

BOARD OF TRADE FORGERIES - A POSSIBLE MISCARRIAGE OF JUSTICE?

By John Nelson

For a number of years now I have viewed with some scepticism much of what has been written on the subject of Board of Trade perfin fakes or forgeries. More recently, principally in the light of information on multi-headed perfin presses which has appeared in the New Illustrated Catalogue and elsewhere, I have found it difficult to avoid the conclusion that results of research carried out in the past may be unreliable to the extent that most or perhaps all Board of Trade perfins could in fact be genuine.

Captain H.T. Jackson, a distinguished philatelist and F.R.P.S.L., in an article published in 'Stamp Collecting' on 7th and 14th December 1962 (which had previously been circulated with the Perfin Study Group's bulletin) wrote that it was he who before 1950 first discovered and classified the Board of Trade forgeries. He had observed, on inspecting a quantity of Crown/B.T perfins, that the position of the holes on certain of the dies did not precisely correspond with those on others. Having decided that two of the dies, which he defined as Types I and II, were genuine, probably from the evidence of unquestionably authentic covers, he pronounced all other dies to be the work of forgers.

Additional confirmation that a Crown/B.T perfin was a forgery was, in his judgement, provided if the stamp was any other than one of those issued by the G.P.O. between November 1880 (or thereabouts) and 14th May 1904 or was of a definitive value not required by the Board of Trade. A postmark bearing the name of any place other than London was also clear evidence of a forgery.

I do not in any way question the integrity of Captain Jackson but I believe it is possible that he may not have had a sufficient practical knowledge of the process of stamp perforation to enable him properly to interpret the evidence available to him. Statements in his article to the effect that a forger had amended the position of some of the holes on one of his dies and on another that "*the holes may have been punched one at a time*" lend support to this possibility.

His findings indicated that the Board of Trade had acquired a perforating press of their own and that, as to the number of dies fitted to it, "...there must have been at least 16 (four rows of four). I do not think there were more than 60 dies (10 rows of 6) ..." The sixteen die idea is feasible but a sixty die press involving a total of 5700 pins is a bit hard to swallow.

The fundamental point Captain Jackson may not have appreciated is that each of the dies on a multi-headed press would have had to have been individually drilled and pinned and only with an absolute optimum of engineering precision would a few of

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such dies have appeared identical. Getting ninety-five holes in exactly the same place on all the assumed sixteen dies is however tantamount to a practical impossibility. The work may even have been done by several workmen at different benches in order to meet the requirement for a press within a reasonable time thereby producing even more varying results. The situation is further compounded by a suggestion that what is defined as Type JJ was produced on a single die press. Could there perhaps have been a number of these one-die presses?

A press containing say 16 dies with a total of 1140 pins, in use for some 25 years, would of necessity have required regular attention. Broken pins would frequently have been renewed, and not necessarily in exactly the same position if the matrix was badly worn or damaged. Where a die or row of dies was beyond reasonable repair it would have been replaced by another which had been newly constructed. In consequence the possibilities for variations in the dies are unlimited.

The above is, I suggest, a reasonable explanation as to how so many variations in the Crown/B.T die might have arisen. By comparison the involvement of forgers is, in my view, a trifle far fetched. Captain Jackson claimed to have identified ten fake dies and this number was increased to sixteen by T.A. Edwards and B.C. Lucas in the publication G.B. Official Perfins (1984).

We are asked to believe that demand from collectors of Board of Trade perfins was so great that from time to time no less than sixteen forgers equipped themselves with Crown/B.T perfin dies and perforating presses. I say there were sixteen, as I can see no rational point in their bothering to make more than one each. They then proceeded to flood the market with bogus Crown/B.T perfins to the extent that according to Edwards and Lucas it is likely that there are more fakes than genuine examples.

What possible profit would there have been to be made by the forgers from all this? Precious little for any of them I would say after the time consuming, meticulous construction of a die with 95 pins as near as possible to a perceived original and the cost of the stamps, many of them mint, which they proceeded to render valueless so far as the vast majority of stamp collectors were concerned.

Is there any proof that demand for Board of Trade perfins ever existed to such a degree that forging them would have been worthwhile? It is said that some of the fakes can be dated around the early 1950s which was before perfin collecting became anything like as popular as it is today. As official stamps, Stanley Gibbons have always declined to list them but they do make a special point of warning about the ten forgeries on page 113 of their Great Britain Specialised Catalogue Volume 2! Collectors of officials who followed French catalogues might have wanted them but surely there would have been more than enough genuine Board of Trade perfins to go round.

Certain other factors were relied on by Captain Jackson in reaching his conclusions. To begin with, he said in effect that the Board of Trade could, when they first brought their press into operation, have used it to perforate only stamps then currently on sale at the Post Office. This is incorrect. They could have perforated any postally valid stamps in their possession at that time and this may well have included stocks of earlier issues. The date in question is said to have been 27th January 1881 (Edwards & Lucas) but Captain Jackson quotes an earlier author as having said that the first Board of Trade official stamps were prepared before November 1880 which is described as being "some few months before issue".

Next he claimed that only stamps bearing London postmarks can be genuine because the Board of Trade had no branch offices. This is untrue. Evidence contained in late Victorian directories shows clearly that they had offices in various British provincial centres and I can personally vouch for Bristol, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool and Manchester. There must have been others especially at seaports such as Cardiff, Newcastle and Southampton.

It is also claimed that all Board of Trade letters to addresses in the British Isles "would be franked" and that if a reply was required an addressed envelope with an embossed 1d stamp was enclosed. I have no evidence to refute this but suggest that there must have been countless occasions over the twenty-five years in question when embossed return envelopes were not readily available and envelopes bearing perforated stamps were used. This may have been contrary to normal procedure but it certainly was not illegal as has been alleged.

Lastly there is the matter of Crown/B.T perfins on stamps issued by the Post Office after 14th May 1904, the date on which the use of the perfins is said to have officially ceased. What became of the multi-headed press and the single die press (or several of them) immediately after they had been de-commissioned? Were they totally destroyed so that they could never again be used to perforate a single stamp? More likely they ended up on a shelf for a while to be lifted down from time to time and tried out by curious Civil Servants on whatever stamps then happened to be available.

I cannot deny that my arguments contain a fair measure of conjecture but I hope it will be seen as conjecture tinged with strong elements of common sense and realism. It is my wish and intention that this article should stimulate discussion in the nature of a retrial of the case. If, as I am inclined to suspect, thousands of Crown/B.T perfins have been wrongly condemned as fakes and forgeries then it is high time that their innocence was established and proclaimed.