

SPECIAL STAMP HISTORY

## Proposed King George V Memorial Stamps

JANUARY - MARCH 1936



When King George V died on 20 January 1936 the immediate problem perceived by the GPO was whether to continue releasing new photogravure-printed definitives bearing the late King's head. On 22 January the Director General, Sir Donald Banks, wrote to Major G C Tryon MP, the Postmaster General (PMG): 'The question of the issue of mourning stamps has been raised in the newspapers, but there is no precedent for this being done, and it might give rise to many practical difficulties.'

A letter had appeared that morning in THE TIMES, proposing releasing the 1½d definitive with a black border; the writer referred to the growing foreign practice of issuing memorial or mourning stamps, suggesting that an issue would be more striking as a tribute to the late King because there was no precedent among the stamps of Britain or the Empire. Correspondence continued in the paper for the next three weeks, largely in favour of a memorial issue; suggestions included a printing of the 1½d in black instead of the normal red-brown, and special stamps variously based on the Colonial Jubilee design of 1935 and the 1840 Penny Black. Reference was made to the German stamp issued on the death of President Hindenburg in August 1934. The GPO must also have been aware of the mourning stamps for Queen Astrid of Belgium in December 1935: the Belgian stamps had included a surcharge for charity, something the GPO would shortly have to consider.

### STAMPS FAVOURED BY KING

Most probably none of this press comment affected the GPO in the slightest; it is clear from the minute of 22 January that neither the DG nor the PMG were disposed toward a special

stamp. However, from the incomplete records available, it appears that during the next few days confidential intimations were received that the King George V Jubilee Trust was to be converted to a Memorial Fund, and that the new King, Edward VIII, favoured a special issue of 1½d stamps to be sold at 2d, the surplus going to the Fund. The Trust had been set up the previous year to mark the 25th anniversary of King George's accession; its object was to provide recreational facilities for the young and by 30 October 1935 had raised £29,737 from the public service and armed forces alone, £4,655 of it from employees of the Post Office. As Prince of Wales, Edward VIII had played a large part in the inception of the Trust, hence his interest in a stamp which would further both its aims and his father's memory.

There are indications in the files that Commander J B Adams, the Secretary of the Jubilee Trust, was in contact with the GPO and a meeting of the Trust in connection with the proposed stamps was arranged for Wednesday, 5 February 1936. A Stores Department memorandum of 20 April records that the DG telephoned around midday on Saturday, 25 January asking that the printers, Harrison & Sons Ltd, furnish designs as soon as possible. It was the first indication as a meeting held at Harrisons' High Wycombe works only the previous day had discussed new definitives and no other topic.

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## PRODUCTION OF ESSAYS

The request was promptly passed to Harrisons, who rounded up their staff - although Saturday afternoon working was common in those days, the sum of 3s 6d was later claimed as 'expenses searching for workers'. By working through Saturday night and throughout Sunday, Harrisons' staff was able to produce a first selection of essays on Monday, 27 January; fresh designs were made available on 29 January and 5 February, the date of the Jubilee Trust meeting. Harrisons worked almost continually from 25 January to 3 February, and intermittently between 4 and 20 March on 'later alterations and experiments for speedy production', later presenting their bill for £91 3s 3d for work done. The detailed breakdown accompanying this shows that most of the artwork was by Palmer and Baxter of Harrisons' design staff - the former was probably H L Palmer, who at this time would have been about 30: he was responsible for the 1940 Stamp Centenary issue and the 2½d of the 1946 Victory set. Additionally slightly involved was L A S Thornton, who was also to contribute designs for a number of stamp issues in later years, though without success.

The production files for the memorial stamps have not been traced and the total number of essays produced is not thus available; however, the chronological order in which the various batches of work were received from Harrisons has been identified as follows from the material in the BPMA albums:

## 27 January

1½d definitives printed in black or violet 'mourning colours'. The BPMA has two perforated blocks of four, one in each colour.

## 29 January

Adaptations of the 1½d definitive using the Vandyk head in place of that by Mackennal, a border of rosemaries replacing the dolphins around the lower part of the head, and the words 'THREE HALFPENCE' replaced by 'IN MEMORY'; printed in standard red-brown or various shades of grey on coated and uncoated paper and various depths of etching. According to a Stores Department memorandum of 31 December 1942 the materials submitted on this date also included a packet endorsed '2CB' containing two panels of six stamps, one panel of five and a single card-mounted specimen, to be handed personally to the DG. The BPMA holds 16 blocks of four as follows:

<b>ETCHING</b>	<b>COLOUR</b>	<b>PERF/IMPERFORATE</b>	<b>PAPER</b>
1st	Blue-grey	Imperforate	Uncoated
"	"	"	Coated
2nd (deeper)	"	"	Uncoated
"	"	"	Coated
1st	Dark blue-grey	"	Uncoated
"	"	"	Coated
2nd	"	"	Uncoated
"	"	"	Coated
1st	Dark grey	"	Uncoated
"	"	"	Coated
2nd	"	"	Uncoated
"	"	Perforated	Coated
1st	Red-brown	Imperforate	Uncoated
"	"	"	Coated
2nd	"	"	Uncoated
"	"	"	Coated

## 5 February

As 29 January, but with deeper background in front of King's face, improvements to space and balance of lettering, 'd' added after '1½' in upper corners, and overall sharpening of print. On a number of essays the rosemary border was extended upwards around the head to give the effect of a wreath - this particular alteration, and thus probably the rosemary border as used throughout, was the work of Mr Baxter of Harrisons. The BPMA holds four blocks of four, all perforated on coated paper:

- dark grey with original rosemary;
- medium grey with original rosemary (ink strength reduced);
- dark grey with extended rosemary;
- medium grey with extended rosemary (ink strength reduced).

### **5 and 11 March**

Harrisons record 'expenses to London' for these dates on the breakdown of their invoice. The following are in the BPMA:

five of the Vandyk head with variations of border/colour/wording/size; all imperforate;

three 1½d definitives printed in head and background colour combinations as follows, red-brown on dark grey, red-brown on violet, violet on dark grey, all imperforate;

two 1½d definitives in standard red-brown, one 1½d in standard green, one 1½d with black and white head on red-brown background, all perforated, one 1½d definitive with black and white head on violet background, imperforate - all overprinted 'KING GEORGE V MEMORIAL' in various styles;

three Mackennal heads with various borders, wording, colour combinations similar to those used in conjunction with the Vandyk head designs - all imperforate.

One of the designs submitted in March with both a Vandyk and a Mackennal head is clearly based on an unused Barnett Freedman design for the 1935 Silver Jubilee issue. Harrisons had presumably retained a copy of the essay they had originally prepared and used it as a model.

### **PROBLEMS OF 'CHARITY' STAMPS**

While all this was in hand the DG had, on 29 January, made enquiries of the Accountant General, Sir Henry Bunbury, his deputy, W G Gilbert, and Sir Raymond Woods, the Post Office Solicitor, concerning the legal and financial implications of a 'charity' issue as proposed.

There was undoubtedly some precedent for it, as in 1890 the celebrations of the Penny Post Jubilee had been marked by the GPO with two limited issues of commemorative stamped stationery to raise money for the Rowland Hill Benevolent Fund. A postcard was on sale at the Guildhall on 16 May, and an envelope with a message insert at the South Kensington Museum and all post office counters on 2 July; both items had postage value of 1d, the postcard selling for 6d and the envelope for 1/-. The scheme had raised much for the Fund and been a popular success, the entire issue of 10,000 postcards selling out in less than three hours. There had been no official objection and the Inland Revenue had been a party to the proceedings throughout. However, the actual authority under which the GPO acted in 1890 went unrecorded.

In 1924 King George wished the sale of British Empire Exhibition stamps to benefit the Edward VII Hospital Fund for London, and proposed that the 1d be sold for 1/- and the 1½d for 1s 6d. The Secretary of the GPO, Sir Evelyn Murray, suggested that this was 'not altogether a dignified scheme'; in reply, the King cited 1890 as a precedent. The GPO sought the opinion of the Treasury, on whose behalf Sir Otto Niemeyer spoke on 12 March with some force that the precedent of 1890 seemed to have been wholly illegal and he could not believe that Parliament, through the Public Accounts Committee, would accept it in modern conditions ... the principle of 'trustee collections' (by the GPO on behalf of a charity) being wholly unsound and likely to lead to considerable abuse.

The legal and practical aspects, as viewed in 1924, were summed up by Sir Evelyn Murray in a letter to Lord Stamfordham of the Royal Household on 22 March: the proceeds of stamp sales had in law to be paid into the public purse, after which Parliament might subsequently be invited to vote an equivalent grant out of the Exchequer in aid of the Hospital Fund. However, 'opposition to such a vote would have to be anticipated and would be difficult to meet ... at the present day there would be criticism in Parliament and probably by the Public Accounts Committee'. The nervousness of the Treasury and GPO towards Parliament may be partly explained by the fact that Britain's first Labour government had come into power two months earlier and was still something of an unknown quantity.

An additional factor in 1924 was the disproportionate element of 'charity' to 'postage' in the proposed sale price of the stamps. A comparable balance existed in 1890, but the stamped stationery had been limited to a single day's duration, whereas the British Empire Exhibition stamps were to be sold on a much larger scale over an extended period. In the face of these objections the King withdrew his proposals, and the stamps went on sale without any charity element.

When the problem was studied afresh in 1936, however, different circumstances prevailed. There was a general wish to honour the memory of a recently deceased and greatly respected King, the charity element proposed for the memorial stamp was modest (a third of the postage) and Parliament was no longer seen as hostile. 'In view of the fact that His Majesty the King will be known to favour the scheme, the possibility of parliamentary difficulty is perhaps remote.' The DG's colleagues, Bunbury, Gilbert and Woods, agreed that the mechanics of transferring the proceeds of a charity stamp, as described by Sir Evelyn Murray in 1924, were acceptable and practicable, and were further supported by F P Robinson of the Treasury in a minute of 4 February. On 31 January, the postal administrations of Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark and Norway were asked for details of their experience of using charity stamps; France, USA, Trinidad and the Bahamas were not similarly approached, the information presumably being already available to the GPO.

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## MEMORIAL PROPOSAL REJECTED

Thus was the situation on the eve of the meeting with the Jubilee Trust on 5 February, by which time most of the memorial stamp essays prepared by Harrisons were ready for inspection. Prospects appeared favourable for a memorial stamp issue as outlined by the new King: the events by which this failed is not easily reconstructed. What seems to have happened is that subsequent to the 5 February meeting, the King received essays from the PMG (certainly including those in the packet received by the DG on 29 January and possibly others) and found none of the designs acceptable. The next recorded meeting of the Trust was on 12 March, and it was possibly in connection with this that Harrisons was called upon to produce fresh essays of alternative design, visiting London on 5 and 11 March. At the meeting on 12 March a committee was formed to put into effect whatever purposes the Memorial Fund might dedicate. The DG, Sir Donald Banks, was a member of this committee and thus able to influence its decisions from within - a memorandum of 1 October records that the initial stamp proposal was considered by the committee, which decided not to adopt it. How promptly this decision was reached is not known but Harrisons did no further work on the memorial stamp after 20 March and presented their final statement of work done on 9 April.

In September 1936 Sir Charles Higham, a leading figure in the advertising world, briefly revived the concept, his idea being a Memorial Fund stamp with a sale price of 1/-, to be placed on sale at post offices. The GPO took this opportunity to remind the organisers of the Memorial Fund that a similar proposal had already been put forward and turned down. The renewed suggestion had not met with any particular public enthusiasm. For the philatelic world, Stanley Phillips, editor of GIBBONS STAMP MONTHLY, wrote on 29 September that charity stamp issues had been 'so abused by many foreign countries that the majority of British stamp collectors would regret to see this country issue anything of the kind'. He cited evidence to show that charity labels needed no postal validity to sell in ample quantities; the Memorial Fund Committee had in fact announced plans for just such labels on 1 August. Henceforward the GPO's part in the Fund's activities were contributions by its staff to the renewed financial appeal - these amounted to £3,388 by January 1938. The fund was ultimately used for the erection of a memorial statue and the provision of playing fields and recreation grounds. Meanwhile the Jubilee Trust independently pursued the similar aims for which it had been set up and continued until the 1980s.

In principle the GPO had been firmly against the idea of charity stamps since at least 1914, and remained so, one of the main objections being that it was invidious to favour one good cause over any other. If pressure was not resisted in one case it could not be resisted in any case, with all the consequences for GPO staff of extra stocking, requisitioning, checking and

accounting. The reasons were in fact those applied to discourage special stamps generally, except that they seem to have been stated with added emphasis when the question of charity stamps arose. That the memorial stamp issue was considered in 1936 can only have been because it was the new King's own wish at a time of national mourning. A brief list of the requested charity issues which have at various times been turned down by the GPO include proposals on behalf of the Red Cross, aid to refugees, tuberculosis and cancer research, and flood relief. On the death of George VI in 1952, the same idea of a Memorial Fund stamp was raised, and once more rejected by the GPO.

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## MISSING ESSAYS

A final mystery concerns the packet of 18 essays handed to the DG on 29 January and subsequently left at Buckingham Palace by the PMG for study by the King. Stores Department records in December 1942 show that only the card-mounted essay was ever recovered out of the contents of the packet. Reports in PHILATELIC MAGAZINE of 4 December 1942 and 1 January 1943 [see Appendix 1] stated that 'a sheet of eight impressions' was returned to Commander Adams, the Secretary of the Jubilee Trust, though this seems at odds with GPO Stores records indicating that the 17 missing essays consisted of two panels of six and one panel of five. There is evidence in the PHILATELIC MAGAZINE articles that at least some of the essays were mounted on sheets of Jubilee Trust letter-headed writing paper, presumably after return by the King. The 'sheet of impressions' remained in Commander Adams' office in St James's Palace for some weeks, and was then torn up and discarded.

The essays that survived found their way to 'one or two highly placed personages' and 'Royalty or persons closely associated with the Royal Household'. Shortly before the end of April 1937 one had 'changed hands for the benefit of the King George V Memorial Fund at a handsome figure'. By October 1942 five remained in Royal (or adjacent) possession, one was in Canada, one owned by Stanley Gibbons Ltd, and one had recently been acquired by a Thomas E. Field. A photograph accompanying the report of Mr Fields' find in PHILATELIC MAGAZINE shows it with a pronounced central crease and marginal damage, bearing out the story of the original set's destruction; it appears to be mounted on a plain backing over the manuscript annotation '2CB', seemingly linking it with the packet reportedly supplied on 29 January 1936.

All eight of the above were imperforate. However, following publication of the December article, a well-known London stamp dealer, E Zinopoulos, found a perforated example, mounted on a sheet of black-bordered Jubilee Trust notepaper, which he had bought it as part of a collection several years earlier. The Stanley Gibbons Specialised Stamp Catalogue also records eight imperforate and one perforated example, adding that essays were printed on chalk-surfaced paper watermarked with the Royal block cypher.

Thus, of the 17 missing essays, nine were traced in private hands after nearly seven years, and eight may have been destroyed in the offices of the Jubilee Trust. This was not the only occasion in Edward VIII's short reign that essays submitted to the King were not recovered by the GPO: an entire set of 1½d essays showing him in the uniform of the Seaforth Highlanders reportedly vanished without trace later that year. An investigation into the latter disappearance suggested that they had gone abroad 'at the same time as' the ex-King.

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## OTHER CONSEQUENCES

Although no official memorial stamp appeared, an example exists of a postcard sent to Australia on 28 January from Glasgow, bearing a 1d and 1½d stamp on each of which an artist, J Walker, had hand-painted a black border. While the stamps were defaced and invalid, the card was accepted for posting.

The death of King George V had other philatelic consequences in that work ceased on the proposed issue of 7d and 8d definitives. These had been planned since the parcel postage increase of 1 July 1935, and designs had already been submitted by Barnett Freedman, Robert Gibbings, Graham Sutherland and Agnes Miller Parker. In addition, the photogravure version of the 6d definitive was still in the production stage with technical problems over inking; the King's death provided time during which these were eventually resolved. Stamps in all three values finally appeared in the George VI series in January-February 1939. Photogravure 5d, 10d and 1/- definitives bearing the head of George V were issued in the month following his death, as originally scheduled.

Memorial stamps were first issued by the GPO for Sir Winston Churchill, while the experiment of a charity stamp was tried in 1975.

GILES ALLEN  
19 May 1993

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## REFERENCES

PO Archive Files

- 33/4747 King George V Memorial Fund
- 33/4972 Photogravure issues
- 33/5265 Loss of Seaforth Highlander essays
- 33/5295 Coronation issues (memorial stamps pts 1 and 10 only)
- 33/5575 King Edward VIII postage stamps (press cuttings)



- 33/5808 Charities 1914-53
- 33/5989 King George's Jubilee Trust 1935-60

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Marcus Samuel, 'King George V Photogravure Sixpence - So Nearly a Stamp', vol. 16, No.7, pp. 3-5 and No.8, pp. 3-5