

JOSEPH SLOPER, PATENTS AND PERFINS

Charles Oppenheim

One of my thematic collecting areas is patents: the history of patents and of patents for inventions, notable inventors and inventions, people who have worked, even if for a short time, in Patent Offices, and so on. In recent years, I have tended to specialise on the overlap between patents and philately, so I have an interest in, for example, Congreve's 1820 patent for compound colour printing, and Charles Whiting's acquisition of his patent around 1825. That's when I discovered perfins. Most philatelists will have come across perfins whilst browsing for new acquisitions or reading philatelic magazines. According to Wikipedia, the name "perfin" refers to a stamp that has had initials or a name perforated within it; this is not quite accurate as a definition, because a perfin could also be any kind of symbol or image perforated into a stamp, not just letters or words. "Perfin" is a contraction of **perforated initials** or of **perforated insignia**. Many philatelists collect perfins, and the UK has a thriving society for such collectors, the Perfin Society, which has its own website (www.perfinsoc.org.uk) and which, like so many philatelic societies, produces a magazine, has meetings and runs auctions. It was founded in 1957 and has about 300 members. Although its emphasis is on the UK and Commonwealth, it also covers (and has members in) other countries. Great Britain was the first country to permit perfins, in 1868, followed quickly by many other countries. Though first applied to just stamps, the philatelic use of perfins later spread to prepaid postcards, and other types of postal stationery in the years that followed. Some perfins are very common and sell for a few pence; others sell for hundreds of pounds, as we shall see. They are not seen nowadays because they have been largely replaced by meter marks.

Why were perfins developed? They were an anti-fraud measure. These were the days where all medium- and large- sized companies had a dedicated post room, which organised both outgoing and incoming mail. Clearly, such post rooms needed a stock of stamps, no doubt of various denominations, to operate. The danger was that post room staff could and did purloin from these stamp stocks for one, or both of two reasons. Firstly, they could use the stamps for their own private correspondence, and thereby save themselves the cost of buying stamps. Secondly, they could exchange unused stamps for cash, as unused stamps had become a type of small change. Indeed, in the UK, unused postage stamps could be officially redeemed for cash at any post office. To reduce this problem of theft, stamp-issuing authorities, beginning with the UK, permitted the use of perfins. Stealing postage stamps which had a perfin and trying to sell them to a post office or any third party quickly became impossible. Figure 1 shows a half penny (GB SG49) used stamp with a perfin spelling the word "Fox". Most perfins comprised initials or other symbols relating to the company that had them added. The Perfin Society has tried to translate as many of such abbreviations into the full name of the organisation responsible for them as possible. Another anti-fraud measure introduced at about the same time (I am not sure exactly when) was the use of underprints, again a popular philatelic collecting area.

Let me now introduce you to the man who first benefited from the Post Office permission for perfins, Joseph Sloper. Figure 2 shows an image of him. Sloper was born



Fig 1: GB 1/2d with FOX perfin

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A.D. 1858, 1st SEPTEMBER. N° 1985.

Indelibly Crossing or Marking Bankers' Cheques, &c.

LETTERS PATENT to Joseph Sloper, of No. 215, Oxford Street, in the County of Middlesex, Builder and Decorator, for the Invention of "IMPROVED MEANS OF AND APPARATUS FOR INDELIBLY CROSSING OR MARKING BANKERS' CHEQUES, DRAFTS, DOCUMENTS, OR OTHER THINGS, WITH A VIEW OF PREVENTING ERASURES OR FRAUDULENT DEALINGS THEREWITH."

Sealed the 23rd November 1858, and dated the 1st September 1858.

PROVISIONAL SPECIFICATION left by the said Joseph Sloper at the Office of the Commissioners of Patents, with his Petition, on the 1st September 1858.

I, JOSEPH SLOPER, of 215, Oxford Street, in the County of Middlesex, Builder and Decorator, do hereby declare the nature of the said Invention for "IMPROVED MEANS OF AND APPARATUS FOR INDELIBLY CROSSING OR MARKING BANKERS' CHEQUES, DRAFTS, DOCUMENTS, OR OTHER THINGS, WITH A VIEW OF PREVENTING ERASURES OR FRAUDULENT DEALINGS THEREWITH."

My Invention of improved means of crossing or marking bankers' cheques, drafts, documents, or other things, with a view of preventing erasures and fraudulent dealings thereon, which forms the words (and) on any cheque, draft, or other document, and for marking personal and household linen. My apparatus or machine consists of the following parts:

Fig 3: Earliest perfin patent



Fig 2: Joseph Sloper, reproduced with permission from www.collection.sciencemuseum.org.uk

The manner of performing my Invention is explained by the following description and the accompanying illustrative Drawings, the first portions of which are devoted to the exemplification of a few of the more prominent 25 among the multitude of applications of which the Invention is susceptible. It may be used for crossing or marking bankers' cheques and drafts with (as for example) the words "Smith & Co.," see Figure 1, or other words or devices for marking bank notes with their value instead of or in addition to a paper water mark (see Figure 2), such value being represented either in figures as 30 shewn, or otherwise in words or marks, as may be preferred; for marking cheques, as under, particular amounts or values (see Figure 3); for marking the value, date, or number, or a symbol, upon exchequer bills, dock warrants, and documents of a like nature, for numbering, dating, or marking, railway tickets (see Figure 4); for numbering or marking the value upon scrip, or 35 certificates, or shares, for producing, or in substitution of, the present embossed stamp, or for cancelling signatures upon cheques and other documents, and at the same time marking the date &c. of cancelling (see Figure 5); for marking the number or date upon turnpike tickets, and the value upon pawnbrokers' tickets, and for marking personal and household linen. But it is to be

Fig 4: Potential uses for the invention

in 1812 and died in 1890. He was a moderately prolific inventor, with five British patents and one US patent to his name. The first of his patents, nothing to do with perfin, was issued in 1857. His earliest perfin patent (number 1985 of 1858) was his second patent; this gave him a UK monopoly on all perfins using his equipment until 1872 (the maximum lifetime for patents was 14 years in those days). His perfin patent (Figure 3) has the interesting title "Indelibly Crossing or Marking Bankers' Cheques, etc.". The patent specification states that the purpose of punching holes in the documents is to "prevent erasures and fraudulent dealings". Why is this title interesting? Because it makes no mention of postage stamps (which were, of course, well established in 1858, the date he got the patent). The text of the patent specification mentions the use of his invention on railways tickets, bank notes, share certificates, turnpike tickets, pawnbrokers' tickets, and even personal linen! (See Figure 4, where Sloper described potential uses for his invention.) However, there is no mention of postage stamps in either the patent's text or title, even though perfins in stamps became common once the Post Office had approved their use, so there was clearly a pent-up demand for them. Not that it matters to Sloper's monopoly, but it seems he did not initially think his invention would be needed or used on stamps. The fact that stamps were not mentioned in his original patent seems odd when we see that the official history of his company (see below) noted that in February 1868 he was lobbying the Postmaster General to authorise perfins. This makes me think he gradually, over a period of ten years, became convinced that his invention was particularly appropriate for postage stamps. He clearly recognised the importance of his perforating method to stamp production when he obtained a US patent (155,340, issued in 1874, and shown in Figure 5) entitled "Improvement in perforating stamps", which not merely only discussed stamps, but also noted that what is created by the perforations could be letters, words or images. Incidentally, he obtained a second relevant UK patent, 3,740 of 1872, on perforating paper (Figure 6). This, as for the US patent, specifically states that his invention can be used to create perforated letters, numbers and/or images, though it does not mention its use on postage stamps. His 1872 UK patent may well have reasserted his dominance of the perfin business very soon after his 1858 patent had expired.

So, by the time the use of perfins on postage stamps had received an official stamp (sorry!) of approval, Sloper's initial patent did not have many more years to run – four to be precise (1868 – 1872). Nonetheless, by the time Sloper's two patent monopolies had finally, around 1888, expired, his company had established such a dominance that it remained the most important UK manufacturer of perfin-creating parts for many years. In 1878, Sloper set up a company called Sloper's Patent Perforating Machines, but this changed to J. Sloper & Co. Ltd. shortly afterwards. His company issued its own perfins on "stamps" in various colours with the perfin "J S", and later "J S Co" as part of its marketing efforts, no doubt liberally distributed to target organisations; examples can be seen in Figure 7.

The importance of patents to the company he founded is made clear in a small booklet issued by the company in 1958, to celebrate its centenary (Figure 8). This official history notes that Sloper founded his first company in 1858, but I do not know what it was called. Nelson (see references) noted that the company was still active in 1967 but probably folded soon after that, no doubt killed off by the popularity of meter marks. The official history notes that the Postmaster General issued a general instruction approving the use of perfins in March 1868, followed by a remarkable announcement dated March 1869 specifically recommending Sloper's company, using the following

UNITED STATES PATENT OFFICE.

JOSEPH SLOPER, OF LONDON, ENGLAND.

IMPROVEMENT IN PERFORATING-STAMPS.

Specification forming part of Letters Patent No. 155,340, dated September 22, 1874; application filed February 6, 1874.

To all whom it may concern:

Be it known that I, JOSEPH SLOPER, of London, England, have invented improvements in perforating-stamps for producing perforations (grouped to represent marks, letters, figures, or devices upon or) through paper and other materials, of which the following is a specification:

This invention consists mainly, first, in the combination of certain removable parts of the perforator with suitable stops to secure the proper register of the parts when the machine is used; and, second, in the combination of certain fixed parts with certain movable parts, as will be fully described hereinafter.

In the drawings my invention is represented fully in detail elevation and plan views.

To enable others skilled in the art to make and use my invention, I will now proceed to describe fully its construction and manner of operation.

Fig. 1, represent a perforator of usual construction, but separated into two parts, as shown, which is suitably attached to a proper standard, adapted to move vertically by the usual well-known or other proper means. a represent the clearer, also similarly divided, which is either connected at each end to the divided matrix b , or suspended in any proper manner from the frame of the machine. The adjoining ends of these divided parts are properly recessed, as shown in Figs. 1 and 3, to receive and hold securely the intermediate removable pieces d c b, Fig. 2.

The stationary parts described, and also the removable, may be provided with any suitable device, it being designed, of course, to use in

practice such devices for the fixed sides as will be desired constantly, and such others for the removable center-pieces as require to be changed from time to time, such as dates and numbers.

For the purpose of insuring the proper relative position between the fixed and removable parts, in order that a perfect register may be obtained, I employ stops or blocks, or equivalent devices, adapted to hold the removable pieces in their proper place, the stops passing through the openings e b , Figs. 7, 8, and 9.

If desired, the removable parts may be employed in connection with a removable carriage, as shown in Figs. 10 and 11.

The devices so constructed may be used in series, either circular or otherwise, for producing a series of marks, as indicated in Figs. 12 and 13; or they may be used singly.

Having thus described my invention, what I claim as new, and desire to secure by Letters Patent, is—

1. The combination of the removable perforator, clearer, and matrix with suitable stops or check-pins, to secure the register of the parts when in operation, as set forth.
2. The combination of the permanent perforator, clearer, and matrix with the removable perforated clearer and matrix, as described.

JOSEPH SLOPER.

Witnesses:
G. F. WARREN,
17 Gracechurch Street, London.
JOHN DEAN,
Of same place.

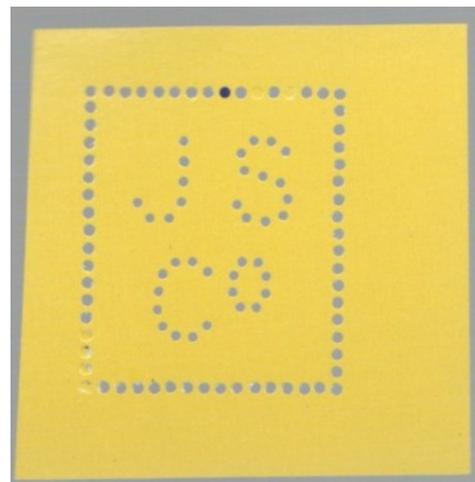
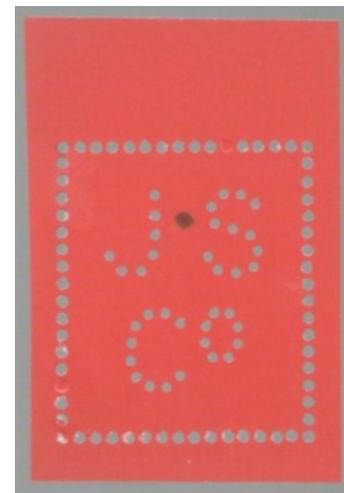
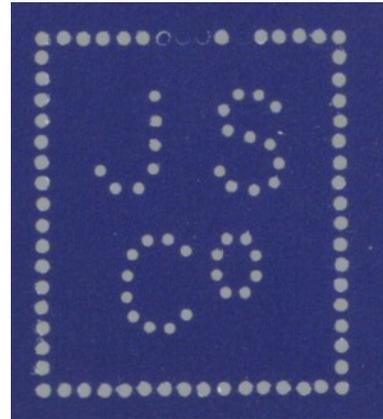


Fig 5: US Patent 1874

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A.D. 1872, 10th DECEMBER. N° 3740.

Tools for Perforating Paper, &c.

LETTERS PATENT to Joseph Sloper, of Walbrook House, Walbrook, in the City of London, Civil Engineer, for the Invention of "IMPROVEMENTS IN TOOLS OR APPARATUS FOR PRODUCING PERFORATIONS (GROUPED TO REPRESENT MARKS, LETTERS, FIGURES, OR DEVICES UPON OR) THROUGH PAPER AND OTHER MATERIALS."

Scaled the 25th February 1873, and dated the 10th December 1872.

PROVISIONAL SPECIFICATION left by the said Joseph Sloper at the Office of the Commissioners of Patents, with his Petition, on the 10th December 1872.

I, JOSEPH SLOPER, of Walbrook House, Walbrook, in the City of London, Civil Engineer, do hereby declare the nature of the said Invention for "IMPROVEMENTS IN TOOLS OR APPARATUS FOR PRODUCING PERFORATIONS (GROUPED TO REPRESENT MARKS, LETTERS, FIGURES, OR DEVICES UPON OR) THROUGH PAPER AND OTHER MATERIALS," to be as follows:—

Certain perforating tools as heretofore constructed, and notably those in accordance with my own patented Invention (No. 1985, A.D. 1858), consist of three principal members, namely, a top member hereinafter called "perforator," consisting of or carrying the perforating punches otherwise called needles or pins; a bottom member hereinafter called

Fig 7: Examples of Sloper's own company perfin

Fig 6: UK patent on perforating paper

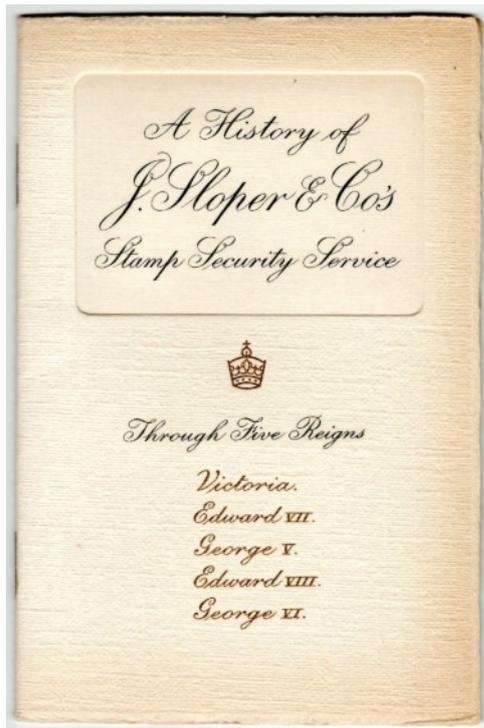
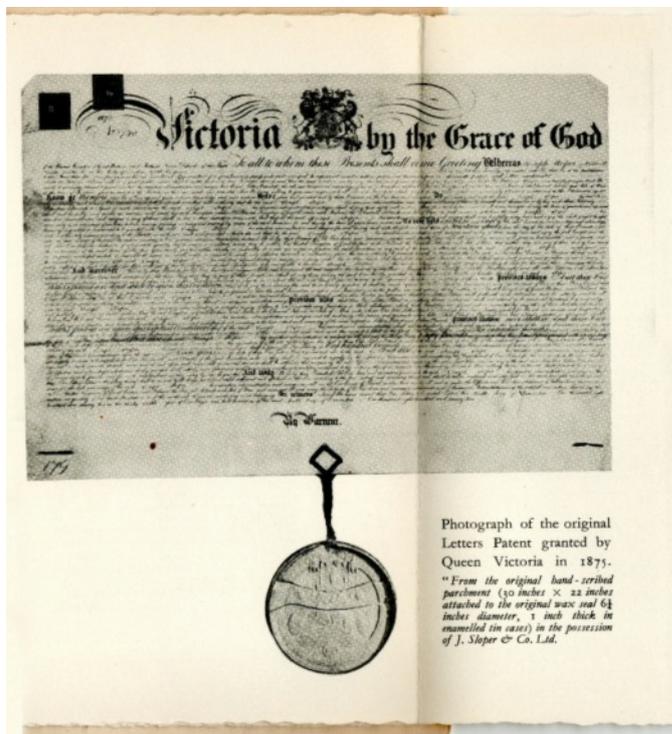
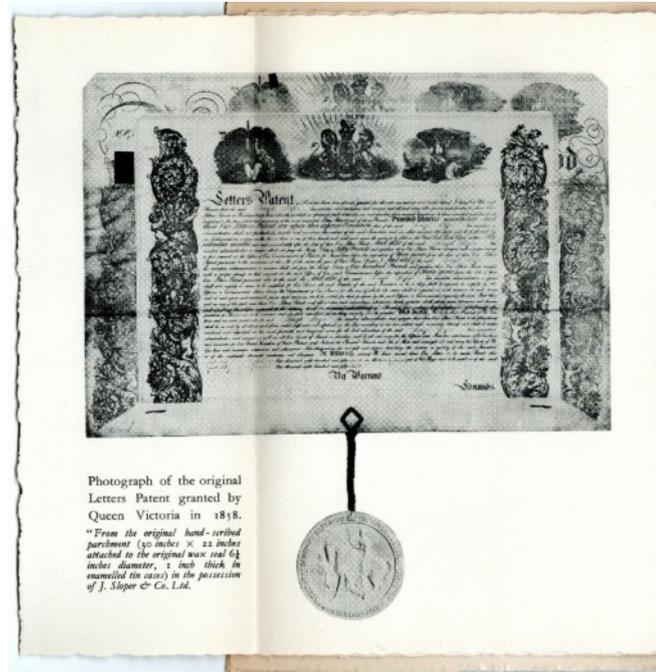


Fig 8: Company booklet 1958



Figs 9 - 10: Patents as published in the company's official history

words: “Mr. Sloper, of Walbrook House, Walbrook, who has devised the machine, would no doubt afford you information on the subject [of perfins]”. The history continues with further extracts from later letters dated 1871-1876 addressed to Mr Sloper offering support and encouragement for the use of his equipment by organisations. The history also quotes from an 1894 letter from a group of large city firms to the Postmaster General, stating that they strongly supported the use of Sloper equipment, having been shown it by Mr. Percy Sloper (presumably Joseph Sloper’s son) of J. Sloper & Co., of 20 King William Street, London E.C. The history concludes with a list of companies who at the time the history was written used the Sloper system; this list includes many of what you would call the great and the good; to my mind, the most interesting client was De La Rue.

The importance of patents to the company is made clear by the two large reproductions of the key Sloper patents - his 1858 original patent, and his later 3740 of 1872 (incorrectly described as 1871) in the company’s official history (Figures 9-10). These were the patent documents held by the company, and readers will note the fact that the patent documents issued to the patent owner are much fancier than the copies of patent documents obtainable by the public (for examples of these, see Figures three and six).

I did say that perfins can be very expensive for philatelists. I give you Figure 11 to ponder over. 

References

- Gault, R. (2021) “MBW and MB/W dies” *Bulletin of the Perfin Society* No. 435, 15-18.
 Matthews, J. (2007) “Joseph Sloper’s American patents” *Bulletin of the Perfin Society*, no. 348, 23-26.
 Nelson, J. S. (1967) *The Handbook of British Perfins*, 2nd edition, self-published.

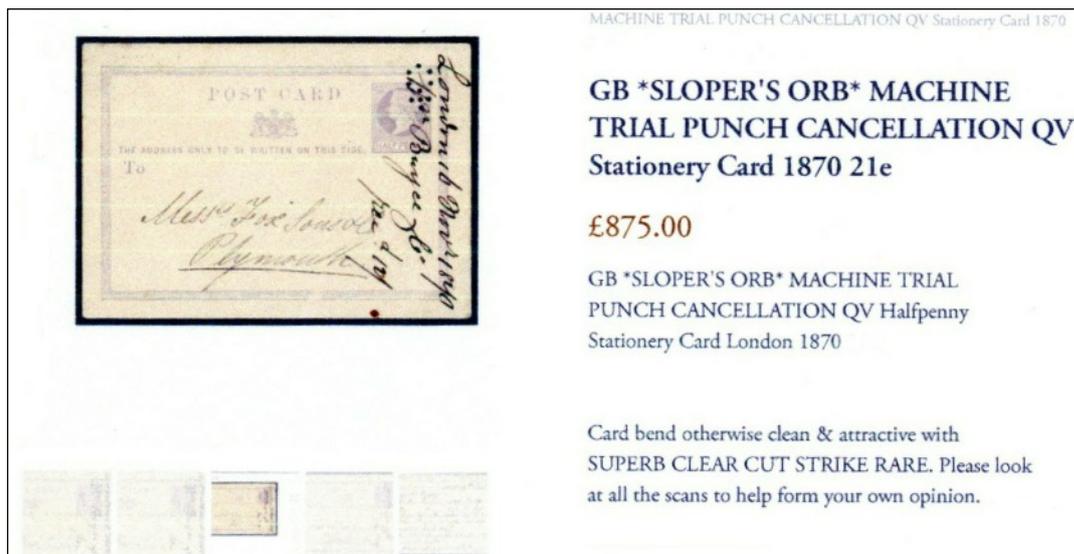


Fig 11: A well-known dealer has (or had) this Sloper item for sale on his website