

James Chalmers: The Real Inventor of the Adhesive Postage Stamp?

By Michael Peach

It is widely acknowledged that the first essays for an adhesive label to be used for the prepayment of postage were created by Scottish postal reformer, James Chalmers, several years before Rowland Hill's famous Penny Black was created. Despite this, Chalmers' role in the introduction of the postage stamp has gone largely unrecognised. For over 160 years many have fought to seek proper recognition for Chalmers' contribution to the history of stamps, a plight often highlighted through the release of special covers and cachets. Michael Peach highlights several philatelic items that champion the Chalmers corner.

In the 1980s the Post Office produced a series of booklets with covers showing Postal History. Number three in this series, a £1.43 booklet issued in February 1982, featured the postal reformer, James Chalmers (1782–1853), on the cover (Fig 1). The booklet marked the bicentenary of the birth of James Chalmers. The back cover of the booklet has a brief *résumé* of his life:

'James Chalmers was born at Arbroath on 2nd February 1782. He took over the family bookselling business in Castle Street, Dundee in 1809 on the death of his brother William.'

'In 1822, James turned his attention to Post Office improvements and suggested a re-organisation of the delivery service in Dundee. His proposals led to a saving of one day in each direction for the London-Edinburgh post and for this he was rewarded by the Dundee merchants and Councillors.'

'In 1837, he submitted some examples of gummed labels to Robert Wallace, the MP for Grenock. Thus James Chalmers produced the first essays of adhesive postage stamps, the forerunner of the Penny Black.'

The essays are illustrated on the inside of the cover (Fig 2).

In 1982, the James Chalmers Society of Arbroath produced several covers, designed by Eric McCashey, to also mark the 200th anniversary of Chalmers' birth. Covers were cancelled at Arbroath on 2 February 1982, (Fig 3). The cancellation shows Arbroath Abbey with the round 'O'. The insert in this cover has a brief note written by Miss C J Stokes from the Marketing Department, Postal Headquarters, London: *'It is universally acknowledged that James Chalmers produced the first essays for an adhesive stamp. He should also receive credit for the idea of using the town name and also date to cancel postage stamps which has become an important features of our present postal system.'*



Fig 1 The front and back covers of the 1982 Royal Mail stamp booklet marking the bicentenary of James Chalmers' birth (Reduced)



Fig 2 The inside of the booklet showing Chalmers' essays for an adhesive 'slip' to be used for the pre-payment of postage (Reduced)

Who was James Chalmers?

So who was James Chalmers (Fig 4) and was he the first to advocate the use of Adhesive Stamps for the prepayment of postage?

James was born in Arbroath in 1782, the second son of William and Margaret Chalmers. He trained as a weaver but in 1809, at the age of 27, he was sent by his father to work with his elder brother, William, in his business of bookseller, bookbinder and supplier of writing materials at 10 Castle Street, Dundee (Fig 5); the building is still standing today. His brother, besides being a lover of books, was also a lover of women and drink. These weaknesses led to his demise in 1809, at which time James took over and rebuilt the business. In 1802 James had married Margaret Dickson. The Dundee Parish Registers show that they had six sons and two daughters who were christened. At least one daughter died in infancy.

The business prospered and in 1830 James began to publish the *Dundee Chronicle*. By 1840 it had expanded into a printing and ink manufactory in neighbouring premises. Initially, James and his family lived over the shop, but sometime between 1834 and 1840 they moved to 3 Comely Bank, Constitution Road, a block of villas or semi-detached dwelling houses that were part of an early Victorian residential development. It is interesting to note that one of Chalmers' business neighbours was the Keiller family, of marmalade fame.

Chalmers became involved in civic affairs, eventually serving as a Town Councillor and becoming Convenor of the Nine Incorporated Trades (of Dundee): Baker, Cordwainer (Shoemaker), Glover, Tailor, Bonnetmaker, Flesher (butcher), Hammerman, Weaver

and Dyer. He battled in the cause of Burgh Reform, for the repeal of taxes on newspapers and newspaper advertisements, and the removal of the excise duty on paper. After James Chalmers died in August 1853 the business was continued by his son, Charles. Charles took David Winter into partnership in 1868. The business continues to this day in Dundee as David Winter and Son Limited.

Postal reform

After having succeeded in his campaign to speed the mail from London to Dundee in 1822, James' burning enthusiasm became postal reform. During the 1830s there was considerable agitation for postal reform, particularly for payment of postage by weight, as was the practice in several European countries.

Robert Wallace, a Member of Parliament, was the Chairman of the Select Committee on Postage. Chalmers sent him a memo in December 1837 on the use of adhesive stamps. In February 1838, Chalmers sent a printed letter entitled *Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicability* to Lt Col William Maberly, secretary of the General Post Office. In the margins he illustrated designs for a square one-penny stamp, one of which has a line cancellation, DUNDEE 10th February, 1838 (Fig 6). This is the first essay for an adhesive stamp showing a cancellation.

A letter from Chalmers was published in the *Post Circular* on 5 April 1838, giving examples of his 'labels'. He mentions the necessity for cancelling the adhesive postage label with the post office town stamp. Subsequently, his entries for the Treasury Competition (see later) had essays for circular 1d. and 2d. stamps with a line cancellation 'DUNDEE SEPT. 30, 39,' or 'USED DUNDEE' with the dates 'SEPT. 24, 39.', 'SEPT. 30, 39.' or 'OCT. 7, 39.' (Fig 7). It appears that he had been preparing adhesive slips or labels cut out from large sheets as early as August 1834. One of the three main conclusions of the Select Committee's report stated that, 'to save costly accounting and delay of the postage, letters should be prepaid on posting with the full charge.' It was decided that 1d. per half ounce would be adequate.

The Treasury Competition

After the Royal Assent had been granted for the Introduction of Uniform Penny Postage, it was not obvious how this could be achieved. Consequently a Treasury Competition was initiated for proposals for the printed covers and adhesive stamps, which were to be sent to them on or before 15 October 1839. A prize of £200 was offered for the best suggestion and £100 for the next best. Over 2000 entries were received, of which 49 suggested the use of adhesive stamps. There were four best suggestions for the adhesive stamp; Chalmers' essays were not among them.

Uniform Penny Postage was a success. The volume of mail was substantial, thanks to the use of adhesive stamps on covers and folded lettersheets. Chalmers had particularly advocated the use of the folded sheets with adhesive stamps. Rowland Hill had, however, preferred the



Fig 3 The 1982 cover created by the James Chalmers Society of Arbroath to mark the 200th anniversary of Chalmers' birth (Reduced)



Fig 4 A portrait of the postal reformer, James Chalmers

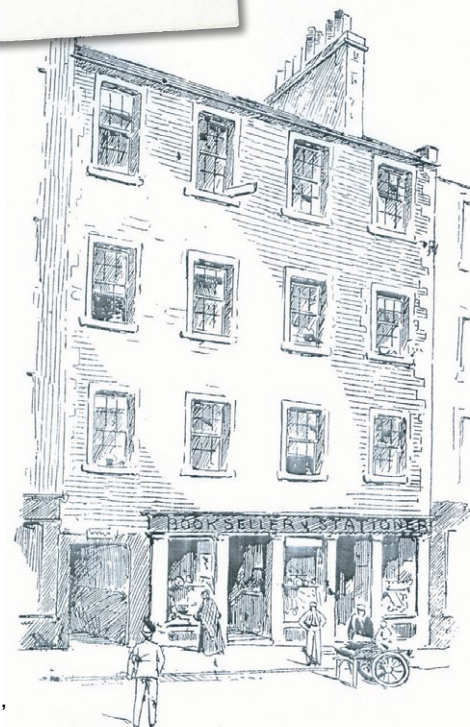


Fig 5 An illustration of 10 Castle Street, Dundee, where Chalmers ran his business

Fig 6 In 1838 Chalmers created essays for a square 1d. stamp, one of which featured a line cancellation of 'DUNDEE 10th February, 1838'

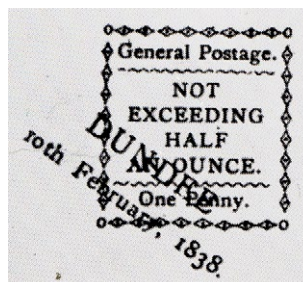
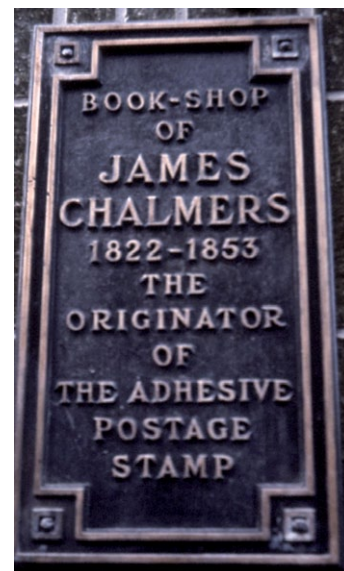


Fig 7 Chalmers essay for a circular 1d. adhesive



Figure 8 The bronze plaque which was formerly located outside the Castle Street shop



use of pre-stamped covers or folders, but the Mulready lettersheets and covers proved to be a disaster. Plain covers with an embossed pink 1d. stamp were prepared in January 1841 on Dickinson's paper with silk threads, which had been used for the Mulready covers to prevent forgeries. Lettersheets with embossed 1d. pink stamps were produced later. All the kudos associated with Uniform Penny Postage and the use of adhesive stamps went to Rowland Hill, and none to James Chalmers.

The good burghers of Dundee were not impressed and were convinced that Chalmers had been a major contributor to postal reform, including the adhesive stamp. On 1 January 1846 at a public meeting of the citizens of Dundee, James was presented with a silver claret jug, a salver, and a purse of fifty sovereigns. A plaque was put up at the side of his shop (Fig 8). It is unclear why the date is given as 1822, as James took over the business in 1809.

The big debate

Who first suggested (invented) the use of adhesive stamps? Was it James Chalmers or Rowland Hill? A battle raged for many years, the interests of both being promoted by their descendants, particularly the sons, Pearson Hill and Patrick Chalmers, and continued for another generation by Col. H W Hill and Leah Chalmers. Both parties seem to have forgotten that adhesive slips or stamps had been used for many years for the payment of taxes.

In his book, *Penny Postage Centenary*, (The Postal History Society, London, 1940) Samuel Graveson notes that, 'The collection of postage by means of a stamp was practiced in Paris as early as 1653'. From as early as 1711, the Stamp Office had been producing adhesive labels for revenue stamps and for taxes on patent medicines.

As mentioned, the fight for the recognition of James's efforts was continued by his youngest son, Patrick Chalmers (1819–1891). His portrait is shown in *Fig 9*. Patrick had entered the tea business in China in 1844 and after his retirement in around 1880 he returned to Britain and lived in Wembley. He was shocked to find that this father had received no recognition for proposing the use of adhesive stamps for the prepayment of postage. During the period 1881–1891 he produced numerous pamphlets and books all aiming to rectify this situation and substantiate his father's place as originator of the adhesive postage stamp. The British Library lists 25 publications, books, pamphlets, letters, etc, by Patrick Chalmers of the Oriental Club during this period. Some have been translated into French.

James' epitaph on his gravestone in the old Howff cemetery in Dundee (*Fig 10*), erected by Patrick in 1888, reads, 'Originator of the adhesive postage stamp, which saved the penny postage scheme of 1840 from collapse, rendering it an unqualified success and which has since been adopted throughout the postal systems of the world.' Due to Patrick's efforts, recognition was slowly being given to James Chalmers, both at home and abroad, as the Originator of the Adhesive Postage Stamp.

After Patrick's death, the cudgels were taken up by his daughter, Leah. In 1939 she published a book entitled *How the Adhesive Postage Stamp Was Born*. Inside, she recalls various documents resurfacing after many years, particularly those of Sir Henry Cole and her aged aunt who had died in January 1891, vindicating the claim that James Chalmers was the first to advocate the use of adhesive stamps for the prepayment of postage.

The cover campaigns

The 100th anniversary of the adhesive postage stamp occurred on 6 May 1940. The Arbroath Philatelic Society organised an exhibition to mark this event. The exhibition was opened by Leah Chalmers and her sister, Christina Chalmers. *Fig 11* shows Christina unveiling a Portrait of James that was presented to the Public Library of Arbroath. Leah is seen sitting on the front row nearest her sister. The exhibition included a number of frames lent by Chalmers' granddaughters showing the original documents supporting James's



Fig 9 A photograph of James Chalmers' son, Patrick Chalmers, who fought ardently for his father to be recognised as the inventor of the postage stamp

Fig 10 Chalmers' tombstone in the Howff cemetery, Dundee

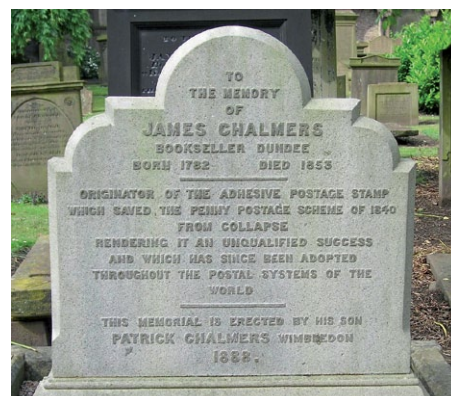


Fig 11 Christina Chalmers unveiling a portrait of James Chalmers during an exhibition organised by the Arbroath Philatelic Society in 1940 to mark the 100th anniversary of the adhesive postage stamp



Fig 12 1940 An Arbroath centenary cover produced in 1940 signed by James Chalmers' granddaughters, Leah and Christina Chalmers (Reduced)

place as the originator of the adhesive stamp. The Society also produced a commemorative cover. The one shown here with five of the Centenary stamps, was signed by Leah and Christina Chalmers (*Fig 12*).

A different commemorative cover marking the 100th anniversary of the first adhesive stamp (*Fig 13*) also states that James Chalmers was the inventor of the adhesive stamp. The cover, with a 1d. centenary stamp, was mailed at the printed matter rate and cancelled on 9 May 1940 at the London Centenary Exhibition organised by the Royal Philatelic Society. The cover was also printed with registration lines (*Fig 14*). These covers were probably produced on Leah's initiative. Leah died on 19 September 1955 at Teddington.

The campaign for recognition of James Chalmers' contribution to postal reform continued, particularly in Arbroath and Dundee. The Arbroath and District Philatelic Society organised an exhibition in 1953 to mark the centenary of his death. The Dundee Philatelic Society hosted the 1975 Scottish Philatelic Congress, and a commemorative cover for the event featured a portrait of Chalmers and images of his essays (*Fig 15*).

The burghers of Arbroath were concerned that the Post Office continued to attribute the invention of the adhesive stamp to Sir Rowland Hill and in 1979 formed the James Chalmers Society. The Society's primary aim was to persuade the Post Office to issue a stamp to mark the 200th anniversary of Chalmers birth in 1782. Despite a considerable amount of lobbying there was no commemorative stamp, but the aforementioned booklet was issued on 1 February 1982 (*Fig 1*). The text acknowledges that Chalmers was the inventor of the adhesive postage stamp. *Fig 16* shows a cover posted on 2 February 1982 at Dundee on which the whole of the booklet, both outside and inside, is attached. The special Dundee cancellation says, 'James Chalmers Maker of the first Adhesive Stamp 1782–1982', and includes a line drawing of the Dundee Town Hall.

There was considerable publicity around the anniversary of Chalmers' birth. On Monday 1 February Morris Scott, coordinator of the James Chalmers Society, appeared on the BBC's *Blue Peter*, and donated 200 first day covers to *Blue Peter's* Indonesian Pipeline Appeal. The next day he was on Grampian TV and on the radio. There was an exhibition of Chalmers memorabilia and artefacts, including the printing press (*Fig 17*) in the Arbroath library. A service was held at his grave.

In the early 1980s the Castle Street store formerly occupied by Chalmers was substantially renovated by its then residents, the McLeish Bros. Grocers. The plaque, which had presumably been removed prior to renovations, was refurbished and unveiled as part of the activities (Fig 8). The store is now occupied by G & A Spink, Fishmongers, and the plaque has disappeared.

In 1988 the 150th anniversary of Chalmers' dated postmark did not pass unnoticed, and commemorative covers were produced by the Dundee and District Philatelic Society (Fig 18). Two years later there was the 150th anniversary of the first adhesive stamp. The Dundee and District Philatelic Society prepared covers and a special cancellation used in Dundee on 6 May 1990 (Fig 19). The cachet on the cover was printed using the original plate produced by James Chalmers in February 1838. The illustrative plaque on the cover has been modified from that located on the outside of the store.

The University of Dundee purchased the old Royal British Hotel, adjacent to the site of Chalmers' shop, at the corner of Castle Street and High Street and in 1965 opened it as a women's residence. The building was renamed Chalmers Hall in recognition of James contribution to postal reform. The property has been sold by the University and presently (February 2013) is being redeveloped as seven flats and a retail outlet, but is still referred to as Chalmers Hall.



Fig 17 James Chalmers' printing press

A place in the history of the post

Certainly, James Chalmers, as one of the many people advocating postal reform in the 1830s, deserves his place in postal history. He may well have been the first to suggest the use of adhesive stamps (labels) for the prepayment of postage and was definitely the first to suggest their cancellation with a date stamp.

This whole matter is probably best summed up in Graveson's words, 'May we accept therefore, if not as an axiom, as a definite probability, that in a democratic state no invention is the product of one mind only, but the fruit of many minds and years of trial and experience. How many real inventors have seen others take credit for something they have passed on to them!'

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G.S.M. June 2013



Fig 14 A registered example of the same cover above (Reduced)



Fig 13 A 1940 cover produced to mark the 100th anniversary of the first adhesive stamp proclaiming James Chalmers as the inventor of the adhesive stamp (Reduced)

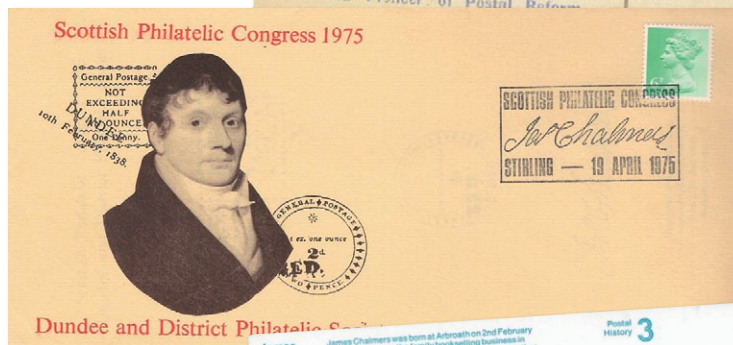


Fig 16 A 1982 Dundee cover with a cancellation claiming 'James Chalmers Maker of the first Adhesive Stamp 1782-1853' (Reduced)

Fig 15 The 1975 cover produced by the Dundee Philatelic Society for the Scottish Philatelic Congress in 1975 (Reduced)



Fig 18 The 1988 cover produced by the Dundee and District Philatelic Society to mark the 150th anniversary of Chalmers' dated postmark (Reduced)

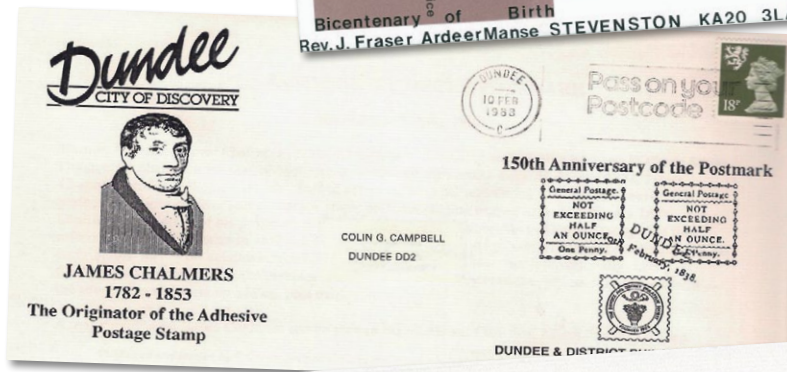


Fig 19 A cover marking the 150th anniversary of the first adhesive stamp created by the Dundee and District Philatelic Society in 1990 (Reduced)

