An Early Photographic Image of a Counterfeit Postal Order

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In June 2008, a group of lantern slides appeared for sale on eBay. They were part of a set produced by H.E. Edgerton illustrating photographic methods and forensic photography\(^1,^2\). The slides were all the standard 3½” square. One of the slides (figure 1) showed two images of a postal order. The upper image is a normal photograph and appears to be a 9/- postal order. However the lower image, which was probably taken in infrared light shows that the postal order has been tampered with. Figures 2 and 3 show the separated images increased to about life size.

![Image of lantern slide showing counterfeit postal order](image1)

**Fig. 1.** Lantern slide by H.E. Edgerton showing two different images of a counterfeit Postal Order.

![Image of tampered postal order](image2)

**Fig. 2.** Image of tampered Postal Order using normal light.
Fig. 3. Image of tampered Postal Order using infrared (?) light.

The forger has modified the numeral and text for the denomination as well as changing the poundage from One Penny to Three Half Pence. For less obvious reasons, the stamp of the issuing post office has also been tampered with. The prefix B immediately gives this away as a 1/- postal order, but as there was no documentation with the slide it is not known how far through the Post Office the forgery travelled before being spotted as false.

Also of interest is the identity of the photographer, H.E. Edgerton, who was a pioneer of scientific photography.

Harold Eugene Edgerton was born in Fremont, Nebraska, on April 6, 1903\(^3\). He became interested in photography through his uncle, Ralph Edgerton, a studio photographer. During high school his summer job was at the Nebraska Power and Light Company. He received his Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering in 1925, and then took a one-year research position at General Electric in Schenectady, New York. It was here that he first saw a strobe light. The technique of rapidly flashing a light in time with a moving object was invented by Worthington and Cole in 1897\(^4\) but useful and practical applications had not yet been realised. He started at MIT in 1926, looking at the dynamics of electric motors using mercury arc stroboscopes and received his Doctorate in 1931 and was subsequently referred to as Doc.

Edgerton became assistant professor at MIT in 1932 and along with two of his students Kenneth J. Germeshausen and Herbert E. Grier started developing commercial applications and a business for the stroboscope and high speed photography.

Fig. 4. H.E. Edgerton, 1933
One of Edgerton’s milk-drop photographs, titled Coronet, was included in the Museum of Modern Art’s first photography exhibition in 1937. A stylised version became the logo for the British Milk Marketing Board. That same year, he began designing studio strobes for Gjon Mili, who became a well-known photographer for Life magazine. In 1939, Edgerton published a collection of his photographs. It was an instant bestseller.

In 1940, MGM asked Edgerton to make a stroboscopic high-speed motion picture with comedian Pete Smith. The ten-minute short, Quicker’n a Wink, won an Oscar.

During the second World War, Edgerton and his colleagues developed the quartz flash lamp and pioneered night-time aerial photography that was crucial to the success of the Normandy landings.

Edgerton, Germeshausen, and Grier became an incorporated partnership in 1947 at the request of the Atomic Energy Commission, being known as EG&G. By 1950, they had perfected ultra-high-speed camera shutters that had no moving mechanical parts, making possible photographs with an exposure of a few millions of a second, and capable of photographing nuclear explosions.

From the 1950’s to 1980’s Edgerton diversified into underwater photography, met and became a lifelong friend of Jacques-Yves Cousteau. Edgerton soon realized the murky ocean waters would require some kind of sound system to augment optical cameras. He developed a penetration sonar-and echo sounder he called a “pinger” – that emitted sound waves to the ocean floor. Echoes returning from the pinger indicated how close the camera was to the bottom. Edgerton invented the “boomer” in 1961 – that could locate objects lying on and beneath the ocean floor.

He died on January 4, 1990 at Cambridge, Massachusetts at the age of 86 and is buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

On July 3, 1990, it was decided to construct a “Hands-On” science centre in his memory. The Edgerton Explorit Center was officially opened on September 9, 1995.

The name Edgerton survived in EG&G through several acquisitions up to 2009. However its current owner, URS Federal Services has announced that the brand name EG&G will be dropped in 2010.

With all of this history, it really is not obvious how he came to photograph a British Postal Order.

References and Acknowledgements.

(1) eBay item 140242550116, ended 25th June 2008.
(2) Thanks to Tony Whitehead for loaning the slide and for permission to reproduce the images.
(3) http://edgerton-digital-collections.org/docs-life/studies-at-mit