

# Partial Pre-cuts of Britain's Imperforate Line Engraved Stamps

## Purpose & Scope

When British postal authorities introduced the first postage stamps in May 1840, they faced a number of technical challenges and design decisions. 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. A particular challenge for these 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 individual stamps so that they would be available when needed. Stamps could be 'Fully' pre-cut into individual stamps, or 'Partially' pre-cut into easy to separate strips.

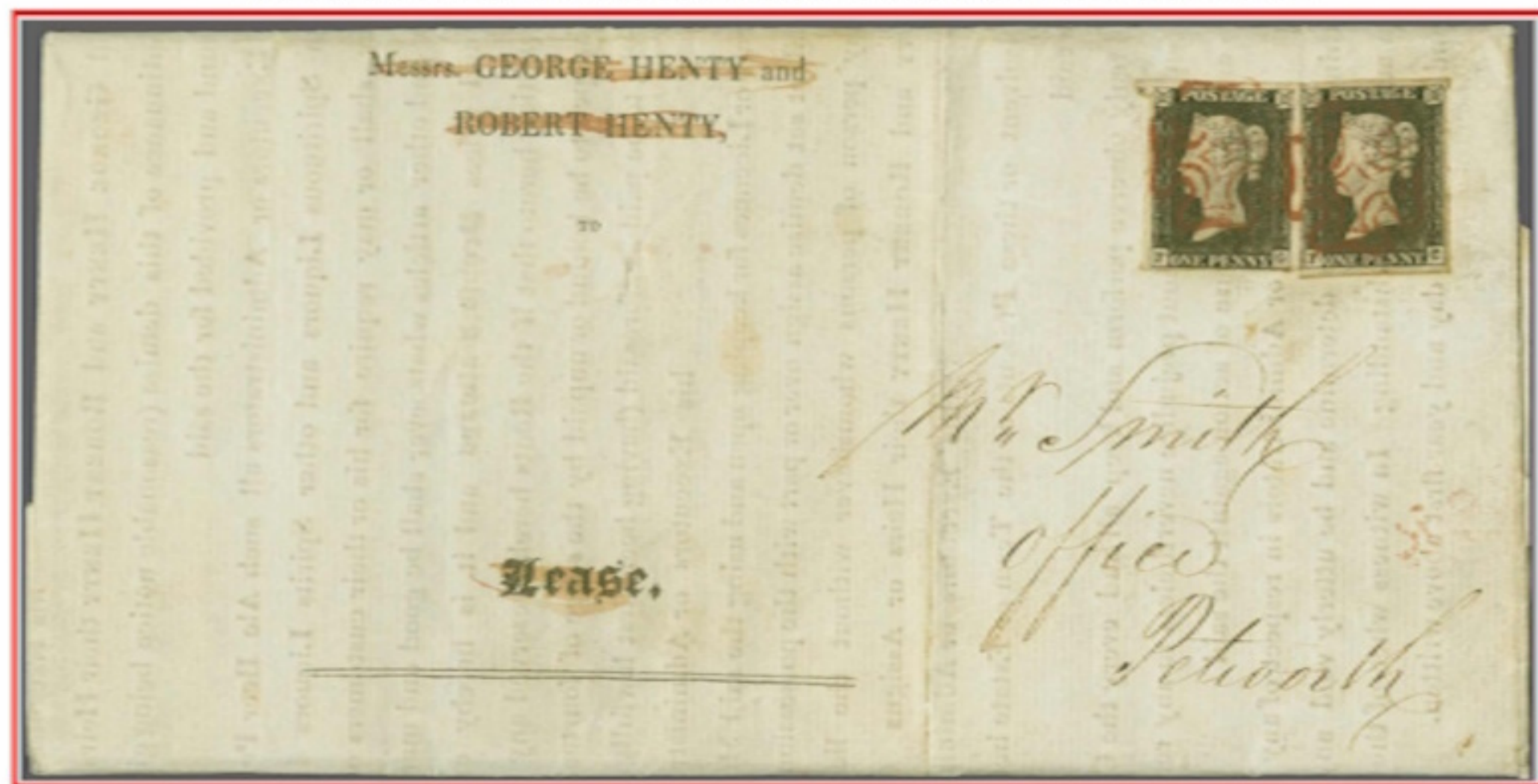
Partially Pre-cut stamps were prepared by the user, usually from a horizontal strip of stamps, by partially cutting the margins between adjacent stamps, leaving small connecting tabs to hold the strip together. When one or more stamps were needed it was a simple matter to remove them from the strip by tearing these connecting tabs.

While traces of the remnant tabs and tears from these Partial Pre-cuts can be found on many single stamps, their intrinsic fragility makes it challenging to find them surviving as multiples of two or more.

Focusing on the Line Engraved stamps of Great Britain used from 1840 through 1853, this single frame traditional philately exhibit examines the characteristic and usage of these ingeniously prepared stamps.

## Earliest Known Use of Partial Precut Separations

1d Black Cover Dated 21 May 1840, 15 Days After Official Use of the Penny Black Began



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



Postmarked  
on reverse:  
Chichester  
May 21, 1840



Closeup of the stamps showing the distinctive tabs indicating  
that they were Partially Precut from a horizontal strip

## Exhibit Plan

1. Introduction
2. Fully Pre-cut Stamps
3. Predominance of Horizontal Strips
4. Orientation
5. Tab Characteristics
6. Multiples
7. Timeline
8. Centre Partial Pre-cuts
9. Conclusion

## Notes

- Statements of rarity and early usage are based on the exhibitor's personal knowledge.

Items of particular interest or rarity are identified with a red border.

## Partially Pre-cut Stamps (1840 - 1853)

### 1. Introduction

The Pre-cutting of imperforate stamps was done in one of two ways.

#### Full Pre-cuts

Some users would pre-cut the 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.

Two 1d Reds, Consecutive Stamps Fully Pre-cut on Cover



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

#### Partial Pre-cuts

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.

While most commonly done on horizontal strips, examples can be found from vertical strips.

1d Red With Partial Pre-cut Edges on Cover



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

## Partially Pre-cut Stamps (1840 - 1853)

### 2. Fully Pre-cut Stamps

Fully Pre-cutting individual stamps meant that the user did not have to find scissors or a blade 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.

In this example, the stamps:

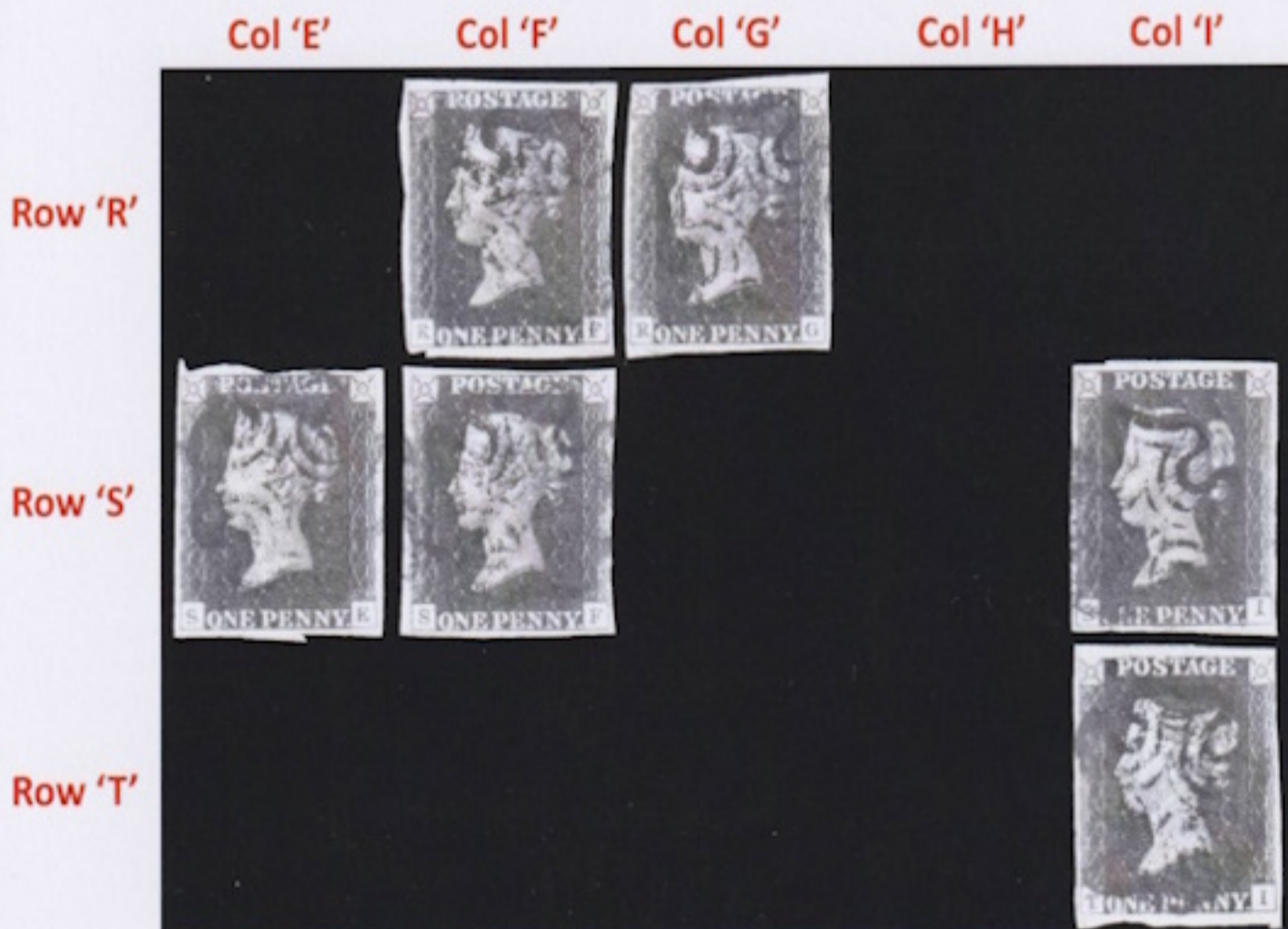
- are printed from the same plate,
- are similar in appearance, and
- are from a similar area of the sheet.

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 in the reconstruction below.

Fully Pre-cut 1d Blacks On Piece



6 Separated 1d Blacks on Piece, Plate 10  
Black Maltese Cross Postmark, Witham, 7 April 1841  
(ex JB Seymour)



Reconstruction Of The Original Positions Of These 6 Stamps On The Sheet  
Illustrating How The Cut Separation Lines Match

## Partially Pre-cut Stamps (1840 - 1853)

### 3. Predominance of Horizontally Aligned Multiples



Pair - Plate 2 'GJ-GK', Black Maltese Cross



Strip of 3 - Plate 96 'MD-MF', '19' Inland London PM



Strip of 4 - Plate 54 'EA-ED', '349' Nenagh, Ireland PM



Strip of 5 - Plate 119 'NB-NF', '176' Chelmsford PM



Strip of 6 - Plate 51 'PD-PI', '186' Dublin, Ireland PM



Strip of 9 - Plate 94 'OA-OI', '312' Gloucester PM

Partial Pre-cutting of stamps took advantage of the fact that the imperforate stamps of the era were preferentially cut into horizontal strips by Post Office clerks. This can be easily seen in the stamps that have survived as multiples.

The proportion of stamps in horizontal multiples is noticeably higher than the proportions in either vertical strips or in blocks.

In the exhibitor's own collection, of over 500 imperforate 1d stamps that are in multiples:

- 71% are in horizontal strips
- 5% are in vertical strips
- 24% are in blocks

## Partially Pre-cut Stamps (1840 - 1853)

### 4. Orientation

While the majority of Partial Pre-cuts were cut from the bottom of a strip of stamps, some were cut from the top.

And a very rare few were cut with a blade in the centre, leaving connecting tabs at both the top and the bottom of the stamps.

These variations are illustrated by the pairs and single examples below.

Cut From Bottom, Tab at Top



1d Red Plate 164 'NI-NJ'  
'172' Derry Irish PM

Cut From Top, Tab at Bottom

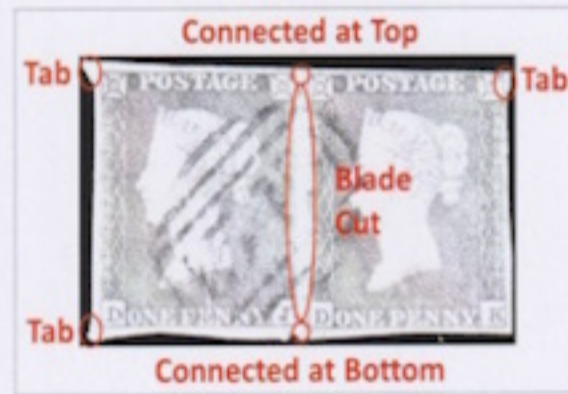


1d Red Plate 82 'TK-TL'  
'177' Cheltenham PM

Cut In Centre, Top & Bottom Tabs



1d Red Plate 152 'DJ-DK'  
'575' Norwich PM



Details: Locations of Cuts and Tabs

Bottom Cut Single



1d Red Plate 16 'PD'  
Black Maltese Cross PM

Top Cut Single



1d Red Plate 66 'RB'  
Unknown Irish PM

Centre Cut Single



1d Red Plate 96 'OH'  
'551' Burslem PM

Centre Partially Pre-cut stamps are, for some reason, particularly difficult to find as single stamps. The example above from Plate 96 is the sole example in the exhibitor's collection.

## Partially Pre-cut Stamps (1840 - 1853)

### 5. Tab Characteristics

#### Size of Tabs

The width of the connecting tabs on most Partially Pre-cut stamps is generally quite small, often barely visible.

The occasional larger tab can be found, left no doubt by more cautious users.

Small Tabs



1d Red Plate 14 'DI'  
Black Maltese Cross

Medium Tabs



1d Red Plate 87 'EH'  
'131' Edinburgh PM

Large Tabs



1d Red Plate 72 'IJ'  
'177' Cheltenham PM

#### Evidence For Blade Cuts

Both scissors and blades were used to separate imperforate stamps, but it is usually difficult to see the difference.

This pair shows clear evidence of having been separated with a blade.

Blade Cut Partial Pre-cut



1d Red Plate 84 'KG-KH'  
'92' Cupar Scottish PM



Detail: Evidence of  
Blade Cut on the Left

#### A 'Mixed' Partial Pre-cut

The tabs on this stamp suggest that the user changed their mind as they pre-cut the horizontal strip.

The tab on the left is at the top, indicating a cut from the bottom. The tab on the right is at the bottom, indicating a cut from the top.

Top and Bottom Tabs



1d Red Plate 63 'IF'  
'223' Coventry PM



Detail: Locations of Tabs

#### 'Foreign' Usage

The tabs on this relatively early imperforate stamp from Barbados suggest that the Partial Pre-cut technique was in use outside of Britain.

1858



Barbados 6d Rose Red



Detail: Locations of Tabs

## Partially Pre-cut Stamps (1840 - 1853)

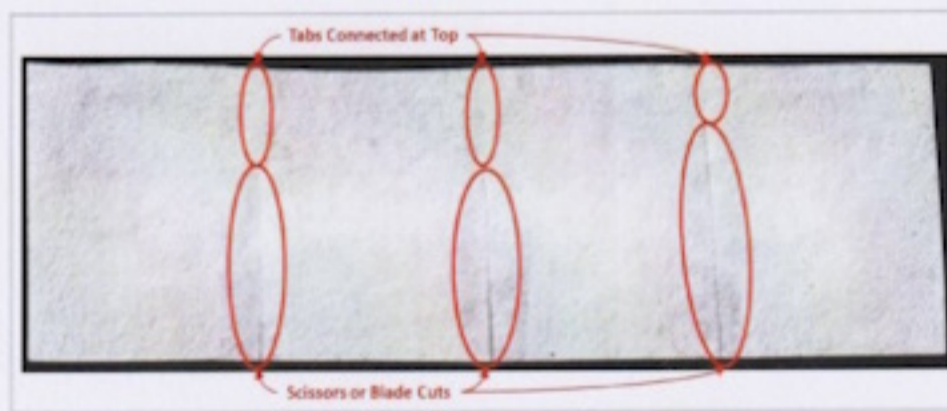
### 6. Multiples

Since the Partial Pre-cutting of imperforate stamps was an informally developed technique, it took some time to become widely used. As such, 1d Black stamps showing signs of having been Partially Pre-cut are uncommon, and surviving examples of multiples are very rare indeed.

This strip of four is a rare early example.



Plate 7 'LA-LD', Red Maltese Crosses  
(ex Simpson)



Reverse Detail: Locations of Cuts and Tabs

While multiples of 1d Red stamps are more common, it is unusual to find them in unused condition. The remnant tabs in the upper left and right corners of this strip indicate that it was originally part of a strip of five or more stamps.

#### Partial Pre-cut Strip of Three



Plate 98 'KE-KG', Unused  
(ex Simpson)



Detail: Locations of Cuts and Tabs

## Partially Pre-cut Stamps (1840 - 1853)

### 6. Multiples

Moistening and applying a long strip of pre-cut stamps would have been very difficult without unintentionally tearing the tabs and separating the individual stamps.

It is therefore very unusual to find long used and intact Partially Pre-cut strips such as the strip of eight on piece shown here. This strip was likely pre-cut with a blade, based on the parallel, slightly curved cuts downwards and to the right.

Blade Cut Partial Pre-cut 1d Red Strip of 8



1d Red Plate 34 'EA-EH', Black Maltese Cross Postmark, Exeter to Boston, Dated 3 January 1844



Detail: Locations of Partial Pre-cuts And Tabs

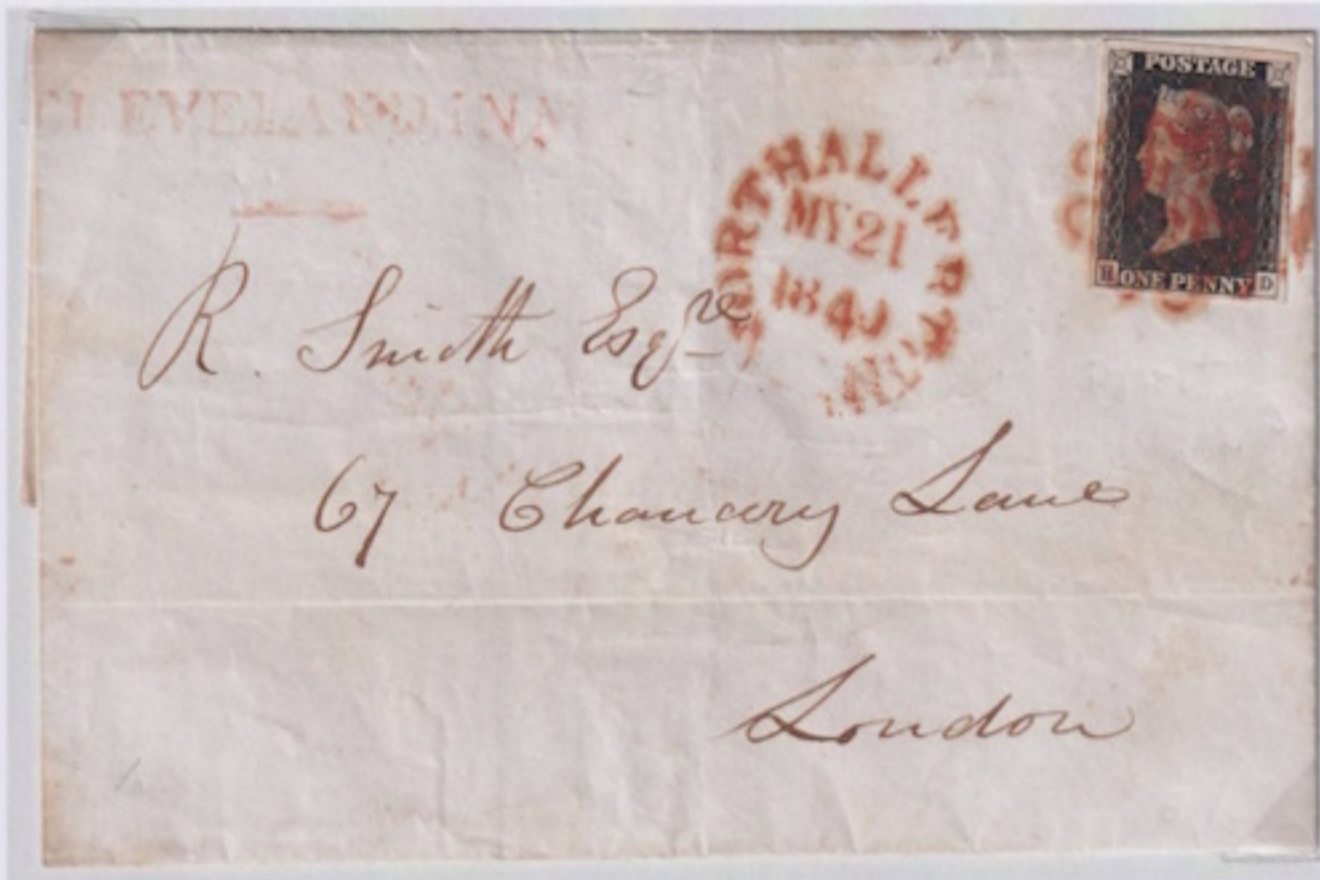
## Partially Pre-cut Stamps (1840 - 1853)

### 7. Timeline

The use of Partial Pre-cutting as a strategy for separating imperforate postage stamps dates back to within days of the introduction of the first stamps in early May of 1840.

The cover on the title page of this exhibit, as well as the first cover below, are both dated 21 May 1840, just 15 days after prepaid postage came into use.

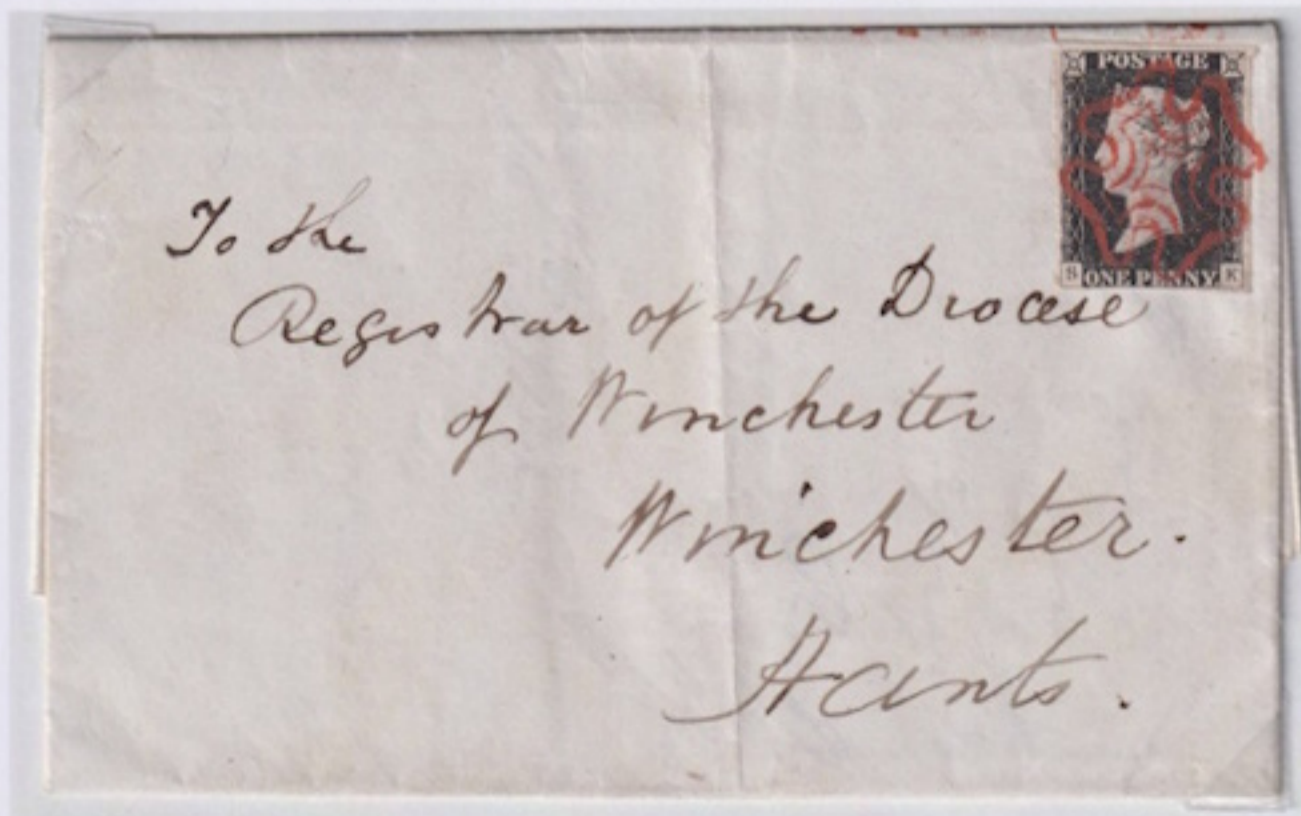
Partial Pre-cut Tab on 1d Black on May 1840 Cover



Detail

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

Partial Pre-cut Tab on 1d Black on July 1840 Cover



Detail

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

## Partially Pre-cut Stamps (1840 - 1853)

### 7. Timeline

The single stamps on this page were all detached from Partially Pre-cut strips, as can be seen from the traces of tabs and tears found in the corners.

The dates of use of these plates demonstrate that this method of separation was used over the full period of imperforate stamp usage in Britain, from 1840 through to the introduction of the first officially perforated stamps in 1854.

Partial Pre-cut Tab on 1d Red on 1841 Cover



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

1841



1d Red  
Pl 14 'SJ'

1845



1d Red  
Pl 60 'DG'

1849



1d Red  
Pl 86 'QE'

1850



1d Red  
Pl 95 'ME'

1853



1d Red  
Pl 156 'KC'



## Partially Pre-cut Stamps (1840 - 1853)

### 7. Timeline

These covers illustrate later use of Partial Pre-cuts in the years just before the official introduction of Perforated stamps in 1854.

Partial Pre-cut 1d Red Pair on Cover



Detail

1d Red Pair, Plate 94 'PC-PD'  
'23' Inland London PM, London to Brighton, Dated 29th October 1850  
(Note: the ink of this letter has bled through the thin paper)

Separated Partial Pre-cut 1d Red Pair (From A Late Imperforate Plate) on Cover



1853 1d Red Plate 164 'EE & EF'  
'10' Inland London PM, London to Birmingham, Dated 25 April 1853

## Partially Pre-cut Stamps (1840 - 1853)

### 8. Centre Partial Pre-cuts

The least common Partial Pre-cuts are those that were cut in the middle of the stamp, and did not extend completely to the top or bottom.

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

Centre Partial Pre-cut 1d Black Pairs from Strip on Cover



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



Detail: Locations of Centre Cuts and Tabs

## Partially Pre-cut Stamps (1840 - 1853)

### 8. Centre Partial Pre-cuts

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

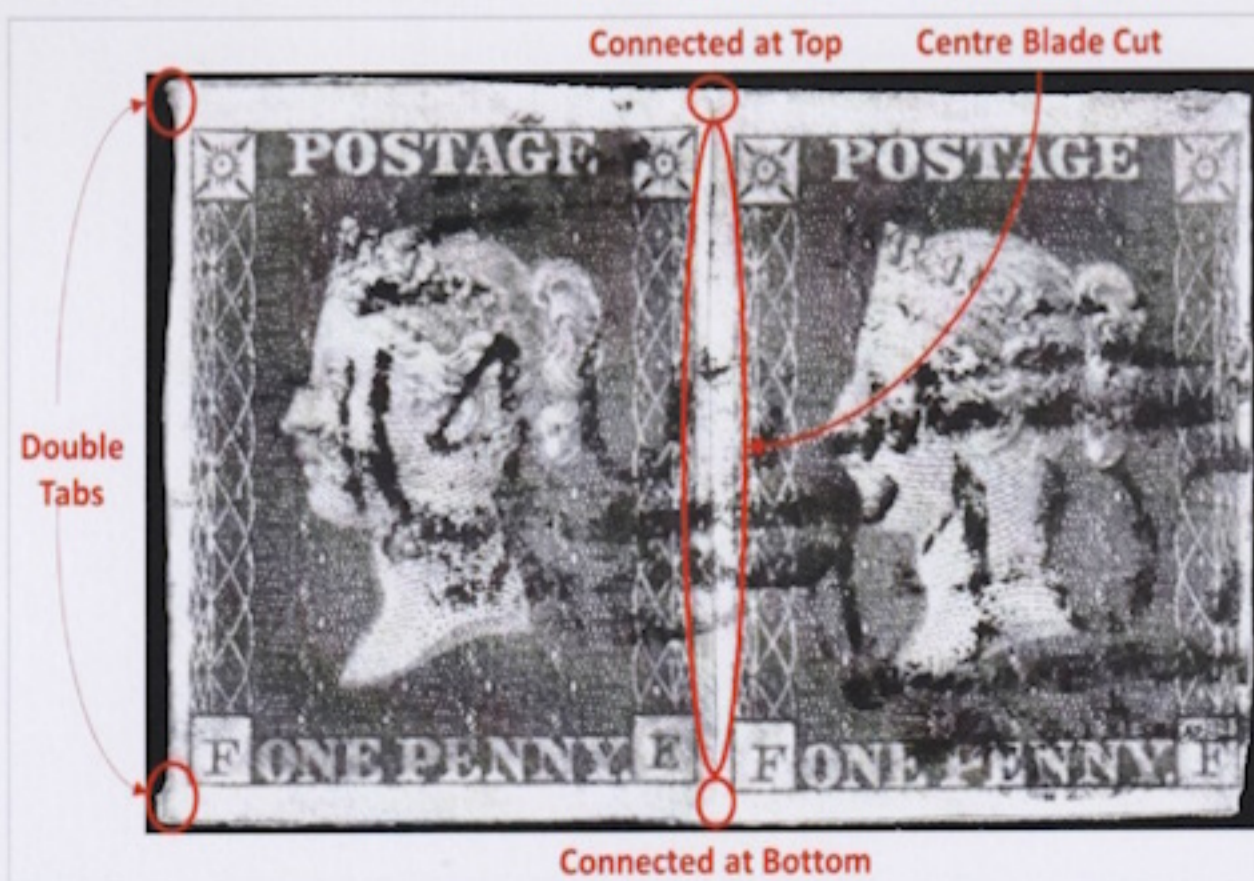
The resulting double tabs between each pair of stamps was as convenient to separate as a single tab, but had the advantage of being much less flimsy. Partial Pre-cut strips were notoriously flimsy; those that have survived off cover have often been reinforced on the back.

One might even argue that this technique resulted in a crude prototype for a perforated strip of stamps: the equivalent of 2 teeth and a hole.

Centre Partial Pre-cut 1d Red Pair on Cover



1d Red Pair, Plate 115, 'FE-FF'  
'407' Douglas Postmark, Ramsey to Douglas (Isle of Man), dated 12th May 1851



Detail: Locations of Centre Cut and Tabs

## Partially Pre-cut Stamps (1840 - 1853)

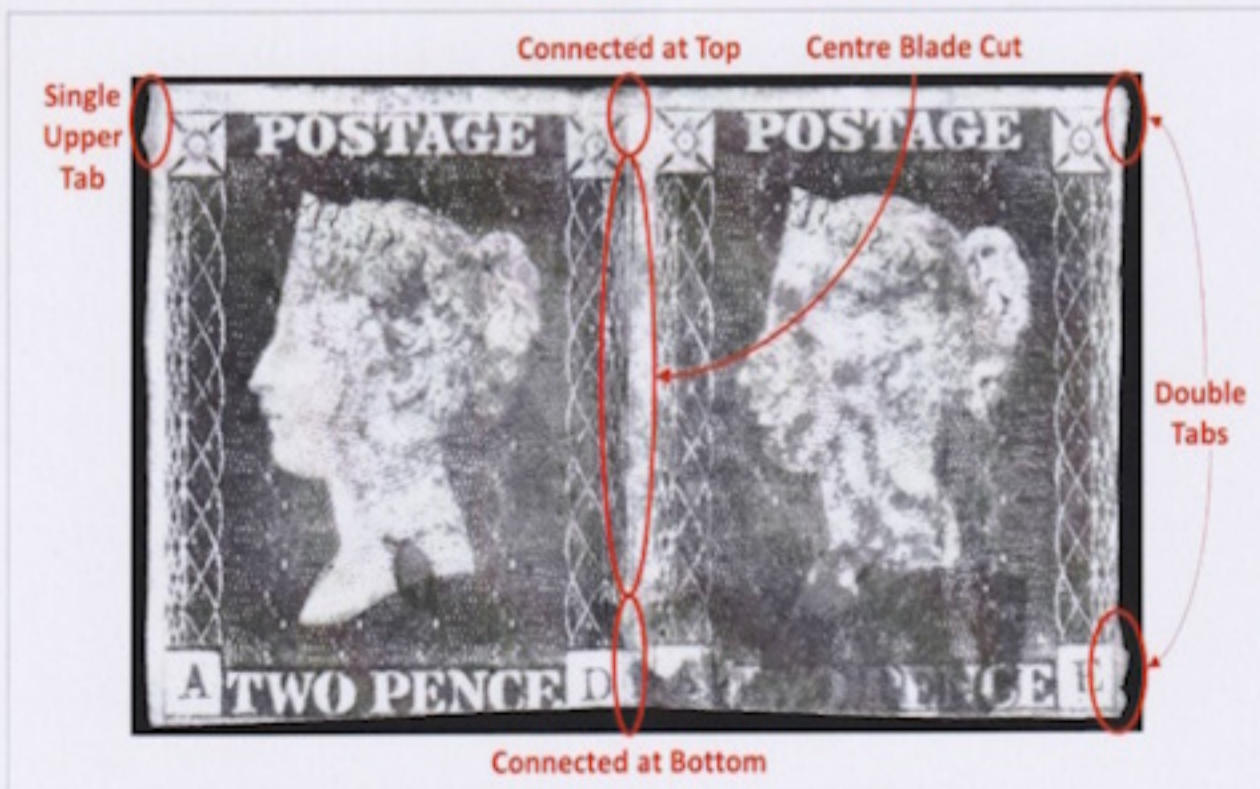
### 8. Centre Partial Pre-cuts

This relatively rare 2d Blue (plate 1) pair on cover shows use of the rare Centre Partial Pre-cut technique.

Centre Partial Pre-cut 2d Blue Pair on Cover



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



Detail: Locations of Centre Cut and Tabs

## Partially Pre-cut Stamps (1840 - 1853)

### 9. Conclusion

While Partially Pre-cut stamps were an ingenious solution to the challenge of imperforate stamp separation, the reality was that they were finicky to cut, and generally fragile to store.

Fully Pre-cut stamps could be cut from either blocks or strips, and were easier to store. As such they were likely to have been more commonly used. However, finding evidence for this is difficult as only stamps on cover or piece can be confirmed as being Full Pre-cuts.

The stamps on the cover below were Full Pre-cuts from the same row of the same sheet, as can be seen in the reconstructed image that shows the matching separation cut lines. Note that the stamps were applied in reverse order to the cover, that is, 'RG' followed by 'RF'.

1841 Fully Pre-cut 1d Black Pair on Cover



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



Reconstruction Of The Original Positions Of These 2 Stamps  
Illustrating How The Cut Separation Lines Match

Ultimately, the challenge of stamp separation was solved through the introduction of stamp perforation on a trial basis in 1850, then officially and universally from 1854 onwards