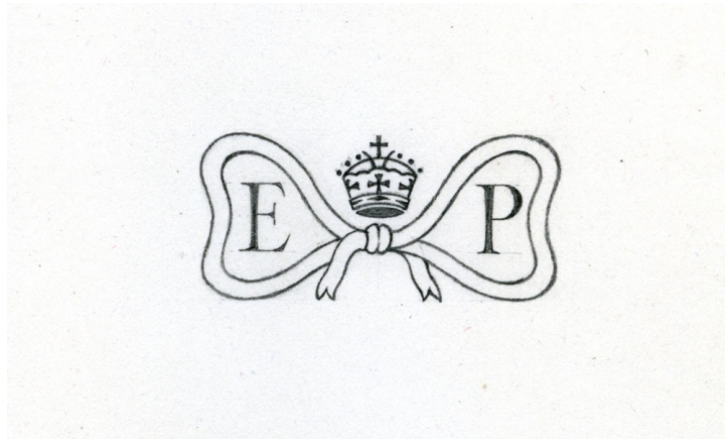


SPECIAL STAMP HISTORY

ROYAL WEDDING 1947 - SPECIAL POSTMARK

20-30 NOVEMBER 1947



[Appendix (i) to Special Stamp History: Royal Silver Wedding 1948]

The wedding of Princess Elizabeth to Naval Lieutenant, Philip Mountbatten, later the Duke of Edinburgh, was announced on 9 July 1947, although the actual date was still undecided. Over the following three weeks the GPO received suggestions for a special stamp issue to mark the occasion, from philatelists and the public. A minute prepared by C O L Leigh-Clare of the Postal Services Department on 31 July states 'this is the sort of national event for which we should ordinarily consider an issue justified'. Press speculation on the wedding date varied between October and February: even the later date meant 'there is no chance of getting a worthy design ready and stamps printed and issued on the requisite scale'.

Leigh-Clare's proposed the event be commemorated with a slogan postmark similar to the 'Victory Bells' of 1945, sufficiently well received by the public to justify a repeat exercise. He envisaged 'Wedding Bells' and a true lovers' knot with 'E' and 'P', plus probably 'Happy and Glorious', 'Bless the Bride' or other short suitable phrase. Some 750 dies would be needed (there had been 400 of the 'Victory Bells') taking about two months to produce; as the wishes of the King would be sought, an early decision was vital. He also suggested that complete secrecy should be maintained until the morning of the wedding so that the postmark would take the public by surprise, thus accentuating its impact.

DESIGNS FOR POSTMARK

The same day, 31 July, the intended date of 20 November was advised to the GPO: the official announcement was made the next day. Leigh-Clare's proposal was agreed by the Director General, Sir Raymond Birchall, on 2 August, provided the postmark remained in use only until the end of November, then replaced by 'Post Early For Christmas'. Various mottoes were considered but shelved: the postmark was wordless, as was the 'Victory Bells', without losing any effectiveness. Four designs were prepared by R H Higgins, draughtsman in the Power Branch drawing office of the Engineering Department, for inspection by the Postmaster General (PMG), Wilfred Paling, MP.

Leigh-Clare suggested that Higgins should feel free to consider other ideas, but in fact only the original was utilised. The designs were submitted to the PMG by the Deputy Director General (DDG), R A Little, on 12 August, together with two specimen covers 'A' and 'B', each with a different version of the preferred design (no. 2 of the four) as it might appear in practice. 'A' differed from 'B' having slightly more fine detail, and was recommended by the DDG. The PMG forwarded the designs to Sir Alan Lascelles, the King's Private Secretary, the following day; assent for 'A' as recommended was formally notified on 15 August with the comment that the King found the designs 'both original and suitable'.

DIES PRODUCED AND DISTRIBUTED

W T Gemmell of the Engineering Department ordered the production of dies from the high-quality engraving firm of A Huggins & Co of Hatton Garden, EC1. Initially tenders were sought for the production by 31 October of 750 dies for electrically-operated, single-impression stamp-cancelling machines; the contractor replied that 550 could be completed by that date, with the remainder by 10 November, very close to the date of the wedding. Rather than place a separate order for 200 elsewhere and risk a breach in the secrecy surrounding the exercise, the Engineering Department placed the entire order with Huggins in view of the trust they placed in him, accepting the later delivery date. A supplementary order was placed for 17 dies of a different shape: these were to fit the Hey-Dolphin type 'M' machines, mainly located in the North-west but also at such diverse sites as Bridgwater and Sunderland. All other types of single-impression SCM then in use (Hey-Dolphin types 'E' and 'F', Universal types 'D' and 'G', and Krag type 'S') took identically shaped dies; no special dies were produced for Krag continuous-impression SCMs.

The order was placed in the last week of August; by the end of September 117 dies, including all those for the 'M' machines, were with the Stores Department. Another 118

had been made, were undergoing hardening, and were delivered by 6 October; 125 more following by 13 October, 126 by 18 October, 128 by 24 October, and the balance by 31 October. By working under considerable pressure the contractors had complied with the original delivery date. The final 174 dies were sent to Inner London offices, other offices having been supplied previously to ensure complete distribution in time for the wedding. Registered post was used: 759 packets were sent out, made up of 742 with ordinary dies and 17 for the 'M' machines (the original order was over-estimated by eight). The total cost of the order was £2,027, made up as follows:

750 ordinary dies at £2 7s 6d: £1,781 5s 0d
17 'M' Machine dies at £4 12s 6d each: £78 12s 6d
Blank dies: £167 3s 6d
Total: £2,027 1s 0d (£2,027.05).

To ensure no advance intimation of the postmark or premature use, despatch of the dies was preceded by instructions to all postmasters that the registered packets should not be opened until receipt of a special service message, which was sent out on the morning of 19 November. Each packet contained further instructions that the dies should be brought into use, as far as was practicable, for the first collection on 20 November. Mistakes were inevitably made: some 13,500 items were postmarked on 19 November at Kettering alone, while premature use by offices at Hull, East Grinstead and Northampton was also reported. Errors also occurred when the postmark was officially withdrawn from use after 30 November, with cases of use at Cheltenham and Sevenoaks on 1 December being reported.

SPECIAL PRESENTATIONS AND THANKS

An unknown number of first day covers with the postmark were prepared for special presentation: the recipients included the King, Princess Elizabeth, Queen Mary (the widow of George V) and 'various foreign embassies'. One was sent by the Director of Postal Services, J E Yates, to A Huggins thanking him for his efforts manufacturing the dies. Leigh-Clare and R H Higgins were seen personally by the PMG on 21 November and congratulated on their contribution. Leigh-Clare's stated on 27 November that 'All I ask is that I should remain in decent obscurity (I feel strongly on this).' His attitude may have been because the public's reaction to the postmark was not entirely favourable. Higgins was later interviewed by G E G Forbes for the Awards Committee, but made it clear that he had only been acting on Leigh-Clare's ideas. In a memorandum of 12 May 1948, Forbes stated he regretted deciding that Higgins was not therefore eligible for any award: 'Mr Higgins ... indicated that he would have been somewhat surprised at any other conclusion ... I formed a very favourable impression of his character and

intelligence and I should have been glad to find ground for a more favourable conclusion.' Curiously, although he is described in the files as a Draughtsman Class 1 in the Power Branch of the Engineering Department, R H Higgins cannot be traced in the GPO establishment lists of the period.

HOSTILE PUBLIC REACTION

On 20 November, the day of the Royal Wedding and the first official day of use of the special postmark, a short press and broadcast notice included the PMG's regrets 'that the time factor did not allow of the provision of a special postage stamp'. It was hoped by the GPO, based on the 'Victory Bells' postmark, that the exercise would earn equal appreciation and perhaps even prestige: they were to be disillusioned. What had been acceptable in the euphoria of the 1945 victory celebrations was not seen as adequate two years later for the wedding. In the ensuing acrimony over the GPO's failure to issue a special stamp, debate on the merits of the postmark was almost entirely smothered. The 22 November issue of STAMP COLLECTING was among the first to express disappointment with the comment that 'among the attributes of an austerity Royal Wedding, special stamps find, apparently, no place', quoting ample precedents ranging from Tonga (1899) to Liechtenstein (1943) by way of Japan, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece, Egypt and Iran.

Most of the critical comment fell under the following headings: the GPO's failure to mark the occasion in an appropriate fashion; the contrasting success of Australia and Canada in issuing commemorative stamps; the lost opportunity to earn foreign currency by stamp sales to the numerous overseas visitors flocking to see the wedding. There is no reason to doubt the genuineness of the disappointment. A typical reaction appeared in the BIRMINGHAM MAIL of 27 November: 'Cannot they understand the psychological effect on people here at home of seeing a smiling portrait of the Princess on every letter?' The Australian stamp issued on the wedding day and the Canadian stamp planned for 15 January 1948 were also used against the GPO. There was widespread belief that the Canadian stamp had already been issued, the argument being that the two Dominions had overcome the 'time factor' cited by the PMG. In reality, the Australian stamp was a new definitive originally planned for 21 April 1947 (Princess Elizabeth's birthday) but delayed by production problems, while the Canadian stamp was not finally issued until 16 February. Neither stamp, in fact, appears to have been produced with the wedding in mind, each comprising the same Dorothy Wilding portrait of the Princess with no reference to her marriage. The argument was false, but fuelled resentment against the GPO. Interestingly, in September the Colonial Office successfully deterred the Seychelles from producing a commemorative issue, because this would be 'invidious' when the GPO was only planning a postmark.

US ORDERS ACCEPTED

Another repeated argument was the revenue, especially US dollars, lost by not issuing special stamps. Among the first to make the point, in fact, before the end of November, was the Treasury; an estimate of \$20 million was later quoted, although the GPO considered this 'a fantastic figure, as are all philatelic forecasts'. A letter from A Tozer to the DAILY TELEGRAPH of 22 November commented: 'This country has created nothing to sell ... surely we are not too proud to chase the dollars or too overworked to plan and select subjects for commemoration?' Tozer looked approvingly at the United States' 'moderate course of habitually commemorating anniversaries, celebrities and special events'. In the House of Commons Edward Keeling MP referred to what might have been: 'Much pleasure would have been given to the public and many dollars obtained.' Among the many requests from overseas for information on the GPO's plans to commemorate the wedding, a large number of orders had come from the US, accompanied by money and asking for first day covers. The GPO overcame its normal pride in not providing a philatelic service, aided by regulations specifically forbidding dollars being sent out of the country, no matter how they had first arrived. On 13 November the DPS, Mr Yates, took the exceptional decision, despite strong feeling to the contrary within his Department, that these orders would be dealt with by affixing covers with stamps to the total value of moneys sent for each one and posting them back individually, ensuring each received the special postmark. This service began on the afternoon of 20 November and continued while the postmark was officially in use. Mr Yates emphasised that 'it should be clearly understood that (this) action is being taken on the basis of a commonsense decision to meet a most exceptional set of circumstances ... no precedent is being established'. Because the GPO did not wish it known that a precedent might have been established, it could not defend itself against charges of failing the economy by showing the steps it had taken to secure US dollars.

GPO'S REACTION TO CRITICISM

There were of course sound operational reasons, as outlined by Leigh-Clare the previous July, why a stamp issue had been rejected, based on the experience of the 1946 Victory issue. It was considered that nine months were required for a worthwhile stamp issue to be produced (seven months essential minimum and two months safety margin). Some 350 million stamps of the Victory issue had been sold and it was expected that future demand would be on the same scale. The GPO was reluctant to create a demand it did not have the capacity to satisfy, so producing special stamps on this scale between July and November 1947 was not a possibility. This was partly due to

the priority given to printing extra definitives for Christmas. On 26 November the Assistant PMG, C R Hobson, attempted to explain this to an unsympathetic House of Commons, in what seems to have been a distinctly unimpressive performance that resulted in much savaging of the GPO in the next day's press (he had only been in the post since 8 October). A particularly strong attack was published in THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, no admirer of either the GPO or the Labour government: 'We have in the past commented on the spectacle of a Socialist Assistant Postmaster General telling the public to go to bed early instead of writing letters at night, and we have noted the care for promptitude of public business which is indicated in fewer postal collections and fewer deliveries ...' The claim was made that the Victory stamps had been produced in only 3½ months (less than the given notice of the Royal Wedding date) and that 264, not 350, million stamps had been required on that occasion (the lower figure was actually the total only of the first printing). It concluded that none of the of the 'facts and figures quoted by Mr Hobson is correct'.

This attack, though largely inaccurate or misinformed, was sufficient to persuade the GPO to draft a detailed rebuttal as a press notice, although it was not released. It expressed the GPO's regret at not feeling able to prepare a Royal Wedding stamp issue: the 3½ months' notice of the Wedding did not leave time to produce stamps worthy of the occasion; in 1946, 4½ months' notice had only permitted the 'Victory' stamp designers three weeks actual design time, which had proved totally inadequate; in the last quarter of the year the stamp printers were fully stretched producing stocks for the Christmas period; the special circumstances of the Australian and Canadian issues were explained. Meanwhile the matter was again raised at Parliamentary question times on 3 and 10 December; the PMG, Wilfred Paling, handled these with such authority that the objections melted away.

RESPONSES TO POSTMARK

Very little attention was paid to the postmark itself but it seems it was thought of well enough and an unsuccessful appeal was made in Parliament for its retention throughout the Christmas period. An eccentric note of dissent was sounded in a letter signed 'Artistic' to the Edinburgh EVENING DISPATCH of 22 November: 'The centre looks too like the face of Mephistopheles with ferocious moustaches and gnashing his teeth.'

In the immediate wake of the wedding a query arose as to whether the 'True Lovers' Knot' depicted was any such thing. Leigh-Clare consulted a colleague, F S Back of the Admiralty mails branch; the correspondence continued into December and was backed up by numerous illustrations and extracts from an authoritative work entitled THE ASHLEY BOOK OF KNOTS, with no fewer than five examples of actual knots tied by a

former naval rating. The conclusions reached were that 'True Lovers' Knot' covered a wide variety of knots, none resembling that shown on the postmark, that the postmark example did closely resemble something called a 'Tom Fool's Knot', but that 'we weren't far out, though obviously not orthodox' (Leigh-Clare, 2 December).

NEW STAMP ISSUES PLANNED

Requests for cancellation with the special postmark persisted until January, long after its withdrawal. Enquiries about the possible issue of a belated Royal Wedding stamp continued until June 1948. The whole debate led the GPO to consider two stamp issues in 1948 in addition to those already planned. The first was for Royal Silver Wedding, produced under great pressure in less than five months. The second was an issue to commemorate the birth of the King's first grandchild. This was agreed in March 1948, under continued pressure from the Treasury, and reached the stage where designs were submitted to the King before it was cancelled.

GILES ALLEN
2 July 1993

REFERENCES

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