

In "The Handbook of British Perfins" which I wrote and published in 1967, I was able to disclose what, in the course of my research for the book, I had found to be the world's first perfin. It was, of course, already known with certainty that perfins originated in Great Britain in 1868 and that Joseph Sloper had had more than a casual involvement with their introduction. There was, however, no evidence to show what had been the very first die.

Hugh Vallancey, before producing his "British Stamps Perforated with Firms' Initials" in 1933, had the privilege of inspecting Sloper's records and confirmed having seen volumes containing lists of his early customers. The first customer to appear in those lists, Thomas J. Allman a bookseller of 463 Oxford Street, London, W. (using T.J.A/463), was, at one time, regarded to be the earliest customer but this was erroneous because the list had been arranged in alphabetical order. How many appeared in that list Vallancey did not record, the highest number he reported being 89, assigned to Frederick Huth & Co. It has been said that the original Sloper records were destroyed during the bombing of London in the second World War, although, as with the Loch Ness monster, there have been unconfirmed sightings of them from time to time.

Among the details given by Vallancey concerning the early Sloper customers in his booklet was that ".....Messrs. Copestake, Moore, Crampton & Co. (using initials "S.C.") are number 20 ....."

It is clear from correspondence held in Post Office Records that the first application for official permission to perforate postage stamps, with initials, was made, not by Joseph Sloper, but by the firm of drapers' warehousemen, Copestake, Moore, Crampton & Co. in October 1867. This firm asked that they be allowed, so as to avoid the theft of their stamps, (a) to underprint those for use on their own mail with their name and (b) to perforate on arrival at their offices those which they received as small remittances with the initials "S.C." which belonged to their senior partner, Mr. Sampson Copestake. With their letter to the Postmaster General dated 2nd January 1868, they enclosed, as specimens, several stamps so perforated. The remainder of the story as to how the matter was taken up by Joseph Sloper in the interests of his business is now well known.

The question as to what was the very first perfin having been resolved, I felt that the next move was to endeavour to trace an example, and to this end approached the collectors I knew to have significant holdings of early perfins. This, however, proved to be unproductive although there were examples of the initials S.C. on later Q.V. stamps, and on those of subsequent reigns, nothing came to light on line engraved or surface printed stamps of the 1860s.

In spite of a number of further enquiries, it seemed that an example of the world's first perfin was not to be found. In June 1969 however, I received information that the firm of H. M. & R. W. Willcocks were offering for sale the perfin collection of a late member of the then S.E.P.S, Mr. W. G. Stitt Dibden. By appointment I called at the firm's premises in Blackheath and spent a most informative evening with Mr. Willcocks whose original work was the basis of the section on protective overprints and underprints in the Stanley Gibbons Great Britain Specialised Stamp Catalogue, Volume I. Although the collection contained some interesting items, including some examples of Frank Braham perforations on stamp selvedge, I did not buy it. I was, however, able to acquire some useful advertising rings and for £3.15.0 a mint Penny Lilac with blue PEARS SOAP under-print now catalogued at "from £300"! Mr. Willcocks made a note of my collecting interest and said that he would contact me if he should later come across anything suitable.

Within a matter of two or three days I was to receive from him in the post an example of the stamp I had been seeking, a Penny Red perforated with the initials SC. I immediately contacted Mr. Willcocks on the telephone and having told him that it was a stamp of exceptional interest to me, he quoted a price which, although stretching my resources to the limit, I agreed to pay.

At first sight the stamp was unattractive, its face disfigured by a diagonal cross roughly applied with pen and dense black ink. When I looked at the reverse side however I saw that it was something out of the ordinary - a perfin and an underprint at the same time. Here are the details :

- The stamp (Fig. 1) - 1864 line engraved Penny Red. Plate 73. Bottom corner letters EG.
- The die (Fig. 2) - Letters S C (no stops - as previously reported). Pins 11, 8. Height 4 mm. Width between letter centres 11 mm. Letters set low on the stamp falling on either side of the Queen's neck and slightly to the left of centre. Pins fine and clean cut, typical of the earliest Sloper die:-..
- The underprint - (Fig. 3) COPESTAKE,/MOORE,/CRAMPTON & Co/London. Printed in red, over the gum. Large ampersand. No punctuation after CRAMPTON or Co Overall height of underprint 15 mm.

All these details were in accord with known information. Its existence was mentioned by Vallancey and confirmed by correspondence in Post Office Records. The plate number was one earlier than the lowest on which perfins had been recorded and the pins were neat and

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precise, so clearly Sloper's early work. The underprint was the first example of the one which was to become prolifically used in slightly amended form by Copestakes both under and over the gum.

Mr. Willcocks could not recall how the stamp came into his stock, but seemed to recollect that Copestakes had gone out of business some months before and certain material from their archives had found their way onto the market.

I had expected that other examples of the "several" which had clearly existed might subsequently come to light, but almost twenty years have passed and nothing has materialised. The description I have given will provide some indication of what to be looking out for and if any collector recognises a similar item I would be pleased to hear about it.

It seems unlikely that the S C perfin of Copestakes ever came into commercial use. As is well known, they preferred the use of the underprint and it was not until later in the Victorian period that this practice was superseded by the use of perfins.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 1.



Fig. 3.

Editor: John Nelson regrets the poor quality of the photocopies but considering the 'tenderness' of the material they are still of great interest.

