You Need to Get Your Head Examined: The Unchanging Portrait of Queen Victoria on Nineteenth-Century British Postage Stamps

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2010 Winston M. Blount Postal History Symposium
“Stamps and the Mail: Imagery, Icons, & Identity”

Queen Victoria, the monarch who greatly expanded the British Empire, became the face of the Penny Black, giving birth to a postal Empire. When Victoria was born on May 24, 1819, postage stamps did not exist. Middle- and working-class English families dreaded the postman’s knock. The post was a luxury: the burden of payment fell to the receiver, and a letter could cost a working-class Britain more than a day’s wage. In 1837, the year Victoria took the throne, postal reformer Rowland Hill, inventor of the postage stamp, published an influential pamphlet advocating reorganization of the postal service entitled Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicability. One of the first things Victoria did as Queen of England was to appoint a Select Committee on Postage charged to look into the condition of the post with a view towards postal rate reduction. Little did she realize that her portrait would end up on a postage stamp, humorously dubbed a “Queen’s Head” (Figure 1).

On August 17, 1839, Queen Victoria gave royal assent to the Postage Duties Bill. In 1840, she ushered in Uniform Penny Postage and the postage stamp, prepaid by the sender. Beginning January 10, 1840, anyone could post a prepaid letter weighing up to \( \frac{1}{2} \) ounce anywhere in the UK for only a penny. Hill describes his idea for a stamp as “a bit of paper just large enough to bear the stamp, and covered at the back with a glutinous wash.”

The postage stamp became official on May 6, 1840. Hill believed the public would prefer prepaid stationery and conceived of the postage stamp as an “afterthought,” but the stamp was an instant success. Victorians stood in lines to buy an innovation equal to today’s iPads and iPhones. Perkins, Bacon & Petch, a government
printer, worked day and night to keep up with the demand. In 1860, Queen Victoria knighted the man who transformed the expensive, unwieldy UK postal service and invented the postage stamp. Other nations quickly modeled this system of prepayment: in 1843, Brazil and two Swiss Cantons, Geneva and Zurich, issued stamps; the United States followed in 1847.\textsuperscript{iv}

Stamps function on many levels. These small physical objects made up of paper, ink, and glue were created to signify prepayment and speedily move the mail. As Stuart Rose reminds us in \textit{Royal Mail Stamps: A Survey of British Stamp Design}, the stamp foremost functions operationally by indicating country of origin and price of postage in a design that supports its “indexical” function. The famous Penny Black uses the Queen’s head to indicate nation; “postage” and “one penny” respectively point to the stamp’s function and value. However, stamps also function representationally: a stamp represents a country of origin to its citizens and the world and sends a political, historical, or cultural message about the country of origin across social classes and national boundaries since stamps, unlike coins, are for foreign and domestic use.

David Scott applies three classes of signs defined by Charles Sanders Peirce—indices, icons, and symbols—to elucidate the semiotic function of stamps in his pioneering \textit{European Stamp Design: A Semiotic Approach to Designing Messages} (1995): “an icon is a pictorial sign; an index, a pointer sign; a symbol, a conventional sign. Whereas the stamp functions primarily as an \textit{indexical} sign (pointing to the country of origin), as an object it encompasses \textit{iconic} and \textit{symbolic} elements (pictures, letters and numbers).”\textsuperscript{v} Scott acknowledges the fluidity of indices, icons, and symbols, which, of relevance to the Penny Black, interact to convey a chosen message: “The great advantage of using the monarch’s head as a national symbol is that it can be used both as an icon and as an index, as both a definitive and a commemorative image.”\textsuperscript{vi} “To this day England has never thought it necessary to identify her stamps with more than her sovereign’s portrait,” notes Donald M. Reid in “The Symbolism of Postage Stamps: A Source for the Historian.”\textsuperscript{vii} A legacy from primacy of issue, the sovereign, depicted as the principal stamp image or a discrete, smaller figure, foremost identifies a stamp as British. But the monarch’s head is also a pictorial sign or icon, as Keith Jeffery emphasizes in “Crown, Communication and the Colonial Post: Stamps, the Monarchy and the British Empire”: “From the start there was a semiotic ambiguity, with the iconic image of the monarch also conveying the practical, indexical information that the stamp was British.”\textsuperscript{viii} To compound this “semiotic ambiguity,” the sovereign’s head is also a symbol, which stamps commemorating the stamp’s own invention illustrate.\textsuperscript{ix} For example, the 1940 design that marks the centenary of the postage stamp features the head of Victoria, who ushered stamps in, alongside the head of George VI, the reigning monarch.\textsuperscript{x}

As Jack Child recognizes in \textit{Miniature Messages}, “The humble postage stamp, introduced in England in 1840, has evolved over the years to the point where an initially secondary function of the stamp deserves serious study, that is, the use of the postage stamps as advertisement or propaganda (domestic or international), with themes as far ranging as nationalism, history, politics, economics, art, culture, and so on.”\textsuperscript{xi} Child
specializes in the semiotics and politics of Latin American stamps, but his insight about “miniature messages” as domestic and international “advertisement or propaganda” applies to the “humble postage stamp, introduced in England in 1840.” In “Politics, Psychology and the Postage Stamp,” Harlan J. Strauss, too, introduces stamps as propaganda: these official government documents not only advertise but subliminally implant messages into the minds of users, giving an official “stamp” to aspects of the country of origin, including great leaders and causes, national symbols, and more. Strauss calls upon stimulus-response theory from psychology to explore how “postage stamps as propaganda affect a literate population”: repeated exposure to the words and images on a postage stamp can inform, influence, and move a literate consumer to think and act.

What does the Penny Black—as index, icon, and symbol—point to and represent? What messages did the elegant neoclassical, design—virtually unchanged from its adoption until Victoria’s death in 1901—instill in the minds of Victoria’s subjects? Since designs on stamps and coins are government-controlled and sanctioned, why did stamps maintain an unchanging representation of young Victoria while the coinage changed likenesses, ageing her markedly? More curiously, why do portraits of an older Queen Victoria appear on stamps from, for example, the Dominion of Canada, while the young bust reigned on all UK stamps and some colonial stamps as the official face of nineteenth-century England? Did repeated exposure to the Penny Black and the unchanging image of a young monarch play a contributing role in solidifying the myth of the British Empire and Queen Victoria?

Putting the Queen’s Head on a Stamp

The famous Penny Black established a still dominant pattern of stamp design. How did the Queen’s head come to grace the first ever postage stamp? The answer is a bit complicated.

In Hill’s day, the Department of Treasury, in conjunction with the Board of Stamps, controlled the design of stamps and prepaid stationery. Although not a Post Office Employee, Rowland Hill in 1839 received an appointment to the Department of Treasury to oversee production of the new stationery and stamps. The design emerged from a Treasury-sponsored competition, which invited “all artists, men of science and the public in general” as well as “people in any part of the civilized world” to submit designs for postage stamps and prepaid stationery (which took the form of letter sheets and envelopes). The Treasury received over 2,600 colored and black-and-white designs (49 of which were for stamps) by foreign and British artists; designs ranged from practical to ornamental, simple to complex, embossed to plain, and beautiful to crude. The Treasury evaluated the designs according to the following criteria: convenience to the public, security from possible forgery, ease of checking the design, and expense of production and circulation. Of the four prizes the Treasury awarded, Hill did not find any single entry suitable for stationery or stamps; nonetheless, he made use of several ideas, including William Wyon’s and Benjamin Cheverton’s concept of putting the sovereign’s head on the stamp. Cheverton (one of the prizewinners) offered a persuasive argument for using a portrait: it would be difficult to forge. Hill, presumably also influenced by
the time-honored practice of putting a sovereign on coins, commissioned Henry Corbould, a well-known illustrator and miniaturist, to make a drawing of Queen Victoria’s profile after William Wyon’s 1837 City Medal as the design on the first ever postage stamp. xviii

Wyon, the premier engraver and medalist of his age, created the City Medal to commemorate Queen Victoria’s first visit to London in 1837. He knew Victoria’s face intimately; he began drawing the princess at age thirteen. The neoclassical design gracing the Penny Black is based on Wyon’s impressions of the young princess from a sitting when she was fifteen years old. Neoclassicism, a 1765 art movement, reacted to the heaviness of baroque and rococo styles and aimed to return art to the perceived purity of the classical arts of Greece and Rome. Wyon wanted his portraits of Victoria to be balanced, uncluttered, pure, even beautiful, so it is not surprising that the Queen’s medalist found favor with the Queen. He produced other images of Victoria as she grew into womanhood and married glory, but the image of a youthful Victoria endures as the face of the Penny Black, which, in turn, became the model for all Victorian postage stamps and many colonial stamps.

The Reception of a Queen’s Head

Stamps were an immediate sensation. In 1842, Punch, the Victorian Londoner’s New Yorker, mocked the fad of stamp collecting. A “‘new mania,’” Punch notes, has “‘bitten the industriously idle ladies of England . . . ; in fact, they betray more anxiety to treasure up Queen’s heads than Harry the Eighth did to get rid of them.’”xix One such “industriously idle” Victorian woman, who collected “Queen’s Heads” as fervently as Henry VIII decapitated queens, took out an advertisement in the Times in October, 1842 asking people to “‘assist her in her whimsical project’” of papering her boudoir with cancelled stamps. When she placed the notice, she had already received from friends 16,000 “Queen’s Heads” (slang for stamps), but she needed more to complete her decor.xx

Stamps collecting quickly surpassed rock and coin collecting in popularity. In Her Majesty’s Mails (1864), William Lewins describes the furor of timbromanie in Birchin Lane in 1862, which cut across social classes and bridged the gender divide: “crowds nightly congregated, to the exceeding annoyance and wonder of the uninitiated—where ladies and gentlemen of all ages and all ranks, from Cabinet-ministers to crossing-sweepers, were busy, with album or portfolio in hand, buying, selling, or exchanging.”xxi But not all Victorians proudly put the “Queen's Head” on their letters. To quote one Victorian schoolboy, licking a stamp provided the “‘satisfaction of kissing or rather slobbering over Her Majesty's Back.’”xxii An amusing rhyme entitled "Lines on the Post Office Medallion" appearing June 6, 1840 in a weekly scandal sheet called The Town suggests the kiss landed lower on the Queen's "behind":

You must kiss our fair Queen, or her pictures, that's clear
Or the gummy medallion will never adhere;
You will not kiss her hand, you will readily find
But actually kiss little Vickey's behind.\textsuperscript{xxiii}

Jokes about the first postage stamp targeted other body parts, such as the Queen’s mouth; a 91-year-old man posted a letter to a lady friend on May 5, 1840 that reads, "'I send you a Queen’s head, the day before it is in Penny circulation . . . what a pity they should make Victoria “gummy” like an old woman without teeth—as I am."\textsuperscript{xxiv}

A Heady Message in a Very Small Space

The Penny Post was an egalitarian measure to bring an affordable post to all social classes. With it, the Queen gave up her privilege of franking—postmarks granting the Queen and Members of Parliament free carriage of mail. Victoria’s exposure on the stamp more than compensated for the loss of her franking privilege. The “Queen’s Head,” which Victorians saw near daily for over sixty years, extended the queen’s agency, bringing her royal authority regularly into nearly every home in her kingdom. Since photography was not widely in use, for most of Victoria’s subjects, stamps and coins were the only places where her British and Commonwealth subjects could catch a glimpse of their queen. “At no point in the Victorian age were British users of stamps to see anything else but the head of Victoria,” as Asa Briggs notes; “There was, after all, only one side to the stamp, unlike the coin.”\textsuperscript{xxv} To push Briggs’s point further, since Britain never changed the philatelic portrait of Victoria, who never ages on the stamp, at no point were Victorian users of stamps to see anything but the young head of their Queen. The unwavering stamp design sent a message from the government to the general public that defined Victoria and her nation.

Although government-sanctioned coinage reflects Victoria’s life stages over her 64-year reign (1837-1901), stamp design does not.\textsuperscript{xxvi} Every time anyone received or posted a letter, the heady message gained force. Did Britain retain the youthful “Queen’s Head” because of the Queen’s vanity (e.g. Victoria had an enormous appetite and worried constantly about her weight)? Did the continuity of the design reflect a conservative stamp practice dominant throughout Victoria’s and Edward VII’s reigns?

Not all supported the administration’s decision to retain the Wyon image. The \textit{Philatelic Record} forcefully questioned in 1879 why could not “‘the mythic effigy’ going back to the Wyon medal be cast into oblivion? Surely the likeness of our Queen as she is—of the sovereign who has earned our love and esteem by over forty years of beneficent rule, of the lady whose joys and sorrows as wife, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, have been shared in by her faithful subjects—should have greater attractions for us than that of the untried girl but lately called to the throne.”\textsuperscript{xxvii} Was the decision to maintain the image on the stamp (but not the coinage) thus primarily motivated by the message that Britain wished to convey not “for us” (its citizens) but to the world? Stamps, unlike coins, are for international use. Did the administration recognize that by maintaining an unwavering design, the philatelic portrait became an international symbol of Victoria’s strength, confidence, and longevity, qualities located at a higher level of abstraction and influence than is a portrait on a postage stamp?\textsuperscript{xxviii}
Figure 2. Penny Black, Two Pence Blue, Penny Red, and Penny Lilac stamps
(from the collection of Catherine J. Golden)

Granted, stamps changed color during Victoria’s reign (Figure 2). The Penny Red replaced the Penny Black in February of 1841; the red Maltese cross cancellation was not readily visible on the Penny Black, and the Post Office feared people would try to reuse stamps. The Penny Red with a black Maltese cross cancel remained in use from 1841-79. The Two Pence Blue also remained in circulation for 39 years. Following a provisional 1880-1881 issue when surface printing replaced line engraving, the Penny Lilac came into circulation from 1881-1901 and became the most issued Victorian stamp. The young head in all colors of the rainbow appears on stamps in denominations as small as ½ d (penny) and as large as 5 pounds. Small variations occurred in printing techniques, colors, corner lettering, and frames. However, the sovereign’s portrait, through repeated exposure, became an icon of national identity and, for some Victorians, a symbol of national pride: as Frederick Philibrick and W. A. Westoby claimed in 1889, “‘stamps of no other country in the world save Great Britain will be able to show an unbroken line of representations of its sovereign during fifty years from their first issue.’”xxxix

The Queen Who Never Ages

If we think of a design on a postage stamp as a record of history and a form of propaganda, then the postage stamp, domestically and internationally, bore the same face of England from 1840 until the dawning of the twentieth century. Queen Victoria’s inauguration symbolized a movement away from the corruption, injustice, and disease long associated with the England of Victoria’s predecessors, George IV and William IV, often referred to as her elderly "wicked uncles." However, Queen Victoria and her nation underwent major changes in life and politics during her long reign as the coinage highlights but the stamp hides: the young, newly crowned monarch (preserved on the stamp) became a blushing bride (she married her beloved Prince Albert on February 11, 1840); a devoted wife and mother; a proponent of family values; a grieving widow; Prince Albert died of typhoid fever, December 14, 1861); a doting grandmother; an old woman; a demanding and increasingly reclusive, unpopular monarch.

In 1840, when Victoria debuted on the stamp, England was busy building her empire. Britain was expanding in India, fighting in China and Afghanistan, founding Wellington (New Zealand), and penetrating Africa. Was the government’s decision to
retain the young monarch on the stamp thus a calculated move to maintain the promise that accompanied Victoria’s coronation at a time when Britain was the undisputed leader of the Industrial Revolution? Was it a strategic decision to advertise to her nation and the world an image of stability and power fueling Victoria’s continually expanding empire?

We now recognize Victorian England as an age of contradictions. Major innovations in science, industry, education, and technology stand alongside dreadful mistakes, wars, and rebellions, including the first and second Opium Wars, the Crimean War, and the Anglo-Boer War. The government righted many social abuses—the Ten Hours Bill of 1847 limited women’s and children’s workdays to ten hours; the 1870 Forster Act established government responsibility for education; the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 granted married women the right to hold property. Concomitantly, British colonialism—especially incursions into India and Africa—planted seeds for political and social problems that plagued Britain well into the twentieth century. To recall stimulus-response theory, all the while the Victorians faced disease, poverty, war, colonial uprisings, or discontent in their enormous imperial holdings, the British government insured that Victoria’s domestic subjects across the social classes saw and used postage stamps with an unwavering design that came to symbolize, among other things, grace, authority, and even invincibility. The real Queen Victoria changed over time and aged ungracefully. In the fashion of Dorian Gray’s own infamous portrait, the Queen’s silhouette on the postage stamp intentionally remained fresh and youthful and maintained a public, international face of the queen unblemished by pain, struggle, trouble, or time.

The Queen’s Face Transcends England: Colonial Postage

Queen-Empress Victoria became the face on postage stamps of nearly every British imperial possession. In regard to format, iconic context, and textual message, the design on the Penny Black conclusively set the standard for colonial postage (and stamps to this day). Since Victoria’s colonial subjects intensively used these stamps for their daily correspondence, colonial stamps illustrate what Strauss describes as a “subliminal effect that makes the postage stamp one of the more ubiquitous forms of political propaganda.” Colonial postage stamps bearing Victoria’s face advertise a vast imperial network that extended to India, Africa, New Zealand, Australia, the West Indies, and Asia.
If we view Victorian colonial stamps as propaganda, we might assume that the unquestionable reproductions of British iconography on colonial stamps instilled in users a sense of loyalty to the Crown or impressed upon them Britain’s unshakeable leadership, perhaps subliminally influencing their thoughts and actions. Some colonial stamps seem to do just that. The Queen’s portrait on an 1896 postage stamp of Hong Kong (Figure 3)—which became a “Crown Colony” in 1842 as an outcome of Britain’s first Opium War with China—closely resembles the young portrait on the Penny Black. Framing the young head are English words (“Hong Kong” and the postage price) and Chinese characters, showing a blending of cultures. This stamp offers a “miniature message” about colonial loyalty proclaimed to Victoria’s Hong Kong subjects and the world.

Some colonial stamps advertise the mother country’s preeminence on a vast imperial stage. Postage stamps of Uganda, a British protectorate from 1894-1962, show a melding of imperial and colonial imagery that stereotypes Africa as “other” (Figure 4). Stereotypical symbols of this East African nation join with the “civilized” mother country on an 1898 stamp, acknowledging Britain’s power and sovereignty: two regal lions and spears flank a shield bearing the portrait of an older Queen Victoria; in a variation of this
design, elephants take the place of the lions and spears. In both versions, lush foliage magnifies the tropical climate of this East African “Crown colony.” The lion has fierce and regal connotations, but the spear, jungle, and elephant emphasize the wildness of the “Uganda Protectorate” while the portrait of Victoria elevates the stabilizing influence of Britain, the “civilized” mother country. The change in postage stamps that occurred in the 1960s as soon as European colonies in Africa gained their independence reinforces how the portraits of Victoria and successive British royals became repugnant imperial icons: new icons on stamps, such as African leaders or plant and animal life, “stamped” out the old order and celebrated independence.

Some colonial stamps glorify the mother country and Britain’s imperial network by depicting her holdings rather than her visage. An 1898 Canadian Christmas stamp celebrating the inauguration of Imperial Penny Postage (Figure 5) demonstrates how some stamps openly proclaimed British imperialism and all that it connoted. Hill’s Penny Post plan concentrated on the “formal” British Empire; the penny rate took 58 years to go into effect for her colonial possessions. This stamp, designed by Sir William Mulock (a Canadian politician and cabinet member), shows a world map with British colonial holdings colored in bright red. The stamp text emphasizes Britain’s size and stature; “We hold a vaster empire than has been” comes from an ode entitled “A Song of Empire” that Welsh poet Lewis Morris composed in 1887 to mark Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee. From this example, Reid observes, “Whether one views modern history through the lenses of the White Man’s Burden, modernization theory, or the model of a capitalist-dominated world market, the connection between the spread of the ‘postage-stamp revolution’ and English imperialism is clear.”

Mulock does put Canada at the center of the British Empire. Nonetheless, how symbolically different is this 1898 Canadian stamp from the much-ridiculed, unambiguously imperial 1840 stationery that William Mulready designed of Britannia sending winged messengers on a glorious postal outreach to all four corners of the globe to celebrate Uniform Penny Postage?
The history of Canadian stamp design bears revisiting. In 1851, the Colony of Canada printed stamps of a beaver surmounted with a royal VR cipher (3d), Prince Albert (6d), and a young Victoria (12d). When the Dominion of Canada came into existence in 1867, it issued a stamp with a young head of Victoria based on an engraving by Charles Henry Jeens. xxxix However, two stamps issued in the 1890s when Canada increasingly asserted its independence from Britain show less flattering portraits of an older Victoria wearing her small crown and veil (Figure 6). The 1897 Jubilee stamp celebrating 60 years of Victoria’s reign and 30 years of Canada’s dominion features a young head based on an Alexander Chalon design alongside an older, less invincible looking Victoria modeled after an 1887 photograph by Alexander Bassano. That same year, the Maple Leaf issue came out, featuring the older Bassano-inspired head surrounded by maple leaves, an enduring symbol of Canada. xl

Might a desire for autonomy from British imperialism’s “heady” power and the long delay in empire-wide penny postage, which colonies long sought (they felt financially burdened in communicating with the mother country), have caused a resentment that led to aging Queen Victoria on postage stamps? Keith Jeffery in “Crown, Communication and the Colonial Post” cautions against “a simplistic analysis which on the one hand equates a slavish reproduction of royal or British iconography with colonial loyalty and, on the other, local images with separatism.” xlix The politics of stamp design is not simple, but we cannot ignore that colonial stamps designed by local British colonial administrators (e.g. the Maple Leaf issue) point to an assertion of identity and an independence of spirit. It may be less significant that 1890s Canadian stamps reject British iconography to show an aging Victoria than that they show a side to Victoria that distinguishes Canada from Britain. Not surprisingly, in 1965, Canada redesigned her flag and adopted a large, stylized red maple leaf to replace the Union Jack. xlii

**Final Note: Why Examine the Queen’s Head?**

Examined from the perspective of stimulus-response theory, Victoria’s enduring silhouette on the stamp—if only through repeated exposure—provided continuity and comfort during an age of rapid change in industry, education, communications, transportation, and gender roles. French historian Élie Halévy was fascinated that
Victorian stamp design did not change; the youthful Queen Victoria remained the official face of Britain, even if she aged on some colonial stamps like Canada and India.\textsuperscript{xliii} In remaining young on all domestic and some colonial stamps until her death in 1901, Queen Victoria became to her people and the world a symbol of power and longevity even as the sun began to set on the British Empire.

Might the design’s continuity be more significant than the enduring youth of the “Queen’s Head”? Queen Victoria symbolizes what today we call Victorian values—moral propriety, domesticity, and family affection—as well as empire, power, and morality. The term “Victorian,” which came into use in the 1850s following the Great Exhibition of 1851,\textsuperscript{xlv} still applies to long multi-plot novels, gracious homes with double parlors, manners, morals, and an illustrious age of imperial expansion. The Penny Black solidified a still reigning pattern for stamp design. More importantly, even the Victorians recognized that the virtually unchanging design was a “‘mythic effigy’ going back to the Wyon medal.”\textsuperscript{xlv} Something as deceptively simple as a postage stamp came to play a pivotal role in the national myth making both of Britain’s longest reigning monarch and her empire.

Notes

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\textsuperscript{i} Postal charges grew high in England due to the inflationary pressure of the Napoleonic Wars. Different from the way mail operates today, payment fell to the receiver, not the sender; in addition, prepayment was a social slur on the recipient. One had to be financially solvent to receive a letter. If the recipient could not afford to pay for a letter, it was returned to sender.

\textsuperscript{ii} Rowland Hill. \textit{Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicability}. 2nd edition. (London: Charles Knight, 1837), 45. Hill goes on to note the stamp was something “the bringer might, by applying a little moisture, attach to the back of the letter” (45). He is assuming continuation of the common practice of folding a letter and sealing it to make its own cover; however, after 1840, envelope use rose in popularity since a letter in an envelope weighing up to ½ ounce could be posted for a penny.


\textsuperscript{iv} Zurich issued the 6 Rappen and 4 Rappen on March 1, 1843; Geneva released the Double Geneva on October 1, 1843. The Canton of Basel issued the Basel Dove on July 1, 1845. Brazil produced the Bull's Eye stamp on August 1, 1843, and on July 1, 1847, the United States issued 5- and 10-cent stamps featuring, respectively, Benjamin Franklin on a red-brown stamp and George Washington on a black stamp.


\textsuperscript{vi} David Scott, p. 18.


\textsuperscript{viii} Keith Jeffery, “Crown, Communication and the Colonial Post: Stamps, the Monarchy, and the British Empire.” \textit{The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History} 34.1
The portraits of six monarchs have appeared on British definitive stamps since 1840.


While definitive (or ordinary) stamps present iconic messages that are not time-sensitive, commemorative stamps celebrate historical or cultural landmarks. A similar pairing of the heads of Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth II appears on a 1990 stamp commemorating the 150th anniversary of the postage stamp.

The Board of Stamps originated in 1694. The term “stamps” refers not to “postage stamps” but to duties on a range of items including vellum, newspapers, advertisements, and many commodities.

In 1884 in response to complaints about the designs issued by the Board of Inland Revenue (which subsumed the Board of Stamps), the government set up a committee to oversee stamp design.


Some postal historians state Cheverton wanted the sovereign on the stamp while others suggest he wanted a portrait. His design no longer exists, but as Douglas Muir notes, a relative of Cheverton’s named Eliza Cooper found a die that shows the head of a young woman, which is possibly Queen Victoria; see Douglas N. Muir, *Postal Reform & The Penny Black* (London: National Postal Museum, 1990), 88. Briggs states Cheverton wished the design to be based on Wyon’s head of the Queen; see p. 339.

Cheverton also suggested that if stamps were printed on watermarked security paper, there would be an even greater protection against forgery.

Ironically, Wyon submitted a design to use the sovereign’s head. As Rigo de Righi notes, “It is hand-drawn in ink, but though it is nearer to the issued stamp than any other submitted, it somehow failed to win Wyon an award”; see p. 11.

Quoted in Briggs, p. 350.

William Lewins, (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1865), 313.


Quoted in Muir, 180.

Quoted in Rigo de Righi, p. 40.


The Young Head coins (in circulation from 1838-87 and designed by Wyon) show Victoria as she looked at her coronation at just eighteen. Copper pennies minted in 1860, which vary this image to show the Queen’s hair, coiled into a bun, present her as a devoted wife and mother of nine children. Wyon also designed a Gothic portrait of
Victoria in 1848-49 when Britain considered switching to a decimal coinage. Coins minted on the occasion of Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 (in circulation 1887-93) show an older Victoria wearing a small crown and a veil over the back of her head. The final “Widow’s Weeds” head issued in 1893 (in circulation from 1893-1901) shows Victoria more as her subjects came to know her: an elderly widow, dressed in perpetual mourning for her beloved husband and Consort, Prince Albert, who died in 1861.

xxvii The Philatelic Record argued this point in its foundation year, 1879, which also marked the death of Hill. See Briggs, p. 355.

xxviii Here I am indebted to the ideas of Rudolf Arnheim and his discussion of Holbein’s portrait of Henry VIII in Visual Thinking, which Strauss references on p. 160 in “Politics, Psychology and the Postage Stamp.”

xxix Quoted in Briggs, p. 355.

xxx I elaborate this point in Posting It, pages 106-07, where I extend the comparison between Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) and the Penny Black. Keith Jeffery makes this reference in passing in “Crown, Communication and the Colonial Post,” p. 50, but I was not aware of his reference when I made this connection and developed it.

xxxi Keith Jeffery, “Crown, Communication and the Colonial Post,” p. 50; he notes Victoria never appeared on stamps of British Guinea (issued from 1850) or the Cape of Good Hope (issued from 1853).

xxxii See Scott, p. 8, where he suggests that the Penny Black also set the pattern for the current British definitive stamp with the Arnold Machin portrait bust of Queen Elizabeth II in regard to format, iconic content, and textual message.


xxxiv Although China gave Hong Kong to Britain in “perpetuity,” in 1997, it was returned to mainland China and assumed the status of “Special Administrative Region.”

xxxv This portrait resembles the Bassano-inspired head on the Canadian stamp.

xxxvi For discussion of 1960s Ghana postage, for example, see Child, p. 19.

xxxvii Reid, p. 227.

xxxviii For a discussion of the Mulready envelope design and its reception, I refer the reader to my book Posting It, pages 89-101.

xxxi Beginning in 1851, the provinces of Canada, co-operating with the administration of the General Post Office in London, began to issue stamps, but each province issued a different stamp.

xl The Maple leaves were initially in all four corners, but the design changed due to Universal Postal Union regulations.

xli See Keith Jeffery, p. 51.

xlii Beginning in 1868, the Canadian flag included a small Union Jack and a quartered shield to signal Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. The Coat of Arms of Canada replaced the shield in 1921, though this ensign was modified again in 1957. The 1965 maple leaf flag remains the current flag.

xliii See Briggs, p. 339.

xiv The first ever world’s fair, this London exhibition of culture and industry, a crowning achievement of Victoria’s reign, attracted over six million visitors who came to the Crystal Palace to see over 13,000 exhibits from Britain and countries across the globe.

xlv The Philatelic Record, qtd. in Briggs, p. 355.
Works Cited and Consulted