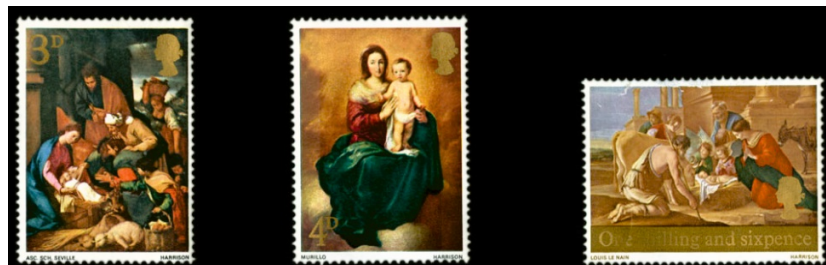


Christmas 1967

Date of issue: 18 OCTOBER & 27 NOVEMBER 1967



On 1 August 1966 the Deputy Director General (Posts), A Wolstencroft, wrote in a general briefing to Edward Short, the new Postmaster General (PMG) 'We think another Christmas issue would be popular.' This would be the GPO's third special Christmas release, after the popular air letters of 1965, and the then still-pending stamp issue for 1966. After discussion involving the Director of Postal Services, G R Downes, it was decided that an issue could be timetabled for 30 November or 1 December 1967. Initial proposals for the 1967 stamp programme were put to the Queen on 12 August, who agreed via her private secretary, Sir Michael Adeane, two days later. These included the suggestion of Christmas stamps, probably with a religious motif, it being the PMG's wish to 'ring the changes' on the 1966 idea of children's designs rather than simply repeating it as seems to have been mooted at least briefly. The matter next arose at a meeting of the PMG, the Director of Postal Services (G R Downes), James Fitton (Chairman of the Stamp Advisory Committee [SAC] of the Council of Industrial Design [CoID]) and Mr White (deputy Director of the CoID) on 29 September. Fitton enquired as to the possibility of the Christmas stamps being used to raise money for charity; the reply was that this had undergone considerable thought, but the dilemma remained of choosing which charity to favour (this was an old argument, but also a time-honoured problem). The PMG felt that cancer research might appropriately benefit; however, the topic was not pursued. A subsequent meeting of the SAC on 20 October supported the idea of Christmas stamps with traditional religious themes.

The planned issue was confirmed in a statement to the House of Commons on 26 October; in a further answer to a parliamentary question on 30 November, the values were given as 3d, 4d, and 1s 6d and the issue date as 27 November 1967. The 3d was the inland 'printed paper' rate for greetings cards; it had been decided the previous January that this rate should only be used for special stamps with the Christmas issues due to the extra complication of segregating 'printed paper' and full-rate mail where both bore special stamps. The 4d, as well as being the base inland letter rate, was also that for surface letters to the Commonwealth and, up to 2 oz, surface mail printed paper to other foreign

destinations (at the time this basically referred to material in open envelopes containing not more than five words of greeting). The 1s 6d was the base rate for airmail letters to most destinations outside Europe.

In a memorandum to the PMG dated 7 December, Mr Johns of the Postal Services Department (PSD) asked whether the designs would be taken from famous religious paintings, or submitted by artists on religious themes in line with normal practice; if paintings were to be used, whether separate or common designs were envisaged. He advised that paintings previously used on Christmas stamps by other postal administrations should be avoided. In his reply the PMG stated that he would prefer to base the issue on existing paintings, and would wish to study what was available before making any commitment on what was to be used. He also asked if the issue date could be brought forward to late October. PSD had considered this last point previously, and rejected it for fear of being accused of 'commercialising Christmas'. It justified this by pointing out that late November would be before the latest airmail posting dates, so that special stamps could still be used to all destinations. The PMG was concerned, however, that the stamps should be available for those wishing to use surface mail for their overseas Christmas postings, even if this meant an issue date in early October close to the British Discovery & Invention set (19 September).

QUANTITY AND ISSUE DATES DECIDED

The problem remained unresolved into the new year; in an internal PSD memorandum of 9 January Downes wrote: 'I should have thought [October] a little early to be flooding the domestic market with Christmas stamps', but conceded that 'there would be less objection' to issuing the 1s 6d prior to the other values. This was presumably because the 1s 6d would be issued in much smaller quantities than the 3d or 4d; the DPS did not address himself to the fact that Christmas stamps for use on overseas surface mail would require an October issue date, whereas this would be unnecessary for the 1s 6d. The fact that the 4d would be used for overseas surface postings seems to have been overlooked, and the 4d Christmas stamp was envisaged purely for inland letter use. By 12 January, however, a compromise had been reached by which the 4d was to be made available in October, while the PMG recognised that there was no point in advancing the late November release date for the 3d and 1s 6d.

Meanwhile the Supplies Department had been contemplating the print quantities; the demand for the 1966 stamps, based on an assumption of one in four of normal seasonal requirements, had proved to be underestimated. In December 1966 PSD had asked that the 3d and 4d should be issued in sufficient quantities to meet the whole of the Christmas 1967

demand. In a memorandum of 19 December J Howard Smith of Supplies argued that such a move would double the load on his department during the Christmas pressure period; its capacity was already severely taxed and the problems caused by PSD's proposal would effectively be insurmountable. He considered that supplies of double-sized special stamps on a basis of one in three of Christmas demand would be manageable, and calculated requirements for these as 272 million 3d and 156 million 4d. Requirements for the 1s 6d were not discussed, so Mr Smith did not presumably consider them a problem. He felt that the entire production process might be accomplished between 3 April and issuing the stamps on 27 November. Subsequent to Smith's memorandum, a meeting at GPO Headquarters on 31 January took into account the earlier issue date for the 4d stamps. It was decided that 180 million 4d stamps should be available for issue on 18 or 19 October, and a further 180 million on 27 November; on the latter date 300 million 3d and 18 million 1s 6d should also be ready for sale.

FIRST ESSAYS OF PAINTINGS

On 8 February Downes submitted to the PMG a number of reproductions from the National Gallery, in answer to Edward Short's request of 7 December for pictures on a religious theme that might prove suitable for the Christmas issue. Harrisons, the stamp printers, had already helped in this initial selection by assessing the suitability for reproduction as stamps. The set consisted of the following:

The Virgin & Child, St John the Baptist, and an Angel, Paolo Morando (1484-1522)

The Holy Family, Titian (c.1477-1576)

Adoration of the Shepherds, Louis le Nain (c.1593-1648)

Adoration of the Shepherds, ascribed to the School of Seville, 17th Century

Adoration of the Magi (detail), Paolo Veronese (1528-88)

The Nativity, with God the Father & the Holy Ghost, Giambattista Pittoni (1687-1767)

In his accompanying memorandum Downes indicated that Harrisons wished to start work on the issue in March, and that the PMG would hopefully indicate his own preferences for 'four or five' of the pictures; in the event Short did not reply until 17 March, when he asked for all to be essayed. On 20 March Don Beaumont of PSD passed this request to Harrisons, except that the Titian was excluded as it had been used for a New Zealand Christmas stamp in 1963.

The first essays were returned on 23 and 24 May. Beaumont had given Harrisons free rein to print the Queen's head in black, white or gold as thought fit; in the event gold was employed throughout both for the head, and the lettering used to denote the values in place of the conventional Arabic numerals. Both decisions (using gold and showing the values in words rather than figures) stemmed from Stuart Rose, the PMG's Typographical Adviser, after

securing Short's general agreement. Rose had also been instrumental in the positioning of the Queen's head, so as to encroach as little as possible on the actual paintings. The 1s 6d (Adoration of the Shepherds, Louis le Nain) had been particularly problematic: it was only by placing a smaller head than normal in the bottom right hand corner that it was possible to avoid its embarrassing proximity to either a cow's rump or donkey's head. The value had been spelt out along the bottom of the design as there seemed no way to Rose that a numeric value could be appropriately placed in the main body of the painting. This solution had the advantage of fully utilising the design's length; the shorter lettering required for the vertical 3d and 4d designs meant that it could also be applied to them without any inconsistency. A further consequence of the Le Nain painting was that it did not lend itself to being trimmed to fit an orthodox stamp shape without damaging the artist's original concept, and so the 1s 6d was essayed in the unusual dimensions 1.2294 inches by 1.6 inches (31.25 mm by 40.75 mm), while the 3d and 4d were 1.6 inches by 1.173 inches (40.75 mm by 29.75 mm). This latter size had previously been used for the British Paintings issue; an essay for the same series had been produced in the same dimensions as the 1s 6d Christmas stamp, but had not been issued as such.

In a memorandum to Downes dated 7 June, J R Baxter of PSD listed the essays as A (Morando), B (School of Seville), C (Veronese), D (Pittoni) and E (Le Nain); he considered that 'Mr Rose's advice ... contributed to producing essays of very attractive appearance'. All the essays with the exception of E' could still be improved on if necessary; the only objection was that the gold heads and lettering were not plainly legible in some lights. The problem was no worse, however, than on some of the British Paintings set which the PMG had recently approved. The printers had yet to overcome the problems experienced with gold heads and lettering since introducing them the previous year. A potentially more serious matter was that the essays contravened Article 178 of the 1964 UPU Convention, requiring the value of stamps to be shown in Arabic numerals, not words - this point had been raised within PSD as soon as the essays were to hand. Baxter was at pains to avoid any further potential delay to the issue, which was already well behind the original schedule, and drew the DPS attention to the fact that the current 5d, 6d and 7d definitives were already in contravention of the Article without this having aroused comment, and that there was no shortage of earlier precedents for British stamps with the value in words.

RECOMMENDATIONS CONSIDERED BY PMG

Aside from these factors, Baxter's summary of PSD's recommendations was that essay A should be chosen for the 3d as this was anticipated to have the largest sale and the figures in the Morando would reproduce more distinctly than in the other paintings. E, the Le Nain, was most suitable for the 1s 6d 'because of its horizontal format ... the lettering can be accommodated on one line'. While there was little to choose between the other three, he

felt that B (ascribed to the School of Seville) should be avoided as its subject and title were identical with those of E, and the detail was obscure in the top half of D, the Pittoni; his recommendation was thus for C, the Veronese, as the 4d. He suggested that the artist's name appear in the guttering of each stamp.

After further discussion with Baxter and K Hind of his department on 12 June, the DPS passed on substantially similar advice to the PMG the following day, with the exception that B was now their recommendation for the 4d as 'we feel that the structure and spirit is best retained after miniaturisation'. A further point, first raised by Baxter in his note of 7 June, related to a request made by the PMG at the end of May that essays should be produced of another painting, The Madonna and Child by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617-82). The original was held in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, Holland on permanent loan from the Mauritshuis in the Hague; although the Dutch were happy to co-operate by supplying a large size colour transparency from which Harrisons could make reproductions, this would not be available until late June. Downes advised the PMG that 'a delay of this order now would seriously jeopardise our production and distribution arrangements ... we would propose that the Murillo reproduction might be retained and considered for a possible future Christmas issue'.

Short declined to heed to his officials on this point, and Harrisons was asked to produce essays of the Murillo on receipt of the transparency from Holland on 23 June. Because the PMG had been able to furnish Harrisons with a smaller size reproduction of the Murillo on 19 June, the company had been able to start work already, and three essays in the 4d value were to hand on 3 July. A note to the PMG from Downes of this date indicates that the new essays showed the value in figures, a change from the previous essays, which Mr Short had probably requested specifically as he had himself been liaising with Harrisons over the Murillo. Both the head and value were in gold as before, but the printer was to produce extra essays with the head and value in other colours, and also with the value in lettering. However, the PMG seems to have decided at once to use the essay as it stood and there is no subsequent reference to these variants. The same day Beaumont of PSD spoke to Harrisons confirming the Murillo as the choice for the 4d, and the Le Nain for the 1s 6d, both stamps to include the artist and printer's name.

FINAL DESIGN CHANGES APPROVED

The following day the PMG asked for new School of Seville 3d essays, revised to show the value in figures; a final decision on the 3d stamp would be deferred until these were available. Three essays were provided to the GPO on 26 July. The removal of the lettering for the value on the lower border had meant that the design could be lowered sufficiently to accommodate the Queen's head in a more orthodox placing at the top right hand corner of

the stamp. The following day, 27 July, the dates of issue for the Christmas series - 18 October for the 4d, and 27 November for the 3d and 1s 6d - were announced in answer to a parliamentary question. On 28 July Short approved the revised 3d; however, he now wondered whether the 1s 6d might be improved by restoring the Queen's head to the top right hand corner. There is no record of any suggestion that the value on the 1s 6d be changed from words to figures, even though it had been decided to bow to the strictures of the UPU on the more widely circulated 3d and 4d.

Harrisons accordingly produced six alternative versions of the 1s 6d and supplied three of each to Beaumont on 11 August. In a note to the PMG dated 16 August Baxter listed the essays as B, B1, C, C1, D and D1; C placed the Queen's head in the top left corner, and B and D either at far top right or about one fifth of the way along the upper border from top right. A smaller head, printed in gold, was used compared with the original 1s 6d design, now listed as A; B1, C1 and D1 were identical to B, C and D respectively except that the head was printed in black.

Baxter made the point that the smaller head on the new essays was now too obscure a feature and still too close to the cow's hindquarters or donkey's head. The slightly larger head as used on the initial essay would intrude excessively into the painting if positioned anywhere else - 'although the head intrudes into the kneeling figure of the woman, it does not kill the figure as a whole or obscure its worshipping attitude'. Baxter and Harrisons both felt 'that the original A version is the best that can be devised'. The PMG agreed to this without further discussion. The Queen approved the proposed designs on 31 August.

FIRST DAY COVERS AND AIRLETTERS

The design team of Richard Negus and Philip Sharland was approached at the beginning of August and formally requested on 11 August to submit first day cover designs. Three four-colour designs were submitted, one being accepted for use on both issue dates (18 October and 27 November). Her Majesty's Stationery Office printed 800,000 covers, of which 500,000 were delivered by 25 September and the remainder by 30 October; HMSO also printed 500,000 filler cards for delivery by 25 September, and a similar number by 24 October. (The anomaly of printing more filler cards than covers is not explained.) The Negus/Sharland fee was 50 guineas (£52.50).

It was also decided to issue two Christmas air letters, one seasonal and one religious in theme, for issue on 1 November; two designs were submitted by Eric Fraser, two by Clive Abbott, and one by the team of Michael and Sylvia Goaman. The chosen designs were a nativity scene by Fraser and Clive Abbott's 'partridge in a pear tree', while the Goamans designed the printed 'stamp' used on both air letters. McCorquodale & Co Ltd printed

1,381,680 'pear tree' and 1,377,120 'nativity' air letters by lithography at its Charles Skipper & East plant in Basingstoke. While Eric Fraser (1902-83) is less well known in the field of stamp design than Abbott or the Goamans, he submitted a number of designs on various occasions during the '50s and '60s, and had previously undertaken poster work for the GPO. His main reputation was as an illustrator.

STAMPS ISSUED TO PUBLIC

Considerable anxiety had been expressed when the design selection process continued long after the late March/early April date first envisaged for Harrisons to begin production (in his memorandum of 7 December 1966 Mr Johns of PSD thought this might be achieved by mid-February). This was understandable in view of Harrison's already heavy schedule for 1967 including several new definitives, and also as the Christmas stamps were among the largest print runs of special stamps to date, surpassed only by the pre-war PUC and Silver Jubilee sets and the 1940 Centenary series. Production was undertaken during September without any problems being reported and the stamps were announced with a combined press notice and launch on 12 September. Subsequent issue and sales figures of the series were as follows.

3d

'Good' stamps delivered – 274,658,400

Unsold – 4,317,555

Net sales – 270,340,845

4d

'Good' stamps delivered – 385,163,040

Unsold – 97,335,600

Net sales – 287,827,440

1s 6d

'Good' stamps delivered – 20,341,380

Unsold – 2,428,180

Net sales – 17,913,200.

It had been anticipated that demand for the 3d would be greater than for the 4d; the latter seems to have been printed in larger numbers simply because it was on sale six weeks longer. The numbers proved considerably overestimated, although sales were respectable enough to indicate that the PMG had been correct in discerning a genuine demand for the 4d value. Sales at ordinary counters ceased after 23 December (24 December was a Sunday) although philatelic sales of the 4d continued until 17 October 1968 and of the 1s 6d until 26 November that year; the 3d was sold out in July 1968. There was no separate presentation

pack for the issue, but the stamps were included in an annual gift pack issued on 27 November 1967, of which 105,577 were sold.

The stamps were printed on chalk-coated unwatermarked paper in the following colours:

3d, olive-yellow / rose / blue / black / gold;

4d, bright purple / greenish-yellow / new blue / black / gold;

1s 6d, bright purple / bistre / lemon / orange-red / black / ultramarine / gold.

The 3d had a single phosphor bands and the 4d and 1s 6d two bands, the phosphor being applied by flexography, a variant of the lithographic process used principally for this purpose. The 3d and 4d were in sheets of 120, but the 1s 6d was in sheets of 60 because of its unusual dimensions.

HANDSTAMPS AND POSTMARKS

First day cover handstamping facilities were available through special posting boxes at a large number of offices; a 'first day of issue' handstamp was also available from Llanelli head post office for Bethlehem, Llandeilo, Carmarthenshire, on both days of issue; machine postmarks with an FDI slogan were also available for Bethlehem on each occasion. There were no special handstamps or slogan postmarks apart from these especially linked with the 4d stamps issued on 18 October; however, for the 3d and 1s 6d issued on 27 November available was 'Dulwich Millennium AD 967-1967 SE21' special handstamp from 1 November to 24 December. Of the various slogan postmarks advertising such seasonal facilities as holidays, pantomimes, shopping, etc, two came into use on 27 November: Cheltenham's 'Christmas Illuminations' (27 November to 27 December) and from Coleraine in Northern Ireland until 24 December 'First Ever Christmas Present - God Gave His Son'. 'Double dated' covers (combining the 4d with an 18 October cancellation and the other stamps dated 27 November) were sought by collectors; regulations were exceptionally relaxed to permit the handling of these covers, which would normally have been rejected as 'embarrassing'.

CRITICISMS OF THE ISSUE

Reaction to the issue was mixed; R H Field of Bexleyheath, Kent wrote to the 'British Philatelic Bulletin' demanding to know why a Christmas stamp in October - in fact, why a Christmas stamp at all - as commercial 'seals' are adequate. Complaints were received from the Head Postmasters of Neath, Banff and Stockport, among others, regarding the 3d and 4d, as having two stamps that were not only of identical size, but, under artificial light, of similar colour and appearance, severely impeded the rate of sorting. From an artistic point of view, the common reaction then and since has largely been to praise the choice of material while criticising its reduction to stamp size or the effect of the constraints on

Stuart Rose and Harrisons as to the placing of the values and Queen's head. Rose was unhappy about the policy enforced upon him by the PMG of filling the entire design area of the stamp with a miniaturised painting into which extra detail had to be inserted. In later years he was able to bring about some improvements in the way that 'paintings' issues were designed, with the aid of Harrisons, the Postal Services Department, the reconstituted Stamp Advisory Committee from February 1968 onward and his own tenure as Design Director from 1968 to 1972. However, he was not alone in disapproving of the sheer principle of 'paintings' issues, and records that he invariably made himself responsible for the design elements of these, as he could not bring himself to ask anyone else to do it.

THE ARTISTS

LOUIS LE NAIN (c1593 - 1648) and his brothers Antoine and Mathieu were born in Laon, France. All three used a similar style and signed paintings only with their surname, so that their works cannot easily be distinguished for purposes of attribution; however, the Adoration of the Shepherds is generally considered to be by Louis. From about 1630 he worked in Paris and was one of the founding members of the French Academy. He specialised in portraying scenes of humble life.

BARTOLOMÉ ESTEBAN MURILLO (1617 - 1682) was famous for depicting the street women and children of Seville, and also for his treatments of religious or legendary subjects. The Madonna & Child Jesus was painted for William I of the Netherlands.

THE SCHOOL OF SEVILLE flourished throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, and comprised many artists; Murillo himself may have painted the Adoration of the Shepherds ascribed to the School without being accredited.

GILES ALLEN
20 June 1994

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