

The Royal Silver Wedding Issue

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Thoughts about stamps for the 1948 Royal Silver Wedding arose after the wedding of Princess Elizabeth on 20 November 1947. The GPO commemorated the wedding with only a special postmark because of lack of time to produce stamps following the announcement on 1 August (nine months was considered necessary).

The GPO found itself the target of adverse criticism from the public, Parliament and the press. There was a 'strong public demand for a British pictorial stamp' to honour the occasion and there had been a missed opportunity to earn valuable foreign currency, especially dollars, a point reiterated by the Treasury.

At the end of November 1947 the Channel Islands Liberation and Olympic Games issues planned for 1948 were already in hand; there was no plan to mark the Royal Silver Wedding of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, or awareness that it required commemoration. However, pressures were being exerted, and senior officials responded quickly. The first discussions were on 25 November, and by 1 December the Board had decided:

there would be a 2½d stamp 'for popular use' and a £1 stamp (aimed primarily at collectors – 'a special stamp will earn dollars which only a stiff necked purist would overlook at the present time');

with only five months available, attempts to shorten the design process would be made by utilising (a) designs originally submitted for the projected Edward VIII coronation issue and (b) the photographs of the King and Queen that had featured on their 1937 Coronation stamps; the printing would be by Harrison & Sons Ltd of London and High Wycombe, using the photogravure process of which they had a virtual monopoly;

the Council of Industrial Design (CoID) would be asked to nominate one or two artists to collaborate with Harrisons in preparing designs.

FIRST DESIGNS

The same day Victor Harrison agreed that his staff would start working on designs: the Edward VIII coronation essays and George VI coronation artwork were delivered to Harrisons' High Wycombe works on 3 December. The Edward VIII designs included scenes of Tower Bridge, the Tower of London, Windsor Castle and St James's Palace, and a photograph of Buckingham Palace. These were intended for the 2½d, to give 'the man in the street should have something to look at'. However, a note of caution in an internal memorandum of 4 December recalled that the Edward VIII designs were not liked when originally seen by the Fine Art Commission on 30 November 1936.

The full programme of special stamp issues for 1948 including the Royal Silver Wedding was announced by the Postmaster General (PMG), Wilfred Paling, to the House of Commons on 10 December, followed by a press release the following day.

The CoID nominated Miss Joan Hassall as designer, having recently been asked by the GPO to contribute designs for the Olympic Games issue, although she had been prevented from doing so. It also recommended that more up to date photographs of their Majesties in full face and profile be obtained. Meeting with the PMG on 11 December, the King undertook to arrange this. New photographs were taken by Dorothy Wilding Portraits Ltd of 16 Old Bond Street, W1 on 15 December and made available to the GPO on 1 January 1948. Five glossy bromides were supplied to Harrisons on 9 January. The King's preferred that designs using opposing sets of profiles be considered, as well as the overlapping profiles generally favoured.

In the last week of January the CoID and the Fine Art Commission for Scotland viewed and rejected three designs by Joan Hassall for the 2½d, and one each by J Stobie and H L Palmer (both of Harrison & Sons) plus another Palmer design for the £1. The following colour essays (unnumbered) were delivered to the King at Sandringham on 27 January:

- A) £1 - horizontal design showing their Majesties full face (Joan Hassall).
- B) £1 - vertical design with dual profiles looking left (Joan Hassall).
- C) 2½d - horizontal design with dual profiles as (B) and view of Windsor Castle (Joan Hassall).
- D) 2½d - horizontal with profiles facing each other and view of Windsor Castle (G T Knipe, Harrison & Sons)

All essays were in blue, with both £1 designs alternatively offered in maroon. The GPO's recommendations to the King were (A) and (C).

REVISED DESIGNS

On 3 February a reply via the King's Secretary, Major Edward Ford, rejected all four essays: the landscape designs of the 2½d were not liked, being felt inappropriate for a personal anniversary of their Majesties; (C) was too similar to that previously used for many Colonial issues commemorating King George V's Silver Jubilee in 1935; (D) was 'rather reminiscent of a popular form of Birthday Greetings Card' (this may also have inspired the rejection of Joan Hassall's £1 design, as she had deliberately aimed at a Valentine motif).

Attention was drawn to the Belgian photogravure commemoratives of 1935-39, vertical designs with a portrait occupying most of the space surrounded by a simple frame. It was suggested the 2½d be redesigned on these lines using the preferred portrait of their Majesties, showing overlapping dual profiles looking right. The £1 should be similarly redesigned, and printed by the line engraving process as 'it is perhaps uncomplimentary either to their Majesties or to collectors all over the world to produce this special £1 issue by a process that is both cheaper and less artistic'.

Joan Hassall was seen by Mr Yates of the Postal Services Department the same day; she promised to produce a new design by the evening of 5 February just for the £1, closely following the guidelines urged by the King, which could be seen and passed to Harrison & Sons the following morning. Also on 3 February, Mr Rhodes of Harrison & Sons at a meeting in GPO Headquarters agreed that it would produce bromides of new designs for both stamps for the next meeting with the King on 11 February - time now ruled fresh colour essays or further referral to the CoLD. Specific suggestions for work by Harrisons' staff designers on the 2½d were also made - H L Palmer was to produce separate designs with views of Tower Bridge and Buckingham Palace and J Stobie to produce an adapted view of Windsor Castle. Clearly the GPO wished to persevere with a 'landscape' 2½d, despite the King's feelings against it.

On 11 February the PMG was able to present the King with two designs for the £1 by Joan Hassall, and twelve from Harrisons' staff, as follows:

- Joan Hassall £1 (vertical) - bromide number 374
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- H L Palmer 2½d (horizontal) - bromide number 376
- H L Palmer 2½d (horizontal) - bromide number 377
- H L Palmer 2½d (horizontal) - bromide number 378
- H L Palmer £1 (vertical) - bromide number 379
- H L Palmer £1 (vertical) - bromide number 380
- J R R Stobie 2½d (horizontal) - bromide number 385
- J R R Stobie £1 (vertical) - bromide number 381
- J R R Stobie £1 (vertical) - bromide number 382

G T Knipe 2½d (horizontal) – bromide number 383
G T Knipe 2½d (horizontal) – bromide number 389
G T Knipe 2½d (horizontal) – bromide number 394
G T Knipe £1 (vertical) – bromide number 386
L A S Thornton 2½d (horizontal) – bromide number 384

The limited time available made photogravure necessary for both stamps; for reproducing a portrait it was also arguably superior to line engraving. The blue would be used as in the essays submitted on 27 January. The King was asked if a decision could be made within 48 hours as Harrison & Sons would need to begin work on Monday, 16 February to meet the deadline of 26 April.

FINAL SELECTION BY THE KING

The decision was reached that day (11 February) with formal acceptance on 13 February; the King's choice was a £1 design (bromide no. 374) submitted by Joan Hassall, and a 2½d (bromide no. 394) by G T Knipe adapted to enlarge their Majesties' heads. Letters were sent on 16 February to the Royal Fine Art Commission for Scotland and the CoID, apologising that the final bromides were not submitted for their approval: a reply in good grace was received from A E Haswell Miller of the former, and in rather bad grace from Sir Francis Meynell of the latter. Joan Hassall was paid 400 guineas on 23 February on the basis of 200 guineas for each value; Harrison and Sons were paid 320 guineas on 2 March on the basis of 40 guineas for each value plus 40 guineas for their rejected £1 designs and 200 guineas for their accepted 2½d design. No formal instructions had in fact been issued for the preparation of designs or the conditions of payment.

Miss Hassall made some comments after the event, in correspondence with the GPO:

'I cannot honestly say that I admire the final result, but if their Majesties are pleased it is a great point gained.' [February 24]

'It is a rather unhappy thing to be credited with a design which is really no design at all, in fact I feel all the credit should go to Harrisons.' [March 1]

STAMPS PRINTED AND ISSUED

By 12 March Harrisons' final essay in ultramarine for the 2½d had been approved; on 13 March the final £1 essay, in steel blue replacing the blue-black shade used earlier, was produced and formally approved on 19 March.

Problems arose, however, with the 5% titanium oxide Royal Cypher watermarked paper supplied by Messrs Portals (John Allen & Sons) Ltd of Ivybridge, Devon. Proofing of the 2½d stamp was being held up because the watermark was persistently showing through due to insufficient penetration of ink. A meeting at Harrisons' High Wycombe works on 22 March with GPO and Portals' representatives concluded that this was most probably due to the paper at Harrisons' request having been bowl calendered to achieve a particularly high finish. It had been thought that this 'could not be overdone', but in fact had been. Portals' experts recommended a machine calender to achieve a standard finish, and a shallower watermark; these measures succeeded in alleviating the problem. A satisfactory cylinder proof for the 2½d was available on 26 March, and printing began on 31 March. The £1 cylinder proof was passed on 6 April.

On 26 April (Royal Silver Wedding day) the 2½d went on sale at all, the £1 at most, post offices; the 2½d was 1.6in by 0.95in in sheets of 120; the £1 was 1.23in by 1.6in in sheets of 20. Issues and sales were estimated as in the breakdown below:

2½d

Ordered - 168,000,000
Waste - 10,587,360
Good - 157,412,640
Transferred for overprint - 9,900,000
Specimens, etc - 3,304
Departmental waste, etc - 120
Issues to (less returns by) Head Postmasters - 147,509,216
Withdrawn on September 30, 1948 - 416
Estimated sales - 147,508,800

£1

Ordered - 1,915,000
Waste - 98,500
Good - 1,816,500
Transferred for overprint - 1,100,000
Specimens, etc - 2,777
Departmental waste, etc - nil
Issues to (less returns by) Head Postmasters - 713,723
Withdrawn on September 30, 1948 - 294,095
Estimated sales - 419,628
Receipts were: £1,536,550 (2½d); £419,628 (£1); £1,956,178 (total).

The above figures show the balance at the close of business on 30 September adjusted for late stock returns in time for the final announcement of results in a press release on 15 November. The 2½d had effectively been sold out by the beginning of June. The total cost to the GPO of

producing the issue was calculated at £5,350, of which £3,489 represents gumming and printing by Harrisons plus miscellaneous costs and £1,861 the cost of paper.

Issues of the overprints were as follows:

	2½d stamps		£1 stamps	
	issued	sold	issued	sold
Tangier	1,980,000	191,916	220,000	24,051
Moroccan Agencies *	1,980,000	407,713	220,000	25,985
Kuwait	1,980,000	178,164	220,000	21,654
Bahrain	1,980,000	185,737	220,000	22,152
BPAEA **	1,980,000	161,750	220,000	20,624
Total :	9,900,000	1,126,280	1,100,000	114,466

* Tetuan, Spanish Morocco, only

** British Postal Agencies in Eastern Arabia (Muscat and Dubai).

In view of these figures the overprints on the Olympic Games issue were cut back from 82,500 to 13,200 sheets of each value.

First day covers were sent to the Royal Family, the Prime Minister, the Post Office Advisory Council and former Postmasters General - while not the first time this was done, a letter to the Treasury from J E Yates of 21 April sought to put the arrangement on a permanent footing for all future issues.

PUBLIC REACTIONS

At home first day sales of the new issue were variously described as 'unprecedented', 'phenomenal', 'like hot cakes' and 'like Christmas time', opening stocks in many offices being practically exhausted by the close of business. Stocks of the £1 went with particular rapidity: there were several reports of offices selling out completely within an hour of opening. That the £1 stamp would sell in this way had not been anticipated (largely the result of the experience with the PUC £1 of 1929: with some 69,000 printed, it had taken until the late 30s for stocks to decline to a level where they were finally withdrawn, the stamps by that time changing hands amongst philatelists for less than face value). The PUC £1 had since increased its philatelic value to between £5 and £10 and there was enough public awareness of this for the new £1 to be regarded as a similar investment.

The majority of Silver Wedding £1 found its way directly or indirectly into the hands of dealers and private collectors (of £419,628 total sales, £390,000 were estimated to be purely philatelic, as

against £30,000 of the 2½d sales). However, by April 1948 a £1 stamp had various uses, such as on airmail packets and parcels or overseas telegrams. The decision to issue a new £1 definitive, the first since the George V issue of October 1913, was influenced by the sales of the Silver Wedding £1. The new £1 stamp went on sale on 1 October 1948, immediately following the Silver Wedding issues withdrawn from sale the previous day.

There was some national and specialist press comment that the stamps were dull and unimaginative; the general reaction, however, was markedly positive. The LEICESTER EVENING MAIL of 27 April called them 'elegant in design, a neat job with clear portraits'. STAMP COLLECTORS FORTNIGHTLY on 3 July called them 'very fine stamps indeed' and praised the £1 for its 'simple dignity ... surely the finest portraits of our King and Queen to appear on any stamps'. The sole actively hostile criticism came from a J T Norman, claiming to speak on behalf of the Purbeck Philatelic Society of Dorset, who wrote to the GPO on 2 June denouncing the Silver Wedding £1 and Channel Islands issues as 'valueless philatelic labels'.

The inclusion of the £1 led to much criticism however: the introduction to the 1949 edition of the Stanley Gibbons Postage Stamp Catalogue was particularly scathing, on the grounds that a special £1 stamp smacked of 'that nasty flavour of commercialism' which, it argued, 'places our country on a level with others - of low repute with philatelists - which issue stamps with the main objective of extracting money from collectors'. There was also adverse comment later when it was leaked that the King insisted on the design being limited to a portrait of himself and the Queen. Although the King's point that the occasion was personal rather than national seems reasonable, some views at the time differed. The columnist Joan Manton, writing in the magazine SOCIALIST LEADER of 5 November 1949, went to some length: 'Our British stamps are bogged down to that most archaic of all our anachronistic survivals from feudalism - the head of the British monarch ... As long as the monarchy is a going concern ... we must be content with our royal art gallery. Our plebeian heroes must pass unhonoured ...'

Her conclusion was that 'it shows the extent to which our monarchy has been outdated by the onward march of social events', although she conceded that 'the outstanding feature of these issued stamps was the beautiful lettering embodied in the design'.

The Silver Wedding stamps were the first not to incorporate the words 'Postage' or 'Revenue' in the design. This caused some complaint among purists but does not seem to have aroused any public controversy.

THE ARTISTS

JOAN HASSALL was born in Bayswater in 1906, daughter of John Hassall the Punch contributor and poster artist and sister of Christopher Hassall the poet. She studied for five years in the Painting School at the Royal Academy and was elected an Associate of the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers and Engravers in 1940. During the Second World War she taught Wood Engraving and Book Production at Edinburgh College of Art for five years before returning to London. She was the first woman to have a stamp design accepted by the GPO (although the engraver Agnes Miller Parker had been submitting designs since the 1930s).

GEORGE T KNIPE was born in 1918 at Tylers Green in Buckinghamshire and studied at High Wycombe School of Art. He received his training in the photogravure printing process with Harrison & Sons and was a member of their staff in 1948 as an artist and designer. His career was interrupted by seven years war service in the Royal Artillery. He later designed the 5d to 7d range of Queen Elizabeth II definitives.

GILES ALLEN

23 November 1992

REFERENCES

PO Archive files

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National Postal Museum booklet

'The Stamp of Royalty', A G Rigo de Righi.