

International Geophysical Year

UNADOPTED ISSUE 1956-58



In January 1955 plans were announced for International Geophysical Year (IGY) to run from July 1957 to December 1958. It was described in 'The Times' as an 'agreed world plan' by which scientists of all nations would co-operate in a programme of observation and experiment in all fields covered by the term 'geophysics', the studies of the world's landmasses, oceans, interior and atmosphere. Precedents were the International Polar Years of 1882-83 and 1932-33, which had come about through the advocacy of the Austro-Hungarian scientist Weyprecht on his return from an Arctic expedition in 1874. Although IGY was meant to be a sequel to these, because of the pace of scientific progress the interval had been halved to 25 years and the scope widened to include atmospheric phenomena and the effects of solar activity (the suggestion for IGY had originated from a group of scientists studying the ionosphere in 1950).

In late July 1955 the United States announced that its plans for IGY included the launch into space of small unmanned artificial satellites. This aroused great interest beyond the scientific community and featured in the logo designed for IGY, depicting a satellite orbiting the globe. Two versions of this were produced, one framed within an octagon to be used on instruments and equipment, and one without the octagon for use on printed matter, including stamps.

STAMPS FIRST PROPOSED

In 1956 the organising committee made the suggestion via the scientific bodies of the participant nations that special stamps be issued incorporating the logo. On 19 June that

year Dr D C Martin of the Royal Society wrote to the Director General of the GPO, Sir W Gordon Radley, passing on this suggestion with the query as to whether a formal approach to the Postmaster General (PMG) would be justified. While he believed it was rare for the GPO to issue special stamps, similar proposals were, he said, being entertained by various postal authorities overseas, and 'it would be in keeping with the leading part we are taking in this great international scientific enterprise'.

In a paper considering Dr Martin's suggestion, the Director of Postal Services, R H Locke, wrote on 26 June that IGY might well merit a special stamp issue, and subject to consultation with Supplies Department and the printers Harrison & Sons Ltd this could be fitted in between the Boy Scout Jamboree stamps (August 1957) and those for the Empire Games (July 1958). The DDG took the view that before making any decision, the GPO should examine the IGY logo. Also a list was to be compiled of any other occasions in 1957-58 for which special issues might be requested. Finally, that the outcome of the PMG's discussions about the possible issue of regional stamps be awaited. The DDG later explained his caution in a memorandum of 9 July: 'I must confess to feeling in any case considerable doubts about the geophysical year project - do we know whether any special event will be taking place in this country, and if not is not the commemoration of a general international occasion, in which this country is playing no specially outstanding part, likely to lead us too far?'

Dr Martin supplied examples of both versions of the logo on 2 July. On 9 July H N Pickering of the Postal Services Department was asked by the DDG, in the memo mentioned above, if he could draw up a list of special events during 1957-58 that might require commemoration, and did so largely on the basis of information supplied by the British Council. The list comprised mainly various scientific congresses and conferences, such events not normally being commemorated by the GPO at that time. There were also a few international telecommunications meetings and one very intriguing possibility, namely the 400th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth I's accession. It was concluded that there were no probable claims ranking equal in importance to IGY.

PROVISIONAL PLANS FOR ISSUE

On 4 September the DPS held a meeting, at which representatives of the Supplies Department and Harrisons the stamp printers were present, on the general topic of stamp production, this being a pressing matter since the announcement of the regional stamp proposals in July. Discussions revealed that the heavy stamp programme now under way had run into a bottleneck, since the limited size of Harrisons' technical staff meant the company could only produce one colour essay a week.

The first reaction of the DPS was that the IGY proposal might be ruled out on these grounds alone. A later study of the timetables indicated that the pressure might ease by the end of 1957, or at worst continue until the early summer of 1958. Accordingly he recommended to the DDG on 18 September that one or two stamps of a common design should be provisionally planned for late October or November 1958. The Royal Society should be promised a final decision in May or June 1957, by which time it would be apparent whether the issue was feasible.

The DDG sought the opinion of T A O'Brien of the Public Relations Department, who thought an issue as late as the closing months of IGY might provoke criticism of the GPO being sluggish in the matter – 'however, we would do better to issue a stamp rather late than not to issue a stamp at all'. On 8 October the DDG finally made his own recommendation to the Director General that a stamp should be considered for the latter part of 1958, while maintaining his personal reservations about its popular appeal.

Fortuitously it was the following day, 9 October, that Dr Martin of the Royal Society wrote to the DG enquiring whether any progress had been made. The DG replied explaining the GPO's heavy existing commitments and indicated the prospect of an issue in late autumn 1958, while discouraging Dr Martin from undue optimism and deferring a decision until May or June, as urged by the DDG. Dr Martin accepted this, although in a letter of 18 October acknowledging the DG's response, he made it clear that an issue at the start of IGY, in the summer of 1957, had been the hope.

The matter rested there until 16 January 1957 when R N Quirk of the Privy Council wrote in connection with a forthcoming parliamentary question, enquiring whether a set of stamps might be issued fairly early in IGY. On 31 January Dr Martin passed on a query from Professor Sydney Chapman, President of the IGY's special international committee, as to the possibility of British and Commonwealth issues. These approaches were symptomatic of the pressure being exerted on the GPO for a favourable decision; in each case the DDG replied outlining the state of affairs as notified to Dr Martin on 10 October.

FIRST REVIEW OF PROPOSALS

On 21 May the DDG reminded the DPS that a review of the prospects for an IGY stamp had been promised for 'May or June'. Various other factors were now influencing the need for a decision: tariff changes planned for October, delays in producing the regional stamps, the first discussions leading to the formation of a philatelic bureau, and the decision, forced on the GPO at the end of March by parliamentary pressure, that a special stamp and air letter be issued to mark the IPU Conference in September. Despite a reassurance that the matter was in hand no action seems to have been taken prior to Locke's retirement as DPS on 11

June and replacement by A Wolstencroft. After a further request by the DDG on 12 July, a memorandum setting out the various options was prepared by Miss E A Knight of PSD and submitted to the DDG on 30 June.

Although Harrisons was still affected by the bottleneck in the production of colour essays, Miss Knight reported it possible for a set of three stamps to be issued in late 1958. However, it was now felt invidious for the issue to occur so late in IGY, and there was the consideration that a full special issue (although favoured by the DG) would bring to 22 the number of special stamps in just over a year (ie, three Scout Jamboree, three Empire Games, one IPU, twelve regionals and three IGY between summer 1957 and autumn 1958). Such an extreme break with previous practice might well be embarrassing, and Miss Knight did not recommend the proposal.

A single high value commemorative was considered; this would be recess-printed as usual, and Harrisons' bottleneck would not thus be a factor. The snag was that high values production was to be transferred in January 1958 from Waterlows to De La Rue, and clearly neither firm could be expected to handle a special issue in the middle of a changeover period. It was also felt unsuitable that a single special stamp should be issued in a high value.

An 'overprinted' definitive, like the IPU 4d was impracticable: the legend 'International Geophysical Year 1957-58' could not be added in an aesthetically pleasing way to any definitive, and in some cases not without changing the initial design to a point which would require the approval both of the Queen and the original artist. This remained true even if only 'Geophysical Year 1958' was used. Overprinting as carried out on stamps produced for overseas postal agencies was considered practicable but unattractive.

The final option was for a single low value stamp, which Harrisons could produce in the 'marginal' time of the regional programme. If the company received a finished design by the autumn then the stamp could be issued about May 1958. To save time the commission would be given to one artist, who would need to receive instructions no later than mid-August. Miss Knight suggested that this was the only practicable option. The value of the stamp should be 3d (the new inland letter base rate from October) and the design by Lynton Lamb as 'he is easy to work with - an important point when we are pressed for time'.

On 9 August the DDG passed Miss Knight's recommendations to the Assistant Postmaster General, Kenneth Thompson MP, in the absence of Ernest Marples MP, the PMG. While the APMG agreed that work should go ahead on designs, he was less than enthusiastic: 'Don't we look rather silly producing our stamp so late? ... I don't think that the Geophysical year is going to make much impact on the people: it's beyond their comprehension.' He considered that the decision to issue should be deferred a further two months until a general policy

meeting scheduled for October had taken place. His personal feelings were that 'I must express myself as opposed to the whole idea.'

DESIGNS REQUESTED FROM LYNTON LAMB

There had been some anxiety about whether the Council of Industrial Design (CoID) would agree to Lynton Lamb receiving the commission by nomination rather than competition, after previously being chosen in a similar fashion to design the new air letter issued that month. The DDG was able to speak privately to both Sir Francis Meynell and Sir Gordon Russell of the CoID and secure their agreement, which was formally confirmed on 20 August. Lamb was sent a semi-formal invitation and instructions by the DPS on 23 August, and accepted the following day. The GPO's instructions, plus a supplementary reply on 26 August to various queries, left the details of the design very much up to the artist: 'we would not wish to lay down any hard and fast rules', except that Lamb was urged to include the IGY logo (in the event he omitted it without question). It was indicated that the proposed stamp would probably be a 3d value, but still undecided. It was made clear there was no guarantee the stamp would be issued.

Meanwhile, on 7 August, Dr Martin of the Royal Society was again pressing for a decision, having been alarmed by the appearance of IGY stamps from Japan, Norway and the USSR. The DG replied on 23 August apologising that the decision was deferred yet again, until October. He also took the opportunity to ask Dr Martin whether there were any themes or symbols he might suggest to represent IGY other than the official logo. The reason was that the logo was very similar to the globe on the Scout Jamboree 1s 3d, designed by the stamp printers, Harrison & Sons, staff artist W H Brown, issued only a few weeks earlier. Miss E A Knight had pointed this out at the end of July. The DPS had been at pains to point this out in his invitation to Lamb (sent on the same day as the reply to Dr Martin) so that the artist could avoid any undue similarity to the Brown design.

Matters again rested until 25 September, when Lamb submitted two stamp designs, 'A' and 'B'. 'A' was Lamb's own preference, with IGY logo at left and the Queen's head on the right, plus '1957', '1958' and 'Geophysical Year'. 'B' included a mathematical grid behind the logo, a constellation of stars in the centre, and a border of formalised stars. In his accompanying letter Lamb wrote of design 'A', 'I hope you will not think it could be confused with the 1/3d Jamboree ... the feeling and balance of the two are essentially different in my opinion'. The PSD did not share his opinion: an internal memorandum of 4 October stated that Mr Lamb's design 'A' could not be more like the World Scout stamp as the 'World', the denomination and the legend all being in similar positions. Writing to the DDG on 7 October, the DPS commented: 'So long as the IGY symbol is the only feature of the design in addition to the Queen's head, this may well be unavoidable'. However, on 23 September Dr Martin had

written to the DG suggesting the Manchester University radio telescope at Jodrell Bank, the Antarctic research ship 'Discovery II', or the 'Skylark' upper atmosphere rocket as possible subjects for the stamp. The DPS thought one of these might be the central feature with the IGY logo relegated to the corners or background.

CONSEQUENCES OF SPUTNIK LAUNCH

During the discussions a completely unexpected factor was introduced, namely the surprise launch of the USSR's Sputnik satellite on 4 October. In talks noted on 11 October the DG and DDG agreed that Lamb's designs were now 'completely ruled out' because they appeared to celebrate the Soviet achievement. Jodrell Bank was likewise ruled out thanks to its well-publicised work under the direction of Professor Bernard Lovell in tracking the satellite, while the 'Skylark' rocket was totally overshadowed. Presumably the GPO should not be seen to celebrate anything other than a primarily British achievement. Thus only 'Discovery II' remained of Dr Martin's suggested alternatives.

A meeting at the Royal Society on 17 October involved Mr Pickering and Miss Knight of PSD and Dr Martin and Dr Moore. Dr Martin argued strongly that Britain was playing a much bigger part in IGY than any of the countries to have issued special stamps, and that Jodrell Bank in particular was playing a unique part: 'it would be very appropriate to include it in the design'. 'Discovery II' would also be appropriate, but Antarctic exploration was not intended to be a dominant theme of IGY (and had already been heavily featured on overseas stamp issues). He agreed that the 'Skylark' rocket should be avoided, on the grounds that it was mainly an Australian project. The solution favoured by the Royal Society was for a stamp with the Queen's head in the centre and Jodrell Bank, 'Discovery II', the IGY logo and the legend 'IGY 1957/58' each in one corner. At the end of the meeting the PSD representatives were supplied with illustrations of the telescope and ship, and on 19 October with a further photograph and artist's sketch of Jodrell Bank. A copy of a letter from Professor Bernard Lovell was attached to the latter, which read in part: 'I feel certain we should all be very honoured if the Jodrell Bank radio telescope found its way on to a British postage stamp'.

On 24 October Miss Knight spoke to Lamb by telephone and put the Royal Society's proposals to him indicating that it was essential to receive fresh designs by mid-November if a stamp was to be issued in spring 1958 as planned. Lamb replied that he could not produce these before 1 December at the earliest, and then only if he received detailed instructions at once. He was now very busy with work for the Brussels exhibition of 1958 involving much travelling back and forth. Furthermore it would be impossible to illustrate more than one theme, eg, the radio telescope.

FINAL REVIEW OF PROPOSALS

A memorandum was produced by Miss Knight on 31 October, reviewing the situation as it now stood. It would create a precedent to commemorate an international event to which Britain was neither playing host nor making a major contribution - Miss Knight had clearly not been persuaded to the contrary by Dr Martin's arguments at their meeting two weeks earlier. However, the Soviet satellite had inspired public interest in IGY to the point where there was now a good case for believing that a stamp drawing attention to the prestige of British contributions, such as Jodrell Bank, would enjoy popular appeal. But, 'there is a practical difficulty of designing and printing it in time for its issue to have any meaning'. The requirement for a completely new design, and the time constraints put forward by Lynton Lamb, were reiterated. It was pointed out that the ten weeks now available to obtain Royal approval by the end of January included Christmas, when many members of the Stamp Advisory Panel would not be available. Any later date would mean issuing the stamp some time after the end of March, thus both clashing with the new regionals and preceding the Empire Games issue by only a few weeks. On these grounds, 'an issue does not now appear to be practicable'.

On 13 November the DPS submitted these views, as the considered opinion of the Postal Services Department, to the DDG. He conceded that an IGY stamp might still be issued in mid-May, although this could mean further delay to the regional issue, already put back until June. He also recalled the Post Office Board's recent decision on 17 October 'that we should be more modest than we were contemplating in our philatelic policy'.

DECISION TO ABANDON ISSUE

Although the DDG, despite his earlier doubts about the proposal based on its assumed lack of popular appeal, was now inclined toward an IGY issue in May or even October, and sought some further discussion, he finally passed the PSD's recommendations to the APMG on 20 November, with the added suggestion that the Royal Society be offered a commemorative postmark in place of the stamp. Although the APMG remained opposed to any stamp issues other than those to which the GPO was already committed in 1958, he found the latter proposal acceptable. However, even this had been abandoned (for no specified reason) by 4 December, when the DG wrote to Dr Martin regretting that it had been decided not to proceed. The decision was made public in answer to a Parliamentary question on 12 December. The artist, Lynton Lamb, who had been given the news by telephone in November, was not paid until 8 January 1958, when he was thanked for his efforts and sent a warrant for 40 guineas (£42).

As indicated, the Post Office Board had concluded as early as 17 October 1957 that the postage stamp programme was already overloaded. The period 1957-58 would prove a philatelist's boom time, with three special issues involving seven stamps, a new air letter in both an ordinary and commemorative version, twelve regionals, new denominations of graphite-lined stamps, a new watermark on all definitives below the high values, and redesigned stamped stationery. That the GPO found difficulty coping is indicated by the final issue of the regionals in August and September, five months later than first planned. Besides the IGY proposal, at least two other contenders for stamps had to be briefly but seriously entertained; these were requests to mark the 75th anniversary of the Boys' Brigade, and the 50th anniversary of the Territorial Army. Both appear to have been inspired by the Scout Jamboree issue of August 1957. The TA proposal was pressed with particular persistence by the War Office until finally rejected.

LYNTON LAMB, RDI, FRSA, FSIA, was born on 15 April 1907. He worked as a painter, book illustrator, and designer, and was on the staff of both the Royal College of Art and the Slade School of Fine Art until his retirement in 1971. He designed the 'Castles' set of high value stamps issued in 1955 and the printed 'stamp' on the air letter of 1957. In 1960 he received the International Philatelic Arts Society's award. Between 1936 and 1974 he wrote widely on painting and other topics. He died on 4 September 1977.

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GILES ALLEN

REFERENCES

British Postal Museum & Archive file
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