

THE FIRST NORTHERN IRELAND REGIONAL STAMPS

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The possibility of 'Regional' stamps, for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Isle of Man and the Channel Islands, was first raised in connection with King George V's Silver Jubilee of 1935, and re-examined on several occasions, most notably in the immediate aftermath of the war. It was not, however, until early 1956 that the GPO fully addressed the question and Home Office support.

On 21 June 1956 the Postmaster General (PMG), Dr Charles Hill, wrote to Lord Brookeborough, the Northern Ireland Prime Minister, that it was proposed to amend the design of certain stamps by including regional symbols, and that Wales and Scotland would also be affected. Lord Brookeborough replied on 30 June:

While we are quite happy with existing arrangements which emphasise the unity of the Kingdom, we would not wish to be the 'odd man out' if Scotland and Wales are to have their own special issues.

He regretted that he could not give a more definite opinion without knowing the details of any contemplated design change; the PMG replied on 4 July explaining that the Queen had still to approve the principle of having different stamp designs for different parts of the United Kingdom. Once this was done Lord Brookeborough would be invited to suggest suitable artists for new Northern Ireland stamp designs; consulted on the composition and deliberations of an advisory committee 'representative of cultural and artistic interests', which would be set up to make recommendations on designs submitted; and finally, asked to approve any selected designs before they were forwarded to the Queen - this last privilege was not extended to any other region. The Cabinet Office in Stormont Castle

confirmed the following day that ‘Lord Brookeborough and his colleagues are quite happy that the scheme should now go forward as planned.’

The Queen approved the proposal on 7 July, and on 18 July Dr Hill made an announcement in Parliament replying to a written question: 2½d, 4d and 1s 3d values would be issued for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and 2½d only for Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man. The size and colour of the stamps would not be affected and the dominant feature of the Queen’s head would remain unchanged; however, the borders of each stamp would include symbols appropriate to the country or area concerned. It was intended that this ‘would symbolise the unity, combined with diversity, which provides the continuing strength of the British tradition’. Committees would be set up for each region to advise on the new designs.

EARLY DISCUSSIONS WITH NORTHERN IRELAND

On 25 July the Deputy Director General (DDG), S D Sargent, wrote to L J Taylor, Director of the Post Office in Northern Ireland (DPO), on the importance of choosing a committee, arranging for it to meet, and soliciting his views ‘as to whom we might consult about the composition of the Committee or invite to sit on it’. The same day, in a letter copied to Taylor, the PMG asked Lord Brookeborough to suggest seven or eight people suitable to serve, ‘alternatively or in addition ... some suitable person or organisation we might approach direct for names’. He added:

The functions of the Committee, as I envisage them, would be to suggest suitable symbols by which the areas concerned might be represented on the stamps; to suggest names of artists to be invited to submit designs; and to advise me about the selection of designs.

On 30 July Taylor replied to the DDG suggesting that Sir Eric Ashby, President and Vice Chancellor of Queen’s University in Belfast, might usefully be consulted; Sir Eric was also Vice President of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (Northern Ireland) (CEMA). In Northern Ireland CEMA’s role was of similar importance and purpose to that of the Arts Council elsewhere in the UK, and the DPO thought it important that it be represented. The College of Arms should be represented by Sir Gerald Woods Wollaston in his capacity as Norroy and Ulster King of Arms. The Ulster representatives ought also to include two with similar experience to Sir Francis Meynell and Sir Leigh Ashton on the panel that already existed to advise the PMG on stamp designs (the latter were on the PMG’s panel by virtue of their respective positions as typographical adviser to HM Stationery Office and ex-Director of the Victoria & Albert Museum). Taylor also commented: ‘Philatelists in Ulster are not rated very highly and I would take the risk and not include

them in the group.' He recommended awaiting Lord Brookeborough's reply, however, before taking any action, so as to avoid offence.

On 1 August Dr Hill and the Assistant Postmaster General (APMG), C J M Alport, agreed that the present advisory panel should have no part in the choice of stamps for Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, and preferably not for the remaining regions (it was thought that the 'islands' might not be able to set up their own committees, incorrectly, as it proved). Two or three designs should be selected by each regional committee for the PMG's final choice, as responsible for the designs and their suitability for postal use. Sir Francis Meynell could still be consulted on designs informally and as a matter of courtesy.

Lord Brookeborough's recommendations for the composition of the committee, sent to the PMG on 18 August, were:

Major Sir Roland Nugent, Speaker of the Senate (the upper house of the Ulster parliament); proposed as Chairman.

Sir Eric Ashby (already suggested by Mr Taylor on 30 July).

Ulster King of Arms (or his representative, as Sir Gerald was 82 years old).

the Countess of Antrim, a member of CEMA's Art Committee.

R H Crawford, nominated but not confirmed as a Northern Ireland representative on the Council of Industrial Design (CoID); Vice Chairman of the Irish Linen Merchants Association. W A Seaby, Director of the Belfast Museum & Art Gallery (already suggested to the Assistant PMG on 7 August, by H Montgomery Hyde, Unionist MP for Belfast North, and passed by Mr Alport onto the DDG).

James Warwick, head of Belfast College of Art.

Alderman J Ritchie McKee, a Board member of CEMA; a Belfast estate agent.

Mr Taylor's comments to the DDG were in general agreement; he thought that the first five were 'musts', followed by Seaby, Warwick and McKee in descending order of importance, adding that Seaby would have been one of his nominations. He gave the additional information that Warwick had been described as one of the UK's leading silver and metal designers, and became quite lyrical about the Countess of Antrim: 'A prominent Roman Catholic. A sculptress of considerable note. Interested in music and drama. Reputed to be a charming, clever lady.' His only criticism was that 'typography lacks a representative', and he suggested R M Sayers of the 'Belfast Telegraph' if the PMG thought desirable; in the event this was not pursued.

ULSTER COMMITTEE AGREED

On 30 August the DDG recommended to Dr Hill that the Ulster Committee, as proposed by Lord Brookeborough and supported by Taylor, be accepted, with Sir Roland Nugent as

Chairman. The DPO thought this last ‘an excellent nomination’, although the Director of Postal Services (DPS), R H Locke, had expressed the reservation that ‘this selection does impart a certain political flavour’. The names were agreed, and also that the Committee should meet in Belfast for convenience and local sentiment: Taylor and Lord Brookeborough’s Private Secretary, Sir Robert Gransden, were anxious that this point should be clarified. An invitation to the eight was sent on 11 September; all accepted by the end of the month except Sir Gerald Wollaston, who could not attend meetings in Belfast due to his age, and Sir Eric Ashby who stated he was already under several heavy obligations both within and apart from Queen’s University. Sir Gerald’s offer to give what advice and assistance he could from London, without joining the committee, was readily accepted; Sir Eric suggested that his place be taken by the Queen’s University Librarian, J J Graneek. Meanwhile Seaby replied offering to stand down in favour of Professor E Estyn Evans, Professor of Geography at Queen’s, ‘foremost research scholar in Ulster Folk Life and a leading writer on antiquarian matters in Northern Ireland’. Sir Robert Gransden, agreeing that an invitation should go to Professor Evans, commented in a letter on 15 September: ‘We had, in fact, thought of him but didn’t want to overload the advisory body.’ Graneek notified his acceptance on 26 September and Professor Evans the following day.

Taylor visited the DPS on 13 September and discussed the guidelines that should be given to the Ulster Committee for its first meeting. Briefly, these were that no name of the country or region should appear on any design; that different designs should be used for each value; that the Committee could use a single artist if it wished, and ideally not more than three or four; and that the stamps would be printed in photogravure. Otherwise the stipulations were as the PMG had announced on 18 July. Taylor was also supplied, for the Committee’s guidance, with a ‘shade card’, plus colour essays and artwork for the current 1½d UK stamp designed by Enid Marx.

FIRST MEETINGS OF COMMITTEE

On 30 October Dr Hill formally notified Lord Brookeborough that he agreed to the Committee as now constituted; the Committee met for the first time on 6 November, with Sir Roland Nugent as Chairman. Taylor attended and outlined the limitations that he had agreed with the DPS on the designs, and these were accepted by the Committee. Discussion centred on the symbols, emblems or themes to be adopted, and it was unanimously agreed to ask Sir Gerald Wollaston at the College of Arms the following questions on points of heraldry: with respect to the Arms of the Government of Northern Ireland, could any particular features such as the beasts or the shield be used either in isolation or distributed to the corners of the stamp, or would such use render them valueless or meaningless? were there any particular features or section of the Arms which were of especial value and significance?

did the Arms of any counties or cities in Ulster contain features which could be regarded as 'representative' of the region?

were there any other emblems or symbols associated with Ulster which might also be suitable for consideration?

In a note sent to Sir Gerald after the meeting, Mr Taylor explained:

The Committee had it in mind that with the passage of time some attractive emblems or symbols, formerly of considerable significance in Ulster, may have fallen into disuse and, consequently, are now remembered by few.

Taylor confirmed that Sir Gerald's reply was received by 10 November; it was apparently helpful, but unfortunately no details are recorded.

At the meeting on 14 November, the Committee agreed on five symbols 'considered to be appropriate for incorporation' after an arduous discussion. The difficulties that had to be overcome were the selection of symbols exclusively representative of Ulster, while avoiding 'undesirable features of political or other significance'. In a letter to the DPO on 20 November, the Chairman stressed that 'in the arrangement of the symbols themselves on the stamps, great care will be necessary to avoid pitfalls, the significance of which would only be appreciated by Ulster folk of experience'. It was important that the Committee have first sight of designs submitted so that those appearing to include 'undesirable features' might be rejected, prior to formal scrutiny at GPO Headquarters. In a letter to the DPS on 21 November Taylor emphasised that the Chairman had requested him on behalf of the Committee 'to press, if needs be, at highest level for the acceptance of that request'.

The Ulster Committee was showing very proper alertness to the region's special propensity for sectarian controversy; for example, in July 1956 Mr Montgomery Hyde MP had proposed that the new stamps show Northern Ireland's Parliament Building, a sectarian symbol to many in Ulster. Taylor, however, while conceding that 'the excuse given has some merit', thought that the Committee was mainly concerned with securing the prestige of this small but important part of the decision-making process for itself – 'if there is any throwing out of obvious non-starters, they want to do it rather than GPO Headquarters in London'. The DPS agreed with the request for the right to preliminary examination of designs because this was being extended to all the regions.

SYMBOLS RECOMMENDED FOR ADOPTION

The five symbols chosen by the Committee were: (1) the Red (right) Hand of Ulster (2) the Arms of Northern Ireland, without supporters (3) the six-pointed Crowned Star, with the Red Hand

- (4) the Flax Plant, with or without leaves
- (5) a Field Gate with typical Ulster pillars.

The Committee felt that all designs should include the Red Hand, alone or in combination with one or more other symbols; it was explained that the 'Red' Hand could be printed in any colour, despite its name. Sketches of the symbols were forwarded to the DPS by Taylor.

Other points covered by the Committee and reported in Taylor's letter of 21 November were: inclusion of the words 'postage' and 'revenue' was accepted; the ideal portrait of the Queen was the standard 'Wilding' effigy in the size seen on the UK 1s 3d; the letters 'E R' should be included in some way, in acknowledgement of Ulster's ties to the Crown. The Committee's approved symbols did not include such emblems as the shamrock (with connotations that might be seen as Irish Nationalist) or the lily (Ulster Loyalist). Taylor mentioned that Edgar Lewy had written to Sir Roland Nugent on 9 November suggesting that a good portrait of the Queen by an Ulster artist could be used in place of the standard effigy; the Chairman had not thought it proper to raise this in the subsequent meeting, but the possibility should be kept open in case any other region wished to depart from convention in a similar direction.

The Committee also recommended five local artists to submit designs; these were Thomas Collins, Leonard Pilton, William Hollywood, Colin Middleton and Miss T Robinson – 'all Northern Ireland people of merit in their particular fields'. Miss E A Knight of the Postal Services Department (PSD) asked the DPO on 31 October to mention R Buckle and L Thornton to the Committee, as both had approached the Post Office offering designs for any of the regional issues. However, the accompanying information, that nothing was known of Buckle and that Thornton's previous stamp designs had never been found of sufficient merit for acceptance, appears to have influenced the Committee.

The prospect of the flax plant in blue and green on the red 2½d, or the Red Hand on the blue 4d and green 1s 3d values, initiated a brief discussion within PSD about two-colour printing, but this was rejected by Locke on 3 December. On 5 December Sargent submitted the Ulster Committee's recommendations, and these were approved by the PMG and APMG. On 28 December Taylor was asked to proceed, and invitations to the five artists were enclosed with accompanying instructions. These were sent out on 3 January 1957, together with illustrations of the chosen symbols, examples of the current UK low value stamps and a photograph of the Wilding Queen's head for guidance.

INVITATIONS TO ARTISTS

As with all the regional issues, the artists were told that the values were to be 2½d, 4d and 1s 3d, and that differentiation from the UK issue should be confined to the borders of each

stamp. The Queen's head could be moved on a vertical or diagonal axis within the design, but must remain the dominant feature. The border design must be symbolic and pictorial treatments were not admissible. Use of Arabic numerals for the values was preferred, but artists were free to use letters either alone or combined with figures; the inclusion of 'postage' and 'revenue' was preferred but optional. The particular instructions for the Ulster stamps related to the Red Hand and the letters 'E R'; the latter, 'separate or intertwined', were to be included 'if practicable' and the former was an unconditional 'must'. Although each stamp would be printed in the standard colour for that value, it was explained that the Hand could be drawn either plain or with the conventional shading used in heraldry to indicate 'red'.

The artists were asked to submit rough wash drawings in sepia-grey four times stamp size, ie, 3.44 inches deep by 2.84 inches wide for the printed area excluding the gutter. A 'shade card' was attached showing the range of tones that could be reproduced in photogravure. Designs for the separate denominations should be distinguished by different motifs or combinations of motifs; artists were urged to submit at least three drawings. It was explained that the initial deadline for rough sketches was 7 February, and 20 guineas (£21) per design would be paid up to a maximum of 40 guineas (£42) per artist. For those drawings then selected for completion there would be a further four weeks allowed, and payment of a further 20 guineas per design. Finally 160 guineas (£168) would be paid for any design actually used.

All five artists submitted sketches by the deadline; on 22 February Locke forwarded the 24 drawings received to the DPO, together with ten sheets of bromides. As the artists' names had been obliterated or removed from the originals to ensure they were examined impartially, the designs were numbered as follows for Taylor's reference:

Hollywood – 4d (1), 2½d (2), 1s 3d (3)

Robinson – 1s 3d (4), 4d (5), 2½d (6), 4d (7), 1s 3d (8), 2½d (9)

Middleton – (10), (11), 2½d (12), (13), (14)

Pilton – 2½d (15), 1s 3d (16), 4d (17), 1s 3d (18), 4d (19), 2½d (20)

Collins – 4d (21), 4d (22), 1s 3d (23), 2½d (24).

Middleton explained that he had deliberately shown a sheaf of six flowering flax stalks (design 12) and an entire flax plant with six rootlets (14). Design 14 also featured a weaver's shuttle, 'thus including both the agricultural and industrial aspects of linen'. Middleton used dark backgrounds throughout on the principle that the Queen's crown did not otherwise register satisfactorily. He concluded: 'I have concentrated on layout, and have made no effort to balance tones.'

A weaver's shuttle was also used on 16, by Leonard Pilton. The Arms shown in design 8 by Miss T Robinson were those of the City of Belfast.

Locke included PSD's technical comments on the designs in his letter to Taylor:

(1) The value had been omitted from designs 10, 11, 13 and 14.

(2) 17 and 20 included 'postage' but not 'revenue'; the Inland Revenue took the view that stamps which could be used for revenue purposes should bear both words or neither.

(3) Ships (5 and 6) and aircraft (6) were not exclusively symbolic of Northern Ireland and should not therefore be used.

(4) 'NI' should not be shown on design 7 as British stamps did not bear the name of the country of origin.

(5) The value on 15 was insufficiently clear.

(6) The arrangement of the words 'four pence' on 22 was unsatisfactory; if the design was chosen for completion the value should be shown in numerals.

REVIEWS OF PRELIMINARY ARTWORK

On 5 March Taylor reported that the Committee had met on 27 February. PSD's technical comments had been accepted; only eight drawings were considered to merit completion, and these were 1, 2 and 3 by Hollywood, 15, 16, 17 and 19 by Pilton, and 24 by Collins. Middleton and Robinson had been rejected outright (14 years later Colin Middleton's painting 'Slieve na brock' was reproduced on the 'Ulster 71' set). The Committee indicated it wished to withhold detailed criticism and improvements until PSD had subjected the chosen designs to its own scrutiny.

Replying to the DPO's letter on 13 March, Locke made a number of preliminary technical comments:

Design 2

The 2½d value figure could be made slightly more prominent by either enlarging it or enclosing it in a ring to separate it from the flowers.

Design 15

The 2½d value must be made much more prominent, possibly by making the figures dark.

Design 16

The 'E R' might possibly be in bolder lettering.

Design 17

PSD preferred to show value figures in Arabic numerals rather than words; 'revenue' should be added to 'postage'; the 4d figure should be more prominent; the star at the bottom of the design appeared to be incorrect.

Design 19

The value should be made more prominent; it was again suggested that dark figures should be used. As with 16, 'E R' should perhaps be in bolder lettering.

No remarks were offered on designs 1, 3 and 24.

The Ulster Committee met on 25 March; details of its further comments were supplied to the DPS on 8 April:

Design 1

An improvement would be effected by making the leaves of the flax plant a little thinner and curved as in 2; the leaves need not be made the same size as in 2.

Design 2

The circle enclosing the Red Hand should be reduced in size to balance the 2½d and reveal a little more stem and foliage of flax.

Design 15

The value figures should be darker and more prominent. The number of Red Hands should be reduced from six to four by omitting the two in the centre of the design. The roots in the bottom corners should be replaced by 'E' on the left and 'R' on the right. The flax leaves should be modified as on 2. Shading should be eliminated on the flowers to remove the resemblance to the Tudor Rose. The inner of the upright double lines on each side of the design should be removed to widen the centre section and the scalloped edging removed on both sides.

Design 17

The word 'fourpence' should be replaced by 'revenue' and the latter dropped to the bottom of the design. 'Postage' and 'revenue' should be approximately the same size as on 15. The foliage and star should be eliminated at the bottom of the stamp; a Crowned Star with the Red Hand should be placed at bottom left and 4d value figures at bottom right. The Queen's neckline could then be redrawn as on 1 and the leaves as on 2.

Design 19

As suggested by PSD, the value should be in dark lettering to make it more prominent, and 'E R' should also be bolder. The star should be omitted; the Queen's neckline should be redrawn as on 1 and the flax leaves as on 2.

Design 24

The gate should be slightly higher and a little less elongated to be truly representative.

No comment was offered on 3; the Committee now considered that 16 was of insufficient merit to warrant further attention, and recommended it be discarded. The view was strongly expressed that the GPO must ensure the Red Hand featured on all designs was uniform with that represented in the Arms of the Government of Northern Ireland (the DPO enclosed a suitable illustration in his letter to Locke). The Committee's final recommendations were:

2½d, first choice 2, second 1;

4d, first 17, second 15;

1s 3d, first 3, second 24.

Design 19 was put forward as general reserve.

TECHNICAL OBSERVATIONS BY PRINTERS

Mr Coulton of Harrison and Sons, the stamp printers, was asked to comment on the Committee's choice including the suggested amendments, and made the following remarks:

Design 2 (1st choice, 2½d)

The Committee's recommendations would mean a reduction in size of the Hand, which was already as small as was desirable. The current wash drawing showed the Hand in black and the rest of the design in grey; accurate colour reproduction of this would mean that the Hand would be a different shade from the red of the finished 2½d.

Design 1 (2nd choice, 2½d)

The Hand and Crown were both on the small side and the latter was too detailed, hence there would be degradation of detail in reproduction. There would be no difficulty with the foliage.

Design 17 (1st choice, 4d)

There would be no difficulty with printing if the lettering were strengthened.

Design 15 (2nd choice, 4d)

The Hands in the background would reproduce merely as unidentifiable blobs. The value and lettering should be strengthened.

Design 3 (1st choice, 1s 3d)

As with design 1 the small size and detail of the Hand and Crown would lead to degradation of the detail of both in reproduction. The lettering was thin and should be strengthened to match that of designs 1 and 2.

Design 24 (2nd choice, 1s 3d)

Shortening and heightening the gate as recommended by the Committee would be helpful from the printing point of view. The 'd' in the 2½d value as shown on the design at present was too small and this should be improved when the value was altered to 1s 3d.

Design 19 (Reserve)

The value might with advantage appear directly on the background rather than within a shield. The lines on the Hand and shading on the flower would not reproduce clearly.

On 29 April Locke wrote to the APMG (Kenneth Thompson, who had replaced Mr Alport in January immediately following the appointment as PMG of Ernest Marples). He listed the Ulster Committee's choice of seven designs for completion and proposed that in the case of 1, 3, 15 and 17 the artists be asked to implement changes to original artwork as suggested by the Committee (none, in the case of 3). For design 2 he suggested the artist be asked to redraw the spray of flax so that the value could be enlarged to the same size as the Hand, rather than reducing the latter as the Committee had proposed; alternatively the value could be placed within a ring separating it from the flax. On 24 it was necessary to redraw the Hand to match the 'official' version in addition to the Committee's amendments. For 19, Locke proposed that the artist might consider removing the hexagonal 'shields' behind the values in line with Harrison's suggestion, as well as the amendments outlined by the Committee.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETED DESIGNS

On 3 May the DDG told Locke that the APMG had largely approved his recommendations, subject to certain reservations, of which the most important was that he inclined towards the Committee's solution of the problem of design 2. Thompson was concerned that the Queen's head on 17 was too small (it was in fact the minimum permitted size, that of the UK issue ½d). He suggested that the Hand and star on the 'reserve', design 19, might effectively be combined into one symbol as used elsewhere; his other remarks were that 15 was 'too fussy', 3 'a very pleasing design', and 24 'not really worthy of a special effort'.

Locke wrote to the DPO on 16 May listing the instructions for the completion of designs. Broadly these incorporated the Committee's original suggestions as modified by Harrison's and PSD, and the reservations of the APMG; the fresh points emphasised included the following:

Design 1

As first pointed out by Coulton in April, the Crown was almost too small to print satisfactorily, and it was suggested that some of the detail should be omitted.

Design 2

As suggested by the Committee and favoured by the APMG, the circle enclosing the Red Hand should be slightly reduced; the value should be slightly enlarged to balance it and possibly also enclosed in a ring.

Design 3

The Crown should be simplified for the same reason as in design 1, and the lettering of 'postage' and 'revenue' thickened slightly.

Design 15

The four remaining Red Hands might be somewhat enlarged.

Design 17

The lettering should be bolder, as pointed out by Coulton the previous month.

Design 19

The star should either be omitted, or combined with the Red Hand as suggested by the APMG. The fine shading on the flax petals should be omitted due to Coulton's warning that they would not print satisfactorily.

Design 24

The Red Hand was to be redrawn as per the illustration enclosed with the original Instructions to Artists.

As well as completing the designs, detachable tabs were requested for each value; Hollywood was asked to prepare a 2½d tab, Pilton a 4d, and Collins a 1s 3d. All three artists were asked that the leaves of flax in their designs should be made slightly curved 'to suggest a more natural growth', and that the Queen's head should be trimmed when mounted 'so as to give an elegant finish to Her Majesty's neck and corsage'.

Taylor replied to the DPS on 21 May that he had discussed the proposed instructions for completion of designs with the Chairman of the Committee. Sir Roland accepted these, subject to the following points:

the Red Hand should be redrawn in all seven designs, not just 24.

the value on design 2 should not be enclosed in a ring; when the value was enlarged this should be done without affecting the adjacent spray of flax (the DPO personally thought a slight redesign would be tolerable).

two versions of design 15 should be prepared, (i) with detachable tabs bearing the top two Hands so that the effect of omitting these also could be studied, and (ii) with the two bottom Hands only, slightly enlarged (with the Queen's head slightly raised if this change permitted it).

the star should be omitted rather than combined into one with the Red Hand, and the hexagonal backgrounds to the values should be retained.

It was decided to leave the redesign of the spray of flax in design 2, which caused Sir Roland such anxiety, to the artist's discretion, rather than labouring the point in instructions; it was also decided to ask for two versions of 19, one omitting the star altogether as preferred by the Chairman and Taylor, and one combining it with the Hand as favoured by Locke and the APMG. These were all adopted and incorporated into the new Instructions to Artists, sent out on 29 May to Pilton, Hollywood and Collins. Payment of 40 guineas was also made to each of all the five original artists for their preliminary designs.

FINISHED ARTWORK RETURNED

All three artists returned completed designs by 24 June; Pilton explained that he had altered the lettering of 'postage' to restore the balance on the version of 19 on which he had omitted the small star. He also stated that if the Red Hand was likely to appear on the 4d rather than on the red 2½d as he had intended, it ought to be redrawn 'in outline with vertical tincturing as in heraldry'.

A long interval followed during which the DDG met Sir Francis Meynell of the PMG's Advisory Panel on 9 August to show him the finished drawings. Sir Francis' opinion was that he liked design 1, the Committee's second choice for the 2½d, better than its first choice, 2, which he thought 'bitty' - a preference with which PSD representatives present concurred. He considered that there was an awkward space at the top of 1 and wondered whether the flowers could be raised slightly; Miss E A Knight of PSD said that this would mean completely redrawing the design at a time when the schedule was already running late. Sargent suggested the Queen's head be raised slightly instead, 'but this was not thought to be a good solution and it was agreed to leave the point unless it could be put right without difficulty'.

Sir Francis preferred 17, first choice for the 4d, to any variant of the second choice, 15, on which he disliked the 'criss-cross' effect. He commented on 3, first choice for the 1s 3d, that there seemed to be too many elements in the design, and that he would particularly like to see 'E R' omitted; he disliked the double denomination on the second choice, 24, and found the gate and posts 'rather violent'. He dismissed the reserve, 19, as somewhat dull.

It was decided by early August that the denominations would change due to the impending postage rates increase, and on 22 August all three artists were asked to prepare new value tabs for 3d and 6d, in place of the 2½d and 4d respectively. Fresh 1s 3d value tabs were also requested, as, although this value was not affected, the intended allocation of designs to

denominations was uncertain. William Hollywood was also asked to supply an overlay tab for design 3 so that the effect of omitting 'E R' as suggested by Sir Francis Meynell could be studied - PSD was doubtful about the inclusion of the letters in bold characters. The artist replied that omitting the letters would probably require a slight rearrangement of other symbols in the design to maintain the correct balance, but 'no doubt this has already been noted'.

ULSTER STAMPS BRIEFING FOR APMG

Between 3 and 19 September Harrisons prepared bromides of the completed drawings incorporating the revised values and it was arranged that these should be seen at a meeting of the Ulster Committee attended by the APMG on 11 October. Briefing notes prepared for Thompson by PSD on 9 September included the following:

Design 2 (3d – Committee's 1st choice)

Photographs of the Wilding portrait of the Queen's head had been in short supply the previous month; as a result Hollywood had had to copy a portrait supplied previously, with resultant defects of tone and definition. However, these could easily be remedied in collaboration with the printers.

Design 1 (3d – Committee's 2nd choice)

PSD indicated that it supported Sir Francis Meynell's preference for this design rather than the Committee's first choice. The same comments about the Queen's head applied as with design 2.

Design 17 (6d – Committee's 1st choice)

PSD liked the design but felt the Queen's head should be slightly enlarged.

Design 15 (6d – Committee's 2nd choice)

Three versions had been prepared: (A) with two Hands only in the lower corners, drawn larger than in the artist's original sketch; (B) with two Hands as 'A' but in the original size; (C) with four Hands, one in each corner, in the original size. PSD expressed a slight preference for 15A.

Design 3 (1s 3d – Committee's 1st choice)

Two versions had been prepared: (A) as per the original drawing; (B) with 'E R' removed. PSD agreed with the artist that the elements of the design would have to be rearranged if 15B were used. It was suggested that 15A might be used with 'E R' in smaller letters. The same comments about the Queen's head applied as with Hollywood's other designs, 1 and 2.

Design 24 (1s 3d – Committee's 2nd choice)

PSD thought that the design was 'not quite square', although this could easily be remedied; the gate and posts were rather too bold; the Hand should have some lines across the bottom of the fingers and around the base of the thumb (this suggestion was apparently based on changes already incorporated in 19A).

Design 19 (Committee's reserve, any denomination)

Two versions had been prepared: (A) with the Hand only at top right; (B) with the Crowned Star and Hand at top right. PSD preferred 19A; there were doubts about the ER monogram at the foot of both designs but would not press for a change if the Committee thought it should remain. The artist had warned that if the design was chosen for the 1s 3d the size and balance of the value spaces would have to be modified.

Also on 9 October, Miss E A Knight wrote to the DPO, asking that the impending meeting should select not less than four nor more than five designs for colour essaying, in the standard shades of violet (3d), purple (6d) and green (1s 3d). A photograph of the Wilding Queen's head slightly larger than that on the bromides of design 17 had been sent so that the Committee could assess whether the head in the design could be enlarged as suggested in the APMG's briefing notes. On designs 17 and 19B, the Hand had been printed in lighter tones; the propriety of this could be checked if the Committee wished. On the question of colour, the 6d would be in either dark or light purple, depending on which design was selected (if dark, about the tone of the Queen's hair on the current UK 6d). It had to be considered whether a dark purple 6d of similar design to the plum-coloured UK issue 11d might lead to confusion between the two, although Miss Knight did not think this a real danger. It was more important to choose a design for the 1s 3d that would avoid confusion with the green UK 1½d; on this basis there was something to be said for design 24, but Miss Knight was reluctant to press for its selection on these grounds alone.

SELECTION OF COMPLETED DESIGNS

At its meeting on 11 October the Committee reached the following conclusions:

3d

Design 1: the value should be redrawn in a somewhat lighter style similar to the '1s 3d' on 3A.

6d

Design 15A: the background shading around the crown should be strengthened so that it appeared more prominently. The figure '6' should be moved a very small fraction to the right to place it at exact centre of the stamp's breadth, and the 'd' placed if necessary a little nearer the arm of the figure, as in ' 17.

1s 3d

Design 3A: the 'E R' should be somewhat smaller in keeping with the value. The head should be moved a trifle to the left to allow more clearance between the Queen's crown and the spray of flowers, but not so much as to place it in the centre of the design.

Reserve

Design 24 should be the reserve for the 3d and 6d; the symbols in the top corners should be switched over and the Hand shaded as in 19A. Design 2 should be the reserve for the 1s 3d, the only change required being the value.

The DPO reported these decisions to Miss Knight on 15 October, adding that although there had been no objection to the Red Hand on any of the finished designs, it would be well to clear the accuracy of its representation with the College of Arms – 'folk are so critical on this point'. Miss Knight reported on 1 November that she contacted Sir George Bellew, the Garter King of Arms, who had been advising on points of heraldry relating to Ulster since Sir Gerald Wollaston's death on 4 March 1957. The query was whether the thumb should be turned outward as the Committee wished, or drawn inward as Sir George thought; it was historically documented in a variety of positions, but he found a tracing from a 15th century coat-of-arms largely similar to the Hand as preferred by the Committee: he acknowledged that the motif as shown was sufficiently accurate. Later W A Seaby, Committee member and Director of the Belfast Museum, supplied Taylor with an illustration of an outward-oriented thumb from the personal seal of King of Ulster Hugh O'Neill, who died in 1364.

The PMG approved the Ulster Committee's decision on 20 October, and the artists were asked for final modifications the following day. Pilton was able to supply his revised design 15A for the 6d by return of post. Collins' revised design 24 (the 3d and 6d reserve) was to hand by the beginning of November; it was noticed that his changes to the Hand were not in line with those requested, and Harrisons was asked on 6 November to amend them accordingly. Hollywood supplied a revised drawing of design 2 (the 1s 3d reserve) on 12 November, of 1 (the 3d) on 21 November, and 3A for the 1s 3d on 28 November. On 10 December payment was made to all three artists for completion of their designs - 20 guineas (£21) to Collins, 60 guineas (£63) to Hollywood, and 80 guineas (£84) to Pilton.

FIRST ESSAYS PRODUCED

Miss Knight contacted Harrisons on 22 October and outlined the requirements for essays. These following were received from the printers on 3 January 1958.

The colours had been stipulated immediately after approval of the Committee's recommendations in October, when design 1 had been ordered in violet, not green as

supplied; this was pointed out to the printers, and a further set of six essays of design no. 1 bearing the 3d value in violet followed on 6 January. The following day Miss Knight wrote to A Wolstencroft (who had just replaced Locke as DPS) that she thought both 1s 3d designs far too like the UK 1½d, and asked Harrison's for further essays in green of designs 15A and 24. Two sets of essays were supplied on 10 January.

On 14 January Miss Knight wrote to the DPO enclosing two copies of each essay for examination by the Committee. She explained PSD's concern over the 1s 3d essays: As we rather expected the 1s 3d design, either the first or second choice, is very similar to the present permanent issue 1½d, mainly because of the solid background ... Although it might be argued that the proposed Northern Ireland 1s 3d stamp is no more similar to the existing [UK] 1½d value than is the existing [UK] 1s 3d, I ought perhaps to mention that we have had complaints from staff associations about the similarity of the two [latter] stamps.

Taylor replied on 3 February with the news that at the meeting on 24 January the Committee had revised its selection; it now recommended design 3A instead of 1 for the 3d, and 24 in place of 3A for the 1s 3d. Design 15A remained first choice for the 6d. Design 2 was now a reserve for the 3d as well as the 1s 3d, and 24 for the 6d only. Suggested modifications to the essays were:

3d (design 3A)

The shading on the Queen's neck was too heavy and should be lightened to correspond in tone value with the UK issue 9d stamp. The '3d' should be redrawn as on the essay of design 24, with a horizontal top stroke and of the same thickness as 'E R'. The uprights of 'E R' should be correspondingly reduced in thickness a fraction.

6d (design 15A)

The surround of the Queen's head should be masked so that the shading immediately around the face, hair and crown was as light as in the UK issue 6d stamp. The shading should deepen towards the borders of the design to maintain the present weight of tone.

1s 3d (design 24)

The value should be as on the completed drawing seen by the Committee the previous October; the figure '3' should be a little stronger.

Reserve 3d and 1s 3d (design 2)

The same comments about shading of the Queen's neck applied as with design 3A. If chosen for the 3d value, the figure '3' should be taken from the '1s 3d' in design 24 and reduced in size.

Reserve 6d (design 24)

The figure '6' should be taken from design 17.

The following day Miss Knight asked Harrison's for six further essays each of 3A in violet, 15A in purple and 24 in green, implementing the suggested amendments, plus six essays of design 2 in violet without changes.

NEW PURPLE INK FOR 6d

Harrison's Manager, H A Berry, replied on 6 February that the company hoped to produce the revised essays by 19 March; he commented: 'It is disappointing to have these revisions, particularly as it would seem they could feasibly have been carried out at the bromide stage.' In discussions with Miss Knight on 28 February, it was agreed that a new purple ink should be used which was slightly different in colour to that used before. This was because the fugitive ink in which the Inland Revenue required the GPO to print the 6d stamp, resulting from its heavy revenue usage, had recently had to be changed, and it had not been possible to achieve an exact match of colour. On 6 March Miss Knight asked for the essays of 15A to be printed in the 'new' purple, plus a set of 24 without revisions in the same colour. There was a slight delay in the availability of the new ink, but the essays were finally supplied on 26 March.

Miss Knight forwarded essays to Taylor on 31 March with the explanation that, to save time, versions of the reserve designs incorporating the requested changes had not been essayed; further work would only be done on the reserves if the Queen preferred them to the first choices. She thought that overall 'the arrangement of the designs for the various values now seems very satisfactory'. In his reply on 9 April the DPO agreed with this and found the new shade of 15A an improvement.

On 25 April the Committee's revised recommendations were submitted to the PMG, slightly simplified in that design 24 was listed as a first choice along with 3A and 15A, while 2 was named only as a general reserve. During the first week of May they were shown in turn to Lord Brookeborough, and received his 'unqualified approval'; finally, the three first choices were approved by the Queen on 21 May. On 29 May approved essays were sent to Supplies with the request that printing begin. The artists were each paid a final 160 guineas (£168) on 30 May for one accepted design. On 16 June Mr Carr of the Supplies Department confirmed that issue of all regional 3d stamps might be on 18 August, and of the 6d and 1s 3d on 29 September, the releases being divided in this way to avoid overwhelming dealers and collectors; full details of the stamps were released to the press at a conference given on 31 July.

On 14 January Supplies had estimated annual use of the new stamps at 100,000 sheets of 3d (24 million stamps), 10,000 sheets of 6d (2.4 million stamps) and 7,000 sheets of 1s 3d (1,680,000 stamps). This was updated on 12 May to 120,000 sheets of 3d, 20,000 sheets of 6d and 10,000 sheets of 1s 3d. Both forecasts ultimately proved fairly realistic.

In March 1959 it was recorded that, of the essays originally produced, one of each design had been transferred to the Royal collection. One of each of all other essays was retained for record purposes. The remainder was destroyed by the Accountant General's Department.

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE STAMPS

The Red Hand of Ulster

This had been an emblem of the O'Neill family, the royal house of Ulster, since ancient times, and as such was always shown as the right hand. Some confusion had arisen over its use by the baronetcy instituted in Ulster by James I in 1612, in which it had become the convention to depict the left hand; this probably derived from the legend of how the first O'Neill had purposely cut off his own left hand when invading Ulster by sea in the 5th century, and hurled it ashore to stake his claim. The right Hand was incorporated in the Arms of both the Province of Ulster and the Government of Northern Ireland.

The Crowned Star

The six-pointed white star bearing the Royal Crown and having at its centre the Red Hand was an integral part of the Arms of the Northern Ireland Government. The Crown was patently incorporated as an assertion of loyalty to the United Kingdom, but it was reported that the Committee had found confirming the origins of the six-pointed star 'a most tantalising and frustrating business'. It was finally resolved that the six points of the star denoted the Six Counties of Northern Ireland. Similar reasoning seems to have been behind the six-sided frame around the Queen's head in Colin Middleton's design 12 and the six-sided value tabs in Leonard Pilton's design 19.

The Flax Plant

The flax was said to thrive in Ireland due to the moist and temperate climate, and was used to make linen. In particular it symbolised Northern Ireland's connection with the trade – 'the secrets and art of manufacturing fine linen of world-wide repute have been handed down in Northern Ireland for generations'. 'Gibbons Stamp Monthly' for September 1958 pointed out that in reality Ulster flax was a highly uneconomic crop in steady decline, so that the plant's importance was more symbolic than actual (sowings in 1958 were the lowest ever recorded at 970 acres, and by 1960 were described as merely 'token').

The Ulster Field Gate

These gates with their whitewashed circular stone pillars had long been a characteristic feature of the Ulster countryside. The conical tops of the pillars were designed to help throw off the rain. Their large size was not merely due to the heavy iron of the gates themselves but also a display of status and prestige; moreover, 'an older generation regarded them as being lucky and in some parts they were believed to be a favourite haunt of fairies'.

In a letter to Miss Knight on 12 May explaining the symbols, Taylor commented that the early decision 'to select emblems having, in the main, Northern Ireland significance only ... added materially to the task of the Committee'. An inevitable later consequence was that the symbols were often found obscure outside the Northern Ireland context; 'Philatelic Magazine' for 22 August was moved by the Red Hand in the designs to comment that 'people abroad receiving the Northern Ireland stamps will wonder what glove making has to do with Britain'. 'Gibbons Stamp Monthly' complained that the field gate 'hardly seems to rank as a national emblem' and suggested that a shipyard would have made a better symbol, a comment echoed by 'Philatelic Magazine'.

A mild controversy arose when 'The Times' of 7 August published a letter from A C Woodburn of Purley, who was sufficiently mystified by the flax plants on all three designs to ask 'why a spray of indeterminate vegetation has been substituted for the shamrock which should have had a place on the new Northern Ireland stamp? As every Irish schoolchild knows, the shamrock is the emblem of St Patrick.' The 'Belfast Newsletter' picked this up on 11 August and remarked: 'It must be said for the man who lives in suburban Surrey that probably he does not know flax when he sees it, and that would apply to many millions of her Majesty's subjects ... do any of the Republic of Ireland stamps incorporate the shamrock in their design?' Sir Roland Nugent suspected that the letter had been written to provoke 'political argument between North and South Ireland', and partly on the strength of this, the DDG succeeded in dissuading 'The Times' from pursuing the correspondence. The answer to the question in the 'Belfast Newsletter' was that the shamrock was featured throughout the definitive issue - strangely, no comment arose over the shamrock's use on UK definitives to represent Northern Ireland.

The stamps were issued on 18 August and 29 September, in sheets of 240 on cream paper with the new 'multiple Crowns' watermark, its first use. The general reaction to the Northern Ireland stamps was mixed, the sternest criticism coming from 'Gibbons Stamp Monthly': the sprays of flax on the 3d 'look rather untidy and the stamp has a cluttered-up appearance as if the designer had unsuccessfully juggled his components'; the stylised flax plants on the 6d appeared 'stiff and stark', while the background of linen woven in a diamond pattern was not recognisable as linen, 'and the criss-cross pattern diminishes rather than enhances the portrait'; on the 1s 3d, however, the portrait was effectively

predominant because it was well distanced from the emblems (these included the field gate). On 29 August 'Stamp Collecting' reviewed press and public reaction and concluded: 'The Northern Irish stamps were the least favourably received, but the 3d is in a strong colour and presents a pleasing appearance. The 1s 3d is a simple design, but the 6d is far too fussy.'

On 28 August 1959 'Stamp Collecting' again reviewed the Regionals after the first year of issue, and claimed that letters from Northern Ireland bore Regional stamps less often than those from Wales or Scotland; it interpreted this to mean that individuals in Ulster found the convenience of UK stamps in booklet form preferable to the purchase of loose Regional stamps, whereas the Welsh and Scots public showed approval of their stamps by preferring them to booklets. In 1960 the Unionist MP for Belfast East voiced a constituent's request that the Ulster 3d be issued in 4s 6d books; however, PSD had decided as early as September 1958 that the Regional stamps should not be issued in books.

PAPER, COLOURS AND VALUES

The previous 'E2R' watermark was replaced in 1958 to meet the wishes of Scots nationalists, although it was explained at the time that 'the existing watermark of E 2 R and a Crown causes damage to the paper by the angular nature of the E and 2'. From 1962 the stamps were printed on whiter paper after the Ivybridge Mills in Devon, paper manufacturers to the GPO, introduced filtration of its water supply; it had previously been noticed that, when heavy rains 'cleansed' the normally brackish water used in production, this had sometimes resulted in a whiter paper. It was hoped that the permanent change to whiter paper would produce 'a more pleasing and vivid stamp'; the change took effect with the 'deep lilac' 3d from 21 May 1962, the 'deep claret' 6d from 4 June, and the green 1s 3d from 9 November.

Stocks of the original Northern Ireland 3d were sold out in October 1967 after sales of 375,417,000; figures up to 31 March 1968 were 28,531,180 for the 6d (sold out November 1968) and 14,060,520 for the 1s 3d. A variant of the 3d with a single 4mm central phosphor band was issued on 9 June 1967, of which total reported sales were 23,456,400 by 31 March 1968; it appears that subsequent sales were not large. An ultramarine 4d in the same design with one centre phosphor band was issued on 7 February 1966 and sold out in November 1968 after total sales of 61,449,360; subsequent variants were with two 9.5mm phosphor bands (issued 2 October 1967, sold out January 1970) and on unwatermarked chalky paper with two bands (issued 27 June 1968, sold out April 1970). In this latter version the colour appeared as 'deep bright blue' rather than ultramarine. On 23 October 1968 the 'deep bright blue' 4d with PVA (polyvinyl alcohol) gum instead of gum Arabic was released and withdrawn the same day. It is known that about 50 sheets were sold over the philatelic counter at the London Chief Office, and also that a small number were sold a few days

earlier by the GPO counter at the British Philatelic Exhibition (Seymour Hall, London W1, on 16 to 19 October).

Two new values appeared on 1 March 1967 - a bronze-green 9d in the 6d design, and a grey-blue 1s 6d in the 1s 3d design. Both were on watermarked paper with two phosphor bands. On 4 September 1968 the 4d was reissued in olive-sepia with PVA gum and one central phosphor band, simultaneously with a 5d in the same design, in 'royal' or 'Stewart' blue with two 9.5mm bands. On 26 February 1969 the 4d saw another colour change to bright vermilion; the 1s 6d was issued on 20 May of that year on unwatermarked chalky paper with PVA gum. The Northern Ireland stamps, along with all the other pre-decimal Regionals, were withdrawn on 25 November 1971 and invalidated for postal use on 1 March 1972.

COVERS, HANDSTAMPS AND PACKS

There were no first day arrangements or envelopes for the stamps in 1958, but on 7 February 1966 a standard 'First Day of Issue' slogan postmark was provided for the new 4d posted in special boxes at Belfast and Londonderry. The Philatelic Bureau provided a full service for the 9d and 1s 6d on 1 March 1967, plus a special handstamp in Belfast and Londonderry, while first day envelopes were sold at Crown Offices throughout the region. The slogan postmark 'New Stamp Issue Northern Ireland 1st March 1967' was available at Belfast and Londonderry from 21 February to 1 March.

Special first day envelopes were provided for the 4d and 5d on 4 September 1968, with philatelic post boxes in Belfast and Londonderry, in addition to the normal Philatelic Bureau services. A slogan postmark was again in use - 'New 4d and 5d Stamps for N. Ireland 4th Sept 68' - at Armagh, Ballymena, Belfast, Coleraine, Enniskillen, Newry and Portadown, from 19 August to 4 September, but at Londonderry from 29 August only to avoid a clash with a local slogan campaign. There were no subsequent first day cover services.

In 1960 a presentation pack was issued containing the stamps issued in 1958 for all regions, including Northern Ireland. This included a six-page descriptive leaflet and came in two versions, inscribed '7s 3d' for sale in the UK, and '\$1.20' for the USA. Another pack was issued on 9 December 1970; this contained the 1967 3d, the September 1968 4d and 5d, the 1969 4d, the 1962 1s 3d, and the March 1967 9d and 1s 6d: there were 28,944 sold before it was withdrawn on 25 November 1971.

THE ARTISTS

WILLIAM HOLLYWOOD was born in Liverpool in 1920 but lived in Ulster from the age of eight. He studied at Belfast College of Art and worked in both commercial advertising and printing before becoming a freelance designer. His hobby was landscape painting in oils.

LEONARD PILTON was born in 1917 and studied at Bolton School of Art from 1933-36 before working as a designer in the textile industry. After war service in REME and the Royal Artillery he continued his studies at Manchester Regional College of Art and then joined the staff of Belfast College of Art, being appointed Senior Lecturer in October 1957. He held a solo exhibition in Belfast in 1955 and had work purchased by CEMA as well as producing a poster depicting Newcastle, County Down, for the Post Office Savings Bank.

THOMAS COLLINS was born in Portadown on 22 April 1936 and attended Portadown College from 1952-57. In 1957 he took the National Diploma in Design at Belfast College of Art and subsequently attended London University before embarking on a career as an art teacher.

Giles Allen
16 August 1996

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