Postal history

Posting messages has happened for thousands of years.

The postal system in Britain started in 1635. The charges were very expensive and there were different rates depending on how far the letter had travelled and how heavy it was. The postage was paid by the person receiving the letter and not the person who sent it.

If someone could not afford to pay, they often refused to accept the letter. The Post Office had carried the letter for nothing and was losing money. This method also did not encourage people to learn to read and write. A review or reform of the postal system was much needed.

A letter from 1833. The letter was folded with the address written on the back and then sealed with a wax seal. This is called an entire.

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The first stamp

In 1840 Rowland Hill suggested that the Post Office should deliver all letters for one penny and this should be paid by the sender. He also suggested that a sticker should be put on the letter to know that payment had been made *"a bit of paper large enough to bear a postmark and covered at the back with glutinous wash which the bringer might, by applying a little moisture attach to the letter".*
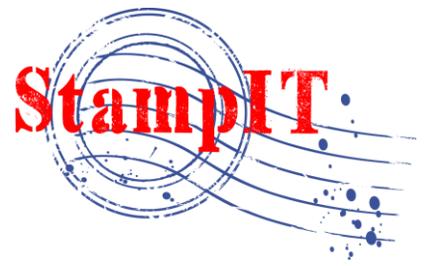
This *'bit of paper'* was the Penny Black, the world's first stamp, issued on 6th May 1840.
It featured the head of the reigning monarch, Queen Victoria.

This was such a good idea that other countries all over the world copied the new invention.

This stamp was issued in 1995, 200 years after Sir Rowland Hill was born.

The first stamp quiz

You may also want to read the StampIT books 'Tearing stamps apart' and 'Postmarks & cancellations' to find the answers to some of these questions. Answers available in online version of this booklet.

1. What year was the first stamp issued?

    _____

2. Did the first stamp have any perforations?

    _____

3. Why is the first stamp called the penny black?

    _____

4. Why did the penny black change to the penny red?

    _____

    _____

Make your own postal history letter

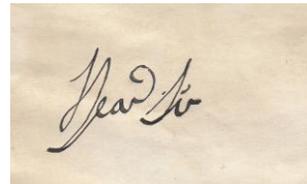Now make your own pretend postal history letter.

You will need:
- paper
- red wax crayon
- lukewarm tea in a tray large enough to hold your paper

1. Take a sheet of white paper and soak in tea for at least 30 minutes (the longer the soak, the more brown and aged the paper will look).

2. Leave to dry thoroughly.

3. Write in an old English lettering on the paper.

4. Fold the paper in three.

5. Draw a seal on with a wax crayon*.

*Wax seals are available from art and craft shops but they must be used with adult help.