

British Paintings

Date of issue: 10 JULY 1967



In December 1964 Anthony Wedgwood Benn, appointed Postmaster General (PMG) under the recently elected Labour Government, relaxed and widened the criteria for special issues of stamps. They could now be issued to reflect ‘the British contribution to world affairs, including the arts and sciences’, rather than events and anniversaries alone. The treatment was largely pictorial, once scorned by the GPO, but the more relaxed attitudes had seen stamp design move increasingly in this direction.

When Edward Short replaced Wedgwood Benn as PMG in July 1966, among the first decisions he agreed with the Deputy Director General (Posts), A Wolstencroft, was that the 1967 stamp programme, then needing to be finalised, should include three pictorial sets. As the number of issues for the year was to be confined to six, this represented a definite commitment to the pictorial concept. On 5 August the PMG discussed the matter with the DDG and G R Downes, the Director of Postal Services, and agreement was reached on the following themes for pictorial treatment: historic forms of transportation, British trees, and notable British paintings. These categories underwent further refinement and were proposed in the following terms to the Queen’s Private Secretary, Lieutenant Colonel Sir Michael Adeane, on 12 August: British transport (road, rail, sea and air), British native trees, and paintings by famous British artists. The emphasis had been changed to distinguished artists so as to exclude the possibility of individually ‘notable’ works by otherwise obscure painters. Sir Michael replied on 14 August that the outlined 1967 programme was acceptable to the Queen.

FURTHER DISCUSSION OF ‘PAINTINGS’

The PMG continued to consider the matter, however, and on 7 September informed the DDG that he was ‘not entirely satisfied with our previous conclusions’. In due course the themes

of 'British trees' and 'British transport' were replaced by 'British wild flowers' and 'British discoveries'.

'With regard to the suggested series of paintings ... while not ruling out such a series, the PMG says that he feels there may be considerable difficulty in selecting suitable pictures for reproduction as stamps from the comparatively small choice available from British artists ... Some of the modern artists like Lowry or Graham Sutherland might be more suitable than the Old Masters. We could probably get some ideas from the Tate Gallery.' (Wolstencroft to Downes, 8 September)

A meeting on 29 September to discuss the 1967 programme comprised the PMG, James Fitton (Chairman of the Stamp Advisory Committee of the Council of Industrial Design), Mr White (deputy Director of the CID) and the DPS. As an aid the Postal Services Department prepared a small selection of stamps reproducing famous paintings that had been issued by other postal administrations. These included the New Zealand Christmas stamps produced since 1960 by Harrison & Sons Ltd, stamp printers for the GPO. Fitton considered that an attractive set could be produced of 'British Paintings' but that this should be held over until 1968 and replaced in the 1967 programme by a 'British Sculpture' series (his reason is not recorded).

There the matter rested until the next meeting of the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) on 20 October. In addition to Fitton this involved Cecilia, Lady Sempill, Milner Gray, Professor R Guyatt, Abram Games, F H K Henrion and Sir John Wilson, Keeper of the Queen's stamp collection. With the exception of Sir John all members of the SAC had themselves worked as designers. The DPS was also present, and reported its conclusions the following day: It would be difficult to issue a stamp depicting British Sculpture ... Henry Moore was the only sculptor of sufficient prominence to be worth inclusion. The alternatives would therefore be a set of stamps depicting solely Henry Moore's work, or a general 'arts' issue in which only one of the stamps would depict sculpture, and this of course would be the work of Henry Moore. It seems to me therefore that ... a 'paintings' issue instead of a 'sculpture' issue would be in line with the Committee's thinking.

The PMG acted on this recommendation, and announced in a statement to the House of Commons on 26 October that the 1967 stamp programme would include a British Paintings issue. By 7 November the Postal Services Department had drafted a minute proposing the most-used inland and overseas letter rates of 4d, 9d and 1s 6d and 12 June as the issue date; in his recommendations to the PMG on 10 October the DPS suggested the date be postponed by four weeks to 10 July to avoid a clash with the issue of new definitives in June. On 30 November the PMG made a further statement to Parliament giving the issue date for the British Paintings stamps as 10 July and the values.

LIST OF PAINTINGS PREPARED

At the SAC meeting of 23 November Fitton said he understood the PMG's requirement was now for the 'treasures' of British painting; he thought such a brief need not be confined to British artists and could include works by Holbein, Van Dyck, etc. Don Beaumont, attending the meeting on behalf of the Postal Services Department, said that he did not think this was the PMG's intention. After further discussion the meeting agreed to restrict the brief to British artists, and more specifically to 'old masters', on the grounds that 'modern British art did not know where it was going'. It was decided to gather a number of suitable reproductions and seek the opinion of the printers Harrison & Sons as to their suitability for reduction to stamp size; recommendations would then be made to the PMG from which he might make his choice for essaying. On 29 November it was recorded that Edward Short agreed this, subject to the proviso that he wished the work of the living painter L S Lowry to be included in the recommendations. As his answer to a Parliamentary question the following January would make clear, the PMG was aware that 1967 marked the artist's 80th birthday, and there was already pressure for its commemoration in stamp form.

Despite urgings from the GPO, concerned for the stamp production timetable, no follow-up was received for two months, no doubt due to the deteriorating relations between Mr Short and the SAC. On 26 January 1967, however, R F York, Harrison's Works Director, sent Beaumont a list of the SAC's recommendations; these included the company's own comments on suitability for reproduction.

Constable – The Hay Wain (possible)

Turner – The fighting 'Temeraire' (possible)

Turner – Peace: Burial at Sea (hopeless)

Stubbs – Lady and gentleman in a carriage (very good)

Stubbs – Groom with saddle horses [also known as William Anderson, a groom, with two horses] (reasonable)

Stubbs – The Prince of Wales' phaeton (could be good)

Anon (Elizabethan) – Portrait of a young lady (very good)

Samuel Palmer – The bright cloud (doubtful)

Millais – The order of release (difficulty with Queen's head)

Millais – Ophelia (needs more investigation)

Millais – The blind girl (reasonable)

Nicholas Hillyard – Elizabethan gentleman (good)

Gainsborough – The painter's daughter [also known as The artist's two children] (possible)

(According to Stuart Rose in his book 'Royal Mail Stamps', the SAC also considered Gainsborough's Mrs Siddons and works by the Scottish painters Alan Ramsay and MacTaggart, but did not submit these for the opinion of the printers.)

Accompanying the above was a folder with a set of experimental essays, based on the material supplied for Harrison's consideration by the SAC; these were

The Hay Wain, with no value and plain Queen's head

The Hay Wain, with no value and gold embossed Queen's head

The painter's daughters, with no value and gold embossed Queen's head

The painter's daughter, with value 4d and gold embossed Queen's head

The fighting 'Teneraire', with no value and plain Queen's head

The fighting 'Teneraire', with no value and gold embossed Queen's head.

It seems the gold embossed heads were based on the Machin design then about to be used on definitives; the 'plain' heads seem to have been the David Gentleman profile based on the Gillick coinage head, used on special stamps since the previous May. Mr York regretted that it had not been possible to include a Lowry amongst the essays, as the company had not received any reproductions of his work from the SAC, despite the PMG's wishes. He commented on the essays.

(1) The Fighting 'Teneraire' is not in exactly the right colours, but ... if chosen, it will be improved by using the correct colours.

(2) The Painter's Daughters is a reasonably good reproduction, with the exception that it might be improved if the outline of the cat is made just slightly stronger than at present. Also the Queen's head needs a slight reduction to prevent the point of the neck being too close to one of the subjects in the main picture.

(3) The Hay Wain I feel could also be improved with more light in the meadow, and perhaps the trunk of the trees being slightly stronger than at present ...

... We are sure that the gold head can be successfully incorporated into this type of design, and that any other type of printed head would detract from the general appearance of the stamp.

... The sole reason for showing these stamps is for the PMG to be able to make a reasonable assessment of the possibilities of this kind of old master making a postage stamp.

York thought that the three experimental essays, plus Stubbs' Lady and gentleman in a carriage, and a Lowry, would provide good possible choices for the issue.

The SAC's final meeting took place on 1 February (a body of the same name and similar function was set up under the GPO's own auspices a year later). At this last meeting, a list substantially similar to that seen by Harrison's was offered for submission to the PMG: Turner's Burial at sea, Stubb's Groom with two saddle horses, Palmer's The bright cloud, and Hillyard's Elizabethan gentleman were omitted, and Hogarth's The shrimp girl added. No suggestions for any Lowry painting were offered; a tacit decision seems to have been reached that, as the PMG was insistent on Lowry's inclusion in the final choice, this might

be left in his own hands. It was recommended that the final selection include a Stubbs because of the Queen's well-known fondness for horses. Attention was also drawn to the question of the stamps' format; the three essays already produced were in the unusual dimensions 1.2294 inches by 1.6 inches, and the meeting agreed with the printer's advice to depart from the orthodox double size format so as to preserve the proportions of the original paintings.

Passing these views on to the PMG in a memorandum of 7 February, Downes included a set of Lowry reproductions from the Tate Gallery - as well as Children coming out of school, these appear to have included The pond, no other titles being recorded. His personal recommendation was for The painter's daughters and The Hay Wain, plus either a Lowry or a Stubbs. He pointed out the extent to which the 1967 stamp production timetable was now in danger because of the SAC's prevarication - designs should have been already have been approved and being essayed by the date of the final SAC meeting.

Unfortunately the PMG found the recommended list wholly unsatisfactory and another set of suggestions was drawn up. On 13 February, Harrisons was asked as before for its comments. Many of the examples it was asked examine were reproductions in a book 'The Romantic Era'.

Lawrence - Master Lambton (excellent for reproduction)

Lawrence - Pinkie (excellent for reproduction)

Stubbs - Mares and foals in a landscape (excellent for reproduction)

Wilson - Llyn-y-Cau, Cader Idris (need to see original before commenting)

Lowry - Coming out of school (could be good, essay necessary)

From 'The Romantic Era':

Raeburn - The Elphinstone children (excellent for reproduction)

Lawrence - The daughters of Colonel Hardy (excellent for reproduction)

Wilson - Snowdon (could be good, need to see original)

Stubbs - The brick cart (not suitable)

Wright of Derby - Matlock, High Tor (difficult)

Blake - Nebuchadnezzar (very difficult)

Bonnington - Coast scene with windmill (could reduce, but detail difficult)

Constable - Salisbury Cathedral (could make a good stamp)

Dyce - George Herbert (could be good, stamp might lose detail)

Hunt - Two gentlemen of Verona (excellent reproduction, difficult shape)

Millais - Autumn leaves (excellent reproduction)

* - A version of Pinkie was reportedly in the Birmingham Art Gallery, from which, Harrisons reported, it would be 'very difficult to make a good stamp'.

(Richard Wilson [1714-1782], possibly the least celebrated of the essayed artists, was an innovative landscape painter and an early member of the Royal Academy. Although respected by his fellow artists he was not popular or successful during his lifetime.)

In a letter dated 14 February to K Hind of Postal Services accompanying these comments York wrote, 'it is dangerous to assume that we can print down to stamp size a picture that shows up well as a transparency ... I would hesitate to reject any particular paintings because of detail, but ... there is a limit to the amount of detail that can be obtained. ... One important point to remember is that we cannot reproduce any of these paintings from prints, postcards and, in some instances, transparencies.' His remarks applied particularly to Lowry's Children coming out of school - in stamp form 'we might lose the value to the picture of all the small figures in the foreground'. He was unable to assess the likelihood of this without an essay being attempted, and strongly advised 'Hind that the GPO should await this before committing itself to the Lowry. More generally the company would ideally like to take its own colour photographs of paintings where possible.

On 17 February the PMG asked to see essays as soon as possible of Lawrence's Pinkie and Master Lambton, Stubbs' Mares and foals, Wilson's Llyn-y-Cau, the Lowry, and - an additional choice - Gainsborough's Mr and Mrs Robert Andrews. In a note to York dated 21 February, S T B Johns of Postal Services confirmed the locations of the paintings - the Stubbs, Wilson and Lowry paintings were in the Tate Gallery, the Gainsborough in the National Gallery, Lawrence's Master Lambton was owned by the Earl of Durham, and Pinkie was believed to be in the Andrew Mellon Collection in Washington DC, USA. While Harrisons had no difficulty obtaining colour reproductions for their own use in the majority of cases, the two Lawrence paintings proved hard to locate. Until 22 March Master Lambton was thought to be kept at West Marden Hall, Chichester, Sussex (the Earl's home) whereas it was in fact in Witton Castle, Bishop Auckland, Durham. On the same date the location of Pinkie was found to be the Henry E Huntington Art Gallery, San Marino, California, USA. This meant that Harrisons could obtain a reproduction of Master Lambton by 3 April and supply essays by 14 April, but that Pinkie was now ruled out through lack of time. The lack of time was causing increasing anxiety to both the Postal Services and Supplies Departments, and it was only the PMG's insistence that prevented a postponement of the issue date. The remaining essays were expected to be ready by 7 April; in fact colour matching problems meant that all five essays were finally available on 14 April (the date approved essays were originally intended to be back with the printers). With the exception of the Gainsborough (1.173 inches by 1.9 inches) these essays were all 1.173 inches by 1.6 inches, none of the essays bearing values. Two types of Queen's head were used, one being fuller at the base of the neck, both printed in the smallest size used to date so as to intrude as little as possible on the pictures. All heads were in

gold ink for the first time (rather than the unsatisfactory gold foil used on the Christmas and Battle of Hastings issues of 1966).

In a memorandum to the PMG accompanying the essays, J R Baxter, Postal Services Department, reiterated that the printers would prefer to use gold for the heads (as York had first stated in his note accompanying the three experimental essays on 26 January) although other colours could be essayed if there was time. His preference was the Lawrence for the 4d (the value in widest use) as Harrisons thought this would be the most successful of the set once all the highlights had been brought out; with the exception of the Lowry, the rest were also capable of some improvement. He preferred the Stubbs for the 9d and the Lowry for the 1s 6d, these values being in roughly equal use. The Gainsborough could be kept in reserve as 'a close alternative'; however, Baxter did not feel the Wilson essay was a success. He also recommended that the values should be placed in the top left hand corner of the Lowry and Wilson (if used) and bottom right on the other three; he felt that the head on the Lawrence essay should be moved further away from top right.

The PMG discussed the essays with Stuart Rose, his part-time Typographical Adviser, and it was decided to proceed with Baxter's recommendations, using the fuller heads in gold (which meant a change to the head on the Stubbs). As for the values, it was decided that these should be placed consistently at top left and also be in gold, apart from the Lowry, on which Rose recommended that '¾ black' be used for the '1s 6d'. In addition the artists' names to be included in the lower gutter of each stamp, to 'help the public's appreciation of the series'. The PMG had stipulated that as much detail as possible should be brought out on the Lawrence; he also wished the essays of the Wilson and Gainsborough paintings to be kept in reserve for future consideration, and a print of Lawrence's Pinkie for the same purpose.

The essays were submitted to the Queen for approval on 2 May with the advice that changes had yet to be implemented, and her approval was sent the following day. Amended essays were received by Beaumont at GPO Headquarters on 31 May.

It became apparent that the value and Queen's head in gold on the 9d essays did not show up clearly and from some angles was practically invisible (this proved a recurring problem with gold inks). This caused the postponement of a press launch which had been scheduled for the following week; Harrisons prepared new essays of the 9d and on 5 June Beaumont received five blocks of four using the following colours: black, chestnut, bronze, blue and silver. The PMG chose black; the head now showed up well, although the value remained less than ideally distinct against a background of trees. The press launch, with a simultaneous press release, was held on 13 June.

Lowry was paid 250 guineas (£262.50) for permission to use Children coming out of school on the 1s 6d; on 11 April the Solicitors' Department advised that while copyright on the other artists' works did not arise as they had been dead for over 50 years, the situation in his case as a living artist required 'a licence from Mr Lowry to the PMG to reproduce, publish and sell [as stamps] on payment of an agreed sum'. It was felt appropriate to offer Lowry the fee normally paid to the designer of an accepted stamp and he replied that he was 'most grateful' to accept. Agreement to the reproduction of the other paintings in stamp form was obtained from their owners as a matter of courtesy.

Stuart Rose contributed the 'design' element, namely the treatment of the size, placing, etc, of the Queen's head and values, both for this set and subsequent 'paintings' issues. His problems both on this occasion and subsequently under Edward Short as PMG were not eased by the latter's insistence that the reproduction of each painting must fill the entire area of the stamp, with the head and value superimposed. While some critics found this concept pleasing in its simplicity, Rose was not of their number. In 1992 he summed up his views: 'To superimpose alien elements onto the reproduction of a painting creates a visual disturbance which is the antithesis of good design.' Earlier he had written in his book 'Royal Mail Stamps' published in 1980 that 'this was not the best way to design stamps ... I could not bring myself to ask another designer to arrange the issues, so I did them myself'. Of the 1967 British Paintings set in particular he recalled, 'I was far from satisfied with the result, insofar as the mixture of size and format made an untidy set', while others criticised the issue for lacking unity of theme. On the other hand, Rose was greatly appreciative of the technical skill and accuracy with which Harrisons reproduced the original colours, and in later years made a point of consulting R F York, Harrison's Works Director, when assessing any painting's suitability for reproduction in stamp form.

At the beginning of April the designer Michael Goaman was commissioned to design a first day envelope and presentation pack for a fee of 50 guineas each (£105 in all). There were 310,000 covers printed by lithography in four colours by HM Stationery Office, and 70,000 packs in three-colour lithography by Harrisons; all supplies were completed by the end of June. Meanwhile, production of the stamps was now in hand, and despite various alarms at the extent to which the original production programme had fallen behind (a problem affecting most of the 1967 issues to some degree) an effectively full distribution of the issue was successfully carried out. At the beginning of April the Supplies Department had decided to cut all requisitions into two approximately equal parts, with the aim of delivering the first batch by the issue date of 10 July and the remainder by 17 July. In the event the required quantities of 9d and 1s 6d were not large enough to constitute a problem, and distribution of the 4d was completed by 12 July.

STAMP ISSUES AND SALES

The stamps were issued on 10 July 1967, printed in photogravure on chalk-surfaced paper with no watermark. All had two phosphor bands applied by the flexographic process: this was the first issue to be produced only in phosphor form. At 1.6 inches by 1.173 inches the stamps were larger than the normal special issues, and were for this reason in sheets of 60. The issue was in colours and formats as follows:

4d (Lawrence) – vertical: rose red / lemon / brown / black / new blue / gold.

9d (Stubbs) – horizontal: Venetian red / ochre / grey-black / new blue / black / greenish-yellow.

1/6d (Lowry) – horizontal: greenish-yellow / grey / rose / new blue / grey-black / gold.

The following totals printed and sold were recorded.

4d

Total printed excluding waste - 103,896,000

Unsold (at July 9, 1968) - 1,452,771

Net sales - 102,443,229

9d

Total printed excluding waste - 10,891,440

Unsold (at July 9, 1968) - 1,322,449

Net sales - 9,568,991

1s 6d

Total printed excluding waste - 10,827,240

Unsold (at July 9, 1968) - 1,166,731

Net sales - 9,660,509

Approximately 96.9 per cent of the issue had been sold by the time it was withdrawn from sale on 9 July 1968; there were no sales of the 4d stamp or presentation pack after October 1967, or of the 9d after January 1968. There were 46,017 presentation packs sold.

The usual facilities were provided for the first day of issue, special post boxes for handstamping of first day cover being available at 117 offices. The 'first day of issue' handstamp from Bishop Auckland was to prove especially sought after, as it was here that Thomas Lawrence's Master Lambton was hung in Witton Castle. Another special handstamp was also available from the West Central District head post office from 10 to 15 July for the Art on Stamps Exhibition at the Strand Stamp Centre, London WC2.

There was one single instance of premature release of the stamps in Lincoln on 30 June - this was traced to staff error rather than any suspicious circumstances.

THE ARTISTS

SIR THOMAS LAWRENCE (Master Lambton) was born in Bristol on 4 May 1769. A child prodigy as a painter, he later studied at the Royal Academy and was accorded the unusual honour of nomination as a 'supplemental associate' in 1791 before election as a full member three years later. Following the death of Sir Joshua Reynolds he was appointed court painter to the King, a position he filled until his death. He was knighted in 1815 and became President of the Royal Academy five years later. He died on 7 January 1830.

GEORGE STUBBS (Mares and foals in a landscape) was born in Liverpool on 24 August 1724, and made his living both as a professional anatomist and a painter of portraits. His studies of horses were also greatly admired and in 1766 his 'Anatomy of the Horse' was published, remaining for many years the standard work. He became an associate member of the Royal Academy in 1780, but was never elected a full member because of his quarrels within the art world. He died on 10 July 1806 (so that the stamp bearing his work was coincidentally issued on the 161st anniversary of his death).

LAURENCE STEPHEN LOWRY (Children coming out of school) was born on 1 November 1887 in Rusholme, Manchester. He attended Manchester School of Art from 1905 to 1915 and Salford School of Art for another ten years until 1925. He first achieved public recognition the following year with the sale of a picture to Manchester Corporation. From 1939 onwards he exhibited regularly and was elected an associate of the Royal Academy in 1955 and a full RA in 1962. He died 23 February 1976.

GILES ALLEN
31 March 1994

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