

County Cricket 1873 - 1973

Date of issue: 16 MAY 1973



In November 1971 the Post Office was approached by the Secretary of the MCC (Marylebone Cricket Club) asking whether a stamp might be issued in 1973 to commemorate the centenary of the County Cricket Championship. The suggestion was subsequently adopted, on the basis that:

sporting stamps were considered very popular both generally and with the large number of thematic collectors and therefore a good source of philatelic revenue;

cricket, like football and rugby that had previously been featured in stamps, was British in origin and this anniversary offered an opportunity to celebrate the fact.

At the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) meeting on 15 February 1972, the Chairman, E G White, outlined the 1973 stamp programme, explaining that the cricket series 'would be devoted to the subject of cricket as a whole, and not simply based on the centenary of the first county championship'.

ARTIST INVITED

On 7 March 1972 D Beaumont, of Postal Headquarters, wrote to the artist Edward Ripley confirming verbal instructions about submitting designs for a cricket series to be issued in May the following year. Ripley was advised of the fees, '£150 for each completed design with a maximum of £450 (3 designs) ... For each successful design selected for use an additional £150'. Beaumont added that all the designs submitted and their copyright would become 'the absolute property of the Post Office', as was normal practice at the time.

On 4 May the SAC viewed artwork by Ripley. In his research Ripley had obtained photographic prints from Lords, which he used for details and to ascertain how the pavilion looked nearly 100 years before. It agreed that the artist should be asked to modify his designs to include cricket equipment and to show the game being played. It was also suggested that a different colour treatment should be considered. Ripley forwarded fresh designs at the end of the month and included an alternative 'with action' for the group set, and an alternative for the single figure set. The submitted designs were: four stamp size designs (groups) and four stamp size designs (individuals) all on envelopes, mounted on boards. The modified designs were shown to the Committee on 27 July: it stressed that it 'would like to see more action pictures, such as bowlers, wicket keepers, fielders, in addition to a batsman'. It was agreed that there should be a review of the research material and that modified designs should be produced along the lines discussed.

ANNOUNCEMENT CREATES CONTROVERSY

The stamp programme for 1973 was announced by the Post Office on 17 July: three stamps would be issued in May to mark the centenary of the start of the county cricket championship. The announcement immediately met with criticism. An article appeared in the 'Evening News' (London) on 29 July written by E M Wellings under the headline 'Frankly this cricket idea should be stamped on'. Wellings opined that if the stamps were issued it would be 'an issue of extremely doubtful validity celebrating a nebulous event ... No actual date exists for the start of a county championship for no ruling body at any time decided that there should be such a competition'. He suggested that if the Post Office wished to produce a cricket centenary issue it should 'wait for the 100th year of Test cricket, which has a definitely recognised starting date'. The first Test between England and Australia was played in the Australian season of 1876-77. The first Test in England followed in 1880 when W G Grace made 152 runs for the victorious England side and W L Murdoch made 153 for Australia. Wellings concluded that 'such characters would make the designing of stamps much easier and more satisfying than for something abstract like a county championship. Moreover, such an issue would have some meaning and be free from controversy.'

On 11 August E G White, Director of Marketing, wrote to the Chairman. In view of the controversy generated by the announcement, the Chairman had requested White provide him with the background to the choice of subject. White stated that they had been aware that the date when the County Cricket Championship began was not universally agreed and that 'characteristically of so British a game, the Championship evolved gradually rather than burst forth suddenly in fully developed form'. This had led to several dates that might be argued to have been the start of the Championship:

1864 - the earliest known record of a league table

1873 - the date chosen by the Post Office

1885 - a revised system of scoring for the Championship was introduced
1887 - the MCC issued a ruling for the first time on the result of the championship
1890 - the scoring was again revised
1894 - the MCC was asked by the counties to decide the Championship
1895 - the competition was enlarged to include 14 of the present 17 first class counties.

So 1873 was thought to be by far the most appropriate date for commemoration, although the MCC itself acknowledged that the subject was not free from argument. It was in that year that certain resolutions were finalised which lay down that no player should play for more than one county in a season, a practice that had previously been common. The MCC was charged with deciding doubtful residential qualifications. The Championship had become truly the 'County Championship', as although championship tables were compiled between 1864 and 1872, the teams were not all county teams as defined by the 1873 resolutions.

W G GRACE TO BE FEATURED

Ripley carried out alterations to the background of one set and updated the set based on contemporary engravings: these were viewed by the Committee on 7 September. Stuart Rose, Post Office Design Advisor, explained that there was little illustrative material dating from around 1873, but they had been fortunate to discover a set of drawings of W G Grace, who had been particularly involved in the period the stamps were to commemorate. Photographic reductions of three of the drawings were shown. Following discussion by the Committee it was agreed that the W G Grace set should be accepted, but that some of the other drawings in the series should be looked at to consider an alternative to the last design submitted. It was agreed that the inscription should read 'County Cricket 1873-1973' and that there was a need to check on the copyright of the drawings.

FIRST ESSAYS PRODUCED

On 18 October Harrison and Sons sent the first essays to Postal Headquarters, using values 3p, 4p, 7½p, 10p, 8½p and 9p.

These essays were seen by the SAC at its meeting the following day. The Committee approved the essays without amendment and agreed that work should proceed.

Three essays, 3p brown, 7½p green and 9p blue, were examined by A D Walker and his staff at the London Materials Section (LMS) on 20 October. The essays were tested for their 'suitability of the designs for coding with facing phosphor'. The tests showed that all three

designs were acceptable for use either with two vertical phosphor bars 5/8 inches width, or with all-over phosphor.

At the SAC meeting on 30 November, the Committee was told that it had been necessary to revise the layouts to cater for any change in tariff. Stuart Rose explained that the caption had been changed from a horizontal to a vertical position in order to 'remove some of the clutter from around the feet'. The Committee was not happy with the lettering in the new position and recommended that it revert to horizontal. It was also recommended that the Queen's head should be essayed in gold as well as in brown, the same colour as the caption.

On 1 December Beaumont wrote to Harrison and Sons, the stamp printers, enclosing a mock up by Stuart Rose of the amendments required. Beaumont asked that new essays be produced as soon as was possible as they were falling behind the agreed schedule on this issue. Harrisons sent essays to PHQ on 28 December, received on 4 January 1973; these were with values 3½p, 7½p and 9p and in each case with the Queen's head in gold or brown.

The shortage of time was becoming a problem, and in an effort to speed up the process, the essays were circulated to Committee members before the next meeting. On 5 and 8 January the seven members who were available were asked their opinions on the two sets of essays. They all agreed in preferring the set with the Queen's head in gold. Several members pointed out that on the 3½p design the Queen's head was difficult to distinguish from the background. It was suggested that the background should be made darker on the 3½p value to overcome the lack of contrast between the background and the Queen's head.

On 8 January Harrisons was asked to provide the Post Office with essays of the 3p (previously 3½p) stamp in slightly darker shades of background. Harrisons sent essays the next day, with the 3p with either a light or dark brown background, and the 9p with a dark blue background.

ROYAL APPROVAL GIVEN

On 18 January the SAC was told that essays had been submitted to the Queen for approval. No details are held in the production files but approval was evidently given. Beaumont wrote to Supplies Department on 15 February stating that the Queen had approved the essays and enclosed one essay of each value, the 3p having a dark background. He also wrote to Harrisons that day and likewise enclosed an essay for each value, 3p, 7½p and 9p, but the 3p having a light background. There is no explanation as to why the dark 3p was sent to Supplies Department and a light 3p to Harrisons.

ALL-OVER PHOSPHOR

A Post Office memorandum, dated 30 March 1973, advises that sheets of all three values had been received from the printers two days earlier. The sheets all had wide phosphor bars, as instructed by LMS. The effect of the wide bars on the designs, line drawing in black on plain pastel backgrounds, was said to be unacceptable as the background colours had been greatly altered. The printer was therefore instructed to produce the stamps with all over phosphor 'thus preserving the clarity of designs we require'. There had been 10,000 sheets of the 7½p value with phosphor bars already printed which were destroyed.

On 13 April all Regional Directors and Chairmen of Postal Boards were informed by Postal Headquarters that because of technical problems the printer would not be able to meet the requirements of post offices. Requisitions placed by all offices, except those within London Postal Region (Inner) for the 3p value were to be cut by 50 per cent, for the 7½p value by 20 per cent, but met in full for the 9p. It was hoped that the balance would be made up prior to the actual day of issue. Although not identified, the 'technical problems' might refer to the change from phosphor bands to all-over phosphor.

THE STAMPS ARE ISSUED

The three stamps were issued on 16 May 1973. They were designed by Edward M Ripley, senior lecturer at Berkshire College of Art, Reading and represented his first Post Office stamp commission. Each stamp showed a drawing of W G Grace taken from a series of 100 sketches of him, 'A Century Of Grace', drawn by Harry Furniss and published by Arrowsmith in the book 'How's That!'. The stamps were printed in photogravure and issued in sheets of 100. They are vertical, slightly larger than double definitive size with all-over phosphor.

QUANTITIES SOLD AND COLOURS USED

The quantities sold were:

3p - 45,861,200 (ochre, black and gold)

7½p - 6,657,900 (green, black and gold)

9p - 5,289,600 (blue, black and gold).

The stamps were on sale at post offices for around one month and thereafter available only from the Philatelic Bureau and Philatelic Sales Counters until they were withdrawn from sale on 15 May 1974.

Presentation packs containing one each of the mint stamps were also available from the day of issue, with 97,870 packs sold. In addition a souvenir pack, which contained a 24-page illustrated booklet giving a history of County Cricket by John Arlott together with a set of the mint stamps, was available, of which 28,576 were sold.

FIRST DAY COVERS

An official first day envelope, designed by Philip Sharland, was available from the Philatelic Bureau and all Head Post Offices. The liner card featured a brief outline of the origins of county cricket written by John Arlott, the television and radio cricket commentator. The Philatelic Bureau also provided covers bearing all three stamps cancelled with a choice of two pictorial handstamp, one of which featured a bowler in action and the inscription 'Philatelic Bureau, Edinburgh', the other showing a batsman at the wicket with the inscription 'Lord's, London NW'. This second cancellation was also used on covers posted in a special box at Lord's. Covers bearing the stamps posted in philatelic posting boxes received the standard first day of issue cancellation.

3p STAMP ON NEW PICTURE POSTCARD

A postcard showing the design of the 3p stamp was produced by the Post Office and went on sale in the middle of July. Issued in the height of the cricket season, the card was on sale at main post offices near the better-known cricket grounds. It was also available in post offices at other tourist centres and some holiday resorts.

The card, known as a PHQ card, was slightly larger than the maximum allowed at the time by overseas postal administrations to qualify for prepayment at the post card rate. It was therefore necessary to apply postage at the full letter rate for overseas posting. Subsequently the size of PHQ cards was reduced. PHQ cards soon proved to be popular with the general public and collectors alike. Although initially the cards did not appear with every issue of special stamps, after several years the policy changed and for each special stamp issue a set of matching PHQ cards was produced. Many collectors affix the respective stamps to the cards that are then cancelled on the first day of issue. When stamps are affixed to the picture side such cards are sometimes referred to as 'maximum cards'.

A Roberts recalls in the book 'Collect Post Office Cards', that 'There was a story in 1973 that the man who invented the Pictorial Post Card, PHQ, died before his idea could come into general use. Nobody in the Post Office seemed to understand why they had been issued. In fact, I was told in 1973 that they were not issued for stamp collectors! When I asked what they were actually issued for there seemed to be some doubt as to what the reply should

be. Because of this uncertainty the Cricket Card was never made available for the First Day of Issue of the cricket stamps.'

W G GRACE

Dr William Gilbert Grace was a remarkably gifted athlete who concentrated his powers on cricket, and is described on the gates erected to his memory at Lord's as 'The Great Cricketer'. He made his first major impression on English cricket in 1864 when he was only fifteen and within a year was considered a batsman of immense talent. At this time there was no active Gloucestershire club and he played most of his early first-class cricket in the frequent Gentlemen v Players, MCC, England. When the county club was re-formed in 1871 Grace took the captaincy and with his brothers made Gloucestershire a team of considerable power. WG's involvement with county cricket helped the game's early acceptance. He was a favourite with the supporters and huge crowds would attend the matches wherever he went. Such was his popularity that a notice at the gate of a 19th century ground read: Admission 6d. If W G Grace plays, Admission 1s.

John Arlott wrote, referring to Grace, 'there could be no more appropriate figure than his on these stamps'.

COUNTY CRICKET

Cricket evolved over some time, and although no exact date can be given for the start of county cricket, it was 1873 that resolutions were passed relating to the players' residential qualifications. The ruling had been decided by a committee in which each of the first-class cricketing counties was represented either by a delegate (Gloucestershire's being Grace) or by giving the views in writing. This important development in county cricket and the county championship ruled that a cricketer might play for only one county in any one season - whether the county of his birth, his family home or his residence for two years. This gave official shape to the game that was to supersede the 'grand matches' that had tended to overshadow county cricket.

John Arlott wrote for the first day envelope liner notes that:

'County cricket is uniquely an English activity, with one important branch in Wales ... In its present form it is played, in four different competitions, on every week from late April until early September. It is confined to the seventeen so-called first-class counties - Derbyshire, Essex, Glamorgan, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Kent, Lancashire, Leicestershire, Middlesex, Northants, Nottinghamshire, Somerset, Surrey, Sussex, Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Yorkshire.'

Local Government Acts have changed the shapes of most English counties. This has not affected county cricket, for at Lord's in 1888 the representatives of the counties carried unanimously the following resolution 'For purposes of county cricket, county boundaries are not affected by the Local Government Act, 1888'. It is suggested that this resolution 'protects the cricketing counties, not as anachronisms but as traditionally indivisible areas of loyalty'.

Andy Pendlebury
July 1995

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