



# News from the American Philatelic Center *Home of the* American Philatelic Society and American Philatelic Research Library

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## A Singular Donation — More Than 32,000 Penny Red Stamps

On Thursday, December 20, 2007, the American Philatelic Society received a gift of 32,000 face-different copies of Great Britain's 1864 Penny Red stamps from the reign of Queen Victoria, housed in two large, hand-made, leather-covered folio albums.



Mercer Bristow, Director of the American Philatelic Expertizing Service and curator of the APS Reference Collection, displays a complete reconstruction of a 240-stamp plate used to print Great Britain's Penny Red stamps of 1864 in one of two hand-made albums housing a collection of this stamp — the last of the early line-engraved definitive stamps of Queen Victoria's reign.

albums.

The gift included 111 complete reconstructions of the original 12- by 20-subject plates that were used to print the 240-stamp sheets, as well as 23 additional plate reconstructions that are largely complete.

The estimated value of this remarkable single-stamp collection — the generous gift of Dr. Edward D. Martin of Arlington, Virginia — is the equivalent of more than \$400,000 U.S., based on the current *Stanley Gibbons Stamp Catalogue*, published in the United Kingdom.

How can a collection contain more than 32,000 copies of the same stamp? And how can such a collection be so valuable?

Printed in rose red, brick red, or lake red, line-engraved 1-penny stamps used in Great Britain between 1864 and 1879 can be collected according to which of 240 positions they came from in each of the 152 plates that were used to print them — a theoretical total of 36,480



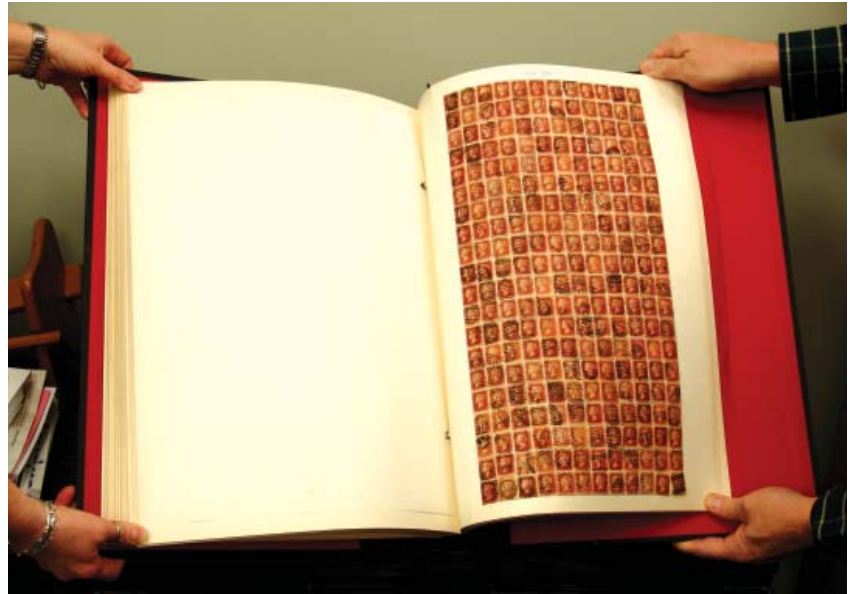
Great Britain's Penny Red stamps of 1864-1879 can be collected according to plate number and position. The letters printed in the lower corners of the stamp (and in reverse order in the top corners) give the position — "T" (the 20th row) and "J" (the 10th column) in the 240-stamp sheet. The plate number — "78" — is incorporated into the scrollwork along the sides of the stamps (rotated and enlarged slightly in the panel below).



possible face-different varieties, not including shades and imperforate errors.

In the example shown above, the letters printed in the lower corners of the stamp (and in reverse order in the top corners) give the position — “T” (the 20th row) and “J” (the 10th column) — in the 240-stamp sheet. The plate number — “78” in the example illustrated — is incorporated sideways centered into the looping scrollwork along the sides of the stamps.

Every 1864 Penny Red that was printed is a plate number single. That’s why the Scott *Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue*, which lists the stamp as Great Britain Scott 33 in Volume 3, takes the unusual step of listing mint and used values for each plate number, from Plate No. 71 to Plate No. 225. Used values vary from the Scott minimum of \$2.25 for this 144-year-old stamp up to \$80 for stamps from Plate No. 219, with two important exceptions.



The last plate, Plate No. 225, was used to print only about 12,500 sheets, and is thus comparatively rare, with single stamps cataloguing \$750 in used condition. (At the other extreme is Plate No. 140, from which 982,500 sheets, or 235 million stamps, were printed in 1870.) Penny Reds from Plate 77 are probably the rarest regular issue British stamps ever produced, with only 7 or 8 examples known. The plate was rejected, and how examples ever reached the public is unclear. Scott lists this stamp at \$150,000 mint and \$130,000 used, and the values listed in the Stanley Gibbons catalogue that is most widely used in the United Kingdom are higher still. (Stamps from Plates 75, 126, 128 were never issued.)

Why did Great Britain go to all the trouble of ensuring that every stamp could be identified by plate and position? Fear of fraud motivated these security measures. From the time it released the world’s first nationally issued adhesive postage stamp in 1840, the British Post Office had greatly feared that crooks would devise schemes to counterfeit, clean, or reuse postage stamps, or use other nefarious means to defraud them of postal income. The engine-turned patterns of line engraving were meant to deter would-be forgers. The check letters in the bottom corners of the stamps, reversed in the top corners, were meant to prevent chiselers from cunningly trimming the upper and lower portions of two partially canceled stamps and combining the parts, Frankenstein-style, to cheat the crown of its rightful penny.

Similarly, there is also a practical explanation for the 240-stamp sheets of this issue. Beginning with the 1840 Penny Black, British penny stamps were printed in sheets of 240 (printed 20 down by 12 across), so that one sheet cost one pound and one 12-stamp row cost one shilling (12 pence was one shilling and there were 20 shillings, or 240 pence, to the British pound). Ten months after the 1840 Penny Black was issued, the color of penny stamps was changed to red brown in order to make cancellation of the stamps easier to see (and make the fraudulent reuse of lightly canceled stamps more difficult to accomplish).

If you are considering making a donation of philatelic material to the American Philatelic Society or American Philatelic Research Library, contact Ken Martin at 814-933-3817 or [kpmartin@stamps.org](mailto:kpmartin@stamps.org)