

James Chalmers was a bookseller and printer of Dundee. In December 1837 he had written to Robert Wallace (a Member of Parliament who campaigned for postal reform and was the Chairman of the Select Committee of the House of Commons, 1837-38, upon the proposed scheme of Post Office Reform), and later in February 1838 to Lieutenant-Colonel William Maberly (secretary to the Post Office) with a suggestion for what he termed 'slips' to indicate the prepayment of postage. He attached a sheet printed with five square labels, in pale red with fancy borders (now in the R. M. Phillips Collection at the British Postal Museum and Archive)

Chalmers suggested that sheets of Stamped Slips should be prepared at the Stamp Office, (on a paper made expressly for the purpose), with a device on each from a die or cut resembling that on newspapers; that the sheets so printed or stamped should then be rubbed over on the back with a strong solution of gum, or other adhesive substance, and (when thoroughly dry) issued by the Stamp Office to town and country distributors, to stationers and others, for sale in sheets or singly. To prevent the 'slips' being used twice postmasters should put the town stamp across the slip, as he illustrated on one of his examples.

Chalmers submitted two entries for the Treasury Competition (on 30th September and 7th October 1839). These later postage labels (1d and 2d values) were circular and somewhat larger, printed in black or red. They were stuck on to dummy letters and cancelled, as Chalmers proposed, with a handstamp giving the town name (Dundee) and the date.

Chalmers also wrote a letter to Rowland Hill dated 8 October 1839, on the back of a printed circular entitled "A Comparative Statement of the Expense of Stamped Envelopes with Stamped Slips" with examples of some of his designs (see scan).

For these reasons Chalmers claimed to have been the first to have proposed the idea of postage stamps. This was, unfortunately for him, incorrect. In January 1840 Rowland Hill wrote to Chalmers pointing out that he (Hill) had suggested adhesive labels or stamps in his 1837 pamphlet and this claim was virtually admitted by Chalmers himself four months later. But equally Chalmers had little or no idea of the practical problems - security, cost and speed of printing allied to fine design - involved in the production of effective adhesive postage stamps. It is these problems Rowland Hill resolved, and he is therefore rightly honoured as the Father of the Postage Stamp. James Chalmers died in 1853 but his claim was revived by his son Patrick and passionately upheld in many books and articles, the first being published very shortly after Sir Rowland Hill's death in 1879. The controversy has been continued by members of both families right up to the present day.

The answer is that each of the two men concerned, Hill and Chalmers, contributed to the birth of the adhesive postage stamp. On balance the credit for the idea must go to Rowland Hill, who certainly adapted it from the adhesive stamps which had been used for the payment of various fiscal duties.

Please note that the above text is copied and paraphrased from the following sources:

Muir: Postal Reform and the Penny Black, A New Appreciation: The National Postal Museum, London; 1990, 242 pages, ISBN 0 9515948 0 X De Rigi: The Story of the Penny Black and its Contemporaries: The National Postal Museum, London; 1980, 56 pages, ISBN 0 9500018 7 2 Stanley Gibbons: Great Britain Specialized Stamp Catalogue Volume 1 - Queen Victoria: Stanley Gibbons Ltd, London and Ringwood; 2006, 501 pages, ISBN 13: 978-0-85259-628-9, ISBN 10: 0-85259-628-6