

Newspaper Stamp Tax

The Stamp Tax was one of the main instruments used by the British Government to control newspapers and other printed material. It was introduced by the Stamp Act of 1712, initially at a rate of one penny a full sheet or one halfpenny for a half sheet, plus one shilling (equivalent to 12 pence) per advertisement. It was increased substantially in later years, and then reduced, before its final abolition in 1855

Newsbooks and pamphlets started appearing in England in the 1600s. Their publication was suspended between 1632 and 1636 by order of the Star Chamber. Control over news relaxed when the Star Chamber was abolished in 1641.

The Licensing of the Press Act 1662 had for its full title “An Act for preventing the frequent Abuses in printing seditious treasonable and unlicensed Books and Pamphlets and for regulation of Printing and Printing Presses. The provisions of the Act were originally intended to last for only two years but were renewed successively until 1679; they were very similar to the order of the Star Chamber of 1637, and provided that printing presses were not to be set up without notice to the Worshipful Company of Stationers. The Act lapsed in 1679, but was re-enacted in 1682 and again in 1692, but in 1695 the Commons refused to renew it again. However, some of the powers to issue a warrant to search and seize the author of a libel or the libellous material itself were not finally declared illegal until 1765.

The public appetite for news was greatly increased during the Civil War, and was largely met by pamphlets and books. The first published daily in England was the Daily Courant in 1702; it was joined by a number of others, mainly shot-lived. The growing number of newspaper was regarded with suspicion by the government of the day, and they introduced the Stamp Act of 1712. The tax was widely denounced as a “tax on knowledge”. The tax was initially set at ½ or 1 pence depending on the size of the newspaper sheet. The tax was increased relatively gradually to 2 pence over the next 77 years, but the Government became increasingly concerned about the rise of the radical press after 1789, and even more so after the Napoleonic wars when the tax was increased to 4 pence.

The tax was applied unevenly. Originally it had been a tax on papers that carried news, and did not apply to papers which only carried



opinion, and it did not apply to monthly publications. And it was possible to obtain an exemption if the views expressed were generally favourable to the Government.

William Cobbett began publishing the Political Register in 1817; it sold for 2d and it soon built up a circulation of 40,000.

After the Peterloo Massacre in 1819, the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, persuaded Parliament to pass the Six Acts. Four of these concerned the prevention of training or drilling, the holding of public meetings with more than 50 people, the seizure of arms, and reducing the delays in prosecutions. The fifth was the Blasphemous and Seditious Libels Act which provided for stronger punishments, and the Newspaper and Stamp Duties Act which applied the duty to all publications, including those which expressed only opinions, which had previously been exempt. However, monthly publications and newspapers priced at more than seven pence were exempt.

The immediate effects of the Six Acts were to cause the closure of some magazines, like the Spectator, and the prosecution of others, like the Black Dwarf.

These measures led directly to the War of the Unstamped in which a number of radical newspapers refused to pay the newspaper stamp tax, and there were numerous prosecutions of publishers and distributors of newspapers. It ended when advertisement duty was abolished in 1853 and the newspaper stamp tax in 1856. There was also a stamp tax on paper which had been established in 1795, and was abolished in 1861 when it was 3 pence per pound weight.

Stamp Tax and Advertisement Duty

Year	Stamp Tax (pence)	Advertisement Duty (pence)
1712	½ or 1	12
1757	1	24
1776	1½	23
1780	1½	30
1789	2	36
1797	3½	36
1815	4	42
1833	4	18
1836	1	18
1853	1	0
1855	0	0

Values in pre-decimal currency
240 pence = 1 pound



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Additional notes

Prepared by P. Nicholson, 2022

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Sources:

Wikipedia articles on Licensing of the Press Act 1662
www.spartacus-educational.com articles on Six Acts

Further Reading:

Wikipedia articles on “Taxes on Knowledge”