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Great Britain: The 1858–1879 1d Rose-Red Plate 77

A Discovery that Raises Questions

Abed Habib Najjar

Foreword

Ever since the discovery of the first 1864 1d rose-red stamp showing a plate number 77, towards the end of the nineteenth century, all philatelists and scholars of the stamps of Great Britain, without exception, believed that Plate 77 printed the ten recorded copies showing a plate number 77. With so few examples existing there were no grounds for philatelic study, and there was therefore no reason to doubt this fact which was, and still is, undisputed by all.

My extensive research into this subject could not find any conclusive evidence that Plate 77 printed any of the stamps known today. On the contrary, my studies have suggested the opposite to be true. Not only is there no evidence that Plate 77 printed any of the existing stamps, but all the evidence that has been unearthed supports the fact that Plate 77 never printed any stamps at all that show a plate number 77. It is therefore reasonable to assume that either all the existing stamps showing a plate number 77 are fake, and I am certain they are not, or come from other plates of that issue that were re-engraved with the number 77. This could have happened either intentionally or in error, or could even have been a clandestine printing that was released to the public.

Is this impossible to believe? Perhaps, but an open philatelic mind in this case is needed for unravelling the mystery behind this iconic stamp and the advancement of philately.



Fig. 1 — The newly-discovered cover with three stamps showing plate 77.

An 1865 Part-Cover to Brussels, franked with three copies of Plate 77 stamps

With no registration sheet (or ‘imprimatur’) in existence, practically no Post Office records, little published information, and only ten copies recorded, one can fully understand why the appearance of a 1d Plate 77 stamp on the market would be treated with both excitement and suspicion. It is therefore understandable that the recent discovery of this exceptionally remarkable item, one that can arguably rate as one of the rarest philatelic gems existing, would be met with serious skepticism.

The item, an irregular strip of three of the 1d rose-red with check letters in all four corners (SG 43) Plate 77 stamps on cover to Brussels, has brought to light a groundbreaking theory on the way Plate 77 stamps were produced. It was only with this discovery that a new study into this line-engraved (or ‘intaglio’) plate, a study that has never before needed to have been considered, now has to be carried out. The single copies that previously existed were taken at face value as having originated from an original Plate 77. However, the three copies on this cover cast doubt on this assumption. This study will show why we may no longer be able to rely on the explanation that a plate that was produced with a die numbered 77 was used to print this issue.

The Cover: Description and Detail

The stamps on the cover are examples of the 1864 ‘letters in all four corners’, with watermark Large Crown, Die 2, perf. 14, 1d rose-red (SG 43) Plate 77, an irregular block of three, with check letters RL, SK and SL, on large part-envelope from Guernsey to Brussels (Fig. 1). The stamps are cancelled by a ‘324’ duplex datestamp of 27 November 1865, and the cover bears a ‘PD’ in circle in red and, on the reverse, a Belgian TPO c.d.s. and an arrival c.d.s. of 28 November 1865. The cover was endorsed on the front ‘[via?] London/Ostende’, and was franked correctly at the 3d rate, the rate required to send mail from Great Britain directly to Belgium at that time. It carries the following postmarks:

1. The Guernsey duplex handstamp SG Type G16b (showing the pointed ‘4’ in ‘324’) which was in use in Guernsey between 1862 and 1867. The cover, which is dated 27 November 1865, falls within these dates. All three stamps are cancelled by this handstamp, which includes the ‘Guernsey A’ c.d.s. of ‘NO 27 65’.

2. A ‘PD’ (Paid to Destination) in a circle, applied in red. This ‘PD’ mark, SG Type 34, is recorded in use in Guernsey between 1866–1873. The mark on this cover precedes this period by two months.

3. A Belgian TPO mark of ‘(?) NO 65’, reading ‘ANGLETERRE/AMB. OUEST 2’. This was used on the Ostend–Brussels railway line. The central octagon may have indicated a night service. (Ref. R. T. Harrison, ‘The Foreign Sorting Marks of Belgium, Part 3’, to be published in *Belgapost*, the journal of the Belgian Study Circle.)



The TPO mark compared with a clear strike.

4. ‘BRUXEL[LES]’ arrival c.d.s of ‘28 NO 65’.

5. The cover was franked correctly at the 3d rate, the rate required to send mail from Great Britain directly to Belgium at that time. (If the letter had gone via France, the rate would have been 4d.)

A London transit datestamp would probably have been applied, but if so, it was on a part of the cover which is now missing.

The Dilemma

Checking the four corner letters on the three stamps shows them to match exactly those of Plate 73 stamps of the same position. This can only mean that either the stamps have been faked from Plate 73 stamps or were produced from a re-engraved Plate 73. The corner letters of the stamps do not match those from Plates 71 or 177, from which practically all fakes are known.

A Comparison of the Upper Corner Letters of Stamps SK and SL on the Cover, with those from Plates 73, 71 and 177

Stamps SK and SL from cover showing plate number 77 (note: reversed letters at top)



Letter 'K' close to left-hand side of square

Small dash inside 'S' square — a constant flaw

Letter 'S' close to right-hand side of square

Stamps SK and SL from Plate 73 registration sheet



Stamps SK and SL from Plate 71 registration sheet



Letter 'S' high Letter 'L' close to left-hand side of square

Stamps SK and SL from Plate 177 registration sheet



Fig. 2 — A comparison of the check letters from two stamps on the cover and Plates 73, 71 and 177.

Facts confirming that the 'Plate 77' stamps on the cover are from plate 73:

1. All corner letters match exactly.
2. The constant red flaw at the base of the upper right-hand square carrying the letter 'S' on stamp SK is on all Plate 73 stamps in this position and on the imprimatur sheet.
3. Not yet shown, the left-hand '7' on the right-hand panel is in a high position unique to Plate 73 stamps.

The 1864 1d Red Line-Engraved Issue: A Brief Outline

In 1858, Rowland Hill announced the decision to issue a perforated penny red with check letters in all four corners and a plate number on either side of the stamp printed within the design. The intention behind this idea was to stop any possibility of re-joining unused portions of other stamps and re-using them. The plate numbers on either side served both to identify the plate from which the stamps were produced and to keep a record of the

work carried out on it [DON'T UNDERSTAND]. The system ensured that if two halves of any unused stamps were re-joined, the plate numbers would probably be different. In order to print the hundreds of millions of stamps required, it was deemed necessary to produce a large number of plates. Ultimately, plate numbers 69 to 225 were produced, even though some were not used to print stamps.

The printing of this issue fell under a new agreement between the Commissioner of Stamps and Taxes and Messers Perkins, Bacon, which was signed on 3 December 1861, for a period of ten years computed from 5 July 1861, with a six-month notice of termination. This agreement was modified in 1865, raising the printing price per thousand stamps to 4½d per 1000. A fresh contract was signed on 12 April 1867, and continued in force until the end of 1879, when the printing of the one penny postage stamps passed out of the hands of Perkins, Bacon.

The first transfer roller — with seven impressions on which the plate numbers were engraved — was produced from the master die in April 1858. The production of the finished plate was a long process, taking over ten working days. This involved the transfer roller being rocked 240 times over a polished steel plate. The plate was approximately 12 inches by 20½ inches and about ⅛ inch in thickness, on which a grid was outlined, producing a complete plate with 240 impressions. Once this process was completed, corner check letters were entered individually.

The printing of this issue did not commence until 1 March 1864, and the first stamps were issued on 1 April of that year. The imprimatur sheets were registered on 14 March 1861 for Plates 71, 72, 73 and 74; on 7 February 1863 for Plates 76, 78, 79, 80 and 81; and on 1 March 1864 for Plates 82 through 87.

These plates were all put to press on 1 March 1864. In total, plate numbers 69 to 225 were produced, and the majority of these plates were well used, as there was a reluctance to discard them until they were worn. Plates 69, 70, 75 and 77, and the later plate 128, were rejected, mainly because the images were out of alignment for the application of correctly positioned perforations. Plate 126 was not produced as the impression on the transfer roller was defective.

The rejection of practically half the number of the nine early plates numbered 69 to 77 had to be a serious setback, bearing in mind that the four plates involved were of no use and involved a large expense of time and money in producing them. Had it been economical or possible, then why were they not replaced with another plate of the same number? It is reasonable to assume that the plate number was of no importance to the postal authorities and merely served the purpose of identifying the printing plate.

Current No.		Description	Preparation begun.			Placed in			Signature	Proof approved		Registered	
Post.	Gen.		Duty	Date	Ref.	Officers Safe	Sen. Ho. S. Room	Ref.		Date	Ref.	Date	Ref.
70		Postage	1	1858 July 29	A 57	1858 July 29	—	A 57	Off	—	—	<i>Not registered</i>	
71		"	1	" Aug 16	A 57	1861 Feb 26	1862 Mar 29	A 57	Off	—	—	1861 Mar 14	
72		"	1	" Sep 29	A 57	1861 Feb 26	1862 Mar 29	A 57	Off	—	—	1861 Mar 14	
73		"	1	" Oct 7	A 57	1861 Feb 26	1862 Mar 29	A 57	Off	—	—	1861 Mar 14	
74		"	1	" Oct 12	A 57	1861 Feb 26	1862 Mar 29	A 57	Off	—	—	1861 Mar 14	
75		"	1	1859 Oct 3	A 57	1859 Oct 3	—	A 57	Off	—	—	<i>Not registered</i>	
76		"	1	1861 July 5	A 57	1861 July 5	1862 Feb 9	A 57	Off	1863 Feb 7	A 25	1863 Feb 7	A 25
77		"	1	" July 3	A 57	1861 July 3	—	A 57	Off	—	—	<i>not registered</i>	
78		"	1	" Aug 5	A 57	1861 July 5	1862 Feb 9	A 57	Off	1863 Feb 7	A 25	1863 Feb 7	A 25
79		"	1	" Sep 2	A 57	1861 July 5	1862 Feb 9	A 57	Off	1863 Feb 7	A 25	1863 Feb 7	A 25
80		"	1	" Sep 16	A 57	1861 July 5	1862 Feb 9	A 57	Off	1863 Feb 7	A 25	1863 Feb 7	A 25

Fig. 3a — The left half of Inland Revenue document IR79/79, showing records of Plates 70 through 80.

Stamps from Plate 77

For roughly a century it has been believed and documented that, as for all the other plates, Plate 77 produced the few existing copies of Plate 77 stamps. There was never a need to look further into how Plate 77 stamps were produced. With so few copies in existence, it was taken for a fact that this stamp came from a Plate 77, which was produced from a Plate 77 roller.

However, new discoveries and observations, brought to light by the author, have put these beliefs into question. These involved study and observations of three stamps with strong provenance; namely the Tapling and Fletcher copies in The British Library, and the copy in the Royal Philatelic Collection. These findings suggest strongly that there is a need to have a re-examination of how stamps bearing the plate number 77 were produced.

The first discovery involves Inland Revenue document IR79/79, pages 40–41 (Fig. 3), held at the National Archives, which clearly states the following:

1. Plate 77 was not registered.
2. Plate 77 was not put to press.
3. Plate 77 — no impressions were printed.
4. Plate 77 was partially defaced in February 1862 (note that the date may have been mis-recorded and is probably 1863).

Put to press		Partially defaced		Defaced		Impressions printed		Signature	Total in stock at and from date		
Date	Ref.	Date	Ref.	Date	Ref.	Number	Ref.		Date	Total	Ref.
<i>Not put to press</i>		1864 Feb 15	A 143	1864 Dec 1	A 75	None		<i>OK</i>			
1864 Mar 1	A 46	1863 Jun 9	A 224	1863 Jun 23	A 225	557,000	A 225	<i>OK</i>			
1864 Mar 1	A 46	1863 Mar 23	A 216	1863 Jun 23	A 225	522,800	A 216	<i>OK</i>			
1864 Mar 1	A 46	1863 May 5	A 224	1863 Jun 23	A 225	529,900	A 221	<i>OK</i>			
1864 Mar 1	A 46	1863 Jun 9	A 224	1863 Jun 23	A 225	531,000	A 225	<i>OK</i>			
<i>Not put to press</i>		1862 Feb 4	A 214	1864 Dec 1	A 75	None		<i>OK</i>			
1864 Mar 1	A 46	1863 Feb 15	A 247	1869 Oct 13	A 265	555,500	A 247	<i>OK</i>			
<i>Not put to press</i>		1862 Feb 4	A 214	1864 Dec 1	A 75	None		<i>OK</i>			
1864 Mar 1	A 46	1869 Jan 16	A 245	1869 Oct 13	A 265	615,600	A 245	<i>OK</i>			
1864 Mar 1	A 46	1869 May 3	A 255	1869 Oct 13	A 265	638,600	A 255	<i>OK</i>			
1864 Mar 1	A 46	1868 May 12	A 225-1	1868 Jun 23	A 225	619,200	A 221	<i>OK</i>			

Rejected on account of a flaw in the stock

** This is the first plate with letters at all four corners in the face, also with the black number on each stamp.*

66 hands returned A 209

** Incorrectly laid down for perforation.*

Fig. 3b — The right half of Inland Revenue document IR79/79, showing records of Plates 70 through 80.

A statement that appears in manuscript next to the Plate 77 entry states ‘*incorrectly laid down for perforation*’.

There is no imprimatur sheet for Plate 77 in The British Postal Museum & Archive.

The Inland Revenue document IR79/79 found in the National Archives clearly states the following facts when recording the details of the printing from Plates 70 to 80, such as preparation, registration, defacement (both partial and full), putting to press, and the number of sheets printed.

For Plates 70, 75 and 77 it states the following:

Plate	Registered	Put to press	Partially defaced	No. of sheets printed
70	Not registered	Not put to press	1864 Feb 15	None
75	Not registered	Not put to press	1862 Feb 4*	None
77	Not registered	Not put to press	1862 Feb 4*	None

* It is very probable that a transcription error was made in entering this date as the year this plate was partially defaced was more than likely 1863 and not 1862. Partial defacement of a plate was the process used to ensure that the plate was not put to press and that no prints could be made from it.

The second discovery involves the impression from the uninked Plate 77 transfer roller (*Fig. 4*). An albino proof from the transfer roller, which produced the 240 Plate 77 stamp impressions on the plate, is available at The British Library in the Board of Inland Revenue Stamping Department Archive. It clearly shows a major feature that is not present on the existing Plate 77 stamps. Notice that there are two dashes adjacent to each figure ‘7’ on the right-hand panel as per the Plate 77 roller (*Fig. 5*). This feature must appear on all the existing Plate 77 stamps if these stamps were printed from this roller and plate.

In addition, and of the utmost importance, any stamps printed from a plate created with this die must have virtually identical plate numbers.

The third observation involves three of the accepted copies of Plate 77. Studying the two stamps in The British Library and the stamp in the Royal Philatelic Collection, one notices states of wear that are not expected from stamps originating from a fresh plate that has printed only a few sheets.

Other major differences involve the figure ‘7’ and the matrix around it. As can be seen in enlarged illustrations of the ‘77’ numbers on the various stamps, the dashes from the transfer roller are not present and the numbers vary.

The above three facts strongly suggest that, if genuine, the three stamps on the cover showing a Plate 77 number did not come from the original Plate 77, but must have come from other existing plates in which the number was altered to ‘77’ by a means yet to be examined in this article.

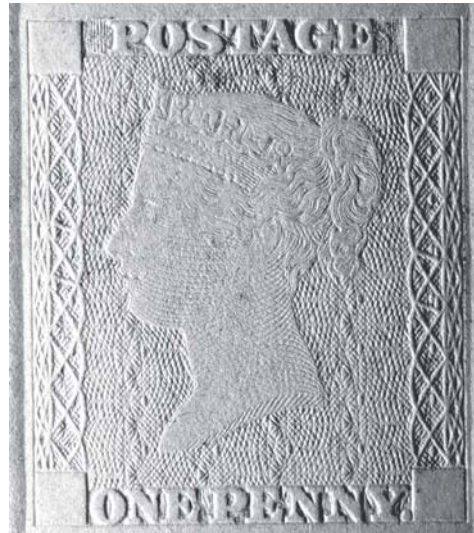


Fig. 4 — The albino proof from the transfer roller for Plate 77 (the image has been reversed).



Fig. 5 — Plate number 77 from the right-hand side of the transfer roller showing the dashes.



Fig. 6 — Three examples of Plate 77: AB from the Royal Philatelic Collection (illustrated with the gracious permission of Her Majesty The Queen), BA from The Tapling Collection, and PH from the Fletcher Collection (the latter two illustrated courtesy The British Library).

The Existing Copies of Stamps Showing a Plate Number 77

To date only ten copies have been recorded, five unused (of which one was presumably destroyed) and five used. These are as follows:

Unused

- Stamp AB In the Royal Philatelic Collection (examined by the author).
- Stamp AC Purchased and sold by Chas. Nissen.
- Stamp BA The Tapling copy in The British Library (examined by the author).
- Stamp ? In W. Hughes-Hughes collection, which passed on to Ferrary.
- Stamp ? Owned by H. J. Crocker and destroyed in 1906 with his collection.

Used

- Stamp LL Sold in 1915 for £50.
- Stamp MI Found in a box amongst a million stamps sold in 1944 for £220.
- Stamp NC Found in a collection and purchased in 1994 at Harmers of London.
- Stamp PH The Fletcher copy, found in 1920, and now in The British Library (examined by the author).
- Stamp PI On piece with 4d. Found in 1920 by a customer who purchased a box from dealers Johnson and Redhead.

The single mint copy found by Nissen and the four used copies, all of which were randomly discovered, proves that the stamp was issued to the public for postage use.

Observations of Features of Plate 77 Stamps

A study of the two stamps in The British Library and the stamp in the Royal Philatelic Collection (*Fig. 6*) yields a few observations:

The impressions on all three stamps were not as sharp and clear as would be expected from a plate that would have printed only a handful of sheets. The impressions show some weakness and wear, in particular, around the crown jewels and the dropped dots.

The second figure ‘7’ in the right-hand ‘77’ varies between the stamps as far as shape and the position of the diagonal within the base of the diamond. Several are not uniform in shape. This difference should not have happened if the plate had been produced from a die with the number 77 in the side panels. Some ‘touching up’ of transfers is possible, but not necessarily to the extent seen here.

The first ‘7’ of the ‘77’ in the right-hand panel has a short horizontal bar.

With the great rarity of these stamps, it is unlikely that anyone felt the need (or had the access) to examine and to compare them before. It is now quite clear that the status of all of the accepted Plate 77 stamps must be examined to explain these anomalies. Their long provenance and observed characteristics preclude them from being fakes. One of the few alternative answers is that they might come from other plates that had been re-engraved.

A Comparison of the Plate 77 Roller Die Impression and the Stamps

A proof from the Plate 77 transfer roller is available as an uninked impression in The British Library Philatelic Collections, from which a copy was obtained, enlarged and reversed for study purposes (*Fig. 4*). Looking at this, one will notice the row of dashes running down the right-hand side of the panel, each within the diamond and touching the plate number ‘7’ in that square (*Fig. 5*). This is a common feature of the master die.

Comparing this with the two stamps in The British Library and the stamp in the Royal Philatelic Collection, one immediately notices the distinct lack of these dashes. There is absolutely no reason why these dashes are not there if the stamps came from the Plate 77 roller and plate. They appear on every other stamp printed and their absence needs to be explained.

The Die and Figures ‘77’ Compared

Notes on the images in *Fig. 7*:

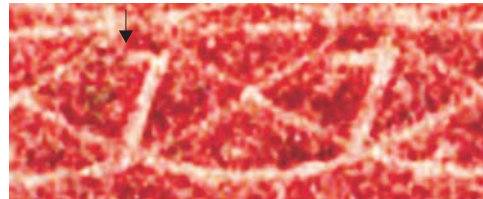
1. Note the distinct absence of the dashes against each ‘7’ on the right-hand panel. These dashes must appear on stamps from plate 77.
2. Note the broken top of the first ‘7’ of ‘77’ on the right-hand panel.
3. Note the distinctly worn impression of the figure ‘7’ on all the stamps.



The shape and position of the right- and left-side figures '77' on the roller impression of the Plate 77 die.
Note that the shape and position of the '7's are different on each of the stamps.



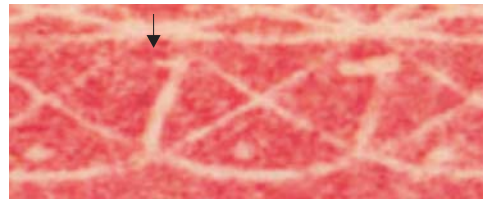
AB left-hand panel: note '7' touching left.



AB right-hand panel: note short first '7'.



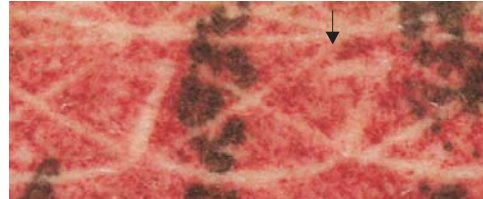
BA left-hand panel: note '7' touching right.



BA right-hand panel: note short first '7'.



PH left-hand panel: note '7' touching centre.



PH right-hand panel: note dropped top of '7'.

Fig. 7 — A comparison of the numbers '77' on the three stamps.

4. Note the varying shapes of the two strokes making up the figure '7'.
5. Note the position where the figure '7' touches the intersection of the curved filigree lines.

The variable nature of these impressions is not compatible with what would be expected of stamps created with the same transfer roller. Each of the '7's in the same position should be identical, but it is clear that they are not.

W. R. D Wiggins, in his book *The Postage Stamps of Great Britain, Part Two, The Perforated Line Engraved Issues*, makes the following statement as to the position of the figure '7': *'In plate 77 the left-hand 7 is placed immediately above the intersection and the right-hand 7 slightly to the left of the intersection'*.

Close study of both right- and left-hand figure '7', as can be seen in the comparisons, shows that he may have used the Fletcher copy 'PH' for his observation, which is the only one that shows those characteristics for the second digits. If Wiggins had based his comments on a single stamp, assuming that the roller had been used to create the plate with the numbers as part of the die, he would have missed the variance between the different stamps.

Note also that the curved lines of the filigree near the top of each '7' are weakened or broken to varying degrees, in contrast to the transfer roller. This would suggest that retouching or other work took place on the plate in this area.

The Challenge of Changing a '3' to a '7'

The check letters of the stamps on the cover in Fig. 1 show that they came from Plate 73, but the plate numbers at the sides of the stamps show '77'. If the three stamps on the cover were altered to change the '3' into a '7' on five of the six positions, with the sixth too scuffed to matter, an artful faker may have chosen one of two primary ways: replacing the second '7' with numbers cut from a different set of stamps, or painting over the '3' and substituting a '7' for it.

Given the nature of the area involved, it is difficult to imagine why someone would choose Plate 73 for the 'raw material', rather than one such as 72, which has fewer strokes to convert (see Fig. 8 for the comparison of a '7' and a '3'). Similarly, choosing a cover that has three stamps, one badly scuffed, offers more work than would be the case with a single stamp in fine condition on a local cover.

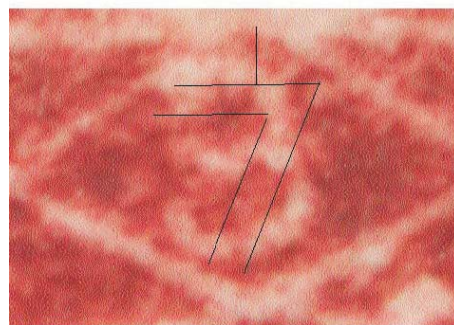


Fig. 8 — The diamond of a '73' plate with a '7' as an overlay, showing the area that would need to be altered.

Some forgers have been known to practice their ‘art’ on inexpensive items, just to perfect their technique. This cover, however, carries the correct rate, correct datestamps, transit and arrival markings and PD mark, all of which tally exactly and are of the correct time period for a Plate 77 usage. This implies that, if faked, the stamps would already have been on the cover and the effort made more difficult in that the cancellations fall over some of the ‘7’s.

To further complicate the logic, why would someone go to all the trouble to make such an item and then leave it to be discovered over a century later in an old-time collection on the continent, where knowledge of such rarefied items as the existence of Great Britain Plate 77 stamps is less likely?

Expert Opinions

Expert opinion was sought for the cover bearing the three Plate 77 stamps and the results were as follows. The two opinions differ greatly.

Expert Opinion ‘A’

The cover with the three Plate 77 stamps was submitted for expert opinion and received a certificate in 2006 stating they ‘. . . are not from Plate 77 but have been faked in each case using a stamp from Plate 73’. A letter in response to one requesting clarification of the opinion stated that ‘The corner letters on the stamps on your cover exactly matched those of Plate 73. Further there is a slight indentation on all these stamps where the “3”s would have been and on examination these have been replaced by “7”s, probably from some defective copies of other Plate 71–79’.

The letter and certificate intimate that the ‘3’s on the stamps have been replaced by ‘7’s from other Plate 70s stamps. ‘Replacement’ would suggest a ‘cut and paste’ process. Examination shows that there are no traces of the ‘indentations’ mentioned in their letter, so it is unclear what they may have seen to make that observation.

The experts, despite being provided with strong suggestions and evidence that all Plate 77 stamps have come from re-engraved plates, continued to insist that the stamps on the cover are not from Plate 77 and, as such, are fakes.

Expert Opinion ‘B’

The cover with the three Plate 77 stamps was submitted to a different expert group and received a certificate indicating that the stamps were fakes, in November 2007, stating specifically ‘. . . The stamps are not from plate no 77, rather the second digit of each stamp has been altered to resemble a 7’.

Requesting further details from the second expert group, the following wording sent to them was agreed by them as to the way the fake was made. ‘Using a 10 power magnifying glass you have noticed readily apparent repairs/alterations to all the right hand figures in order to make them resemble a figure ‘7.’ The five small localized areas of 1.5 mm in diameter containing this figure are covered by a yellowish rose-red colour as opposed to the lake red colour of the stamp. This is presumably due to the skilful application of a pigment/paint/colour/dye or similar in order to complete the faking process. This accounts for the colour difference between these five small areas and the colour of the stamps’.

The correspondence and certificate intimate that the right-hand figure on the stamps was tampered with and altered to resemble a ‘7’, and that a foreign coating of some form was applied, often referred to as being ‘painted in’.

(To be continued)