

British 1984 Frama Issue: Synopsis

This exhibit focuses on the British 1984 Frama issue, the very first machine vended postage in British history where customers can decide what values to purchase on the spot. This exhibit includes the forerunner, trial, tests, official stamps and usage, varieties and derivatives of 1984 Frama issue based on stamp catalogs, publications, and author's own research.

British Royal mail introduced its first automated vending machines on May 1, 1984. Four Frama FE 263 machines from Switzerland Frama AG were installed inside head post offices in Cambridge, London, Southampton, and Windsor. The Frama stamps were available from these four onsite machines between May 1, 1984 and Apr 30, 1985. They can also be ordered from Royal mail philatelic center between May 1, 1984 and Apr 30, 1986. The original denominations of the Frama stamps were between 1/2P and 16P with half penny incremental. Later on, 16 1/2P and 17P were introduced on Aug 28, 1984 to prepare the postal rate change on Sep 3, 1984. The half pence were removed and only whole penny can be printed after Jan 1, 1985.

Unlike normal postage stamps, which are printed once in the factory, there are two stages to print a Frama stamp. The first stage is to prepare background paper without design or denomination in two steps: A phosphorescent layer and gum were applied on top of white paper in the first step; Then, a pattern of green waves as security design were applied by Harrison on top of the phosphorescent layer. The background paper after stage 1 is similar to normal stamp paper and then cut into rolls and loaded into Frama machines. The paper with phosphorescent layer and gum only is called lead paper since they were at edges of original paper rolls. A very rare (2 reported) uncut strip of Frama paper is included in this exhibit to illustrate the Frama paper with edges of lead paper before cut into rolls.

At the second stage of printing Frama stamps, customers can select the denomination and print various values after they paid in coins. The design and denomination of the Frama stamp were then printed on top of the background paper in red ink and cut into pieces. The Frama stamp is designed by Martin Newton with 5 overlapped rectangles and solid Queen's head on the top right corner. The official Frama stamp is 33mm high and 40mm long without perforation.

Before the first day issue on May 1, 1984, Royal Mail tested usage of Frama stamps by applying Swiss test Frama on cover mailing from suburb London to Switzerland. Two forerunner covers with different postal rates are included in this collection. The trail design minus her majesty the Queen's head was tested on normal paper, lead paper, and white paper. This exhibit shows all 3 types of trails with rare blank paper, 0 value and overvalues on normal and lead paper. The design with hollow Queen's head on normal and white paper were also tested and included in this exhibit.

Given the nature of two stages of printing for Frama stamps, there were multiple varieties with different combinations of paper and values outside of normal range. White paper was accidentally left at Windsor machine on the first day of issue, which resulted in famous Windsor White variety. A rare first day cover with Windsor white Frama stamp is included in this exhibit. When an engineer installed new stamp roll at London kiosk for additional values of 16 1/P and 17P in late Aug 1984, the stamp roll was accidentally put into opposite position and resulted in Frama stamps printed on gum side. The lead paper was also available when the roll of lead paper was accidentally left in kiosks after testing.

Except normal values between ½ pence and 17 pence, 0 pence were used to test machines with no impact to sales amount, which is called engineering 0. This exhibit displays 0 values on all 4 types of paper including normal paper, white paper, lead paper and gum side print. The 0 values with offset at back on normal paper and gum side print are very rare. There were also out of range values printed when coins were stuck in machines and accumulated values to the very next Frama stamp printed. The value could be higher than 17 pence and up to £2.90 for normal paper and £2.90 for white paper, both of them are rare and included in this exhibit. Overvalues on lead paper are extremely rare with only 5 values reported including 20P, 21P, 24P, 25P, and 50P, each with a few copies available. One 21P and one 50P overvalues on lead paper are displayed in this collection.

Frama stamps were printed in red for the design and denomination. When ink was almost run out, there were faint prints or almost invisible. When the ink was just replaced, there could be smear Frama stamps printed or heavily offset at back. Examples of both are included in this collection. When the blank background paper and the printer were not completely synchronized or the machine was malfunction, there were also double prints or partial prints. This exhibit includes blank Frama paper with first day cancellation, partial print with top or bottom half missing. Double print Frama stamps were only reported on normal paper with values of 1P/2P, 2P/2P, 6P/17P, 10P/11P, 10P/15P, 10P/15 ½P. Two rare double printed Frama stamps, 1P/2P and 10P/15 ½P, are included in this exhibit.

There were also derivatives based on this British Frama issue. the first one is the first class paid stamp, which was pre-printed to pay 1st class rate within UK. This stamp was printed on top of the Frama stamp paper in factory instead of onsite. It supposed to be used on cassette envelop only. However, it was rarely used on normal mails within UK or on international mail. One example of such usage is included in this exhibit. The second one is the National Postal Museum (NPM) specimen. One Frama machine was installed at NPM in London to print souvenir for visitors. The NPM specimen used different design from official Frama issue and can only be printed in whole pence between 1P and 17P. The NPM label was available between May 6, 1988 and Apr 13, 1993. The paper used for NPM specimen is similar to lead paper without security waves. There were different shades of red, black and mixed colors available for NPM specimen. 7 different colors of NPM specimen are displayed in this exhibit. Since NPM specimen is label instead of stamp, it can not be used as postage. However, it is occasionally used as stamp on cover and one of such usage is included.

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This exhibit first introduces the Frama machine and its paper in chapter 1. Then, it focuses on the forerunner and tests in chapter 2. Chapter 3 is for normal stamps and usage and chapter 4 highlights all known varieties. The last chapter presents the derivatives of Frama stamps.

1 Introduction

1.1 Frama machine

The manufacturer of the Frama machines is Switzerland Frama AG, a famous manufacturer for international automatic stamps. Frama introduced its first machine on Aug 9, 1976 by Swiss Post and then tested by other countries.

British Royal Mail introduced its first automated vending machine on May 1, 1984. The design of the Frama machine is pictured on the maximum card on right. The machine accepted coins from customers and printed stamps at the values in preset value or customer selected other values.

