

The last of the HMSO perfins: rescued from the storeroom

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As a qualified accountant in government service, I wasn't much impressed by being moved sideways into the internal audit department, especially as it required me to take some time away from home for an intensive course for another professional qualification.

But there is a reward for virtue, and my reward came during the spring of 1983 when a colleague auditing the post-room found a stack of stamps in full sheets, even though the office used franking machines (known in the USA as meters).

I worked for Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO), one of the few UK government departments which still, in the 1980's, used perfined stamps in the small offices which had too little external mail to make franking machines worthwhile.

Eventually they decided to use franking machines everywhere and the stamps were returned to HQ and put away in a cupboard.

Unused postage stamps can be returned to the post office for a refund, but 15% of the value is surrendered as a commission, so HMSO started to use the perfined stamp stock on parcels.

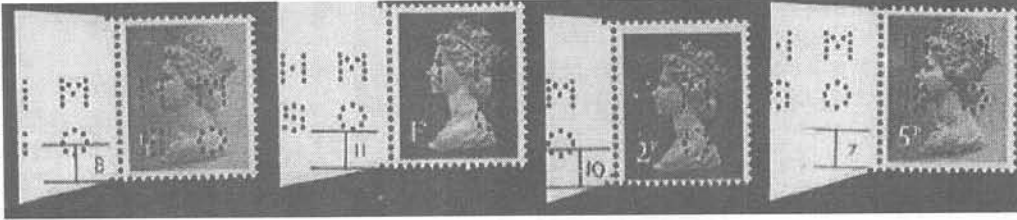
There was little real control over this, and there came a point when the numbers and low values meant that the only way to use them was by sending a parcel with 100+ stamps affixed.

My colleague, aware of my philatelic interest, mentioned this stock that was now going back to the post office, and I gained permission to purchase some.

I did attempt to enable others to share my good fortune. I offered the GB Perfin Society the chance to buy some of these from

the department. I wrote to the secretary and in return received a telephone call from his local police department!

I explained the situation to



the officer, and he was happy. What he reported to the GBPS I don't know.

The stamps were all Machin definitives, and the numbers rescued were as follows: 300 each of the 1p and 2p; 20 of the 5p; 10 each of the 6p, 7p, 8p, and 9p; and 2 each of the £2 and £5 (traffic light gutter pairs).

Most of the 1p & 2p stamps have since been used on philatelic mail—a bonus to the recipients. Some of the 2p values were used (by me) on commemorative covers when Queen Elizabeth visited her Stationery Office HQ in Norwich during the department's Bicentenary Year, shortly after her 60th birthday.

The perforating machine seems to have been set for rows of 12 stamps, as in pre-decimal sheets (20x12). On the low value decimal stamps, it also perforated the sheet margins. The alignment along the row of stamps appears to be constant, but the vertical separation between the hole in successive rows, varies—10mm on the ½p stamp (see my note at the end of the article), 14mm on the 5p, 11mm on the 9p.

The high value stamps have only one row of perfins, suggesting that the sheets were perforated one row at a time. The vertical clearance is at least 17mm.

It is probable that the machine was set for the Wilding

Castles, which had 10 rows of 4 horizontal stamps. The photogravure Machin high values consisted of 10 rows of 5+5 stamps in two panes separated by a gutter.

For the perfin machine these were folded in half vertically along the gutter, so not only is the gutter perfined, but the stamps on one side are perfined normally, and on the other side they are reversed, which makes an interesting pair. The folding and perforation was upright but otherwise random. Each stamp has at least one complete HMSO, and parts of another.

The £5 shows that the fold was to the right of the gutter, producing a wide M and O. On the £2 stamp, the job was done more cleanly!

I do not actively collect perfins—I just don't throw them into the kiloware box—but I am happy to respond to any enquiries about these perfins. You may reach me via e-mail at ian.billings@argonet.co.uk or by regular mail at 13 Robert Key Drive, Mattishall, Dereham, Norfolk NR20 3RW, United Kingdom.

THE ½P STAMP is not listed among those rescued from stock. I was even luckier in finding these! Some directors' secretaries held small stocks of stamps with the petty cash for 'out-of-hours' mail. I found one of these ladies using pairs of ½p stamps because there was no longer any a ½p value in the postage rates. I speedily exchanged her remaining stock of ½p for some 1p stamps. I think the total number of ½p stamps rescued was less than 30.