

British Ships

Date of issue: 15 JANUARY 1969



The British Ships series of six stamps was a tribute to British Shipbuilders and seamen.

On 21 February 1968, at the inaugural meeting of the new Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC), J R Baxter, of the Overseas and Operations Division, GPO and Secretary of the Committee, informed the members of the more important of the 100 or more suggestions received for stamps in 1969. 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 Chairman said that advice on the composition of the stamp programme was not part of the Committee's terms of reference, but he would certainly welcome views on the subject.

On 10 April 1968 at the second SAC meeting, the Committee discussed the programme. The Committee suggested the following special issues, in addition to that for the Prince of Wales:

- (a) Anniversaries
- (b) Ships
- (c) Cathedrals
- (d) Christmas.

For the Ships the Committee suggested that British ships through the ages be shown, including the 'Cutty Sark' and the new 'Queen Elizabeth 2'.

SUGGESTION ADOPTED

On 19 June 1968, at the third SAC meeting, the Chairman reported that the PMG had accepted its suggestions of a series on British Ships and one on English Cathedrals.

On 10 July 1968 the SAC was shown the work of two new artists suggested by the Council of Industrial Design (CoID) for the British Ships issue, scheduled for early 1969:

C Howard - the Committee doubted whether his work would be suitable for stamp designs.

Mr Polac - it was agreed that his work was very professional and that he should be asked to submit designs for British Ships.

At this meeting the Chairman reported that the new Postmaster General (PMG), John Stonehouse, who became PMG in June 1968, had not yet finalised the 1969 stamp programme. Copies of the programme, as published in 'Hansard', were forwarded to members on 24 July 1968.

The artists commissioned for the Ships series were to submit their designs by 3 September 1968, as it was essential for the printer to start work on the stamps by mid-October in order for them to be issued on time. To facilitate this, on 22 August 1968 Baxter suggested that the SAC meetings for September and October would be as follows:

Wednesday, 11 September - to see the designs and recommend accordingly. The designs would then be submitted to the PMG and his choice(s) essayed by Harrisons (who would need three weeks to produce the essays);

Wednesday, 9 October - to view the essays.

This was agreed by G R Downes, Chairman of the SAC and Director of Operations and Overseas.

ARTISTS COMMISSIONED

No instructions or invitations to artists are held in the files; however, it is known that Clive Abbott, Johan Polak, Andrew Restall and David Gentleman (on behalf of Harrisons) submitted designs shown at the September SAC meeting.

DELIBERATIONS OF THE STAMP ADVISORY COMMITTEE

At the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) meeting held on 11 September the Chairman advised that, while the Committee now felt the series should be restricted to steamships, the PMG preferred a historical series showing ships from sail to steam. To accommodate the SAC's views, however, the artists were asked to provide designs suitable for either a 'sail to steam' or a 'steamship' series. The Chairman added that a ships series in 1969 could hardly exclude the 'Cutty Sark': the members agreed.

All the submitted designs were considered of good quality. It was decided to recommend that the complete series be the work of one artist, and thus show some uniformity.

The Chairman said that there were likely to be four values and asked members to vote on the artists' work accordingly. As first choice, four members preferred Gentleman's work and three preferred Polak's.

Gentleman's work was felt to be superior to Polak's for the following reasons:
his detail was better,
he had used up the limited space well, and
the placing of the titles, Queen's head and value figures had all been well thought out.

It was agreed nonetheless that Polak's work was most promising, and he should be given encouragement and commissioned again for future issues.

Of Gentleman's individual designs, the Committee recommended the following four:
Elizabethan Galleon,
Cutty Sark,
Mauretania,
QE2.

These four ships spanned the centuries while the choice included the two for which 1969 was an important year.

On 9 October 1968 the SAC met for its sixth meeting. The Chairman said that the PMG had, on 19 September 1968, accepted the Committee's recommendations but also asked for the 'Great Britain' to be included. Gentleman had suggested that, to balance the set and give historical continuity, an 'East Indiaman' should also be added. The members agreed to the additions and the Chairman said that the set would consist of strips of three and two each of different denominations; the QE2 would be 5d.

In discussing the QE2 design it was agreed that:

the original design with the coloured background should be used to distinguish that ship as the only one afloat in 1969;
the brightest colour of blue was best;
Harrisons should print the name Cunard in red on the side of the ship;
Gentleman should be asked whether he felt it would improve the overall presentation of the set if the position of the ship on the stamp was lowered to correspond with the position of the other ships.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STAMP ADVISORY COMMITTEE

On 18 October 1968 G R Downes wrote to the PMG enclosing essays of David Gentleman's designs and the recommendations of the SAC. These were 'that the values of the stamps should be as follows: (a) the treble, ie Elizabethan galleon, East Indiaman and Cutty Sark at 9d each; (b) the double, ie Great Britain and Mauretania at 1/- each.'

The PMG had already said that he wished the stamp showing the Queen Elizabeth 2 to be the 5d, the basic inland letter rate at that time and so the stamp was likely to be the most widely used in the series. This arrangement gave a face value of 4s 8d for the set. The values, used in combination, provided the basic rates of inland, 'all up' Europe and three air mail rates

THE QUEEN'S APPROVAL SOUGHT

On 21 October the PMG submitted a set of essays to the Queen: there were to be some slight modifications, as follows:

Queen Elizabeth 2 -
substitute the word CUNARD for the red rectangle;
the first lifeboat to the left of radar mast to be in red.

TS Mauretania -
omit the lettering 'TS';
omit the three horizontal black lines.

SS Great Britain -
omit the lettering 'SS';
lift the design to conform with the line of the Mauretania;
transfer name 'Great Britain' to bottom left similar to 'Mauretania';
straighten the keel.

Elizabethan galleon -

the smaller of the two boats on the main deck to be omitted;

the yard arms on main mast and bow sprit to be at same angle as shown on foremast.

Also on 21 October the PMG wrote to Post Office Headquarters (PHQ) giving his agreement to the recommendations of the SAC, but asked:

does the head have to be black on the QE2,

would the deletion of 'SS' before 'Great Britain' lead to confusion.

On 22 October PHQ responded as follows:

for technical reasons there is no alternative to black,

the 'SS' on 'Great Britain' and the 'TS' on 'Mauretania' were omitted in order to achieve some consistency in the titles. It was realised, however, that the omission of 'SS' on the 'Great Britain' stamp could lead to confusion and it could be arranged to have it replaced.

On 23 October the Private Secretary to the PMG wrote to PHQ saying that the PMG accepted that there was no alternative to having a black head. The PMG wished, however, to have 'SS' before 'Great Britain'. The PMG also wished to have a prefix before 'Mauretania', and having since been advised by Cunard that 'Mauretania' was an RMS not a TS would they therefore put on the stamp 'RMS', a prefix for Royal Mail Ship placed before the name of a British merchant ship with a licence to carry the mails.

On 22 October the Queen approved the designs as submitted to her, subject to the amendments to the essays that were attached to the letter. Following the decision made by the PMG to include prefixes it was necessary to write to the Palace to explain that 'SS' and 'RMS' would now appear.

ESSAYS

Essays are held at the British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA) and were produced at an early stage before the recommended amendments. In addition to those already recorded, these were:

Elizabethan Galleon:

The smaller of the two boats on the main deck to be omitted.

Cutty Sark:

Stern sails on various riggings to be shortened and fore yard altered;

The hull to be copper coloured (in lieu of green shown) similar to East Indiaman.

Mauretania:

Omit the three horizontal black lines.

FIRST DAY COVERS

The full service cost 7s 8d per cover and for this the Post Office provided the envelope, the full set of stamps, typed the address and cancelled the stamps with the Philatelic Bureau handstamp. Customers' own pre-addressed covers were serviced at a cost of 5s 8d. A new service was introduced in that the envelopes were addressed by a machine plate and a minimum of 50 to the same address had to be ordered. It was hoped this new system would appeal to agents and dealers especially with the reduced service charge of 1s 6d. The normal rule that first day covers posted in philatelic posting boxes should bear the full range of new stamps did not apply on this occasion.

PRESENTATION PACKS

A Presentation Pack was issued inscribed 'RMS Queen Elizabeth 2 ... she sailed on her maiden voyage to New York on 17 January, 1969'. A further edition was produced, inscribed 'RMS Queen Elizabeth 2 ... she sails on her maiden voyage early in 1969', and was for sale exclusively on board 'Queen Elizabeth 2' during her maiden voyage which had been postponed until 2 May 1969.

DATE OF ISSUE

The date of issue was 15 January 1969. The stamps were printed by Harrison and Sons Ltd using photogravure on sheet fed machines.

The quantities sold were:

5d (RMS Queen Elizabeth 2) - 67,584,528

9d (Elizabethan Galleon, East Indiaman, Cutty Sark) - 14,351,160

1s 0d (SS Great Britain, RMS Mauretania) - 10,784,480

Presentation pack (English) - 116,526

Prsentation pack (German) - 4,416.

THE SUBJECTS OF THE STAMPS

The stamps depict five famous ships of the past and the 'Queen Elizabeth 2', which sailed on her maiden voyage to New York on 2 May 1969. RMS 'Queen Elizabeth 2' (65,000 tons), as part of the Cunard fleet, was designed for both the North Atlantic traffic and cruising. She was launched in September 1967, and made her maiden voyage having been postponed from the original date of 17 January 1969.

The sailing galleon of the 16th century was both merchantman and warship. Constructed of British oak, these vessels were extremely seaworthy. The East Indiaman, plying between Great Britain and India in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, were effectively armed and noted for their comfort. They sailed under the flag of the Honourable East India Company. The SS 'Great Britain' (3,270 tons) was designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, and in 1845 was the first iron built, screw propelled steamship to cross the Atlantic. Her hulk lay aground in the Falkland Islands until it was re-floated some years ago. It was subsequently restored and is at Bristol. The 'Cutty Sark' (963 tons), launched in 1869, was a tea clipper and one of the fastest sailing ships ever built. She is preserved at Greenwich to commemorate the days of sail.

RMS 'Mauretania' (31,938 tons), completed in 1907, was a passenger liner designed for the North Atlantic run. She was a fast and most popular ship, and held the Blue Riband for many years.

The British Ships stamps were withdrawn from sale on 14 January 1970.

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November 1993

REFERENCES

British Postal Museum & Archive files:
MKD/BS/1688 1969 British Ships
Post 54 SAC Minutes 1968-1970

Press and Broadcast Notices:
PB255 issued 19 September 1968
PB381 issued 3 November 1968

Stanley Gibbons Great Britain Specialised Stamp Catalogue Vol. 3 Queen Elizabeth II pre-decimal issues. Stanley Gibbons Publications.