

Stamp Production: Letterpress

For Royal Mail's *Stamps and Collecting* Website

Stamps printed by letterpress were once the most commonly found worldwide due to the popularity of this printing method. It is rarely encountered today, being restricted to occasional issues only.

Letterpress is the correct name for a printing process that is also known by stamp collectors as flexography, surface-printing or typography. It involves printing from a raised design, with the image being in relief on the plate.

The stamp design is first engraved onto a metal die, and then the non-image area is etched away leaving just the raised design to print from. Electrotyping or stereotyping of the original die is undertaken next to generate duplicate impressions (or clichés) of the design, which are eventually combined and locked into a frame (which is known in the printing trade as a forme). This creates a printing plate that contains the number of impressions required to print a full sheet of stamps.

Old letterpress printed stamps are easiest to identify from the reverse side because the design feels raised to the touch, due to the use of metal plates. The modern plastic plates that are now used for this process tend not to leave the raised reverse, so can be confused by those unfamiliar with printing techniques as having been produced by another printing method.

De La Rue had led the way with this process in Britain when in 1853 they produced the first letterpress fiscal stamps, although France and Bavaria had both created letterpress postage stamps four years earlier in 1849. This method of printing was used on British postage stamps from 1855 to 1934 and until 1971 for postage due ('To Pay') labels. It was revived in 1999 within a commemorative prestige stamp book that incorporated different types of printing method.

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