

Festival of Britain

Date of issue: 3 MAY 1951



Around July/August of 1947 (the exact date is unclear) a suggestion was made to the GPO for an issue for the celebrations proposed to mark the centenary of the Great Exhibition of 1851. This arose in informal discussion with the Council of Industrial Design, who would play a large part in the staging of the Festival. On 5 December, plans for the 1951 Festival of Britain were announced to the House of Commons by Herbert Morrison MP, Lord President of the Council – ‘we propose to mark it by a national display illustrating the British contribution to civilisation past, present and future, in the arts, science and technology, and industrial design...we shall welcome suggestions from all quarters’. Squadron Leader Sir Gifford Fox MP asked ‘Has the issue of a memorial postage stamp been considered, not only for the benefit of stamps collectors all over the world, but as a means of advertising?’ Mr Morrison replied ‘That has not been thought about, but it is well worth considering and I will see that the matter is gone into.’

An immediate consequence was a letter from the Treasury on 15 December, written at the behest of the Chancellor and suggesting ‘a complete range of postage stamps for the 1951 Exhibition’. Many suggestions had arrived at the Lord President's Office in response to the statement to Parliament, those relating to postage stamps being forwarded to the GPO. These did not include any strikingly original ideas (apart from one for triangular stamps), but caused some concern to A H Ridge, Secretary of the Post Office Board. On 15 September 1948 he explained to the Director of Postal Services (DPS): ‘Producing stamps is difficult enough already...before bringing not only the organising body [of the Festival] but almost inevitably the Lord President too into the picture.’

The DPS, J E Yates, broadly agreed that any efforts by the Lord President's Office, the Festival organisers or any other outside body to be involved in the normal stamp design and selection process were undesirable, suggesting such efforts might largely be ignored. He confirmed that

the matter of special postage stamps was already in hand; by 4 November it had also been decided to use a special postmark.

LIAISON WITH FESTIVAL COMMITTEE

In the meantime the Official Committee of the Festival of Britain had been constituted, drawn from senior members of the Arts Council, the Central Office of Information and the Council of Industrial Design (CoID). By December 1948 this committee, with Miss J H Lidderdale of the Lord President's Office as Secretary, recommended issues of both commemoratives and new definitives under the heading of 'exhibits' for the Festival. On 16 December Miss Lidderdale wrote to the GPO on this matter asking for advice on the procedures to be followed in the design of new stamps. The committee's view was 'that the Festival Organisation should be associated as closely as possible with the choice of designers and the designs selected', and its brief was to report directly to the Lord President. Despite this, the fears that there would be undue efforts at interference by outside authorities in the normal sequence of events did not come to pass. By 26 February 1949 Miss Lidderdale informed Mr Yates that any ideas of the Festival organisers requiring consideration by the GPO would be passed via the CoID, the Council being represented on the Official Committee and 'most co-operative in postage stamp questions' when dealing with the GPO, as Mr Yates noted to the Board on 4 January.

NATURE OF ISSUE DECIDED

At a meeting on 4 February 1949, the Post Office Board examined its options for issuing a stamp or stamps as follows:

- pictorial commemoratives (suggested by the Council of Industrial Design in the summer of 1947)
- a complete new range of definitives (suggested by the Treasury in December 1947)
- a mixed issue of commemoratives and definitives (suggested by the Festival Committee in December 1948).

It was swiftly agreed that the Treasury's idea of a whole new set of definitives issued on one day to mark the Festival was quite impractical, as such a project would actually take at least a year. A paper before the Board suggested that the commemorative issue should consist of (a) redesigns of the four high value definitives (2/6, 5/-, 10/-, £1) and (b) a number of low value special stamps which could be pictorial or otherwise. This met with the meeting's approval. By 16 February it was decided the special stamps would be 2½d and 3d values, printed in photogravure as usual by Harrison & Sons. This was approved by the King on 21 March.

On 2 April a new proposal by the Festival organisers was raised by Mrs C G Tomrley, Design Advice Officer at the CoID: this was for a redesign of the 6d air letter to coincide with the issue

planned for the 1951 Festival. Mr Yates replied that any fundamental change in shape of the air letter would need new machinery that might take two years or more to supply, so its availability could not be guaranteed in time for the Festival. An alternative might be to print the design of one of the special stamps on the existing form. On 29 April at a meeting at the GPO 'on the question of a special air letter form, Mrs Tomrley saw the difficulties and was not disposed to press the point'. Nothing more was heard of a commemorative air letter.

DESIGNERS CHOSEN

Before finalising the list of designers for the 2½d and 3d stamps correspondence in early May between Mr Yates and Mrs Tomrley related to the artist Abram Games' design of the official symbol of the Festival of Britain, a stylised head of Britannia (to be made public on 8 June). Sir Francis Meynell of the CoID favoured it being incorporated into a stamp design; Mr Yates was less enthusiastic (he found 'considerable difficulty in visualising' how the symbol could be fitted into the same design as the King's head). Eventually it was agreed that Games be included in the artists asked for submissions, that the CoID would encourage him to utilise his own symbol, and any problems in juxtaposing Britannia and the King were his to solve.

On 19 May Mrs Tomrley wrote again, suggesting a list of designers: these included Edmund Dulac, Mary Adshead, Enid Marx and of course Abram Games, 'on account of a certain festive quality often found in their work', plus, 'as fresh talent', Lynton Lamb, Victor Reinganum, Robin Day, John R Barker, Hans Tisdall, and Lewitt-Him (this last being the partnership of Jan Le Witt and George Him). To make up the normal number of twelve, Mrs Tomrley suggested George R Bellew (the Somerset Herald of Arms, whom she understood the GPO routinely invited) and Percy Metcalfe. These were all acceptable to Mr Yates once it had been established that Enid Marx was a British subject. He was able to assure Mrs Tomrley on 25 May that naturalised subjects were equally acceptable (without this proviso Edmund Dulac, a Frenchman naturalised in 1912, could not have submitted designs).

Letters of invitation and 'Instructions to Artists' were sent out on 13 June; on 20 June the invitation was extended to stamp printers Waterlows, Harrisons, Bradbury Wilkinson and De la Rue, the two latter declining to take part. It asked that designs include the legend 'Great Exhibition 1851-1951' and should for preference be pictorial rather than symbolic. Two of the artists, John R Barker, and Stanley D Scott of Harrisons, asked whether Abram Games' Festival symbol might be used. Mr Barker sought rulings on whether the symbol was either specifically barred from use or positively required as a design element; he was concerned about accusations of plagiarism and problems of copyright. The GPO was able to reassure him on 28 June that designs would be considered either with or without Games' symbol. Mrs Tomrley of the CoID gave an official ruling on the copyright question on 12 July, that the symbol could be used 'without any restriction ... we are making strenuous efforts to see that it is applied only to

items of good quality, and in a well drawn, dignified way, but there is no control'. The Festival symbol appeared, in addition to the designs of Games, Barker and Scott, on those of G R Bellew and Mary Adshead - six out of 26 finally submitted.

FIRST DESIGNS

Of the twelve individual artists originally contacted, only Robin Day failed to produce work by the deadline of 1 October, an apology being sent on 15 October. The remainder of the response (as far as information is available) was as follows:

ARTIST		DATE
Hans Tisdall	2 designs	24 August
Abram Games	1 design	not known
Victor Reinganum	3 designs	Two on 31 August, one on 8 September
John R Barker	2 designs	23 September
Enid Marx	2 designs	19 September
Lynton Lamb	2 designs	28 September
Percy Metcalfe	2 designs	26 September
Lewitt-Him	1 design	28 September
George Bellew	2 designs	28 September
Mary Adshead	3 designs	28 September
Edmund Dulac	1 design	not known
L D Fryer - Waterlows	1 design	not known
S D Scott - Waterlows	1 design	not known
Hugo Fleury -Waterlows	1 design	not known
William H M McLaren - Harrisons	2 designs	28 September

The GPO was fortunate to receive a design from Edmund Dulac, as for seven months he had been hospitalised by severe illness and subsequently undergone a prolonged convalescence. For this reason in late May, his omission from the list of recommended artists had been considered; he had not been able to reply to the invitation until 9 July, and submitted his work on the deadline date by dint of considerable effort while under medical instruction to rest.

DESIGN SELECTION

On 10 October Lady Sempill, Harry Carter and Gerald Barry visited GPO Headquarters as representatives of the CoID to assess the designs for high values and Festival commemoratives to hand. Of the latter, the best design of the four chosen was emphatically felt to be Dulac's, on

the theme of 'Commerce and Prosperity' - the heads of Britannia and the King facing each other across a centrepiece of a cornucopia and a caduceus (the winged staff carried by the god Mercury in his role as divine messenger). The rest in order of merit were as follows:

- 2) Reinganum - King's head on right, Crystal Palace in centre, circled by ribbons
- 3) Reinganum - King's head in centre, Crystal Palace in background
- 4) Bellew - King's head on right, Festival symbol centre, Crystal Palace on left.

Design (2) by Reinganum included some figures and a balloon - it was felt these should be removed, as at stamp size such small details might be mistaken for a printing error, this presumably being the advice of the Harrisons' and Waterlows' representatives at the meeting. On 20 October the Postmaster General (PMG) and Assistant PMG saw these designs for the first time, and were told that bromides would be available for a further view; the Reinganum design favoured by the CoID was not liked.

At a meeting with Carter and Berry of the CoID on 7 December it was decided that Dulac's design, still the most preferred, should be the 2½d, and the Reinganum design the 3d. Bellew's design was dropped and replaced by Abram Games' design with the King's head at right and the Festival head of Britannia at left; this and Reinganum's second design were a joint reserve for the 3d, on which the decision was not final. It was decided to replace the wording 'Great Exhibition' with 'Festival of Britain' - this was at the instigation of the PMG (not present) but was readily agreed by the CoID representatives as being more in keeping with both the occasion and the favoured designs. Mr Yates agreed to pass on recommendations for minor changes to artwork, lettering, etc, to the artists and promised colour essays.

FINAL DECISION

On 30 December the revised designs of the Dulac 2½d, the Games 3d and both Reinganum designs for the 3d were sent to Harrisons to prepare bromides. The stamp-size bromides (four of each) were returned on 5 January 1950 for the final meeting of CoID (Sir Francis Meynell, Mr Berry, Mr Carter, Mrs Tomrley) and representatives of the Postal Services and Supplies Departments of the GPO on 10 February. The CoID's final recommendations were (A) the Dulac 2½d ('easily the best and strongly recommended'); (B) the Games 3d; and (C) the surviving Reinganum design, which, having been second preference at the 10 October meeting was now a 'reserve (and a very poor one at that)'. The recommended bromides were nos. 613 (Dulac) and 614 (Games) and the rejected Reinganum bromide no. 623. A list of bromides produced by Harrisons from August 1949 to the last set in January 1950 follows:

ARTIST	ORIGINAL	BROMIDE NUMBER /	REVISED BROMIDES /
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	DRAWING	DATE	DATES
Tisdall	536	540, 31 Aug	-
"	537	541, 31 Aug	562, 26 Sept
Reinganu m	538 (2½d)	543 (3d), 31 Aug	600 (2½d), 24 Nov; 622-3 (3d), 23 Jan
"	539 (3d)	542 (3d), 31 Aug	601, 24 Nov; 620-1, 23 Jan
"	544	545 (2½d), 8 Sept	-
Marx	546	548-9 (2½d), 19 Sept	560, 26 Sept
"	547	550-1 (3d), 19 Sept	561 (2½d), 26 Sept
Barker	552-3	554-5, 23 Sept	-
Metcalfe	556-7	558-9 (2½d), 26 Sept	-
Lamb	563	564, 28 Sept	-
"	565	566, 28 Sept	-
Lewitt- Him	567	568, 28 Sept	-
Adshead	569-70	572-3 (2½d), 28 Sept	584 (2½d), 28 Sept
"	571	574 (3d), 28 Sept	-
McLaren	575 (2½d)	577 (2½d), 28 Sept	-
"	576	578 (3d), 28 Sept	-
Bellew	579	581 (2½d), 28 Sept	598 (2½d), 24 Nov
"	580	582 (2½d), 28 Sept	-
Dulac	not known	not known	591, 597 (2½d) 24 Nov; 612-3 (2½d) 5 Jan
Games	not known	not known	610-11 (3d), 614 (4d), 5 Jan

No information on bromides of the Waterlows' designs is available.

The PMG wrote to the King's Private Secretary, Sir Alan Lascelles, on 17 February, passing on the COLD's recommendations. The King's reply on 27 February approved the Dulac 2½d and Games 3d, and entirely discarded the Reinganum. Why Reinganum's designs fell out of favour between October 1949 and February 1950, to be replaced by Abram Games' contribution, cannot be identified from the files, except to note the early dislike to them by the PMG.

A total of £1,008 was paid out in October 1949 as artists' fees for designs submitted, on the basis of 40 guineas for each submitted up to a maximum of 80 guineas for each artist or print firm; in addition to this Dulac and Games received an extra £168 (160 guineas) each as their designs were adopted. Waterlow misinterpreted the terms of payment and argued that they were entitled to 120 guineas; an additional sum of 40 guineas was paid as a goodwill gesture.

REVISION OF DESIGNS

In March 1950 the issue was announced in Parliament. On 14 March original drawings with stamp-size bromides attached were forwarded to Harrisons for work to begin on colour essays (at this stage the colours were blue for the 2½d and violet for the 3d, as the current definitives). Both artists worked closely with the printers in the ensuing period; Dulac re-drew his original design to reduce the range of tonal variations at Harrisons' request, while Games was anxious to co-operate from an early stage to ensure accurate reproduction of colour shades, and was also asked to do further work on the lettering of the value, the outline of Britannia's helmet, and His Majesty's crown.

On 14 July it was decided that due to the forthcoming increase in the minimum overseas postage rate from 3d to 4d, Games' design should be changed to 4d; he had already supplied artwork for the new denomination to the printers. Also the colours of the low value stamps were to be altered under the requirements of the UPU Convention: the 2½d would be red and the 4d blue. A succession of colour essays of both values, in both deeper and paler shades of each colour, was produced during the following weeks. In each case the artists preferred the deeper shades as showing off the design to greater effect; Mr Rhodes of Harrisons thought it might be difficult to maintain the tone throughout a bulk printing with the deeper blue, so Games' preference was overruled. The objection to the darker or 'magenta' red preferred by Dulac was that it was probably not 'red' within the terms of the Convention. Dulac's first preference was for a reddish-brown shade: a compromise seems to have been reached with a colour both unmistakably red and stronger than the norm then in use.

Earlier Harrisons stated that they could meet printing requirements for the Festival opening at the beginning of May 1951 so long as they received authority to proceed by New Year's Day at latest; by 31 August, however, this deadline had changed to mid November. With time a pressing factor, Games' final revisions were secured on 19 September and colour essays of both values - the 4d in light blue, the 2½d in magenta despite the GPO's prior reservations - submitted to the King by the PMG on 26 September. Exceptionally, these were printed on Harrisons' stock of commercial Esparto paper with their own watermark, as the paper to be used for the bulk print was not available. It was decided on 13 June that Harrisons' regular suppliers, Messrs Portals (John Allen & Son) Ltd of Ivybridge, Devon, should produce a batch of 75% Esparto/25% chemical wood paper with the Royal Cypher watermark, but it was not until 12 October that Harrisons could confirm they would be receiving supplies from Portals in adequate quantities and of an acceptable standard.

The colour essays produced by Harrisons during July to September 1950 are summarised below; no essay numbers are recorded:

VALUE	COMMENTS	DATE
2½d	Pale red	19 July
2½d	Magenta	19 July
3d	Blue	19 July
3d	Pale blue	19 July
4d	Blue with altered helmet	31 July
4d	Pale blue with altered helmet	31 July
4d	As above - crown as in original drawing	18 September

STAMPS PRINTED AND ISSUED

The essays were approved by the King on 30 September; Harrisons were officially notified on 4 October and given an initial print order of 1,250,000 sheets of 120 by 2½d (150 million stamps) and 200,000 sheets of 4d (24 million). A protracted debate had occurred between the Postal Services and Supplies departments of the GPO from early February till the end of August, the PSD's preference for printing the minimum necessary to meet the early needs of dealers and collectors traditionally clashing with Supplies' view that the maximum number of stamps should be printed initially to avoid the inconvenience of later reprints. Estimates of the volume of 2½d stamps required varied from 100 to 180 million, of the 4d from 15 to 30 million. The PSD was particularly mindful of the large numbers of stamps left unsold after withdrawal of the 1946 Victory and 1949 UPU special issues.

Printing began from 14 February; as the final breakdown of stamps printed, issued and returned showed later, forecast usage of the 4d was reasonably accurate but considerably underestimated for the 2½d:

	2½d (sheets)	4d (sheets)
Ordered	2,250,000	230,000
Waste	43,576	4,867
Good	2,206,424	225,133
Reserve stocks	-	11,381
Returned by Head Postmasters	38,578	28,778
Sold to public	2,167,846	184,974

Total sales were therefore 260,141,520 of the 2½d stamps and 22,196,880 of the 4d stamps, and total cash receipts £3,079,855.50. The purely philatelic element of this was later estimated as about £100,000. Total print costs were estimated at £3,312.

While no first day covers were produced by the GPO for sale to the general public, 29 were prepared and presented to members of the Post Office Advisory Council, former Postmasters General, the Prime Minister and others. Harrisons also produced an unknown number of 'souvenir cards' bearing the two Festival stamps for their own distribution. No overprinting was done for British postal agencies overseas as the Festival was felt to be of purely domestic interest: there was apparently little or no discussion on this point.

COMPLAINT BY ABRAM GAMES

No technical difficulties were reported during the printing of the stamps, but a bone of contention arose with Abram Games over the issued 4d stamp. On 18 October the artist's request to see a sample of the actual print run was noted, and when Harrisons finally began printing in mid-February 1951 a visit to their High Wycombe works was arranged for Games for 20 February. Very soon after Games was in touch with the GPO: he felt that Harrisons had done 'an excellent job', except that the King's head was considerably lighter than in the final proof he had previously seen and now competed with the Festival symbol to the detriment of the overall design. A prompt investigation discovered that 'it is the usual practice for Harrisons to improve the reproduction of the head when making printing cylinders', a practice to which the GPO found no objection. 'The King's head has always been regarded as a most important feature of every British stamp design...we could not have countenanced the effigy of the monarch being so much overshadowed by the festival design as Games would seem to wish.' Although it was recognised that the essay seen by Games had been printed on a higher quality paper than that available for the bulk print run, and that Mr Rhodes of Harrisons had not consulted with Games to the degree previously agreed, the artist received scant sympathy. It was felt that only a minute difference was visible between the final essay and the stamps, that such differences were inevitable, that the lightening of the King's head was if anything an improvement, that no other artist had ever complained before, and that it was difficult to understand Games' concern. Subsequently Games had a number of similar differences with the GPO, and eventually he largely withdrew from personal involvement in stamp design, although he served in a purely advisory role on such bodies as the Stamp Advisory Committee for many years.

FESTIVAL POSTMARKS

The Festival was officially declared open on Thursday, 3 May 1951; the same day the special 2½d and 4d stamps were issued, together with four new high value definitives and five low value definitives in new colours. The main Festival venue opened the following day on the South Bank in London, and was served by a special on-site Branch Office with its own satellite posting boxes. Until the Festival ended on 30 September (when the commemorative stamps were

withdrawn) all items posted through the office received postmarks incorporating the official Festival symbol, registered items being handstamped on the counter and others dealt with at the South East District Office, where they were either handstamped or passed through a cancelling machine with a special die as appropriate.

Prior to the Festival's opening a slogan postmark with the official symbol had been used by 40 head post offices from 2 to 30 April (although use at Cardiff and Belfast as late as 3 May was reported). The handstamp, SCM and slogan designs were all produced by the Power Branch drawing office of the GPO Engineering Department from original suggestions by London Postal Region staff and approved by the Festival authorities.

A vending machine on site also issued parcel postage labels bearing the official symbol and ranging in value from 9d to 1s 10d. These were known as TIM labels, the acronym standing for Ticket Issuing Machine. A 'Festival of Britain BO' parcel handstamp was also in use: this did not include the Festival symbol.

Of 10,307 registered items accepted at the Festival BO between 4 May and 30 September, 4,143 were accepted on the first day: many collectors found it convenient to combine the two stamps on a registered cover, as 4d was fortuitously the basic fee for registration as well as overseas postage. 16,000 covers were also accepted for handstamping at a special counter open for that day only at the South East District head post office. Otherwise, by agreement with the Festival organisers, use of the special hand or machine cancellations was confined to postings on the South Bank site. One result was that there appears to have been as much interest shown in the first day of the Festival postmark (4 May) as in the first day of issue of the stamps on 3 May.

REACTIONS TO ISSUE

Collectors' reactions to the stamps as revealed in the specialist press were mixed, ranging from 'neither of the designs provides the slightest inspiration' (GIBBONS STAMP MONTHLY, 1 June 1951) to 'a fine cheerful pair' (STAMP COLLECTING, 11 May). STAMP MIRROR of 12 May found the 4d 'clean and uncluttered', while Games was also praised elsewhere for his neat solution of a tricky design problem. However, STAMP MIRROR saved its most interesting remarks for the 2½d: while Dulac's concept was questioned ('Britannia and the King ... facing each other coldly across a batch of liquorice allsorts') its artistry was unreservedly admired: 'Graceful and excellently executed ... one of our most distinguished low value commemoratives to date ... might well be described as one of the designs of the decade.' The 2½d was also admired for its rich colour. A feature that all collectors found welcome was the care taken in the cancelling of covers. Following considerable complaint in recent years, this had been the subject of a strongly-worded Post Office staff circular of 25 April, and general satisfaction was felt at the quality of cancellation.

THE ARTISTS

ABRAM GAMES, a lecturer in design at the Royal College of Art and self-taught artist, was born in London in 1914. After freelancing prior to the war he enlisted in 1940 and was employed by the War Office to design over 100 posters for the Army. During and after the war his work appeared internationally in exhibitions and one-man shows. He designed the 3d 'Speed' stamp for the Olympic Games issue of 1948 and both contributed and advised on stamp designs for the Israeli government in 1950. In addition to the official symbol and 4d stamp, he also designed flags and guidebook covers for the Festival of Britain. He continued to win awards and prizes for his work in graphic design for many years, most recently at the International Philatelic Competition held in Italy in 1976.

EDMUND DULAC was born in Toulouse, France in 1882, and made his career as an artist from 1904 onwards. He worked in Britain from 1907 in a variety of fields, most prominently book illustration, but also including poster art, caricature, and designs for playing cards, interior decoration, and theatrical sets and costumes. His first stamp designs were for Red Cross charity labels in the 1914-18 War; after designing and modelling the King's Poetry Prize, he was responsible for the 1937 Coronation stamp. In succeeding years his stamp work included the 7d to 1/- definitives of 1937-54, the 2/6d and 5/- definitives of 1939-51, the Olympic Games 'Winged Victory' 1/- of 1948, and the George VI cameo portrait used on all issues throughout the King's reign. He also worked on the projected Anglo-French issue of 1940, Free French colonial stamps and banknotes, and France's first post-war 'Marianne' issue. He died on 24 May 1953; his last designs, the 1/3d Coronation stamp, and the 1/-, 1/3d and 1/6d range of Wilding definitives, were issued after his death.

GILES ALLEN
29 January 1993

REFERENCES

PO Archive files
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