

SPECIAL STAMP ISSUE

## Joseph Lister, Antiseptic Surgery

Date of issue: 1 SEPTEMBER 1965



On 12 August 1865 James Greenlees suffered a compound fracture of the leg. He was admitted to the Glasgow Royal Infirmary, under the care of Professor Joseph Lister of Glasgow University. It was Lister's experimental treatment of James that transformed surgery, from an extremely dangerous last resort into an essential cornerstone of modern medicine.

Prior to 1865, surgery had little changed since the earliest days of medicine, with one important exception, the introduction of anaesthetics in the mid-19th century. While extensive surgery was now technically possible, and painless for the patient, septicaemia was an all too common complication, and the dangers of infection limited surgery to amputations, opening abscesses, and removing superficial cancers. The causes of post-surgical infection, indeed any infection, were unknown, although 'bad airs' impossible to keep off a wound, were generally thought to blame.

Joseph Lister, who had been appointed Regis Professor of Surgery at Glasgow University in 1860, was educated at University College, London, where he witnessed the first ever ether anaesthetic operation carried out in Britain. He was disturbed by the high fatality rate of post-surgical septicaemia, and spent many years exploring its cause. It was not until a colleague at the University of Glasgow, Dr Thomas Anderson, Professor of Chemistry, introduced Lister to the work of Louis Pasteur that the breakthrough came. Pasteur had shown that fermentation of wine, or putrefaction of milk and meat, was caused by the presence of micro-organisms, which were carried in the air. To Lister this was a revelation. Combating septicaemia then became a problem of keeping the airborne germs from the wound, rather than excluding the air itself.

Lister decided that of the three logical methods for excluding germs - filtration, heat, and chemical agents - chemical agents offered the best hope. It had already been shown that carbolic acid was effective as a disinfectant in the treatment of sewage, so Lister chose

this as his agent. The first patient to receive carbolic acid antiseptic applied to his wound was young James Greenlees. James made an astonishing recovery, and Lister's subsequent experimentation transformed surgery. He went on to found the British Institute of Preventive Medicine, later renamed the Lister Institute. He also became a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, and of the Royal Society, serving as President from 1894 to 1900. In 1897, he was raised to the peerage in recognition of his contribution to medicine, becoming the First Baron of Lyme Regis.

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## REQUEST FOR A SPECIAL STAMP

As 1965 marked the centenary of Professor Lister's famous discovery, the University of Glasgow, the Glasgow Royal Infirmary and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow planned jointly to celebrate the occasion. On 27 November 1964, Sir Charles Illingworth, Convener of the Lister Centenary Committee wrote to the Postmaster General (PMG) to suggest a stamp to commemorate Lister's discovery.

Sir Charles' request was at a most opportune moment. After the Labour victory in the General Election of October 1964, Anthony Wedgwood Benn became PMG. He ordered a thorough review of the criteria under which special stamps were issued (previously only to mark significant current events and Royal or postal anniversaries).

The programme for 1965 was first discussed by senior Post Office officials in mid-August 1964: a memorandum, dated 10 August, from K Hind of the Postal Services Department to the Deputy Director General, W A Wolverson, suggested possible subjects. Hind proposed to limit the number of issues in 1965 to four or five, as there had been some criticism levelled at the Post Office for what was considered an excessive number in the past. In order to allow for new subjects that might arise, Hind proposed only three subjects be confirmed at this stage.

Wolverson was largely in agreement, but concerned that the forthcoming general election might bring a new PMG, unfamiliar with the criteria under which stamps were issued. It was decided to prepare a minute that would explain current policy, and the revenue derived from issuing special stamps. The new PMG could then decide how the Post Office should proceed.

The Deputy Director General's caution was apposite. Following the Labour victory, Anthony Wedgwood Benn, undertook a full review of the Post Office, including commemorative stamps. The new policy, approved by the Post Office Board on 25 November 1964, broadened the criteria. When announced in the House of Commons, on 15 December, this new policy was outlined:

to celebrate events of national and international importance;  
to commemorate important anniversaries;  
to reflect the British contribution to world affairs,  
including the arts and science;  
to extend public patronage to the arts by encouraging  
the development of minuscule art.

Sir Charles Illingworth's request arrived at Post Office Headquarters between the Board's approval of the new policy, and its public announcement. T P Hornsey of Postal Services presented a memorandum to the Director of his department, Brig. K S Holmes, indicating that, although this request would have been a non-starter under the former policy, it could not be rejected outright any longer. A problem arose from the fact that the PMG had already approved a tentative programme for the following year.

Brig. Holmes forwarded Hornsey's memorandum to Wolverson on 8 December 1964, highlighting the dilemma: 'I think this illustrates the difficulty in which we are likely to be placed by the new policy on special stamp issues. I should have thought the Lister centenary had a stronger claim to commemoration than one or two of the other subjects now in the programme as submitted to PMG. But if that programme is to stand it looks as though the only line we can take in turning down this application for a Lister stamp is the quite arbitrary one that the 1965 programme is already settled.'

The suggestion was put to the PMG by Wolverson that there be an interval between the announcement of the new stamp policy and of the first issue of 1965. A delay would give time to consider further requests that may be received following the change of policy. The request for a Lister stamp was put to the PMG as one that would now be claimed 'a serious contender for a place in the programme'. At a meeting between Wolverson and the PMG it was decided to delay announcement of the programme for 1965 until after consideration of further ideas. In a subsequent parliamentary announcement, the PMG asked members of the House and the public for ideas for special issues.

The floodgates opened, and an enthusiastic British public submitted numerous requests for stamps commemorating a wide variety of subjects. Sir Charles Illingworth was informed by Postal Services that the programme for the coming year was undecided, but his request would be given 'sympathetic consideration'. A decision was expected in mid-January.

Despite the response, when the time came to re-evaluate the programme for 1965, little had changed. Wolverson wrote to the PMG on 13 January 1965 with a proposed list of issues. There was only one that had not been among those originally considered by the Post Office Board the previous November, namely the Lister Centenary. The original list of eight subjects had included a Robert Burns memorial stamp, which was now planned for January

1966. Strictly speaking, therefore, there was room to include one more subject in the 1965 list. Wedgwood Benn agreed to the Lister Centenary, and the programme for that year was announced in Parliament on 1 February.

At this point, no decisions had been made regarding the denominations, or the exact date of issue, although it was assumed they would be issued in the latter half of the year. In accordance with the new guidelines, two stamps would be issued. D H Beaumont wrote to Sir Charles Illingworth on 3 February with the PMG's decision, and suggested 12 August, Lister's birthday, as a potential date of issue. Illingworth agreed that this was a most suitable date, and thus the preparations went forward.

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## COMMISSIONING DESIGNS

Beaumont requested from Sir Charles Illingworth proposals from the Lister Centenary Committee for possible designs. The response, received towards the end of February, gave two suggestions: a design based on the Lister statue in Kelvingrove Park, Glasgow, backed by the University; Lister in his ward at the bedside of James Greenlees. These ideas were passed to the artists with the invitation, although they were encouraged to generate new ideas as they saw fit.

The 'Instructions to Artists', sent on 2 March, along with the invitations to submit designs, indicated that the stamps were to be issued in 6d and 1s 0d values. There had been debate as to the exact title, with 'Lister Centenary' being dismissed as too obscure for the public, while 'Joseph Lister, Antiseptic Surgery. 1865-1965' was too long. The chosen inscription, 'Lister Centenary, Antiseptic Surgery' emerged as a happy compromise. Enclosed with the instructions was a booklet detailing the life and achievements of Joseph Lister prepared by the Lister Centenary Committee, which it was hoped would inspire the artists to generate other design ideas. Four independent artists, Frank Ariss, Peter Gauld, Anthony New and Michael Farrar-Bell, were invited, in addition to the stamp printing firms of Harrison & Sons, who would print the stamps, and Bradbury Wilkinson & Co. The deadline for receiving completed submissions was 21 April.

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## SUBMISSION OF DESIGNS

Bradbury Wilkinson & Co replied on 9 March that their staff artists were regrettably too busy to undertake the commission; all the other artists submitted designs before the deadline. Each design was allocated a design number by the Postal Services Department upon receipt, which provided an easy reference base.

## F Ariss

1 – 1s 0d: unexplained symbolic design;

2 – 6d: Lister portrait, chemical symbol for phenol, square of lint and of tin/lead.

## A New

Series B – Hospital architecture

3 – 1s 0d: Western General Hospital, Edinburgh, and a 19th century microscope

4 – 6d: Slough Hospital, and Carbolic spray.

Series A – Lister

5 – 1s 0d: Kelvingrove monument, Glasgow University, and quote of Louis Pasteur at his meeting with Lister in Paris 1892;

6 – 6d: Lister at boy's bedside explaining antiseptic surgery to students.

## P Gauld

7 – 1s 0d: Microscopic view of germ overlaid with a square of lint;

8 – 6d: Antiseptic carbolic spray pump.

## M Farrar-Bell

9 – 1s 0d: Lister's operation on James Greenlees;

10 – 6d: Lister peering through microscope.

## Harrison and Sons

11 – 1s 0d: Lister at James Greenlees' bedside;

12 – 6d: Lister statue and Glasgow University.

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## DESIGN SELECTION

The designs were discussed by the PMG's Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC), under the chairmanship of Sir Kenneth Clark. The committee liked the sets by Michael Farrar-Bell (9 and 10) and Peter Gauld (7 and 8), but there was doubt whether the square of lint in design 7 would reproduce at stamp size and so this design had to be abandoned. It was decided to replace it with design 2 by Michael Ariss. Michael Farrar-Bell's set (9 and 10) were selected as first choice, with these were to be essayed by Harrison & Sons as they stood. For the second choice, the committee selected designs 2 and 8. Design 2, by Ariss, had originally been drawn as portrait (vertical). Ariss was asked to redraw this design landscape (horizontal), and to change the denomination to 1s 0d. This was to match design 8 from Peter Gauld featuring Lister's carbolic spray pump.

The first choice (9 and 10) and one of the second choice (8) were sent to Harrison & Sons for essaying on 30 April. The printer was instructed that the denominations for design 10 and 8 should be changed from 6d to 4d, a measure necessitated by the wish to avoid issuing stamps of the same denomination in successive issues; the Commonwealth Arts Festival set due for issue on 1 September included a 6d stamp. Michael Ariss's redrawn 1s 0d design was forwarded to Harrison & Sons by Beaumont on 10 May. A letter from R F York, General Manager of Harrison & Sons, to Beaumont of Postal Services, indicates there was a problem with Ariss's design. He had apparently used half-tone in part, rendering it unsatisfactory for reproduction in large quantities. York proposed, however, to proceed with the essay, and should the SAC select it, the tone problem could be dealt with later.

There was also some discussion over a technical question with Frank Ariss's design. The design was described by Ariss as follows: 'The design incorporates a portrait of Lister and the chemical symbol for Carbolic Acid, (Phenol). Both these elements are placed within a third, the white square. This represents a square of lint and the black outer border overlapping the white square a sheet of lead or thin block tin. This symbolism has been devised to graphically outline Listers [sic] initial experiments.'

While the symbolism of the design was much appreciated, a question arose over Ariss's depiction of the chemical symbol for Carbolic Acid - or Phenol,  $C_6H_5$ . The symbol consisted of a hexagon (the benzene ring) and the letters 'OH' (the hydroxyl radical). Strictly speaking this was only a partial representation of the full chemical symbol for the Phenol molecule. Upon consultation with the Government Chemists' office, the conclusion was that the design as it stood would be acceptable as a 'reasonable interpretation' of Phenol, although the 'OH' should appear at the apex of the top right hand corner of the hexagon, rather than halfway along upper right hand side. In the end, it was decided to exercise a little artistic licence in order to retain the balance of the design, and leave the 'OH' where it was, as to move it would have caused difficulty. Those chemists who might object to the inaccuracy were considered too few to warrant undue concern.

Harrison & Sons forwarded essays of three of the four designs to D H Beaumont on 20 May. Essays of the redrawn design by Frank Ariss arrived six days later.

The essays were shown to the SAC, chaired by Sir Kenneth Clark, on 27 May, where it was decided to overturn the earlier decision, and designate the set by Gauld and Ariss (8 and 2) as first choice. Michael Farrar- Bell's designs were to be submitted to the Queen as well, as the committee's second choice. There is no record of changes being made to the tone of Ariss's design, despite Mr York of Harrison & Sons stating that the half-tone used originally was unacceptable.

The PMG sent essays of the two sets to the Queen's Private Secretary, Sir Michael Adeane, on 17 June. She approved designs the SAC's revised first choice on 18 June 1965. It is possible that, given the time constraints on the printers, essays with the unacceptable half-tone were shown to the Queen, and not amended until after her approval had been given.

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## PRODUCING THE STAMPS

For some weeks during the spring of 1965, staff at the Post Office Supplies Department had been on an unofficial overtime that led to delays in the production of some of the special issues intended for the middle of the year, notably, the Churchill, Parliament and International Telecommunication Union Centenary issues. Harrison & Sons, who were undertaking all of the printing for these issues, informed Postal Services that it was going to be impossible to meet the original deadlines for later issues, such as Lister, because of the backlog that had been created.

A memorandum from Wolverson to the PMG presented the problem, and suggested a revised timetable for the rest of the year's issues. He suggested that the Lister stamps be issued on the same day as the Commonwealth Arts Festival, planned for 1 September. Clearly this was not the best solution, nonetheless, it was proposed in order to keep the Commonwealth Arts Festival issue to its original date; because 1 September was about the earliest date the Lister issue could be put on sale (a longer printing time was required because the issue included a 4d stamp); as far as possible to leave a period of three weeks between successive issues to avoid choking the Philatelic Bureau (there was a very real danger of work getting behind leading to enquiries, complaints, etc which the GPO was very anxious to avoid).

The PMG agreed with Wolverson's suggestions, and announced the new dates in response to a Parliamentary question on 21 June.

A press showing of the approved designs was arranged for 7 July. Peter Gauld attended, but Frank Ariss, unable to do so, was represented by his wife Angela. The accompanying press release stated that the 4d stamp would be printed in three colours, grey, blue and brown, and featured 'the carbolic spray used by Lister when he introduced his antiseptic technique'. The 1s 0d stamp was printed in blue, purple and black.

It had been Benn's intention to show essays of all of the submitted designs; however, this idea was shelved due to the pressure of work on the printers, and cost. Instead, Harrison & Sons provided stamp size bromides of the unsuccessful designs, and colour essays of the stamps themselves.

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## PHILATELIC SERVICE

It was decided by the Postal Services Department not to produce a special first day envelope and presentation pack for the Lister stamps. No reason can be found in the files, but perhaps the time constraints were a deciding factor. A Press and Broadcast Notice issued 24 August announced that philatelic posting boxes would be provided to envelopes to receive a first day of issue postmark.

In mid-August, the Board of the Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh, where Lister had taught for many years, approached the Director of the Post Office in Scotland, T Vallance, with a request that a special envelope it had produced for the stamps be sold over post office counters. This was passed onto Postal Services in London on 19 August for approval with the strong support of the Edinburgh office. The request was turned down by Postal Services on the grounds that involvement in such an 'agency service', even at a profit, would put the Post Office in a position of having to accede to similar requests.

The matter was taken further by Vallance, who pursued it most vigorously with the Director of Postal Services, Brig. K S Holmes. In the end, a compromise was reached: Vallance could notify sub post offices that they could sell the envelopes of their own accord, without involving the Post Office in an official capacity.

An explanatory letter was sent to Vallance by Brig. Holmes on 2 September detailing the reasons for the original refusal. It was explained that for each commemorative stamp there was a wide variety of special envelopes produced, both by the commercial philatelic world and other interested bodies, all of whom were attempting to make a profit from the sale. Gaining distribution through the Post Office network would be an extraordinary boost, if one group could claim an exclusive distribution; were the Post Office to sell all the envelopes which became available, the stocking and accounting task would be enormous. Once distribution and sales costs had been taken into account, the actual revenue accrued to the Post Office, would be minimal.

An interesting footnote is a letter that appeared in 'The Scotsman' on 28 August 1965: 'Sir - My attention has been drawn to the statement in your issue of August 25 that an envelope is being issued by the Royal Infirmary [Edinburgh] to carry the postage stamps commemorating the Lister centenary. It should be noted, as a matter of historical accuracy, that the event whose centenary is being celebrated took place in the Royal Infirmary, Glasgow.'

The letter was signed by Sir Charles Illingworth, Convener of the Lister Centenary Committee, who had first proposed the stamp.

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## RELEASE OF THE STAMPS

The two stamps were issued on 1 September 1965, together with the Commonwealth Arts Festival stamps. The PMG presented gifts of mint stamps mounted on a card to the Queen, Princess Margaret, the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, the Speaker of the House of Commons, previous Postmasters General and Assistant PMG, Postmasters General of the Commonwealth countries, members of the SAC, the stamp designers, and Sir Charles Illingworth, Convenor of the Lister Centenary Committee.

A number of post offices reported discovery of Lister stamps sold prematurely on 31 August. Early releases occurred in many parts of the country, with total amounts reported as approximately 2,000 of the 4d and 150 of the 1s 0d. Particularly large numbers were sold prematurely at the following Post Offices:

St Dunstons Rd SPO, Canterbury – 600 of the 4d and 40 of the 1s 0d

Earlstone Sub Office, Galashiels – 157 of the 4d

Barry PO, Glamorgan – 81 of the 4d, and 21 of the 1s 0d

Kingsway PO, Swansea – 720 of the 4d, and 60 of the 1s 0d.

The stamps were withdrawn on 15 April 1966 having been issued in the following quantities:

### **Ordinary**

4d – 92,167,440

1s – 8,368,800

### **Phosphor**

4d – 10,732,800

1s – 1,452,360.

Alan Griffiths  
July, 1993

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