

Stamp Production: Recess

For Royal Mail's *Stamps and Collecting* Website

Designs are incised into a printing plate, inked and transferred on to paper. The skill of the engraver and tactile feel of the stamp make this a popular printing method.

Recess printing is also variously known as intaglio (pronounced 'in-taly-o'), line-engraving, copperplate / steel engraving or siderography by printers and collectors alike, but all relate to the same printing process.

The stamp design and any wording is incised in reverse using an engravers' tool called a burin (a sharp, pointed implement) into the printing plate to varying depths below the surface. Ink is then applied to the plate, the excess is wiped off and the paper is pressed under great pressure against the plate, actually squeezing into the inked grooves, extracting it and transferring the image to the paper. The design is now a mirror-image of what was on the plate and lettering and pictorial elements can be correctly viewed.

A recess printed stamp has a distinct raised, tactile feel comprising grooves and ridges and has been popular with philatelists since its first use by Perkins, Bacon & Petch on the Penny Black from 1840 until 1880. It was later used for the high values from 1913-77, then, after a ten-year gap, from 1988-2003. It has also been effectively used on occasional special issues (such as the Sailing, Mail Coaches and Pillar Boxes sets) and within a 1999 prestige stamp book.

Recess printing is an expensive and slow process when used for the large print runs produced for Royal Mail, so it is used infrequently these days, being reserved for issues that would truly benefit from its use. There are very few countries that continue to take regular advantage of this process, but for those that do (such as Sweden), there is a strong collector following. Gravure works on a similar principle to recess, but lacks the raised imagery and therefore much of its appeal.

[30 words in teaser and 311 in article] [Compiled by Glenn H Morgan FRPSL, 09 March 2007]