

De La Rue Living Timeline

4. Stamps: 'A Triumph of Science' (1853-1861)

De La Rue is now famous for security printing, and before banknotes and passports, we were printing stamps! Stamps allowed us to develop our security features, to showcase wondrous engraving, and to gain a foothold in countries around the world!



The idea of the stamp is, nowadays, seemingly universal. However, stamps were only actually invented in the 1840s! Sir Rowland Hill in 1840 introduced the penny post, ensuring for the first time that the ordinary person could send a letter - and that the sender would pay. The stamp was invented to facilitate the new system and the first adhesive stamp is incredibly famous - the Penny Black.

The Penny Black was printed by Perkins Bacon and increased the popularity of adhesive stamps. In 1853, the Board of Inland Revenue decided it would be a good idea to use similar stamps on their receipts and drafts. To this end, they started looking around for a company for the contract.

De La Rue's First Stamp

De La Rue was still glowing in the success of the [Great Exhibition](#). They'd proven in public their ability to use science and innovation to create new, better products. Despite their lack of experience in stamps, De La Rue jumped to argue their case for the contract, offering in particular to use their new typographical process - which came to be known as letterpress, or surface printing. This process, which Thomas had developed for playing cards, offered three key benefits.

1. Firstly, they would use special 'fugitive inks', which would disappear if someone attempted to clean the stamp for reuse. The increase in letters sent meant an increase in the possibility of fraud.
2. Secondly, that they would be easier to perforate. The Perkins Bacon traditional line engraving method involved dampening the paper, leading to shrinkage, making stamps difficult to perforate. The typographical method would not involve any dampening, alleviating this difficulty.
3. Thirdly, their system was cheaper. [Sir Henry Cole](#), the man who organised the great exhibition, estimated that hiring De La Rue would save the Exchequer £10,000 a year!

De La Rue won the contract! And they so impressed the Board with how cheap the stamps were and their good quality, that they won their next contract, this time for a postage stamp - the fourpenny carmine.



Joubert & the Fourpenny Carmine

The fourpenny carmine, known as the world's first surface-printed postage stamp, is renowned in philatelic (stamp-collecting) circles. This was partly the beautiful 'purest carmine' ink and the smooth new process, but also owes much to the beautiful engraving, completed by master engraver Jean Ferdinand Joubert de la Ferté.



Joubert is another of those designers in De La Rue's early history who gave the company an aesthetic edge. He was a French immigrant, and has been described as 'the last of the great French line engravers'. His art was renowned, with some of his pieces being displayed in the Royal Academy, and his engravings are still remarkable. His design was matched by a keen scientific mind - he dealt with the corrosive effects of vermilion ink, advanced new processes to improve surface printing, and, outside of his work for De La Rue, developed new photographic processes - exemplified in a self-portrait 'burnt in on enamel for permanence'!



Colonel Billy and the Crown Agents Stamps

'Competition with others won't do any longer. The true art consists in not waiting to be stimulated by rivalry.'

These words from Thomas in a journal article are indicative of De La Rue's reaction to the success of their first stamps - they did not stop there! Thomas registered patents, including [one for printing inks in 1855](#). Warren wrote to the Royal Society for assistance, and was rewarded when [Baron Liebig](#) sent over one of his assistants, a chemist named Hugo Müller. Müller perfected the fugitive inks and took control of the stamp department, becoming a great friend (and neighbour) to the De La Rues and eventually a director of the company.

The [watermarks on stamps](#) were also improved - by Warren's younger brother, Colonel Billy.

Colonel Billy, or William Frederick De La Rue, was a man of action. Thomas had sent him out on the road at aged 15, which had given him not only great administrative skills, but also enormous charm:

'An Elizabethan born out of his age, with the charm that overcomes obstacles both human and material – the Cavalier as well as the Colonel.'



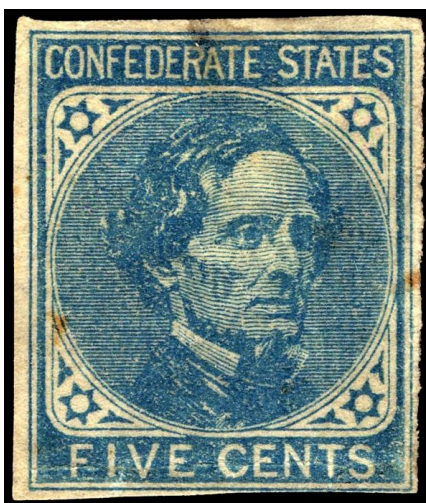
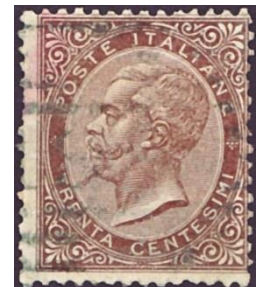


It was mostly thanks to Colonel Billy that De La Rue were able to rapidly expand their stamp line. From 1855 they were working for the East India Company, but the postage for the other colonies rested solely in the hands of the Crown Agents, and Perkins Bacon held their contracts. However, in 1858, Perkins Bacon made a terrible mistake when they failed to consult the new Agent General of the Crown Agents, Penrose Julyan, about a new design. Fuming, Julyan took the dies off the company and started looking about for a new partner. Julyan felt that Colonel Billy was a man he could trust - it has been said that 'he and Colonel Billy took to each other on sight.' He granted Billy the title 'Engraver to the Agents General for the Crown Colonies' and handed over the contracts!

Stamps around the World

In 1859, after a scandalous second wedding to a much younger, Catholic, Swedish girl, Thomas retired. The company was in safe hands however, as Warren and Billy were determined to provide De La Rue's products where they were needed. This involved being onsite when a head of state was dying, or for the birth of new nations.

In 1862, Italy was reaching a high point of its lengthy unification process. Colonel Billy was first on the scene, Warren hurried over, and Thomas came out retirement to look after London production. Warren and Billy proved an incredible duo – diplomacy and charm – securing Italian interest in building their own press. Billy's whole family went out there to help with set up, and, after declining to run the factory themselves, in training Italian printers. The two brothers were awarded the order of St Maurice and St Lazare by the Italians in recognition of their assistance.



A more famous story of De La Rue's world-wide presence, however, was the printing of stamps for the Confederate States of America. The American Civil War began in 1861, and it soon became clear that the Confederate States needed their own postal service, complete with stamps, one of the most recognised symbols of nationhood. The De la Rues were already friends with certain American supporters of the Confederacy, and were called upon to produce stamps and plates, and to export miscellaneous other materials. Joubert engraved the head of Jefferson Davis (President of the Confederate States), which was reproduced on a five cents blue. Millions of stamps, along with a set of plates, were shipped out. One of these ships however, the Bermuda, was arrested at high seas by the Union! Many of the stamps were thrown overboard during this incident, which came to be known as 'The Lost Shipment'. Funnily enough, after this debacle it came to light

that one bill from the Americans was never paid – and the Confederate States still owe De La Rue £294 8s 4d!

De La Rue was rapidly sailing around the world, and printing better and better stamps. This soon lead to new opportunities for security printing – banknotes!