

THE HISTORY OF THE “SO CALLED” VARNISH INK STAMPS OF GB GEORGE V

by

Trevor I. Harris A.I.E.P.

In the 1920's and 1930's, philately at last achieved a good degree of sophistication. In depth studies were at last being carried out on the printing inks, watermarks, perforations, and much more.

It is therefore very surprising to learn that the varnish inks of the George V stamps of Great Britain, now seen on many different values and printings over twenty five years, were completely unknown during this period. Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, the printers, Harrison & Sons, make no mention of the use of varnished inks, nor of any intention to do so.

In 1923, Sidney Oliver and Hugh Vallancey, two extremely knowledgeable collectors of British stamp who were years ahead of their time, published what is generally considered to be the first truly specialised book on British stamps. It included every shade that they were aware of, and they went into the same depth of study that we are used to seeing from modern philatelic experts.

Indeed, for the 1912-1924 1d value of George V on Royal Cypher watermarked paper, which for them were basically new issues, they listed no less than 17 different shades, one more than Stanley Gibbons list in their Volume Two specialised catalogue of George V stamps, which was published in 2010.

In addition to their very detailed study of shades, they also listed watermark varieties, printing varieties, thick papers, un-milled papers and much more. It would therefore appear inconceivable that Oliver and Vallancey would have missed out on describing varnished inks had they existed in 1923, and had varnish inks existed then, Oliver and Vallancey would almost certainly have known about them.

The fact that there continued to be no mention of varnished inks until approximately the mid-1950s, some 30 years later, only adds to the puzzle, and raises more questions than it answers.

However, we should remind ourselves that the history of philately is not without such periods of silence. It is also not uncommon for some varieties to appear 100 years or more after a stamp was issued.

Nevertheless, enhanced scientific knowledge, and the increased interest being shown by philatelists in similar specialised areas, makes this period of delay a little more than suspicious.

Even more telling is the fact that these so-called varnished inks all hit the philatelic marketplace at roughly the same time in the 1950's and 1960's, and all involved the use of red tinted inks.

Colour control copies show that stamps with varnished inks came from stamp printings of 1913, 1915, 1916, 1921, 1929 and 1934, amongst others, and a 5d Postage Due with W. 35 control (1935) has just appeared on the philatelic market.

It is the red pigments which contain aniline, so it is no surprise that the four values which have appeared on stamp market with varnish inks are the 1d, 1½d, 5d and 1/- values, which all contain red pigments to varying degrees.

Logic dictates that with this plethora of dates, at least one or two would turn out to be common, with large numbers appearing on the stamp market, but no, they are all "rare" and therefore highly priced.

The possibility that stamps with varnish ink might be colour trials should also be considered. From a technical standpoint, printers have frequently been known to make colour trials on a regular basis.

However, had Harrison & Sons wished to produce colour trials with varnish ink, they would certainly have chosen to do so over a continuous but short period of time as was the practice at that time (and still is generally).

It would be most unlikely that Harrison & Sons would print varnish ink stamps intermittently and over so many different years and basically at random, and then for each one to be considered rare. Therefore the notion that varnish ink stamps were colour trials can easily be discounted.



Normal George V stamps in the issued colours

The mystery deepens when we look at the paper used by the printers, Harrison & Sons, to print all these stamps. They used exactly the same un-dyed paper for all values up to the 1/- value, apart from the paper for the 8d value which was dyed yellow or yellow-buff.

Very importantly, the paper seen in varnished ink stamps is generally very shiny but slightly toned, which could well be the result of being kept in a hot and confined condition under pressure. Similar "shiny" adhesives have occasionally been found on Queen Victoria stamps.

Careful investigation reveals that in the latter case, such stamps have been stored for a long time in the old 'crystalline' transparent mounts, which were discontinued in the 1970's, at the same time being held in a relatively warm place and under some pressure, perhaps quite unintentionally, for example if several other albums had been placed on top of it over a lengthy period of time.

It would also appear highly unlikely that the shiny paper which is seen on varnished ink stamps would not have occasionally appeared on stamps of other values which did not contain red pigment in the ink.

Oliver and Vallancey could never have missed out on these varnished ink adhesives with their very shiny but dull paper and strikingly glossy inks.



A 1d "varnish ink" in the scarlet shade with a clean 1988 certificate stating that the stamp has "varnish ink".

The colour of the paper is comparatively dull compared to the issued stamps.

The strange phenomenon of shiny paper and varnished inks on the stamps of GB George V has been described above. However it does not explain how all this came about. For that, we need to call in forensic scientific experts. However, before we look at the scientific evidence, let us first recapitulate on what we actually know.

1. All recorded specimens of varnished ink stamps involve the use of red tinted pigments in the printing inks, regardless of their face value.
- 2). The paper seen in varnish inks stamps generally appears shiny and seems to have been polished or stored under pressure.

During KG V's reign, many red pigments used in printing inks were formulated on aniline-based or coal-tar extract-based dyestuffs. Some of these dyestuffs may change colour, or take on a deeper hue, and even become a little more "rubbery" in texture when subjected to heat (e.g., towards 95°C).

Also, one of the dyes used in the red inks of George V was alizarin crimson. This was made from a coal-tar extract (anthracene). The process of manufacturing alizarin had been invented in Germany in 1868.

If the ink is heated above 200 degrees Fahrenheit (95 centigrade) in an oven, it becomes orange, and eventually extremely bright red!

These same dyestuffs may produce similar effects when treated with other chemicals, more particularly with formaldehyde, formalin, phosgene (coal tar gas) and microscopic elements contained in burning wood gases.

An example of this kind of chemical reaction may be found when intense (or deeper) orange vermillion shades of the KG V Royal Cypher 1d stamp were “manufactured” by unscrupulous people the 1920’s by treating stamps with phosgene or coal tar gas.

The accompanying change towards a more rubbery, plastic looking appearance when carried out under pressure (e.g. within ‘crystalline’ mounts in a heavy book) could give rise to a more shiny and polished finish. In other words, the result could be varnished ink stamps.

Varnished ink stamps are reported to have been found in the old 1960s style stock books with acetate strips where the stamps had not been moved for many years. It is therefore not at all surprising to learn that these same strips contained formaldehyde type chemicals, the use of which has since been discontinued. This could well be considered to be the “natural” way of producing varnished ink stamps, although they might also been subject to heat at some period in the past.

Likewise, the same could be said for varnished ink items that occasionally appeared in the 1950’s and later in stock-books with plastic strips which had survived despite having been very close to a major fire, for example during The Blitz in World War Two. The books might then have been carefully tucked away for many years, only to re-appear at a later date containing varnish ink stamps.

However, these occasional and rare sources of “naturally produced” varnished ink stamps cannot in any way account for the relatively large number of varnish ink stamps now being sold in the philatelic marketplace, and we can only conclude that they must have been produced intentionally from the 1970s onwards.

With large profits to be made, it would not be too difficult for an unscrupulous person to “manufacture” varnish ink stamps by placing old-style acetate over a stamp, putting the stamp under pressure or under a heavy weight, and then subjecting the stamp to extreme heat, perhaps in a wood burning oven, and this might still be going on to this day.

This is also borne out by the fact that many varnish ink stamps have the odour of burning wood, although this smell does lessen with time.

It must also be remembered that during the entire lifetime of the GV Royal Cypher issues, coal and wood fires were extremely common throughout the country, as were unfortunately the resultant house fires. In addition, during the 1914-1918 First World War, Zeppelin dirigibles were flying over the country dropping incendiary bombs on houses which would also undoubtedly have caused many more house fires.

To sum up, when taking everything into account, my inescapable conclusion is that no varnish ink stamps were ever sold over the Post Office Counter during the reign of King George V.

Therefore, it appears that all varnish ink stamps have been manufactured artificially, either accidentally or intentionally, perhaps at the time of issue or at a much later date than when the stamps were actually on sale at Post offices. To put it in a nutshell, in my opinion all varnish ink stamps are fakes.