

Coronation of King George VI

Date of issue: 13 MAY 1937



The abdication of King Edward VIII on 11 December 1936 and the subsequent accession of his brother, the Duke of York, sent shock waves around the world and reverberations throughout the British establishment. At the General Post Office (GPO) plans were well advanced for stamps to mark King Edward's Coronation, now redundant. The priority for the GPO was to obtain definitive designs that could be issued as soon as possible for the new reign, hopefully by the date of the Coronation, which remained the same as intended for King Edward, 12 May. It was thought time would not permit a Coronation stamp, but it was subsequently agreed that, provided the issue was a small one, might prove possible. A final decision was deferred until the definitive designs were underway and the total workload could be more accurately assessed.

PROPOSALS SUBMITTED

As early as mid-December a question was tabled in the House of Commons requesting information regarding new stamps. Obviously no decisions had been reached as the Postmaster General's (PMG) reply made clear. On 30 December, Harrison and Sons on their own initiative sent the Vice-Controller of Stores, R Fanshawe, eleven rough drawings of possible designs for a Coronation issue. Although receipt of these was acknowledged, no action was taken. Edmund Dulac submitted a 'rough suggestion' for a stamp on 4 January, 1937 which was also acknowledged by the GPO, but he was informed that no decision had been taken whether to issue a stamp. On 9 January, Dulac submitted another rough design

to Mr Napier of the Postal Services Department, together with a short note stating he understood a stamp was being considered. All the submissions were sent to Mr. Tydeman, the Controller of Stores, whose department was responsible for stamp procurement.

Further questions were asked in the House of Commons during January: all received the same answer that no decision had been taken. The PMG's briefing notes for one of these Parliamentary questions, tabled on 11 February, indicates that stamps for the Coronation might be possible as a stop-gap measure to allow additional time for the production of definitives. Stamps for the Coronation would take less time as the print run would be much smaller. It would be possible to replace a Coronation issue with definitives after a short time. A reply to a question by Mr Hull-Caine MP reiterated that the definitive stamps were nevertheless a priority.

Despite official denials of any plans, obtaining designs was underway should a Coronation set be issued. Eric Gill, asked to design the definitive series, was approached regarding Coronation stamps although his initial response was less than enthusiastic. In December Gill, who had been advising the GPO on the designs for the King Edward VIII stamps, was asked to submit designs along the same lines for the new definitives. He was informed, however, that King George, having seen the proposed Edwardian designs, had expressed a wish for something more ornamental, a compromise between the stamps of George V and Edward VIII. Gill's reply deserves quoting:

'The abdication of Edward the VIII and the accession of the Duke of York to the throne may be taken to represent a return to previous conceptions both in art and politics and this fact is made immediately obvious by the opinion expressed by the new King that the postage stamps designed for Edward VIII are not ornamental enough; for it was symbolical of Edward's short reign that the kingship, like the postage stamps, had been deprived of some of those ornamental accessories on account of which thrones and postage stamps had become ridiculous...and I regret to say that I find it impossible to help you because I do not believe that there is in reality any such thing as an ornament...unless they spring from the exuberance of the workman and his joy and pleasure in his labour and even then a decent restraint should be observed...Now in the case of postage stamps I understand the necessities are 1. the crown, 2. the portrait head, 3. the words 'postage and revenue', and 4. the denomination. And if you say: please add some curlywigs or dolphins or roses or dandelions or shells or Corinthian columns, or something ornamental, I can only say: but why?'

(Eric Gill, Rapallo, Italy, 26 December 1936)

Following his return to the United Kingdom in early January, Gill met Mr Tydeman to discuss designs for Coronation stamps. Again his opinion of pictorial elements, along the lines of those intended for the Edward Coronation stamps, was not favourable:

‘From my point of view the whole idea of a picture stamp is essentially unreasonable ... It seems to me that to use a pictorial subject is simply pandering to sentimentality and the appetite of collectors for anything curious ... I think it would be extremely undesirable to have both a view of Windsor (or whatever it is) and a photograph of the King's head. It is difficult to imagine anything worse than a combination of ornamental border, view of Windsor and photograph of King ... Is there any reason why England should not set the pace in these matters? Why should there not be one rational Post Office in the world? Why must we all follow one another sheepishly in these outrageous sentimentalities?’

(Eric Gill, 2 February 1937)

Nevertheless, Gill agreed to assist the GPO, insisting, however, that he keep to his own ideas. He brought with him some rough designs to demonstrate what he considered appropriate.

In mid-February steps were taken to obtain suitable photographs of the King and Queen for use on postage stamps. Bertram Park, the official court photographer, supplied a number of portraits as did photographers Marcus Adams, Miss Landucci and Hugh Cecil. Three of the photographs by Bertram Park were selected and sent to Mr Rhodes of Harrison and Sons for inspection.

CORONATION STAMP ISSUE FINALISED

Substantial progress had been made by the end of February to obtain designs for new definitives, so the PMG proposed to seek the King's approval. At the same time he mentioned the possibility of Coronation stamps featuring both the King and Queen seeking views on the matter. A departmental memorandum spelled out the proposals as they stood:

‘It is proposed to provide a special issue of Postage Stamps in commemoration of the Coronation. They would be twice the size of the ordinary stamps, ie, of the same dimensions as the Silver Jubilee Stamps. They would consist of any or all of the three higher denominations - 9d, 10d, and 1/-.’

(A R Kidner, 25 February 1937)

The memo also mentioned that designs had been received and were under preparation. Unfortunately, however, the photographs by Bertram Park were not felt suitable for reproduction by photogravure. It was hoped that a special sitting for Mr Park could be

arranged to take photographs especially with stamps in mind. The PMG saw the King the following day, receiving approval for a Coronation issue: the King undertook to select a photograph. The King asked that the Queen appear to his left on the stamps as this was the protocol for all formal occasions.

On 1 March, Mr Pettitt, a staff member at Harrison and Sons working on the definitive series, met Eric Gill to discuss his rough design. They considered treatments of the portraits of the King and Queen. Gill favoured drawn portraits rather than photographs and suggested that the King and Queen should be shown as three-quarter profile facing each other rather than full face looking directly ahead. Mr Pettitt agreed to undertake preliminary work towards essay production by the middle of March. Meanwhile the King selected photographs of himself and the Queen: these had been taken by Dorothy Wilding and were forwarded to the GPO and to Harrisons in the first week of March.

The PMG saw Mr Tydeman and Mr Kidner on 9 March to confirm the still unofficial plans for a Coronation issue. It was proposed to discuss with Harrison and Sons the possibility of issuing a set of two stamps, 1½d and 1d. Logistically this might prove difficult so the PMG agreed to measures to facilitate the issue. First, the sale of the stamps would be limited for the first two weeks if stocks were in short supply. Second, the plan to issue high value stamps, possibly showing Royal castles, as had been the original intention for Edward VIII, was abandoned. Third, if printing was behind schedule, the release of low value George VI definitives could be delayed and additional stocks of Edward VIII low values issued instead.

The following day, 10 March, several GPO officials including Mr Tydeman met the senior director of Harrison and Sons at the High Wycombe plant to discuss the Coronation stamps. It was immediately obvious that production demands for new definitives and the short time scale made it impossible to print sufficient stocks of more than one stamp for issue in May. If, however, a design could be finalised shortly, it would be possible to produce a 1½d stamp, the rate for inland letters up to 2oz. Final essays had to be approved by 18 March so that cylinder production could be finished by 10 April and sufficient stocks for two weeks' supply printed by 1 May. This would leave a fortnight for distribution. There was a danger of under-supply particularly if, as could be expected, the stamps proved popular and demand was high. It was estimated that about a month's supply of Edward VIII stocks remained and Mr Rhodes agreed to determine whether it would be easier to print more, or to move ahead with new George VI definitives. As there was no remaining stock of paper bearing the E8R watermark, Harrisons were reminded that more would have to be ordered, affecting their schedule. It was also agreed that providing coated paper for 'Silver Jubilee size' stamps would be impossible, but Harrisons asked whether it was possible to obtain a paper kinder to photogravure printing, preferably one with a less deeply impressed watermark and other qualities, thus reducing cylinder pressure. Enquiries were subsequently made with Portals, the paper manufacturers, but the experiments that took place, which included trial sheets

of the George VI ½d definitive design, were largely unsuccessful as the colour was affected by the new paper.

APPROVING FINAL DESIGN

By 13 March the position was clear and the plans officially finalised. One stamp, 1½d, could be issued for the Coronation provided the design was finalised by 25 March. Two weeks' supply could be delivered to 2,500 Post Offices throughout the country by 10 May, but if necessary it was agreed to limit supply and provide existing stocks of Edward VIII stamps. Mr Rhodes had informed the GPO that the cylinders for the Edwardian 1½d had been destroyed, so printing more would take as much time as printing new Coronation stamps. Provided the production of Coronation stamps went according to plan this was not a problem. However, should delays in the selection of the design occur or vital members of Harrison's staff, such as the engravers, be unavailable, the failure to meet the deadline was a real possibility. Neither Harrison's nor the GPO staff involved could guarantee that the May deadline could be met, but it was considered sufficiently important to take the risk.

As the photographs of the King and Queen had not proved suitable, it was decided to proceed with a drawn version of their heads. Edmund Dulac was asked to undertake this from photographs taken by Dorothy Wilding while working on a totally new design for the issue. Bromides of two of Eric Gill's designs had been seen by Tydeman but only one was considered promising. Gill was asked to amend this to resubmit as soon as possible. Dulac must have worked night and day on his new design and the drawings of the heads, as a note in the file indicates that his design was sent to Harrison's on 15 March, just two days after the plans were finalised.

DEVELOPMENT OF DULAC'S DESIGN

Dulac's artwork for his new design together with his drawn portraits and an essay of Eric Gill's preferred design arrived at the GPO on the same day, 15 March, and were shown to the PMG. He preferred Dulac's design and asked for essays. Additionally essays of Eric Gill's design were produced with the drawn heads by Dulac replacing the Bertram Park photographs. Six essays mounted on card of each of these designs were received on 18 March and were taken by the PMG to the Palace for the King to make his choice. The King also preferred the Dulac design and approved it subject to some alterations to his portrait, which he considered ought to be thinner in the face. Mr Tydeman then took essays of this design to the Royal Fine Arts Commission meeting that day. The Commission was informed that the King had already approved the design and time was short, but the hope was that it would provide some opinion on minor modifications that might be possible. This it was

happy to do, finding the design generally acceptable. There were, however, two points which the Commission felt should be addressed: the epaulettes, medals and sash on the King's shoulder required attention as the detail had been lost in reduction to stamp size; the tone of the King's tunic ought to be lighter in order to reduce the contrast between it and the Queen's gown.

Because of the severe time restrictions, production of essays and subsequent alterations to the approved design took place on an almost daily basis over the following week. Dulac worked on the revisions required that day, and further essays were produced by Harrisons the following morning, 19 March. Four essays in all, two printed in brown with violet added, and two in brown with green added, were forwarded to Fanshawe, the Vice-Controller, who passed them on to Kidner, the Director of Postal Services. Mr Rhodes conveyed the printer's opinion that adding a little violet to the original colour would not present any production problems. The green, however, could create a 'muddy', or impure, colour, although this might be negated by the high quality of ink used for stamps. These essays were shown to the Director General on 22 March who approved the darker shade of brown with a violet mix (later called plum brown), despite fears that the darker shade would increase the risk of stamps being reused since postmarks would be less visible. It was decided, nevertheless, that since the stamps would only be available for a short period, the risk could be ignored. At the same time the date of issue was finalised for 13 May, the day after the Coronation. This would provide a few vital days to allow delivery of stocks to sub-post offices.

Later that evening in the House of Commons a question regarding Coronation stamps was tabled by two backbench MPs, the PMG answering that he had approved the issue, limited to one stamp because of time and the difficulties of producing both commemorative and definitive stamps. The denomination was 1½d, the most widely used in the Imperial and Inland services, being the basic letter rate for both (Inland rate for letters up to 2oz; Imperial rate for letters up to 1oz). The House was also informed that the Royal Fine Arts Commission had seen the design and provided helpful suggestions.

A further set of essays incorporating the changes recommended by the Royal Fine Arts Commission was forwarded to the GPO on 24 March; six printed on Royal Cipher paper, three on coated paper, all mounted on cards. These were printed in violet-brown with a slight addition of green as the previous essays had a slight violet tinge on the faces of the King and Queen. The PMG compared these with the previous set of essays, approving the violet-brown shade over the green-brown. Edmund Dulac made a few amendments including lightening the hair of the King to remove the curly-haired appearance, straightening the line of the hair, and lowering the line of the medals. Later in the day it was decided that, having lightened the King's tunic as recommended by the RFAC, it lost the appearance of a dark blue naval uniform and therefore ought to be further darkened. Dulac's revised drawing was delivered to Harrisons on 25 March for final essays to be produced.

What was hoped would be the final essay arrived at the GPO on 2 April (five mounted on cards) and incorporated the changes. Additionally, the shoulders of the King and Queen had been separated as suggested by the RFAC. These essays were immediately shown to the PMG for approval. He approved them but hoped it would be possible to lighten the King's hair: however, if the production schedule would not allow it, the essay would suffice. The following morning, however, the PMG's Private Secretary, Mr Napier, telephoned Fanshawe to say that the PMG recalled that King George had criticised the Edward VIII stamps for showing the King hair too dark. In the circumstances, the PMG felt it might be prudent to have King George's hair lightened on the Coronation stamp.

Time was now extremely short with a real possibility that if essays were not approved soon the entire production schedule would be at risk. Work continued frantically over the weekend of 3 and 4 April as Edmund Dulac went to Harrisons in High Wycombe and various trials were attempted. In the initial prints, the lightened hair tended to disappear into the background and attempts to darken the background obscured the finer details of the design. Despite the obstacles, Harrisons managed to produce a final essay designated 4W on 7 April that satisfied all of the criteria. Ten more copies of essay no. 4W, all singly mounted on cards, were sent the following day. The PMG approved the new essay and Harrisons were given the go-ahead to finish cylinder preparation and begin printing immediately. Approval on 8 April, almost two weeks after the originally stated 'last day' of 25 March, meant providing enough stock was a difficult task.

ISSUING THE STAMPS

Focus switched to the publicity arrangements. A press conference announcing the designs of both the new definitives, which would be issued on 10 May, and the Coronation stamp was planned for 5 May. Prior to this newsfilm companies were given an opportunity to film the stamps in production at Harrison and Sons for a newsreel to be released on 5 May. Perhaps the highlight of the publicity was a live broadcast on BBC television at 3pm on the same day, the first public announcement of the new stamps. Television was still in its infancy as the BBC had inaugurated the service in November 1936; for the Post Office, under whose remit the BBC fell, to make a major announcement live on television was a remarkable demonstration of the new medium.

The 1½d stamp to mark the Coronation of King George VI and his Consort, Queen Elizabeth, was issued on 13 May 1937 at post offices throughout the country. The stamps had been printed in photogravure by Harrison and Sons Ltd in sheets of 120, each stamp bearing the watermark 'GVIR'. Supplies were limited and the stamps were only provided on request, otherwise Edward VIII 1½d stamps were given.

Overprints for the Tangiers and the Morocco Agencies were issued, the latter being available in both French (15 centimes) and Spanish (15 centimos) currencies. These overprints were on sale for one week only. In addition to the stamp, a Coronation Greetings Telegram designed by MacDonald Gill bearing the Royal Arms and floral emblems of the home unions, in the standard gold envelope, was available, as was a Coronation Home Safe in book pattern bearing medallion embossed heads of their Majesties. The Coronation stamp was explained in an official press release as follows:

ARTIST'S IDEAS

To incorporate portraits of Their Majesties The King and Queen in a decorative design of a relatively simple character. The crown which is particularly emphasised is of conventional design and is interlaced underneath with the initials of Their Majesties. The orb is included in the left border and the Ampulla - the vessel holding the holy oil used during the Coronation ceremony - in the right border. The design is intended to convey a feeling of festivity; the intertwined white lines on the sides suggesting garlands and the device in the shape of Maltese crosses in the top corners suggesting Union Jacks.

The designer of the stamps, Edmund Dulac, was educated at Toulouse University, Toulouse Art School and in Paris. He had illustrated a number of books as well as undertaking portrait work and stage design. In 1935 he was awarded the King's Poetry Prize medal. His hobbies included Eastern and native music, Art psychology and bamboo flute making. He also campaigned for the improvement of design in industry and government and in his own words, 'denouncing, whenever opportunities occur, nineteenth century self-centred thinking and Romanticism'. Dulac became the pre-eminent stamp designer of his generation.

The stamps were available at most Post Offices until 2 October when general sales were terminated; however, they remained available at the London Chief Office until the end of the year. Final figures indicate the following stamps issued:

Stamps printed	3,681,701 sheets of 120 stamps
Not issued	275,503
Total issued to POs	3,406,198
Returned from POs	166,769
Total sales	3,239,429 sheets or 388,731,480 single stamps.

Press reactions to the issue were generally favourable and the stamps were reportedly popular with the public. The decision not to produce the stamp in book or roll form failed to attract any comment.

National Postal Museum
Alan Griffiths
March, 1994

REFERENCES

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Post 52/516	Notes on 1924-40 commemorative stamps, 1946
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