

## Christmas 1969

Date of issue: 26 NOVEMBER 1969



On 21 February 1968 the reconstituted Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) held its inaugural meeting. Amongst topics for discussion was the stamp programme for 1969. George Downes, Chairman of the SAC and Director of the Operations and Overseas Department, informed the Committee that although advice on the composition of the annual programme was not among in its terms of reference, on this occasion views would be welcomed. The Secretary of the Committee, J R Baxter, also of the Operations and Overseas Department (OOD), advised members of the more important of the 100 or more suggestions received by the GPO from members of the public, interested bodies and organisations celebrating anniversaries. These included:

- The Investiture of the Prince of Wales (a stamp issue had already been agreed);
- 20th anniversary of NATO;
- the maiden voyage of the 'Queen Elizabeth 2';
- centenary of the 'Cutty Sark';
- aviation anniversaries, including the flight of Alcock and Brown;
- 200th anniversary of James Watt's steam pump;
- 200th anniversary of the Wedgwood factory;
- stamps commemorating British poets or musicians;
- stamps showing British architecture - cathedrals, stately homes, villages, etc.

The SAC met again on 10 April, the members suggesting the following for the 1969 programme, in addition to that for the Prince of Wales: Anniversaries; Ships; Cathedrals; Christmas.

On 13 May 1968 Downes wrote to the Postmaster General (PMG), Roy Mason, with recommendations for the 1969 programme, having on this occasion consulted the SAC. The following recommendations were made:

- The Investiture of the Prince of Wales  
(announced by Edward Short in 1967; Short was PMG from 1966 to April 1968);

Maiden voyage of the 'Queen Elizabeth 2' – it was suggested that, rather than devote a whole issue to this, it could be the culminating stamp in a series on British Ships including the centenary of the launching of the 'Cutty Sark'.

The Post Office was already committed to a stamp for the 20th anniversary of NATO. It was suggested to include three other anniversaries: 50th anniversary of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), 200th anniversary of the patenting of James Watt's steam pump and the 50th anniversary of Alcock and Brown's flight across the Atlantic.

Besides the British Ships issue, the following were suggested:

English Cathedrals (possibly the first of an annual series on British architecture);  
Christmas.

The Post Office first issued Christmas stamps in 1966, which were designs by children. In 1967 the three stamps were reproductions of religious paintings and proved very popular. For 1968 Short had chosen three stamps showing children with their toys. For 1969 it was suggested to alternate back to the religious theme. Downes felt these were probably the most popular at Christmas.

The years 1969 and 1970 were to be especially important for the Post Office with the introduction of Giro and the change to corporation status. Downes felt 1969 would be an appropriate year for an issue showing various facets of the Post Office story including one stamp at least devoted to Giro.

Downes proposed the following timetable if the recommended subjects were accepted:

January – British Ships

April – Anniversaries

May – English Cathedrals (possibly to include St Paul's and Coventry)

July – Investiture of the Prince of Wales

October – The Post Office

November – Christmas.

Downes informed the PMG that the values would be recommended later.

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## CHRISTMAS STAMPS

The PMG accepted the general proposals for 1969 with some small alterations. He was highly critical of the 1966 Christmas designs by child artists. Although he agreed that the stamps for 1968, showing children playing, were a sophisticated effort by a top-class artist, Rosalind Dease, for the future he was inclined to favour stamps showing

reproductions of paintings. He was not impressed when told by Baxter (OOD) that some members of the SAC bitterly opposed these. He was, however, prepared to accept the advice that for 1969 the stamps should have original designs but with traditional themes.

On 3 October 1968 Baxter wrote to the PMG for guidance on the style of design for the Christmas issue. Baxter told the PMG, John Stonehouse, that Mr Mason, who had been PMG until June that year, had indicated a preference for a return in 1969 to the art reproduction used in 1967. This type of design was not favoured on aesthetic grounds by some of the SAC, but was undoubtedly quite popular with the public and with collectors. Baxter suggested that if the stamps were to show reproductions the works of British artists and sculptors should be considered. This would be a change from the international paintings used in 1967 and would avoid the criticism the Post Office incurred then of using 'foreign paintings'.

Alternatively if the PMG preferred contemporary designs, Baxter suggested professional designers should be commissioned rather than having another children's competition as in 1966. The children's stamps were not very well received by the public. In 1969, after 300 hundred years as a Department of State, the Post Office was to become a public corporation. This prompted Baxter to explain to the PMG that, whilst the Christmas 1969 stamps were likely to be issued by the Corporation and would therefore have to be approved by the new board, selection of designs would have to be completed, and printing and distribution started well before the earliest possible date for Vesting Day, which in the event was 1 October 1969.

The theme of the Christmas stamps continued to be discussed at Postal Headquarters (PHQ) until October. The schedule required the designs to be at the printers by 27 January 1969 and it was therefore necessary to start the process moving. Progress could not be made, however, until the theme was decided. PSD sought clarification of a memorandum from OOD that simply stated the artists were to be asked for contemporary designs and gave no indication as to whether they were to be religious. PSD informed OOD that approximately 40 letters of complaint had been received that the 1968 Christmas stamps were 'keeping Christ out of Christmas'. A number of these had even vilified the artist, Rosalind Dease. It was thought the complaints were likely to increase once the stamps were issued on 25 November 1968. Having reconsidered, OOD notified PSD to 'go religious in 1969'.

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## ARTISTS INVITED

The Council of Industrial Design (CoID) was asked to provide a list of artists to design the Christmas stamps. The following names were put forward: David Gentleman, Andrew Restall, Clive Abbott, Richard Downer, Peter Branfield and Fritz Wegner. Invitations to were

sent on 5 November 1968 to Harrison and Sons Ltd, Bradbury Wilkinson, Richard Downer, Fritz Wegner (Saxon Artists Ltd), Clive Abbott and Andrew Restall.

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## **INSTRUCTIONS TO ARTISTS**

Instructions to artists were compiled as an aid to design preparation. The artists were informed that 4d, 9d and 1s 6d stamps would be issued in November 1969 illustrating Christmas religious themes.

A set of three designs was required, although artists could submit alternative designs for use in one set or more than one set of designs. The designs were to be drawn four times linear stamp size, horizontal format. A vertical format could be used if the artist felt that a specific design would otherwise be inhibited. A profile portrait of the Queen was to be an essential feature of the designs.

Although the design was to be religious, the artists were not restricted to the nativity scenes; other themes such as the Three Kings on their journey were acceptable. The inscription 'Christmas 1969' was to appear on each design.

The printing process dictated that not more than four colours for each stamp could be used. Black was not to be used as a background, although a white background was acceptable.

The completed artwork was to reach Don Beaumont, PHQ, by Monday, 30 December 1968.

The fee for each completed design was 60 guineas with a maximum of 180 guineas for any one artist. An additional fee of 190 guineas was to be paid for each design selected for use, making a total of 250 guineas.

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## **DETAILS ANNOUNCED**

On 28 November 1968 the GPO released the Press and Broadcast Notice PB374 giving details of the 1969 stamp programme, including three Christmas stamps, 5d, 9d and 1s 6d.

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## **ARTWORK RECEIVED**

The designs received were allocated numbers for ease of reference.  
Fritz Wegner (received 23 December 1968 – 4d (1), 9d (2), 1s 6d (3))

Bradbury Wilkinson (received 30 December 1968) – 4d (4), 9d (5), 1s 6d (6)  
Andrew Restall (received 3 January 1969) – 5d (7), 9d (8), 1s 6d (9)  
Clive Abbott (received 3 January 1969) – 4d (10 and 11), 9d (12 to 14), 1s 6d (15, 16)  
Richard Downer (received 6 January 1969) – 4d (17 and 20), 9d (18 and 21\*), 1s 6d (19 and 21\*)  
Harrison and Sons – 4d (22), 9d (23), 1s 6d (24).

\* In the files the list of artwork received indicates that two pieces by Downer were labelled 21.

Unsolicited artwork was submitted by Jennifer Toombs on 2 January 1969: this was numbered 1A, 2A, 3A and 4A.

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## DELIBERATIONS OF THE STAMP ADVISORY COMMITTEE

At the SAC meeting held on 8 January 1969 the members examined the submitted designs and without exception decided that 'Fritz Wegner's designs had captured the religious element of the occasion much more than any of the others.' Although his designs for the 5d and 9d were accepted by all, a discussion arose about the 1s 6d design. This was felt by a few members to be the 'odd man out' and it was therefore suggested that the artist be asked to submit a further design, perhaps a 'crib scene' in the same style as his 5d and 9d. The Committee felt that the caption 'Christmas 1969' should be removed as the designs adequately expressed the occasion.

The Committee recommended as second choice Andrew Restall's designs, but only because the members felt obliged to suggest a second set.

On 18 January Beaumont sent Mr York, of Harrison and Sons Ltd, the stamp printers, the successful designs and requested production of essays. York was told that slight modifications were to be made in that the 9d design was to be 5d; the 1s 6d design was to be 9d; and the 5d design was to be 1s 6d.

The recommendations of the SAC were submitted to the PMG who agreed the choice of Fritz Wegner's designs. The PMG also agreed that 'Christmas 1969' be removed from all the designs. He felt that if these words were replaced with a vertical gold line there would be a sufficient consistency among the three stamps to form an acceptable series. Although there would naturally be some difference, if one showed shepherds while the other two showed kings and angels, the PMG did not consider the difference in style ruled out the 1s 6d design, which he considered too good to be lost.

On 20 March essays of the 5d (Three Kings), 9d (Three Shepherds) and 1s 6d (Angel) were delivered to the GPO.

These essays were examined by the SAC on 26 March when the members gave their unanimous approval of both designs and printing. York said that, over a long printing run, a higher standard of registration could be maintained with the present 9d design and suggested it for the 5d value. This was agreed subject to the matter being examined by the engineering department. On being asked why the low value stamp was to be 5d rather than 4d, the Chairman explained that at present it was essential for operational reasons that minimum value special stamps should always have the same rate, namely the first class rate, but said he would review the situation. Following the introduction of the two-tier postal system on 16 September 1968, it was decided to have no more 4d special stamps in order to improve segregation and sorting of letters bearing special stamps, in the knowledge that they were invariably first-class mail. The two-tier system had been introduced to give customers a choice between a fast and a slower, cheaper service for all inland correspondence. Both services were available for all types of correspondence; the contents of an envelope were no longer relevant. The request for a 4d Christmas stamp was probably influenced by the fact that Christmas cards could previously be sent unsealed as 'printed paper' at a lower cost. There may even have been some misconception that the 'printed paper' rate still existed.

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### **THE QUEEN'S APPROVAL**

On 18 April 1969 the PMG sent a set of essays to the Queen. It was explained that there was to be one modification, the 9d showing the three shepherds would be the 5d value, and the 5d showing the three kings was to become the 9d. The Queen's approval was notified three days later.

On 20 May 1969 Harrison and Sons Ltd sent further essays of the 9d (Three Kings) with the value in either gold or black.

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### **FURTHER DELIBERATIONS BY THE SAC**

At the SAC meeting on 21 May, the Chairman reported that the possibility of a 4d stamp in the Christmas series had been thoroughly re-examined, but the conclusion reached, and endorsed by the PMG, was that operational objectives overrode all other considerations. The Chairman detailed the problems of mail segregation, especially at Christmas, and suggested members might like to visit a sorting office to study the problems at first hand. On being asked if it was really necessary to have Christmas stamps if they could not be

used on Christmas cards, the Chairman replied that the Post Office did not wish to forego the extra revenue, which was considerable. In view of its strong feelings, the Committee asked for further consideration to be given.

The Committee studied the essays. The denominations used Bodini typeface, and in three colours, gold, black and blue. It was agreed that the style was excellent and that blue was artistically and operationally the best colour for the white 5d stamp. The blue 9d and red 1s 6d would have white and black values respectively. Harrison and Sons were informed that the essays had been approved subject to the following amendments:

9d - Three Shepherds, value to be 5d

5d - Three Kings, value to be 9d

1s 6d - Angel.

The position regarding a 4d stamp was unchanged at the SAC meeting on 17 June, with the Post Office still feeling that a 4d would cause too much operational difficulty. At the next meeting of the SAC, on 29 July, the Chairman said that the question of a 4d stamp had been carefully reconsidered, and that as a result of strong recommendations made by the SAC and others, the PMG had announced in Parliament on 3 July that the 1969 Christmas issue would include a 4d stamp (the other values would now be 5d and 1s 6d). The Chairman regretted that there had not been time to inform the members in advance of the announcement. In an attempt to overcome many of the anticipated operational difficulties it had been decided to use the red Angel design for the 4d value and the blue Shepherds design for the 5d.

On 8 July Harrison and Sons was informed of the proposed: the 5d value was to be in the design as essayed; the 9d design was to be used for the 1s 6d value, and the 1s 6d design was to be used for a 4d value. The revised 'good' printing requirements (and approximate warrant quantities in brackets) were as follows:

4d - 4,200,000 (5,200,000) sheets of 72

5d - 1,600,000 (2,000,000) sheets of 120

1s 6d - 200,000 (250,000) sheets of 120,

with supply deliveries phased to arrive by 19 September, 17 October 7 November and 14 November 1969.

The quantities sold were:

4d Herald Angel - 271,244,808

5d The Three Shepherds - 139,845,600

1s 6d - The Three Kings - 19,136,520

Presentation pack - 121,454.

However an internal report written in December 1971, which compares philatelic sales of Christmas special stamps issued in 1969 and 1970 with all stamps issued in 1971, gives a different figure.

This report indicates that the total postings in philatelic boxes for Christmas 1969 was 666,184 (91.23 per cent being complete sets) with a further 50,728 extracted from normal post. 256,278 FDCs were sold at post office counters, representing 39.82 per cent of postings in philatelic boxes. The estimated revenue from postings in philatelic boxes, including 'normal postage' was £70,006, with estimated staff costs at £2,600, the net revenue excluding 'normal postage' was £50,100.

The stamps were printed in photogravure by Harrison and Sons Ltd, with the Queen's head and stars (4d, 5d) and scroll work (1s 6d) embossed in gold.

The stamps were withdrawn on 25 November 1970.

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## UNSATISFACTORY PRINTING

Sheets of 4d Christmas stamps were sent to the Purchasing and Supply Department (Materials Section) on 15 August 1969 for routine testing of the phosphor. It was discovered that the width of the phosphor bar was 5/16 inches and not 3/16 inches as normal. This presented problems for the mechanised sorting offices in that the signal received by the Automatic Letter Facing machine (ALF) from the wider phosphor bar was the same as from a first class stamp. Some 75 per cent of the order, 2,658,000 sheets, had been delivered with this defect. The printers, Harrison and Sons, took immediate remedial action once aware of the problem. There was insufficient time, however, to reprint supplies and so the decision was made to accept the defective sheets. The remainder of the order, 1,288,000 sheets, was delivered with correct phosphor bands.

This was not the first time errors had occurred with the phosphor bars. The 1968 Christmas special stamps had been produced with weak bars. This had led to a review by the Post Office of design and manufacturing procedures. One of the controls put in place was that all new stamps were to be checked for accuracy of the phosphor signal before printing took place. The files give no indication as to why these controls failed in this instance. Harrisons, in explaining how the fault had occurred, said that their planning department had made an error in the information that was sent to the factory. This happened, it was said, due to the anxiety to get things moving.

The printing of the Christmas stamps had been a rush job accomplished by Harrisons, against all expectations, to make the distribution by the due date. The decision to issue a



4d stamp involved an increase in the number of stamps required by the Post Office. To accommodate this Harrison rearranged their production programme at the expense of other commitments. The company was in the process of etching the printing cylinders for the original values when notified of the changes to be made.

On 1 December 1969 Harrisons was advised that the Post Office reserved the right to a refund, within 10% of the sum paid for the stamps, to cover any additional costs incurred. Harrison reacted by pleading extenuating circumstances. The GPO Supplies Department wrote to PHQ on 7 January suggesting the claim be waived as investigations found only negligible costs had been incurred. Although not wishing to condone the error, the Supplies Department recognised that Harrisons had produced the stamps under difficult circumstances and as such the error was possibly understandable and excusable. Further to this it was felt that the treatment of this particular case by the Post Office could influence Harrisons attitude in the future whereby they might ask for additional time to complete a job or find it impossible to make a last minute change. The suggestion to waive the claim was agreed to by PHQ.

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## CHRISTMAS AIR LETTER FORM

Fritz Wegner was asked to design not only the 1969 Christmas air letter form but also the stamp to be featured. The PMG and OOD agreed that the form should have a religious theme.

The stamp design, showing Mary and Joseph journeying to Bethlehem, was approved by the SAC on 26 March 1969. It was then submitted to the PMG who gave his approval on 1 April. At the SAC meeting on 21 May, the Committee agreed that the design submitted by Wegner for the form was excellent. It was felt, however, that an improvement could be achieved by making thinner the lines on the address panel. There was further agreement in that the lettering 'By Air Mail' on the proof was unsatisfactory and that it should be in the standard flat lettering.

The Christmas air letter form was on sale at all post offices between 29 October and 24 December 1969 and cost 10d, which included 9d postage. The dimensions of air letter forms had been changed in 1968 to conform to new standardised sizes for envelopes, to comply with the needs of the mechanised sorting offices.

As an experiment first day of issue facilities were available for this form. The usual philatelic posting boxes were provided and for this occasion Bethlehem, Carmarthenshire was also a 'philatelic' office. 'First day of issue' 1 inch diameter rubber handstamps were used to cancel the form posted in the philatelic boxes; however, any forms bearing

additional postage stamps were withdrawn and cancelled by machine or sorting office handstamp. For an inclusive charge of 2s 6d the post office at Bethlehem provided a service on 29 October to supply and address the form, hand-cancelled with the Bethlehem, Llandeilo, Carms 'First day of issue' postmark.

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## FIRST DAY COVERS AND PRESENTATION PACKS

The first day envelope was illustrated with a reproduction of a 10th century drawing of an angel, in black and gold. It was designed by Clarke, Clements and Hughes, a partnership of graphic designers from Maidstone, Kent, and was on sale in all head post offices at a cost of 6d. Until this issue covers had only been available at offices where philatelic posting boxes were provided and at the Philatelic Bureau in Edinburgh.

Inclusive charges for a cover and servicing with the full range of stamps was 5s 3d from the Philatelic Bureau, Edinburgh. Servicing of customers' own addressed envelopes was 3s 3d a cover.

A presentation pack, containing all three Christmas stamps together with details of the designs and artist, was also available in head post offices, price 3s 3d.

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## POSTMARKS

A Bethlehem first day of issue postmark was available and applications were sent to the Head Postmaster, Llanelli, Carms. Applications for the Philatelic Bureau cancellation only or for both Bureau and Bethlehem cancellations were sent to the Philatelic Bureau, Edinburgh.

A circular handstamp, inscribed 'Jerusalem - Skellingthorpe - Lincoln' around the circumference, was used at Lincoln on 26 November. Slogan postmarks were used at Bethlehem, Llandeilo and at Cheltenham.

Andy Pendlebury  
March 1994

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## REFERENCES

British Postal Museum & Archive files:  
MKD/BS/1766 Special Stamps Submission to PMG and Palace

MKD/BS/1805 Christmas 1969 - Instructions To Artists  
MKD/BS/200 Christmas 1969 - Unsatisfactory Printing  
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PB228 issued 12 September 1969  
PB259 issued 16 October 1969  
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