

Churchill Commemoration

1965



The death of Sir Winston Churchill renewed pressure for stamps in his honour. Back in 1944, after a national newspaper had asked, on his 70th birthday, ‘What shall we do for him?’, Edwin Thompson of Liverpool had suggested Sir Winston appear on a stamp.

Similar requests were received by the GPO during the 1950s. In August 1961 Mr Thompson repeated his request to his friend, the then Postmaster General (PMG), Reginald Bevins. In a reply of 6 September it was explained to Mr Thompson that, in accordance with international postal regulations, all stamps bore the name of the issuing country with the exception of Britain where the portrait of the reigning monarch was the means of identification. The PMG pointed out that ‘if we were to include the portrait of anyone else we fear we might lose this unique privilege’.

Then on 23 April 1964 the four low-value stamps marking the Shakespeare Festival became the first British postage stamps to bear the portrait of someone other than a member of the Royal Family. Mr Thompson was prompted by this to write to the PMG once again; he now suggested that special stamps to mark Churchill’s 90th birthday. Mr Thompson acknowledged that the Queen’s head was a prominent feature of British stamps but noted that ‘it is possible to add another head just as I see you are doing for Shakespeare’s birthday’.

This latest request generated serious debate within the GPO. On 29 April, following discussions with the Director of Postal Services, the Director General prepared a minute for the PMG: it listed three objections to a Churchill stamp:

‘Her Majesty let it be known that her agreement to Shakespeare’s head appearing on the stamps was not intended as a precedent. I think therefore, there would be opposition from the Palace.

'Sir Winston Churchill's ninetieth birthday is 30th November next. He is not at present in very robust health and if we were to agree to a special stamp for his ninetieth birthday then presumably this would have to be issued if he were to die in the meantime.

'The announcement that a Churchill stamp is to be issued on 30th November might be regarded by some people as carrying political significance on the eve of a General Election. I know that Sir Winston is really, these days, almost above politics but the point is worth mentioning.'

In the Director General's opinion a Churchill stamp would also 'introduce a completely new policy' regarding special stamps, so was unable to recommend such a stamp.

The PMG discussed this minute with the Assistant Postmaster General in early May 1964. They were not convinced that the other objections would stand if there was no opposition from the Queen and so asked that a short letter exploring the possibility be sent to the Palace. A draft letter was drawn up but never actually sent. The Deputy Director General stated on 8 May that the Palace authorities might be reluctant to raise this matter with the Queen because a Churchill stamp could be construed as a political move. He suggested that the PMG instead bring the matter to the attention of the Prime Minister or even the Cabinet before contacting the Palace.

The PMG eventually wrote to the Prime Minister in the middle of July. On 17 July the Prime Minister replied that he was opposed to any special stamp to mark Churchill's 90th birthday. In his letter the Prime Minister doubted that Sir Winston would approve of such a move: 'I was very impressed with something he said in the House when moving the Resolution for a statue to Lloyd George about the need to allow time to elapse before proposing a public statue and I think the same would apply to a portrait on a stamp'. The PMG contacted Mr Thompson on 21 July and informed him of the Prime Minister's decision.

Public pressure for a Churchill stamp continued. With the defeat of the Tory Government in the General Election, Anthony Wedgwood Benn became PMG from 19 October 1964. In the House of Commons on 25 November the new PMG was asked by J A Kilfedder, if issuing postage stamps for Sir Winston, to make any announcement on or before 30 November. Mr Kilfedder was told by the PMG that GPO policy was currently under review and no decision could be made until the process was completed.

The files in the British Postal Museum & Archive contain many requests from the public for Churchill stamps dating from December 1964 and early January 1965. All requests were answered that the PMG was reviewing the following year's special issue programme and that stamps honouring Churchill were being considered. On 24 January 1965, Sir Winston Churchill died. The following day the PMG met the Director of Postal Services (DPS) and informed him that he wanted an issue of stamps in Sir Winston's honour. The PMG decided

there should be two stamps; one at the inland letter rate (then under review) and one at the common air mail rate of 1s 3d. The DPS advised the PMG that nine or ten weeks would be needed for production and even then only if corners were cut. It seems the PMG wanted the stamps issued as quickly as possible. It seems as if the GPO was looking at a date with special significance such as 23 April (St George's Day) or 24 May (Commonwealth Day).

The PMG formally announced on 27 January that there would be stamps in honour of Churchill, even though the Queen had not yet been consulted. The Prime Minister had an audience with the Queen the next day and obtained her approval for the use of Churchill's head alongside her own portrait.

INVITATIONS TO ARTISTS

Designs were commissioned from three sources between 27 and 29 January. David Gentleman was invited to prepare designs during a meeting at GPO Headquarters on 27 January; two days later he received an official written invitation. It seems he had originally been led to believe that he would be the sole designer and so postponed ongoing work in preference to what seemed a more urgent commission. When he became aware that his designs would be in competition with those of other artists, Gentleman asked for some form of financial compensation, which the GPO declined. The company that would print the Churchill stamps, Harrison & Sons, was invited to submit designs on 29 January. Unusually, as he was a member of the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC), Abram Games was also invited to submit designs.

No formal instructions were drawn up, but the thinking can be gleaned from seven design features listed in a letter to David Gentleman:

The inclusion of the Queen's head on the right of the design.

The inclusion of the Karsh portrait of Sir Winston Churchill on the left of the design. The head may be larger or smaller than the Queen's head. A reversed design of Sir Winston's head may be used if advantageous to the design.

Any additional features to the design are left to your own choice.

The heading 'Sir Winston Churchill' may be used if desired.

The dates 1874-1965 must be shown.

Up to three basic colours would be the ideal but more may be used if desirable. Black may not be used as a background; a white background is acceptable.

The denominations will be 4d and 1s 3d. We expect the same design will be used for both stamps. White value figures should, if possible, be on a clear detachable acetate sheet.

The fee will be 60 guineas each for up to two designs, that is a maximum of 120 guineas with an additional 190 guineas if a design is successful.

Harrison & Sons was given similar advice: the company was also told that designs were to be submitted by not later than 10 February 1965. It is not clear what instructions were given to Abram Games.

In collaboration with his wife, Rosalind Dease, David Gentleman produced a number of variations of four basic designs. These were delivered on 2 February. Abram Games initially submitted one design but later sent in a second version which he preferred: the original artwork is not in the British Postal Museum & Archive collection as it was returned upon request to the artist on 5 April 1965. Harrisons also produced designs.

ESSAYS

Colour essays of all of the designs were prepared by Harrisons. The first essays were submitted by the printers firm on 15 February, with two further essays of a Gentleman and Dease design on 16 February.

The Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) met on 16 February 1965. Present were James Fitton (Chair), Sir John Wilson, Abram Games, Milner Gray, Prof. Richard Guyatt, Paul Reilly, Mrs C G Tomrley (Secretary), R F York (Harrison & Sons), and A A Mead and D H neaumont of the GPO.

The SAC selected two first choice and two second choice designs. Its first choice was, for the 4d, the Gentleman and Dease 1s 3d design which featured the larger version of Churchill's head, together with the second version of Abram Games' design for the 1s 3d. The second choice was two further Gentleman and Dease designs. The SAC 'strongly recommended' the first two designs.

The SAC requested further essays of the selected Gentleman and Dease designs. All were to include a vertical white line separating the Queen's portrait from that of Churchill: this had originally appeared only on the designs that featured the larger version of Sir Winston's head. It seems David Gentleman heard of this decision as he wrote on 20 February to explain that he had not at any time considered submitting the design with the smaller head with the white line. He pointed out that Harrisons believed that this white line would cause 'registration difficulty in the final printing of the stamps'. Harrisons did, in fact, inform the GPO that, because the line was the natural colour of the paper, there was a tendency for the colour in the remainder of the design to spread over the line. After tests Harrisons felt that 75 per cent of stamps would be imperfect. On the other hand it had been suggested that without the line it appeared as if the Queen was looking over Sir Winston's left shoulder.

The further essays were submitted by Harrisons on 8 March.

Gentleman also produced a design omitting the Queen's head: Benn thought this should be considered, and was furious that it was not shown to the SAC. He asked that essays be prepared of the design, although it was not used.

DESIGN SELECTION

On 23 February, at the request of the Director General, essays of the four selected designs were shown to Lady Churchill, a most unusual move on the part of the GPO. Lady Churchill expressed regret that the Karsh portrait of her husband had been used, although she did admit it was the image that the public would expect to see. She did not like the first choice designs, but did approve of the second choice designs. The PMG submitted all four designs when he wrote to the Palace on 15 March seeking the Queen's approval. He recommended not the two designs chosen by the SAC but the two favoured by Lady Churchill, which he admitted were his own preference. He explained to the Queen that the dates which appeared on the 1s 3d designs would be omitted if selected. These two designs were formally approved by the Queen on 16 March 1965.

The approved essays were forwarded to Harrison & Sons on 17 March with the instruction that the dates '1874-1965' be removed.

ISSUE DATE

Initially either 23 April or 24 May were considered as issue dates; during the early development 10 May, being the 25th anniversary of Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister, was also considered. By this time a number of other postal administrations around the world had announced stamps in honour of Churchill, and there was some discussion with such countries as New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the United States regarding an appropriate date of issue. It appears the GPO hoped that some if not all of the stamps might be released simultaneously.

In early March the favoured date was 24 May, for which New Zealand and Australia had already expressed a preference. By 24 March the PMG had proposed 17 May, a date with no connection with Churchill, but, not only was this the date on which a tariff change came into force, but the GPO had been subject to international pressure to issue the International Telecommunication Union Centenary stamps on that date. The Director of Postal Services pointed this out to the PMG and explained that Australia and New Zealand would find difficulty in accepting this date. He also pointed out that 'as we were unusually late in

getting the approved essays to the printers we do not as yet, have a clear assurance that they can meet all our demands for the 17th May’.

The PMG was obviously convinced, so when the Churchill stamps were announced to the public on 7 April, the issue date was given as 24 May. Unfortunately, the GPO was forced to postpone the issue due to an unofficial ban on overtime by staff at Supplies Department depots. On 21 June 1965, the PMG announced that the stamps would be issued on 8 July.

PRODUCTION DETAILS

Three types of printing machine were used in the production of the stamps. The Timson was a reel-fed, two colour, twelve-inch wide rotary machine and was used to print the 4d value. This produced stamps with a clearer impression due to greater pressure being applied by the cylinders; greater detail can be seen on Churchill’s portrait while that of the Queen appears lighter and sharper. The Rembrandt was a sheet-fed rotary machine and was also used for the 4d value. By comparison this produced stamps with a lack of detail on Churchill’s portrait while the portrait of the Queen is described as ‘dull and coarse’. A quantity of stamps from this machine was printed with three phosphor bands. The ‘Linotype and Machinery No. 4’ was a sheet-fed rotary press used for printing the 1s 3d value, a quantity of which was printed with one phosphor band. This machine was also used to print the phosphor bands on both values.

The stamps were issued on 8 July 1965 and the following sales are recorded.

Ordinary:

4d (Timpson) – 32,040,000

4d (Rembrandt) – 103,217,520

1s 3d – 7,893,480

Phosphor:

4d (Rembrandt) – 10,322,760

1s 3d – 864,960.

The 4d phosphor sold out in December 1965 and the remaining stamps were withdrawn from sale on 28 February 1966.

PHILATELIC ARRANGEMENTS

On 12 February 1965, David Gentleman was asked to prepare designs for both a first day envelope and a presentation pack, ensuring that the design of the envelope was consistent

with that of the stamps without being merely a repetition. For this he received 100 guineas (£105) in addition to the 500 guineas (£525) he and his wife received for their stamp designs.

The first day cover was priced at 6d. The Philatelic Bureau provided a full first day cover service inclusive of cover and stamps at a cost of 4s 6d. In addition the Bureau also serviced customers' own addressed envelopes at a cost of 2s 6d. The GPO envisaged a massive public response to this issue and although no actual sales figures are recorded it appears that 350,000 envelopes were ordered. A total of 38,500 presentation packs were sold.

CHURCHILL'S PORTRAIT

The portrait used on the stamps was based on a well-known wartime photograph taken by Karsh of Ottawa. Use of this photograph was suggested from the moment the idea of a Churchill stamp was conceived; its use on the stamps was approved by the PMG on 27 January.

It was later suggested that an alternative image for the stamps might be taken from a marble bust of Churchill in the Queen's possession at Windsor Castle. This had been produced by Oscar Nemon in 1956 and was recommended, on his own initiative, by the Queen's Assistant Private Secretary on 2 February. On 9 February Lady Churchill's Private Secretary wrote to the GPO and explained that the Nemon bust had recently been suggested to Lady Churchill as a suitable image for the stamps. It was explained by the GPO that the idea of featuring a bust had been rejected because a sculptured image ran the risk of losing definition when reduced to stamp size.

SIMON BATES
23 APRIL 1993.

REFERENCE

British Postal Museum & Archive file:
P 627/66 - Special Postage Stamps Sir Winston Churchill.