

SPECIAL STAMP HISTORY

900th Anniversary of Westminster Abbey

1966



The 900th Anniversary of the founding of Westminster Abbey by Edward the Confessor fell on 28 December 1965. A number of activities were planned with the preparations beginning years in advance. The 'Receiver General' of the Chapter Office of Westminster Abbey, W R J Pullen, wrote to the Director of Postal Services on 23 October 1963 suggesting that the event be marked by 'a special postage stamp, and a special franking marking'.

Mr Langfield of the Postal Services Department (PSD) replied on 12 November explaining that the GPO received a number of requests for special stamps and that, in order 'to keep their number within reasonable limits', it was policy to limit issues to 'outstanding current national or international events and Royal and postal anniversaries'. Langfield added that although the GPO realised the importance of the anniversary it did not fall within the confines of its policy. However, he also stated that this policy could be relaxed when there was 'a current event marking an historical anniversary of outstanding importance', so if there were any major celebrations to coincide with the anniversary the GPO would be 'very willing to consider an issue of special stamps to mark them'.

The Receiver General wrote again on 16 December 1963 reasoning that the 900th anniversary could be seen as a Royal anniversary. He made the point that Westminster Abbey was a Royal foundation, being originally founded by Edward in 1065 and then re-founded as a Collegiate Church by Elizabeth I in 1560. Pullen therefore asked whether 'Under these circumstances may I take it that our application would be favourably received?' The reply on 9 January 1964, stated that the GPO would not be finalising the special stamp programme for 1965 until later in 1964. It also pointed out that those anniversaries that had been celebrated as Royal were more personal occasions, a jubilee or a wedding for example. The letter stressed that no decision would be made until 'we have some ideas of what you

have in mind' regarding celebrations, and therefore asked that the GPO be kept informed of any events associated with the anniversary.

Internal discussions took place in February 1964, with a suggestion from T A O'Brien of the Public Relations Department that there be a pictorial stamp to mark the anniversary of the Abbey. A reply to O'Brien reminded him of the stamp issuing policy but said that the Postal Services Department would 'do our best to build up a good case to put to PMG'. The letter added that the GPO would bear in mind the possibility of treating the anniversary as a Royal occasion.

The Receiver-General wrote again on 26 March informing the PSD that the anniversary celebrations would involve a wide range of activities rather than one major event. He asked that the letter be considered a formal request for a special stamp, which he suggested be issued for one month from 1 December 1965 'as a prelude to the year's activities, drawing attention to the commemoration in a general way'. The Dean of Westminster also wrote to the PMG on 11 June 1964 reiterating the request for anniversary stamps.

The subjects for the stamp programme for 1965 appear to have been discussed during the later part of 1964, perhaps into early 1965. The anniversary of Westminster Abbey was under consideration but, when the details of the 1965 stamp programme were announced in the House of Commons on 1 February, the event was excluded.

On 12 February 1965, the new PMG, Anthony Wedgwood Benn, received a letter dated 3 February from the Dean of Westminster. In this the Dean expressed his extreme disappointment that 'Westminster Abbey was not included in the list of Anniversaries to be commemorated by special stamps this year'. He concluded by making a 'very strong personal plea' for the PMG's 'sympathetic consideration' of the idea for stamps to be issued from 28 December.

Still the GPO showed no signs of changing its mind. Then, on 23 February the PMG received a personal minute from the Prime Minister: this recorded the fact that the Prime Minister had been approached (he did not make clear by whom) about the 900th anniversary of Westminster Abbey, adding 'I should be grateful if you felt able to give this favourable consideration'. The Prime Minister commented that a stamp associating the Abbey with the Queen might be a 'fitting and acceptable tribute'.

Faced with this pressure the GPO reversed its decision; the PMG's reply to the Prime Minister contained the news that Westminster Abbey stamps would now, after all, be issued. The issue date of 28 December, suggested by the Dean of Westminster, was ruled out on practical grounds. The GPO was looking at early January/late February 1966 as an

issue date. The Dean of Westminster was informed of the decision on 8 March while an announcement was arranged through a question in the House.

At a meeting of the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) on 25 March 1965 the Council of Industrial Design (CoID) representative submitted a list of artists for certain of the 1966 issues. It had been decided there would be two Westminster Abbey stamps and it was suggested (it is not clear when or by whom) that one be produced in photogravure and the other engraved. For these stamps then, there were two lists of artists:

Photogravure:

Cecil Keeling,
Charlotte Halliday,
David Caplan.

Engraved:

Lynton Lamb,
Robin and Christopher Ironside.

In early March 1965 the PMG had been granted an audience with the Queen to discuss what is described in internal papers as the GPO's 'new stamp policy'. At this audience the Queen had agreed that 'non-traditional designs could in future be submitted'. This decision was confirmed by the Queen's Private Secretary in a letter dated 12 March 1965. It seems that the discussions had touched upon the possibility of the Queen's head being omitted on these 'non-traditional' designs. The letter of 12 March contained the suggestion that the Royal cypher 'might be used on certain stamps in place of the Queen's head'.

INSTRUCTIONS TO ARTISTS

It had been decided that the stamps would be 3d and 2s 6d, the former in photogravure and the latter line-engraved. Different versions of the 'Instructions to Artists' were prepared. Both contained 'the brief for the traditional design'.

Artists invited to submit designs for the 3d (photogravure) stamp were told the stamps would measure 1.51 inches by 0.86 inches, exclusive of perforations and gutters; their artwork was to be 'four times linear stamp size'. They were asked to use a maximum of three colours with white being the recommended background colour. They were reminded of the properties of the photogravure process and asked to ensure that their materials would permit photography of each tone in its true value. They were also told the stamp would be produced by Harrison & Sons Ltd with whom they were encouraged to consult on all technical matters.

Those artists invited to submit designs for the 2s 6d line-engraved stamp were told that this would be produced in one or two colours, the choice left to them. They were also told that this stamp was to measure 1.50 inches by 0.9 inches exclusive of gutters and perforations. Artists were advised the stamp would be produced by Bradbury Wilkinson who they were encouraged to consult on technical matters.

All artists were asked to submit full colour designs on 'good quality white board' by the morning of Monday, 11 October 1965. They were asked to include the title 'Westminster Abbey 1065- 1965' or '900th Anniversary Westminster Abbey'. All designs were to include the denomination at least once, in 'clear Arabic numerals' no more than 0.5 inches high. The theme was left to the artist's discretion.

Artists were invited to submit only one design but told they could submit more if they so wished. However, the instructions explained that artists would receive only payment for one design, namely 60 guineas. Adopted designs would receive a further 190 guineas, a total of 250 guineas. Artists were told that this payment would include any modifications to the original design 'agreed as reasonable'.

Both versions of the instructions gave artists the opportunity to prepare 'non-traditional' designs: artists were encouraged to submit 'any designs that they wish' and given 'absolute freedom' regarding size, colour, and other design features. Similar instructions were also given when designs for the Burns stamps were commissioned. Artists were also advised there were no obligatory requirements except that, should the Queen's head be omitted, the words 'UK Postage' or the Crown should be incorporated in the design.

The reason behind 'extending freedom to designers to submit non-traditional designs' was that it would answer the criticisms of those designers who felt that design briefs had, in the past, been 'too-restrictive'. Artists were warned that this move was experimental and carried no guarantees that any non-traditional design would be selected. Artists who intended to produce such designs were advised to also submit alternative 'traditional' ideas.

On 16 September 1965, D H Beaumont of PSD wrote to the artists recommended by the CoID back in March inviting them to submit designs for the stamps. On 20 September Cecil Keeling replied declining due to the pressure of his other work. Therefore, the following day, the GPO invited Clive Abbott to submit designs. Also on 21 September, invitations were sent to the stamp printing firms of Harrison and Sons and Bradbury Wilkinson. They were told to submit designs only for the stamp each was printing and to submit designs as the collective effort of the design staff, not from individual designers.

The invitations mentioned that the Abbey is a 'Royal Peculiar' adding that a stamp showing the Queen with the Abbey would be a 'fitting and acceptable tribute'. The suggestion envisaged a non-traditional design that included a representation of the Queen and would therefore remove the need for the Wilding portrait.

SUBMITTED DESIGNS

The GPO received 22 designs from the artists, a number of them taking advantage of the freedom to submit non-traditional designs.

Photogravure (3d):

C Abbott - 3 designs (nos 1-3)

D Caplan - 4 designs sent 11 October (nos 4-7)

C Halliday - 1 design sent 12 October (no. 8)

Harrison & Sons Ltd - 4 designs sent 13 October (nos 9-12)

Line-engraved (2s 6d):

L Lamb - 2 designs sent 8 October (nos 13 and 14)

R Ironside - 1 design (no 15)

Bradbury Wilkinson - 7 designs sent 11 October (nos 16-22)

For some unknown reason, the Harrison designs show a 4d value and not 3d specified in the instructions.

DESIGN SELECTION

The SAC met on 20 October 1965 to view the designs: present at this meeting were James Fitton (Chair), Lady Sempill, Sir John Wilson, Prof. R Guyatt, J N White, A Games, Mrs C G Tomrley (Secretary), plus R F York (of Harrisons), S A Ridler (of Bradbury Wilkinson) and A A Mead (of the GPO).

The Committee found that 'acceptable submissions' for the photogravure stamp were very limited and so it was decided to commission additional artists: the names of four were nominated, Edward Bawden, Sheila Robinson, Ivan Lapper and Richard Downer.

Accordingly, Beaumont of PSD wrote to Robinson, Lapper and Downer on 22 October. Although no deadline is mentioned it seems certain that they were only given about ten days to produce designs.

For the engraved stamp the Committee liked Robin Ironside's design (15) although it was unfinished as he had sadly died. The Committee also approved the Bradbury Wilkinson design, 18, showing the inside of the Abbey roof, although the Committee expressed a desire to see the drawing reversed so that the 'defined edge' bordered the Queen's portrait. The Committee felt that both designs were worthy of production as colour essays while Bradbury Wilkinson's representative expressed the wish to see design 17 essayed as well. The Committee decided to approach David and Anne Gillespie to see if a further design for the engraved stamp could be produced in the time available.

It was also suggested at this meeting that Bradbury Wilkinson show the Committee the set of engraved portraits of the Queen used on various Colonial and Commonwealth stamps.

The PMG had also seen the submitted designs and on 20 October requested that a number be produced in essay form for his own personal information. These designs were 2, 8 and 12 of the 3d (photogravure) and 19 and 22 of the 2s 6d (line engraved). On 27 October Beaumont wrote to both Harrisons and Bradbury Wilkinson to pass on this request. The latter were not asked for line-engraved essays of their two designs, merely 'water-colour stamp-size essays'.

However, no essays were produced at this point as it had been decided to delay until the SAC had seen the additional commissions; this took place on Thursday, 11 November at a meeting attended by J Fitton (Chair), Sir John Wilson, Prof R Guyatt, M Gray, A. Games, Mrs C G Tomrley (Secretary), A Restall, plus H A Berry (of Harrisons), S A Ridler (of Bradbury Wilkinson), D H Beaumont (of the GPO).

A further seven designs had been submitted:

I Lapper: 2 (23 and 24),

R Downer: 2 (25 and 26),

S. Robinson: 1 (27),

A Gillespie: 2 (28 and 29).

It is likely the SAC viewed once again all the designs, and not just the new submissions. It rejected Downer's designs as 'not in the running at all' and also the designs for the engraved stamp by Ironside and Gillespie. The designs selected were:

3d Photogravure:

first choice - no. 27 (Sheila Robinson). It was recommended she consult with Harrisons about the background colour and contracting the length of the lettering used on the base of the design.

second choice - no. 3 (Clive Abbott).

2s 6d Line engraved:

first choice - no.18 (Bradbury Wilkinson), the fan vaulting of the Abbey's ceiling.
second choice - no.17 (Bradbury Wilkinson), the Rose Window.

These four designs were to be prepared as essays and forwarded to the printing companies on 12 November. The first essays delivered were of the 3d photogravure stamp which Harrisons sent on 2 December. It would seem that these essays included those requested by the PMG.

The essays from Bradbury Wilkinson of designs 17 and 18 followed on 6 December. Each design was essayed in five different shades of black, in blue and in brown. Four copies of each of the black essays were sent together with two of each of the blue and brown, a total of 48 essays.

On 9 December Bradbury Wilkinson sent the essays requested by the PMG of designs 19 and 22. All the essays were forwarded for inspection by the PMG on 10 December.

SUBMISSION TO PALACE

The PMG wrote to the Queen on 21 December 1965 for formal approval of the designs. Essays of four were enclosed: A1 and A2 (designs 27 and 18) as first choice with B1 and B2 (3 and 17) as second choice. The letter advised that these stamps would be released on 28 February 1966, the earliest mention of this date in the files.

A reply from Buckingham Palace on 22 December gave the Queen's approval of essays A1 and A2. The approved essays were forwarded to the respective printers on 23 December, both being instructed to include their name on the gutter of the stamps while Harrisons were also told to include the artist's name.

PRINTING DETAILS

The 3d was printed in sheets of 120 stamps on white paper bearing the multiple crown watermark. Only this was produced in a phosphor version, with one vertical phosphor band on the face. The 2s 6d stamp was recess-printed by Bradbury Wilkinson on chalk-surfaced paper, in sheets of 40 stamps.

The stamps were released on 28 February 1966, with stocks of the 2s 6d value selling out during April. The 3d was withdrawn from sale on 31 August 1966, although it is reported that

it was put on sale again in error later in the year at the Philatelic Counter in London and the Philatelic Bureau in Edinburgh. Total sales are as follows:

Ordinary

3d – 48,703,427

2s 6d – 2,819,056

Phosphor

3d – 5,247,720.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS

The GPO produced a first day envelope for this issue. Bradbury Wilkinson was approached to design both this and a presentation pack, a design brief being sent on 20 December 1965.

This set out a number of design specifications for the first day cover:

‘The design on the envelope should be consistent with the style of the stamps’ but was to illustrate a similar theme without any repetition of the stamps themselves.

The covers to bear the words ‘900th Anniversary Westminster Abbey’ and ‘G.P.O. First day Cover’.

The covers to measure 6½ inches (165mm) long by 3¼ inches (95mm) wide.

Designs to be confined to the left hand side of the envelope and allow enough room for the stamps.

Designers to allow for a gap of ¼ inches (6mm) between the stamps and the edge of the cover and also to allow for a 2mm gap between the two stamps.

The design to be in two colours only.

The design that Bradbury Wilkinson produced featured the North Rose window of Westminster Abbey, which had earlier appeared on two of the company’s own designs, including design 17 selected as second choice for the 2s 6d stamp.

The company was also asked design the presentation pack. When the stamps were being developed in early 1965, the GPO had not intended to produce a presentation pack. At the time packs were a recent introduction and the GPO was not convinced of their popularity and profitability. However, a written request for a presentation pack was sent by the Dean of Westminster on 29 April 1965 and by December the GPO had obviously decided to produce a pack.

Included in the letter of 20 December was a design brief for the pack:

The pack will consist of a wallet to hold the stamps, a card bearing all the printed information, and a transparent sleeve.

The card will contain technical information about the stamps, notes about the designer and information about the stamp designs and about printing of the stamps.

The folded dimensions of the pack were to be 7 inches (178mm) by 4 inches (108mm).

Both the cover and the pack were printed by Harrison & Sons using lithography; Bradbury Wilkinson was paid 100 guineas for the designs. The first day envelope sold at 6d and the presentation pack at 3s 9d. The files show that an initial order was placed with Harrisons for 100,000 folders for the packs although later documentation refers to 156,500 presentation packs being transferred to the Philatelic Bureau in Edinburgh. However, the figure given for sales is only 24,272.

A press showing of the stamps took place on Tuesday, 18 January 1966. Both printers provided a block of four stamps. Two Press and Broadcast Notices announcing the details of new stamps were released on the same day, one giving details of the special philatelic arrangements for this issue.

Both covers and presentation packs were available from the Philatelic Bureaux at London and Edinburgh and from 72 selected Offices around the country. The Bureau provided a full first day cover service at a cost of 5s 9d. The 72 offices also had special philatelic posting boxes for the day of issue.

POSTMASTER GENERAL'S GIFTS

As usual gifts were sent of the stamps comprising a first day cover and presentation pack. It seems that 60 were prepared, the recipients including the Queen, Princess Margaret, Prime Minister, the Speaker of the House of Commons, The Dean of Westminster, members of the Stamp Advisory Committee (7), and presumably also to former Postmasters and Assistant Postmasters General, the PMG or equivalent Minister of the self-governing nations of the Commonwealth.

PREMATURE RELEASE

It is reported in the files that 100 of the 3d value were 'sold in error' at Lee Road TSO (Harwich, Essex) on the afternoon of Saturday, 26 February 1966. An investigation revealed that the usual warning notice had been included with the stamps delivered to this sub-office.

Upon discovery of the error the sub-Postmaster involved immediately informed his Head Office and 'all correspondence awaiting despatch' was examined. A total of nine items with

the stamps had been recovered by the evening of Sunday, 27 February, none of which had been datestamped. These were all intended for local addresses and were retained until the morning of Monday, 28 February when they were datestamped with that date and included with the second delivery.

SIMON BATES
17 MARCH 1993.

REFERENCES

British Postal Museum & Archive file:

P 628/66 - Special Stamps, 900th Anniversary of the Foundation of Westminster Abbey.