

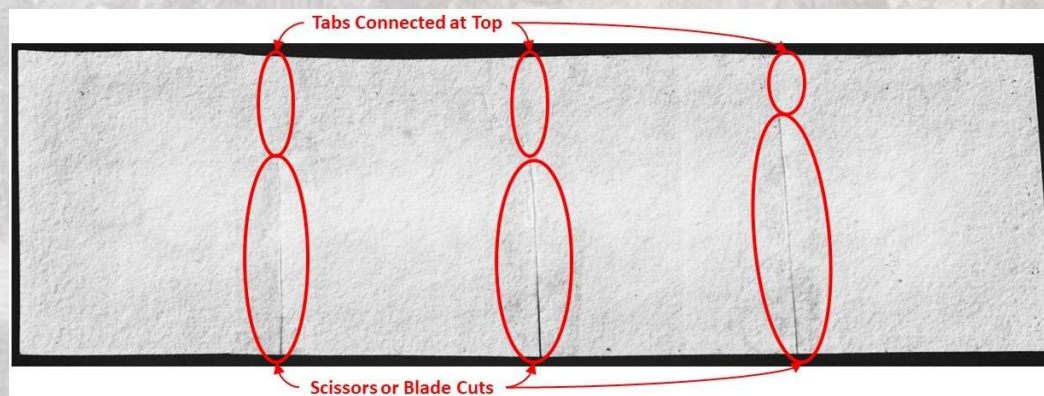


1858 Barbados 6d Rose Red

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps *Multiples*

Partially pre-cut  
1d Black stamps  
are uncommon,  
and surviving  
examples of  
multiples are  
very rare indeed.

1d Black, Plate 7 'LA-LD', Red Maltese Cross



# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps *Multiples*

1d Black Strip of 6, Plate 1b, 'LA-LF'  
Black Maltese Cross Postmark



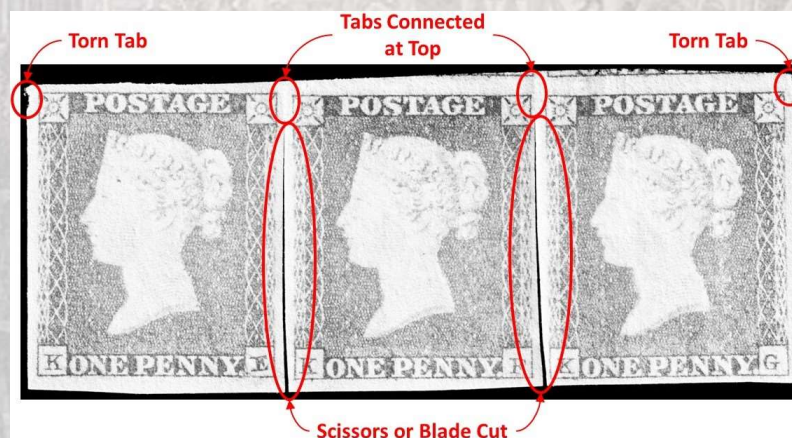
Multiples of partially pre-cut stamps are flimsy, as can be seen by the broken tab between 'LB' and 'LC'.



# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps *Multiples*

While Partially pre-cut 1d Red stamps are more common as multiples, unused examples are also very rare.

1d Red, Plate 98 'KE-KG'



# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Multiples*

Applying a long strip of pre-cut stamps would have been very difficult without tearing the tabs. It is uncommon to find long used Partially Pre-cut strips such as this strip of eight.



*Mr J Nichols*  
*Liquorpond Street*



1d Red, Plate  
34 'EA-EH'

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Early Use*

Earliest  
known date  
of use of  
Partially  
Pre-cut  
stamps:  
21 May 1840.

From  
Chichester,  
Sussex.



1840 1d Black, Plate 1a 'FC' and 'FG', both Partially Precut with a blade  
On Folded Legal Document, from Chichester to Petworth

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Early Use*

Postmarked on  
reverse “Chichester  
MY 21 1840”.



The tabs on the  
stamps are clear,  
as are the signs  
of blade cutting  
on the sides.

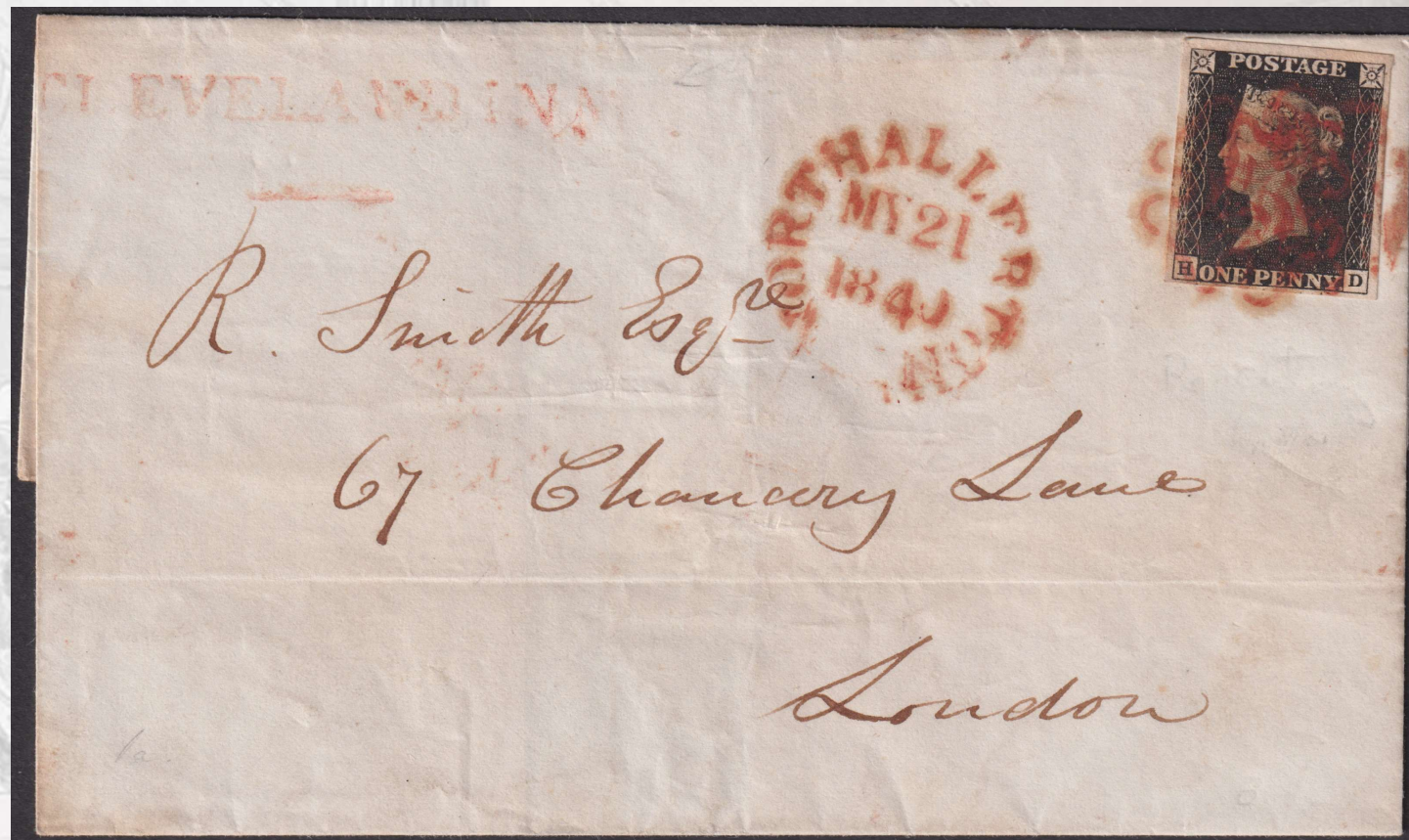


# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Early Use*

A second cover from  
the SAME earliest  
known use date:  
21 May 1840.

From Northallerton,  
North Yorkshire.



1840 1d Black Plate 1a 'HD', Red Maltese Cross Postmark on Cover  
Northallerton to London, Dated 21 May 1840

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Early Use*

A close up and masked view of the stamp clearly shows the tabs on both upper corners.



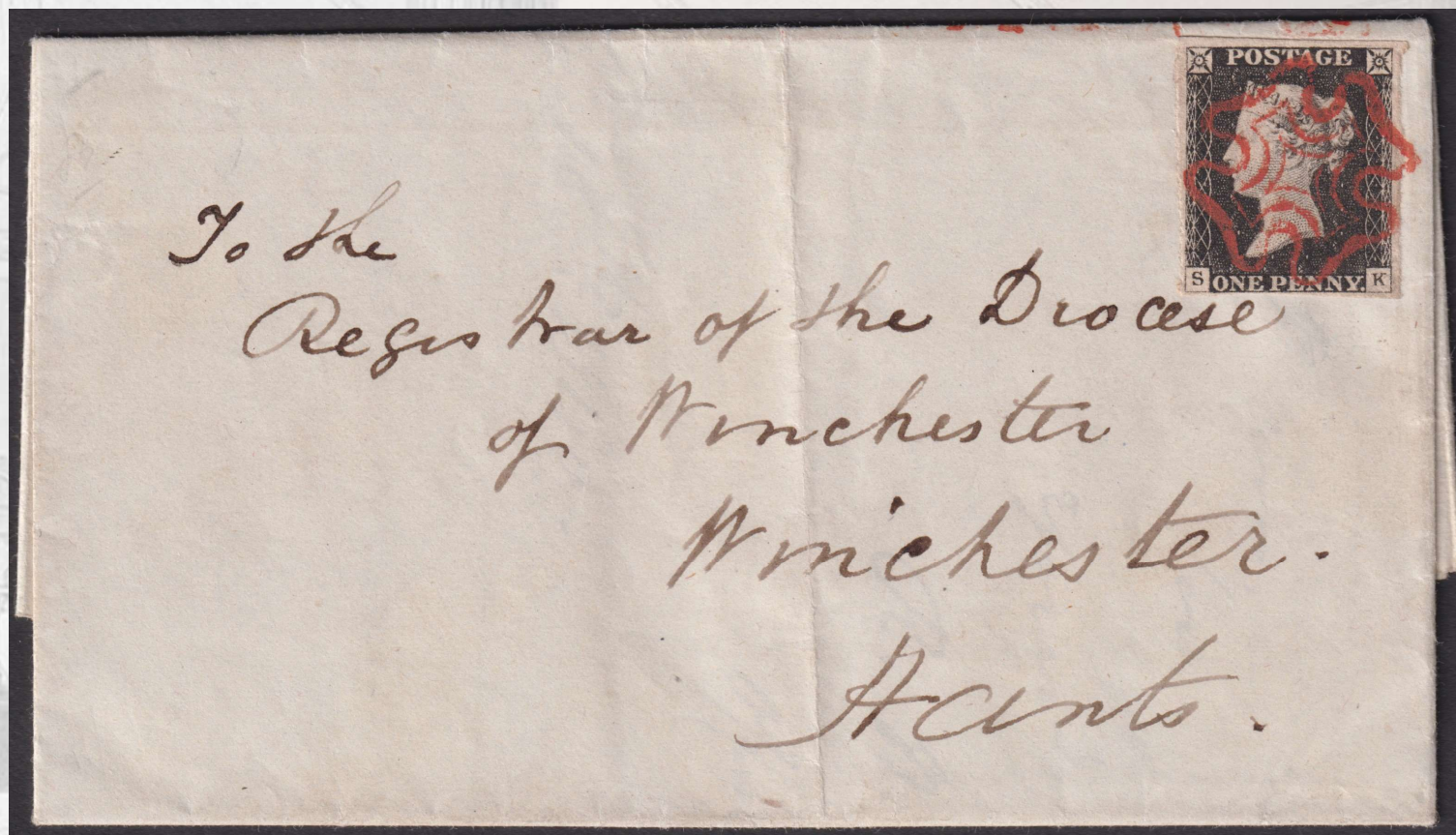
1840 1d Black Plate 1a 'HD', Red Maltese Cross Postmark  
Northallerton to London, Dated 21 May 1840

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Early Use*

Another early cover:  
18 July 1840.

From Basingstoke,  
Hampshire.



1840 1d Black Plate 2 'SK', Red Maltese Cross Postmark on Cover  
Basingstoke to Winchester, Dated 18 July 1840

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Early Use*

There is a tab on this stamp at the upper right.

However, the sides appear to have been torn rather than cut.

So this particular tab is likely an anomaly...



1840 1d Black Plate 2 'SK', Red Maltese Cross Postmark on Cover  
Basingstoke to Winchester, Dated 18 July 1840

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Early Use*

As seen by the tab at upper right: another early use of Partial Pre-cuts, this time in Ireland in July 1841.



1841 1d Red Plate 11 'PJ', Black Maltese Cross Postmark on Cover  
Larne to Lurganville, Dated 5 July 1841

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## Where?

We have two covers with partially pre-cut stamps mailed:

- on 21 May 1840, the same EKV date, and
- at opposite ends of England.



Northallerton,  
North Yorkshire

Chichester,  
Sussex



# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps *Later Use*

Examples of single stamps exhibiting the distinctive Partial Pre-cut tabs can be found throughout the imperforate stamp era, right up to the onset of official perforation in 1854.

1845



1d Red Plate 60 'DG'

1850



1d Red Plate 95 'ME'

1853



1d Red Plate 156 'KC'

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps *Later Use*

A late use of  
two Partially  
Pre-cut  
stamps on  
cover in April  
1853.



1853 1d Red Plate 164 'EE & EF' on Cover with '10' Inland London Postmark  
London to Birmingham, Dated 25 April 1853

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps *Later Use*

The two stamps, while adjacent in the original strip, were detached as separated single stamps.



1853 1d Red Plate 164 'EE & EF' on Cover with '10' Inland London Postmark  
London to Birmingham, Dated 25 April 1853

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Centre Cut*

The least common Partial Pre-cuts are those that were cut in the middle, leaving tabs at both the top AND bottom of each stamp.



1d Black, Two Pairs cut from a Strip of Four, Plate 2, 'MB-ME'  
Red Maltese Cross Postmarks, Yarmouth to Norwich, dated 4th July 1840

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Centre Cut*

Leaving the connecting tabs at the top and bottom of the stamps in this manner helped to prevent the flimsy strip of stamps from falling apart before use.

1d Black, Two Pairs cut from a Strip of Four, Plate 2, 'MB-ME'  
Red Maltese Cross Postmarks, Yarmouth to Norwich, dated 4th July 1840



# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Centre Cut*

Creating a strip of Centrally Partial Pre-cut stamps would have required the use of a blade, being impractical to cut with scissors.



1d Red Pair, Plate 115, 'FE-FF'

'407' Douglas Postmark, Ramsey to Douglas (Isle of Man), dated 12th May 1851

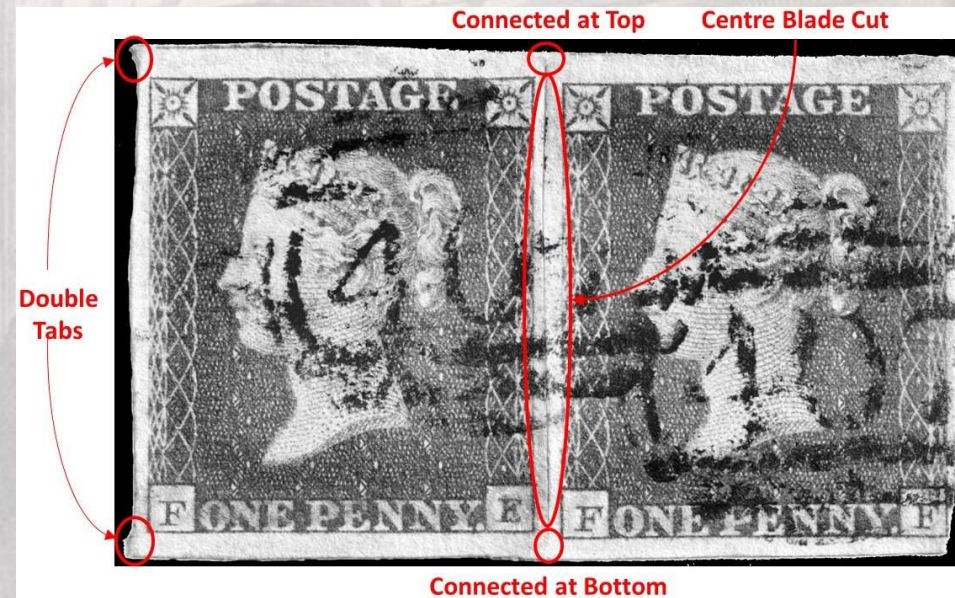
# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Centre Cut*



1d Red Pair, Plate 115, 'FE-FF'

'407' Douglas Postmark, Ramsey to Douglas (Isle of Man), dated 12th May 1851



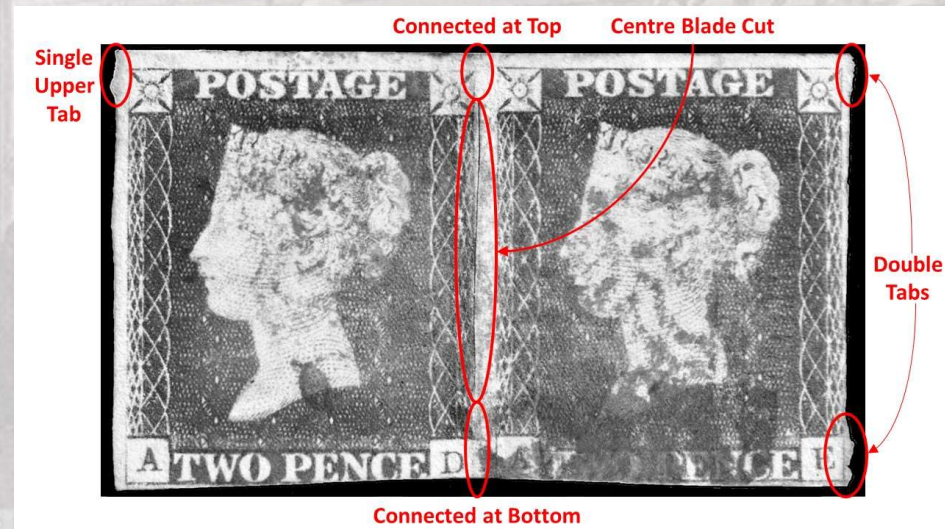


# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Centre Cut*



2d Blue Pair, Plate 1, 'AD-AE', Red Maltese Cross Postmark,  
Manchester to Edinburgh, dated 1st February 1841



# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Who?*

It has been presumed for many years that it was Post Office clerks who made these pre-cuts during slow periods.

We're fairly certain that these clerks were often already detaching horizontal strips from the sheets to facilitate sales during busy periods.

But was it the clerks, or the customers who bought the stamps who made the pre-cuts?

Or both?

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## Who?

1. Pre-cut strips are **FLIMSY**: too flimsy to easily transport



1d Red, Plate  
34 'EA-EH'

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

## *Who?*

2. Strips were not  
**COMPLETELY**  
pre-cut from end to  
end.

1d Red,  
Plate 96  
'OH'



1d Black, Plate 7 'LA-LD', Red Maltese Cross

# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

*Who?*

2. Strips were not  
**COMPLETELY**  
pre-cut end to end



1841 1d Red Plate 11 'PJ', Black Maltese Cross Postmark on Cover  
Larne to Lurganville, Dated 5 July 1841

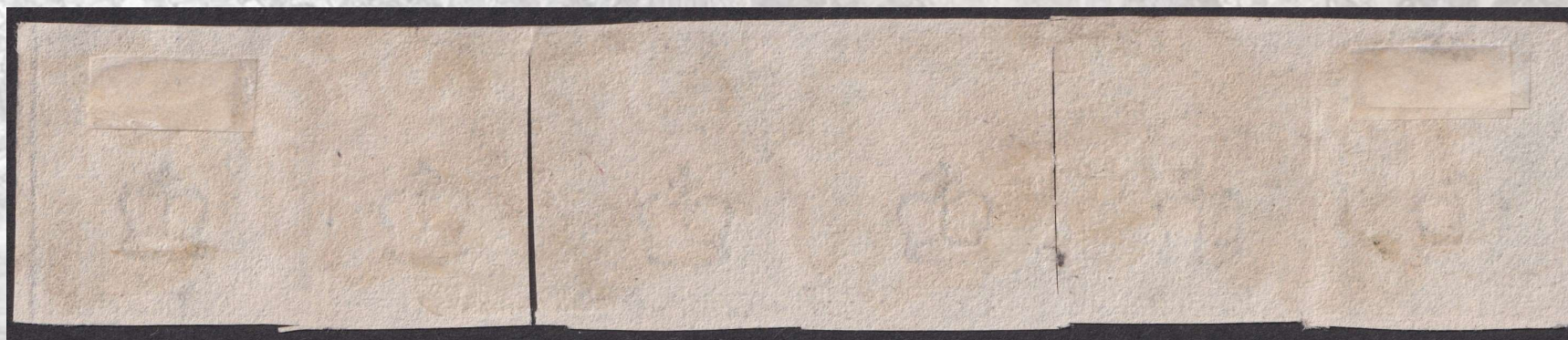
# Partially Pre-Cut Stamps

*Who?*

1d Black Strip of 6, Plate 1b, 'LA-LF'  
Black Maltese Cross Postmark



3. Strip  
pre-cut  
into  
PAIRS...



**Thank You!**

**Questions?**

