

British Trees

Date of issue: 28 FEBRUARY 1973



The subjects recommended for the 1973 stamp programme by the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) on 20 October 1971 included a 'Tourist' stamp. This proposal arose from an idea being developed at that time in the Marketing Department of the Post Office for a new series to be known tentatively as Souvenir Post. When the SAC met on 15 February 1972, Mr Elliott, representing the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, indicated that the Ministry might oppose the issue of a tourist stamp, although he did not apparently specify why.

At the SAC meeting on 23 March 1972 the Chairman of the Committee, E G White, Director of Postal Marketing, advised of an approach from the Department of the Environment to the Managing Director (Posts), Brigadier Holmes, requesting that consideration be given to a stamp in 1973 to mark 'Tree Planting Year'. The request stressed the 'increasing importance which needs to be given to environmental and conservation issues'. As it had been the intention of the Post Office to produce a special 'British Trees' stamp as part of a new marketing venture, it agreed to the suggestion. The idea was that this stamp, to be known as a 'Tourist' stamp, would be used with suitably designed envelopes illustrating popular castles, stately homes, etc. It was intended that visitors would be able to buy the stamp and envelope to post in a special box, ensuring it was handstamped as a personal record of a visit to a place of particular interest. Although this would be the prime purpose of the stamp it would also be sold through normal philatelic outlets. As the stamp was to be common to the whole country, it was to bear a design epitomising the attraction of Britain as a tourist centre. Interest was to be maintained in both the tourist and philatelic markets by changing the design of the stamp each year. The scheme was by no means finalised and the Ministry had not been consulted as yet, but it was estimated that the net annual profit would be in the region of £300,000.

The Post Office proposed a face value of 15p but the Committee ‘felt there was a case for the stamp to be sold in a lower value (such as 9p) related to a specific postal service rate’. The Committee agreed that the first ‘British Trees’ stamp in 1973 ‘should feature the Oak and that consideration should be given to the use of photographic treatment in the design work’.

At the meeting on 4 May 1972 the Chairman confirmed that a high value stamp would be produced in Tree Planting Year and that the aim was for the issue date to coincide with the Stampex exhibition.

ARTWORK EXAMINED

The production files lack detail at this stage; however, the SAC minutes state that on 27 July the Committee examined artwork ‘previously seen together with fresh designs by Gentleman’. The artwork submitted by David Gentleman, a freelance illustrator and designer of many British stamps since 1962, included stamp-size watercolours of various native trees as they appear at different seasons. He had produced these in 1965 as part of an album of experimental designs for the Postmaster General, Anthony Wedgwood Benn. The fresh designs by Gentleman depicted a summer and winter oak. Other artwork submitted for this issue was by Sidney Badmin, Stewart Irvin and Robert Micklewright, all of Saxon Arts Ltd. It is unknown when these artists were invited, nor is the date when the designs were submitted known as the production files hold no details of these designs, apart from a record of payment to Saxon Artists for unaccepted artwork. The albums held at the British Postal Museum & Archive contain five designs by Badmin, four by Micklewright and one by Irvin that appear to make up two sets.

The Department of the Environment had further requested that more than one tree be depicted and that the Tree Planting Year symbol be incorporated in the design. When the Committee then examined the symbol it unanimously agreed it was unacceptable. It was further agreed by the Committee that ‘Gentleman should be asked to progress his design of an Oak Tree in leaf’.

Gentleman carried out further work on his design and, on submitting his artwork for essaying, provided notes making suggestions on how the colours should be printed. He stated that the stamp was eventually to comprise about six colours, and enclosed the first three separations. Gentleman was ‘most anxious to exploit the possibilities for great detail in this design’ and suggested that if it were possible to print the separations in several differing weights of colour it would be easier to select the best version. The colours to be used were:

mid green - the main working for the foliage (a darker green for additional detail in the darker areas was to be added as necessary after seeing the essays);
brown - main working for trunk and branches; two alternative colour swatches were supplied (a darker brown or black for additional detail was to be added later, including the denominations, and so on);
pale yellow-green - a tint with vignetted edges all round, in order to keep some colour even in the lightest areas of foliage. Essays were requested with and without this working.

WHY A 9p VALUE?

On 2 August Lord Sandford, Under Secretary of State Department of the Environment, wrote to the Chairman of the Post Office, Lord Ryland, asking if further consideration could be given to issuing the tree stamp in a value in everyday use and whether the words 'Tree Planting Year 1973' could appear.

The Chairman replied that the 9p value had now been chosen to enable American tourists to use the stamp in sending letters home. A 3p value was considered impractical as, apart from the difficulty of accommodating the large print run that would be required, the likely profit from the tourist scheme would be jeopardised.

As for the inscription on the stamp, the Post Office had considered including 'Tree Planting Year 1973' but was advised against it by the SAC and the designer of the stamp because 'being a large group of words and in addition to the name of the tree which must be included, it would detract from the design'.

Although Lord Sandford was disappointed, he understood and accepted the reasons.

DECIDING THE DATE OF ISSUE

During early August the Post Office held a meeting with the organisers of the 1973 Stampex exhibition. At this meeting 'several cogent arguments emerged for issuing the Tree stamp during the week of the exhibition'. These were:

the venue of Stampex, the Royal Horticultural Hall, was considered 'a particularly appropriate setting for the launch of this issue';

1973 was the 20th anniversary of Stampex and the organisers hoped that a member of the Royal Family would agree to open the exhibition. It was felt that this would 'focus attention on the exhibition and any stamp associated with it'.

It was suggested that if the date of issue was confirmed by the beginning of September the organisers could include a reference to it in the exhibition prospectus. The prospectus was sent to all potential exhibitors and stand-holders and would provide further publicity for the issue. In these circumstances it was considered that agreement be obtained from the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications and the staff associations to issue the stamp on Wednesday, 28 February 1973. The Minister contacted the Department of Environment (DoE) and was told that Lord Sandford would be delighted to open Stampex on 28 February to mark the day of issue of the Tree stamp.

FIRST ESSAYS PRODUCED

On 19 December 1972 the printers, Harrison and Sons Ltd, supplied the Post Office with essays inscribed either OAK/QUERCUS ROBUR or ENGLISH OAK QUERCUS ROBUR.

On 21 December, following discussions concerning the essays between Gentleman and Stuart Rose, Post Office Design Advisor, D Beaumont, of Postal Headquarters, wrote to Harrisons advising them of amendments to be made:

the legend 'Oak/quercus robur' to read 'Oak. Quercus rebur';

the grass behind 'rebur' to be cropped to show a white background for the lettering;

the grass at right of trunk to be extended;

the value 9p to be re-aligned;

the 'O' of 'Oak' to be moved slightly right to line-up with the bottom left edge of lower branch.

Regarding the amendments, the company was instructed to consult Gentleman, who wished to advise the printers on the addition of a tonal brown shade to the tree as well.

Harrisons supplied the Post Office with further essays, in blocks of four, on 15 January.

PAYMENT TO ARTISTS

On 11 October a payment of £500 was made to Saxon Artists Ltd for the unsuccessful designs submitted by Badmin, Irvin and Micklewright. This payment represented £250 for each set of designs submitted. On 21 January Gentleman was paid £300 that included £150 for one commissioned design and £150 for one accepted design.

PRESS PREVIEW AND PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES

The press preview was timed for 16 January, approximately six weeks ahead of the date of issue, allowing time for inclusion in monthly stamp journals including those published abroad. As Philip Paul, Deputy Director of Public Relations, acknowledged, this gave the Post Office 'the usual problem in terms of getting a second bite at the cherry by way of reminder editorial coverage when the stamps go on sale to the public'.

This issue coincided with Tree Planting Year 1973, 'a project sponsored by the Department of the Environment to encourage the planting of trees and to increase public appreciation of them'. The Chairman of the Post Office, Sir William Ryland, therefore agreed to launch sales by planting a young oak tree in Postman's Park, near the Postal Headquarters building, on the day of issue. Regional Directors were encouraged to carry out similar plantings in an effort to create a nationwide link-up, and trees were planted in each of Britain's postal regions with plaques inscribed to mark the occasion; displays featuring the stamp were arranged at the planting sites. Philip Paul had written to Colin Webb, Publicity Manager, on 10 January stating that the aim of the occasion was to draw attention to the stamp and not merely to provide gratuitous support of the 'Plant a Tree in '73' campaign. Paul also stressed to the Chairmen of the Postal Boards and Postal Regional Directors that whilst the idea of each Head Postmaster carrying out a planting would gain the interest of the media, albeit localised, and had the approval of the Chairman, there was a need for the Post Office to 'safeguard ourselves against possible observations by our most immovably biased critics, that the Post Office has lost sight of the wood because of its trees'.

The stamp printers, Harrison and Sons, entered into the spirit of the occasion and donated a tree planted on 27 February in Hughenden Park, High Wycombe, opposite the factory entrance.

ROYAL APPROVAL SOUGHT

On 29 December Sir John Eden, Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, wrote to the Private Secretary to the Queen, asking that the design of a stamp proposed for issue on 28 February be submitted for approval. An essay was enclosed; it was stated that slight tonal alterations to the tree and background were still to be made. On 3 January a reply stated that the Queen was glad to approve the design.

THE STAMP IS ISSUED

The stamps were printed in photogravure and issued in sheets of 100, horizontal and slightly larger than double definitive size with two phosphor bands. The design depicted an oak tree with foliage in varying shades of green, with black on the trunk, against a white background.

The original marketing idea of making this a 'Tourist' stamp, that would be available all year at popular locations, was never adopted. The stamps were available in the same manner as other issues, namely at all post offices for around two months, in this case until the close of business on 2 May, and then available only from the Philatelic Bureau until 17 February 1974: there were 5,875,100 sold.

Although the stamp was issued for Tree Planting Year, it was intended to be part of a thematic series on British trees to be continued over the following years. In the event only one more stamp followed, depicting a Horse Chestnut issued on 27 February 1974.

FIRST DAY COVERS

A special first day envelope was available depicting a branch from an oak tree bearing leaves and acorns. The envelope was designed by Peter Hatch, of Peter Hatch Partnership. Hatch was paid £20 for rough sketches and a further £43 for the finished design. Covers were available from the Philatelic Bureau bearing the stamp postmarked 'Philatelic Bureau, Edinburgh' and incorporated the legend 'Plant a Tree in 73'. Special philatelic boxes were provided in 185 post offices for collectors who wished to post their own covers. Items posted in these boxes were given the standard first day of issue cancellation. Presentation packs, also designed by Hatch and costing 14p each, containing a mint stamp were available: there were 96,722 sold. The issue was timed to coincide with the opening of Stampex, and the Post Office produced a commemorative cover only available at the exhibition. A pictorial first day of issue handstamp was sponsored by Stampex, applied to covers bearing the new stamp and posted at the exhibition.

Andy Pendlebury
April 1995

REFERENCES

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- MD/CO/3192
- MKD/BS/12
- MKD/CJ/189
- POST 54 SAC Minutes 1970 - 1972

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- PE 13, issued 16 January 1973
- MM 37, issued 28 February 1973.