

SPECIAL STAMP HISTORY

First Flight of “Concorde”

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The first flight of Concorde, supersonic airliner developed and produced jointly by Britain and France, was seen by the British Government as an excellent way of being associated with the project. In France Sud Aviation produced Concorde with finance from the French Government. The British involvement was through British Aircraft Corporation Ltd (BAC), with financial backing from the British Government. In 1977 BAC became part of British Aerospace (BAe), a public corporation including Hawker Siddeley Aviation, Hawker Siddeley Dynamics and Scottish Aviation.

FIRST SUGGESTION

The first suggestion of a stamp to commemorate the first flight of Concorde is associated with Mr Doubtfire, a portrait engraver for banknotes and stamps, from Ventnor, Isle of Wight. On 9 June 1967 he submitted unsolicited designs for a stamp commemorating the maiden flight: the files contain a letter, dated 20 June 1967, sent in reply on behalf of the Postmaster General (PMG) that thanked Mr Doubtfire but stated the Post Office did not at present have plans for such a stamp. However, the work was thought to be so good that he was told he might be considered to produce designs for a future issue.

FIRST OFFICIAL DISCUSSION

On 13 July 1967 a meeting between Edward Short, PMG, and the Department of Postal Services (DPS) discussed the stamp programme of 1968, including whether to commemorate Concorde with a stamp. It was felt that the first step should be for DPS to determine the plans of the French postal authority. It was noted that the ‘Sun’ newspaper was running a competition to design a Concorde stamp and that further discussion was needed to establish how far to take account of this.

The PMG made it clear that he would be willing to make an announcement about the programme before the parliamentary summer recess. In order that Concorde might be mentioned a letter was sent to R Joder, Directeur Generale des Postes Paris, dated 21 July 1967 that asked if the French Post Office was proposing a Concorde stamp. The reply, dated 4 August 1967, arrived too late to enable the PMG to include Concorde in his announcement. It did, however, establish that both postal authorities believed Concorde was a suitable subject for a stamp and that the French had already commissioned an artist. There was further agreement, that it should be issued after the first flight and that each country would have its own design. It was felt that to have the same design for both countries would be too difficult since production methods and design requirements inevitably differ. In October the French Post Office sent a copy of its draft design.

DOUBTS ON THE FUTURE

Initially the idea of a stamp had been seen by the Government as an excellent way of being associated with Concorde. Problems arose in that whenever there was a delay in issuing the stamp it fuelled speculation about the Government withdrawing from the project.

Doubts were raised on the future of Concorde as early as 1967. These centred around its noise, so to gauge public opinion a series of sonic boom tests was held over London and the rest of Britain. These tests, in July 1967, consisted of unannounced sonic booms by Lightning fighters.

INSTRUCTIONS TO ARTISTS

The files do not contain instructions in any great detail and only state that the set was to comprise three stamps, 4d, 9d and 1s 6d. The designs must feature Concorde and symbolism of the co-operation of the two nations in the project. The French issue, a single stamp of Concorde in flight, did not include such symbolism.

The following artists were officially invited to submit designs: Harrison and Sons Ltd, including David Gentleman; Philip Sharland and Richard Negus; Michael and Sylvia Goaman; Margaret Calvert. It is believed all accepted the commission.

In addition to the 23 designs received from commissioned artists, there were two unsolicited designs, from Miss S Down and S Doubtfire, his design being that sent on 9 June 1967.

ARTWORK RECEIVED

Artwork received was numbered as follows for ease of reference:

Harrison and Sons (David Gentle) (sent 9 October 1967) – designs 1 to 11

Richard Negus / Philip Sharland (sent October/November 1967) – designs 12 to 14

Michael and Sylvia Goaman (sent October/November 1967) – designs 16 to 20)

Margaret Calvert (sent October/November 1967) – designs 21 to 23)

Unsolicited designs:

Miss S Down - design A1

S Doubtfire (sent 9 June 1967) - design A2.

All the designs were submitted to the Ministry of Technology to be checked for technical accuracy.

The following are the comments made by the Ministry of Technology on the six designs that were later chosen to be essayed:

David Gentleman:

Design 1 - Windows in rear fuselage too near top of fuselage; nacelle too deep (nacelle is the enclosed part of an airplane in which the engine is housed); these two points combine to make rear fuselage appear appreciably too thick; separation line of radome on nose over exaggerated (radome is the plastic dish on nose of aircraft giving protective covering to radar).

Design 6 - No comment.

Design 9 - Forward fuselage in plan form not symmetrical; droop angle appears to be 10 degrees.

Michael Goaman:

Design 16 - Nozzles protrude too far to rear of trailing edge of wing and are of incorrect shape; nose of fuselage probably too foreshortened.

Design 17 - Nozzles of wrong shape; fin and rudders of wrong shape; outer pair of elevons not separated; junction between fin and rudder not shown.

Doubtfire:

Design A2 - Nozzles should be flush with wing trailing edge.

A design submitted by the team of Richard Negus and Philip Sharland featured shock waves (the cause of sonic booms), which the Ministry of Technology pointed out might give undue prominence to sonic bangs: this design was not short-listed.

The criticism by the Ministry of Technology of design 1 may have been over zealous, as a letter to the PMG from Charles Gardner, Publicity Manager BAC, dated 27 March 1969 states 'the engine nacelles are always being mucked about - almost any shape is bound to have been right at some time or other'.

Until 1966, the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) had selected the designs to go forward: the Committee was disbanded in 1967 and reformed in 1968 as a much more formal body with official status. At the meeting of 13 July 1967 it was decided that DPS would write to Sir Paul Reilly (Director of the Council of Industrial Design) to say that the PMG had still not decided on whether or not to have a reconstituted Advisory Committee, and for the time being there would be a reliance on artists known to the Post Office but in future it would approach the Council of Industrial Design.

On 13 November 1967 the designs were submitted to PMG for adjudication. By the next day he had decided to have the following essayed: designs 1, 6 and 9 (David Gentleman), 16 and 17 (Goaman), and A2 (Doubtfire). He also decided that he would not for the present announce any decision to have a Concorde stamp. The question of an announcement would be readdressed once the essays were ready. He hoped that by then the future of Concorde would have been decided and, if still to go ahead, an approximate date for the maiden flight would be available.

The printers were to be Harrison and Sons Ltd. Design A2 was sent directly to Mr York of Harrisons on 21 November 1967 with instructions to make one small amendment. The other five designs were sent from the respective artists who were still adding finishing touches.

From this shortlist of six, three essays were submitted for the Queen's approval:

4d Concorde in flight by Michael and Sylvia Goaman

9d Plan and elevation views by David Gentleman

1s 6d Concorde's nose and tail by David Gentleman.

THE SPELLING OF CONCORD(E)

On the 12 December 1967 a letter was sent from the Ministry of Technology to PSD advising that in line with the minister's recent Roll-out speech, when it was said that in future Concorde should be spelt with an 'e' in English as well as in French, it would therefore be grateful if amendments be made to any spelling of the word in relation to the special stamp issue.

SPECIAL STAMPS ANNOUNCED

On 14 December the PMG announced that the first successful flight of the Concorde prototype airliner would be commemorated by three special stamps, 4d, 9d and 1s 6d, to be issued on an appropriate date as soon as possible after the flight.

On 25 January 1968, copies of the chosen designs were sent to the French Post Office. The accompanying letter stated that the PMG had by then announced publicly the intention to issue the stamps and that the Queen had approved the final choice.

On 23 January 1968 D H Beaumont wrote to Doubtfire, 'Your design was considered with a number of others and while I am glad to say it was short-listed, I am sorry that it was not included in the final choice.' Beaumont went on to say he looked forward to seeing his Christmas stamp designs.

FIRST DAY COVERS AND PRESENTATION PACKS

Amongst the artwork relating to the Concorde stamp held at the British Postal Museum & Archive are two first day cover (FDC) designs submitted by Margaret Calvert, neither of which was chosen. The issued envelope was designed by Philip Sharland featuring Concorde in flight seen from below shown in white with an orange background and a jet-stream of a lighter orange and pink.

On 28 November 1967 David Gentleman was invited to submit a design for a presentation pack, with the following instructions:

1) The Presentation Pack

The finished pack will be the same dimensions as the specimens enclosed. The make-up will be the same, ie, it will contain technical information about the stamps, notes about Concorde and information about the printing of the stamps. A maximum of three colours may be used. It will bear the Royal Arms to be printed in one colour, eg, red or blue. The price will be 3s 7d.

The pack will be printed by lithography and the design should exploit this to the full.

2) Fees

The fee will be 50 guineas for the design. Payment will cover any modifications to the original design that may be agreed as reasonable.

3) Ownership of designs

All designs submitted and copyright therein will become the absolute property of the Postmaster General. He will not make any alterations to any of the drawings without the artist's permission.

REQUISITION OF STAMPS

From Post Office headquarters in London were sent instructions to all Postal Controllers to requisition the stamps, required by Friday, 1 December. The aim was to have the stamps in all post offices prior to 28 February 1968, the date Concorde was originally expected to fly.

PRESS SHOWING

On 26 November 1968 the Post Office held a press showing of the stamps at Post Office headquarters: the maiden flight was expected in the near future and the stamps would be issued on a suitable date soon after. There was much speculation over the weekend about French public expenditure cuts; France announced a \$12 million cutback in the Concorde programme as one of the austerity measures designed to bolster the Franc. This led to the British Post Office seeking advice from the Ministry of Technology, which was to go ahead with the stamps as to cancel now would heighten speculation as to the future of Concorde. That year had already seen the project put back two months due to strikes in France during May and June, technical and supply problems had led to additional delays, and now there was this politico-financial doubt about the project. The maiden flight had been first expected 28 February 1968 at which time the letter rate was 4d; however, by the time of the press showing the letter rate had increased to 5d. The operational effects of this are explained in a Press and Broadcast Notice stating that the two phosphor bands on the 4d stamp would result in mail being treated as first class in the mechanised offices. These effects on operations were felt of minor consideration compared to what might happen if the press picked up on the fact that a 4d 'slower service' stamp was being used to commemorate a plane with supersonic speed. However, the fact that the low value stamp was 4d was largely ignored by the press: this strengthened the argument against changing the denomination. Changes would create difficulties as the stamps were ready for distribution to post offices and 50,000 first day covers and 55,000 presentation packs were made up with the 4d stamps.

THE FUTURE OF CONCORDE

The stamps were eventually issued 3 March 1969. However in February 1969 the Government were reconsidering the case for withdrawing from the Concorde project. A

decision could not be made until late March, after the maiden flight. A meeting chaired by the Ministry of Technology, with members of the Treasury present, agreed that if the Government decided to withdraw, its embarrassment might be increased if it had, only a short while previously, allowed special stamps commemorating the first flight to be issued. It was felt that the PMG should verify the situation with the Ministry of Technology before sanctioning the issue, to be assured that no embarrassment to the Government would result. The Post Office was not represented at the meeting and the PMG was not pleased to learn of its decision. He believed he had the final decision on issuing stamps and wrote to the Ministry of Technology strongly recommending the stamps be issued soon after the maiden flight, be it a successful flight or not. The financial loss to the Post Office if the stamps were never issued would amount to £90,000.

FILTON FIRST DAY COVERS

In December 1967 the publicity officer of BAC Ltd, Filton, Bristol (British Aircraft Corporation Ltd, the company involved with the British part of the project) contacted the Post Office outlining plans to commemorate the first flight of Concorde. BAC Ltd was proposing to issue commemorative covers and postcards to its airline customers, sub-contractors and suppliers to BAC plus many other companies in the United Kingdom and abroad who were involved in the Concorde project. BAC Ltd hoped that the Post Office would waive, as far as this issue was concerned, the regulation that stated that items for first day handstamps bear the complete set of stamps. The Post Office was unable to do so as the first day issue cancellation was part of the guaranteed first day cover service offered to collectors. It was explained that the collector paid for the service either by meeting the Bureau's charges or by affixing the full set of special stamps on the cover. BAC was informed that the Post Office offered to firms, wishing to post in bulk covers and postcards that bear only one of the special stamps, a machine cancellation with a special slogan die reading 'First Day of Issue'.

A further option open to BAC was made by the Post Office, if it wished to commemorate the first flight of the Concorde, to provide a handstamp at a cost of £20, which could incorporate a design of its own choosing and have interchangeable date slugs in case the date of the flight was not known in advance.

SUCCESSFUL MAIDEN FLIGHT

The successful maiden flight of the French prototype Concorde 001 took place on 2 March, while the British Concorde, 002, made its first flight five weeks later on 9 April 1969. The French put its Concorde stamp on sale at Toulouse on 2 March, but the British Post Office

was unlucky. Having 'stockpiled' the three Concorde stamps for about twelve months it announced (when the first flight was imminent) that the stamps would be released on the day 'following the first flight'. As it occurred on a Sunday, the official first day of issue was 3 March 1969.

QUANTITIES SOLD

The details of the stamps, and the quantities sold, were:

4d – Concorde in flight (Michael and Sylvia Goaman) - 91,551,720

9d – Plan and elevation views (David Gentleman) - 9,488,520

1s 6d – Concorde's nose and tail (David Gentleman) - 9,874,560

Presentation pack (English) – 100,608

Presentation pack (German) – 2,827.

The stamps were withdrawn on 2 March 1970. They were printed in photogravure on non-watermarked phosphor lined paper by Harrison and Sons Ltd.

Andy Pendlebury
October 1993

REFERENCES

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