

SPECIAL STAMP

200th Anniversary of Public Fire Services

Date of issue: 24 APRIL 1974



In the early 1960s the GPO contacted the Home Office for suggestions of subjects that might be commemorated on stamps, a desultory correspondence ensuing over the next few years with little result. In July 1971, however, John Rawles, Principal Information Officer at the Home Office, informally approached the Post Office Design Director, Stuart Rose, to seek his views on an issue to celebrate the bicentenary of the public fire service in 1974. Rawles had formerly worked for PRD, the Public Relations Department of the Post Office. Rose advised him to make a formal suggestion to the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) at a later date; meanwhile, however, he passed the idea to Brian Sproat of the Operations and Overseas Department, commenting 'this would make a good set and it would certainly have my backing'.

After further contacts between Rawles and Rose in mid-1972, the 200th anniversary of the fire service was included in a preliminary list of suggestions for the 1974 stamp programme, discussed by the SAC on 15 June 1972. These discussions continued at the next meeting on 7 September without reaching a conclusion. On 12 September regional directors were canvassed for their reactions to suggested topics and own proposals; it had been planned to do this as early as May, the delay being apparently due to some confusion following the handover of chairmanship of the SAC to E G White, the Director of Marketing, at the start of the year. On 2 October Miss D J Fothergill, the Director of the London Postal Region, replied to White advocating the fire service anniversary as part of the 1974 programme.

Meanwhile Rawles had written to D W Barker of Postal Marketing at the end of September that the passing of the Fire Prevention (Metropolis) Act on 14 June 1774 had been 'an outstanding landmark in the history of fire prevention in this country', regarded as a model of its kind and laying down detailed, practical and comprehensive regulations which had endured for some 70 years and were still recognisable in much current legislation. He added 'there seems to be an almost embarrassing choice of subject for a designer'; there were 'the very colourful engravings of notorious fires of the late 18th and early 19th centuries',

while an equally possible line of approach was the array of fire appliances ranging from the handpumps contemporary with the Act to the hydraulic lifts of the present day. He suggested that the issue would link usefully with plans for the Post Office to distribute fire prevention booklets to households throughout the UK by the end of 1973. Barker replied on 3 October assuring Rawles that the fire service anniversary was under consideration, and suggesting further discussion on ways in which the Home Office and Post Office might usefully co-operate on stamp and philatelic matters (there appear to have been subsequent assurances of promotional support from the Home Office, and indications that fire brigades would collaborate in arranging open days to coincide with the day of issue).

FIRE SERVICE SUGGESTION SHORTLISTED

A provisional shortlist of subjects for the 1974 programme was drawn up on 17 October for that month's SAC meeting; this included the fire service anniversary and suggested the history of fire engines, pictorial fire scenes, and firemen's uniforms as possible treatments. At the meeting on 19 October the subjects were narrowed down to ten, the fire service anniversary being included with the comment 'this subject was ideal for historical treatment, up to the present day'. In a minute prepared for the SAC on 6 November, Barker proposed subjects in two categories, those 'thought to be essential', and those 'which are not thought essential but are desirable'. He placed the fire service anniversary in the second category, with the remark 'that the best approach would be to show the development of fire fighting equipment and engines'.

At the SAC meeting on 30 November, the Chairman, E G White, said that the fire service anniversary was one of the subjects the Post Office was under some compulsion to include, and would be attractive to both collectors and the general public; the only other subjects for which there was a similar obligation being Christmas, the opening of the National Theatre, and the anniversary of the Universal Postal Union. This was accepted by the meeting; by the time of the next SAC meeting, however, the proposed National Theatre issue had already been set aside as the opening was not now expected before 1975. On 12 January 1973 White sent a minute to A Currall, the recently appointed MDP (Managing Director, Posts), detailing final proposals for the fire service anniversary ('a popular and attractive subject ... [with] a good marketing potential') and six other issues in 1974. Currall, who had been taking a close interest in the 1974 stamp programme, replied next day expressing the feeling that there should be a return to the 'self-imposed ration' of six issues a year that the Post Office normally sought to maintain, but which it was already planned to exceed in the year now beginning (eight issues had been agreed for 1973 at this point, and the eventual total was to be nine). As a result White asked the SAC meeting on 18 January to drop a proposal for an issue on Heraldry and this was agreed.

Subsequent disagreement over elements of the 1974 programme, other than the fire service set, delayed its finalisation by the SAC until 14 June; approval from the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications was received on 4 July and the first details were released to the press a week later. The issue date of 24 April was fixed at this stage; the idea of a 14 June issue to match the actual date on which the Fire Prevention Act was passed in 1774 seems to have been only briefly entertained. The necessity of issuing Christmas stamps in November meant that the Churchill issue was pushed into October, although the centenary was properly the following month; similarly the UPU issue was pushed out of its proper month of October into June. The fire service issue was accordingly pushed out of June into April and scheduled first for 17 April and then for 24 April.

Meanwhile the design process had been set in motion; as early as 16 January 1973 Don Beaumont, of the Stamps Division of Postal Marketing, had written to the artist David Gentleman, confirming verbal instructions from the Design Director, Stuart Rose, to 'look into' the fire service issue. Gentleman was not formally commissioned until sometime between the SAC meetings of 28 March and 9 May, although the terms were as specified in January, namely £150 for each design submitted up to a maximum of four, plus £150 for each design actually used. These sums excluded 10 per cent VAT.

THE STAMP DESIGN PROCESS

Gentleman later outlined the gestation of his designs both in a lecture on 'The design and production of postage stamps', given to the Royal Society of Arts in February 1974, and in an article for the 'British Philatelic Bulletin' in May. His brief from the Post Office asked only for four designs commemorating the bicentenary of the Act and offered no guidelines. Gentleman described how he began by gathering together 'photographs, booklets, postcards and books', including 'old Victorian engineering manuals from the London Library'; later he took a large number of photographs at the Science Museum and a fire-fighters' training school, and also visited the Dennis works at Guildford where the fire-engines in modern use were made. He remarked that, '35mm photography is an excellent way to gather material for a design task, whether a stamp or a mural: one can accumulate it quickly, and sort it out and discard the useless elements at leisure with a cool and uncommitted eye, whereas if one has spent a long time sketching a possible subject one is much more reluctant to drop it when it begins to seem inappropriate'.

Having accumulated 'a bewildering mass of material', Gentleman explained, 'one begins to prune, to discard, and to grope towards a theme which can somehow extend over four stamps, each complete on its own. At the same time one begins thinking of ways in which these ideas might be expressed. Some would need a symbolic or diagrammatic approach, some could be decorative or even comic, others still could be soberly realistic. In that case,

the graphic techniques extend still farther - from photographs, images in acute perspective or in plain elevation, naturalistic or simplified, seen in silhouette or reduced to the calm formulae of an engineering drawing.'

Gentleman made it clear that 'of course, it was fire engines that leapt to mind straight away'; he felt bound, however, to consider possible alternatives. In this instance he found that there was no need to 'rack his brains' for these to spring to mind: 'Dramatic eighteenth century prints of famous blazes; heroic rescues from this inferno; even the basic idea of a single flame ... the very rich graphic material associated with fire insurance ... the uniforms or liveries, of the firemen, distinguished by their various colours and badges ... the familiar brass helmet of the fireman of one's imagination.'

Even having settled on fire engines for his theme as being 'historic, interesting, and recognisable', Gentleman commented that this still left the problem of which machines to choose and how to present them: whether 'complete with drivers in full historic rig', in a landscape or in isolation, or focussing on some detail of the engine, 'like the flashing lights or the fire bell and siren'. He finally opted to show four 'historically significant' engines that were 'the right shape ... to fill the whole stamp, and to do so in simple elevation', that is directly side-on, rather than in perspective. He attached great importance to this last point, and argued that stamps could not convey spatial depth and perspective since 'the illusion fades at this small scale'; perspective angles also clashed with the right angles of the stamp, leaving awkwardly shaped areas around the edges of the design; finally, showing a vehicle in perspective created unnecessary technical problems and filled the design with superfluous content because four wheels had to be shown instead of two, 40 wheel-spokes instead of 20, and so on.

With regard to the 'right shape' of the engines, Gentleman's meaning was that this eliminated out those subjects too long or too short for the standard 30mm by 41mm horizontal frame of special stamps; a horizontal frame was dictated by the nature of most potential subjects, and so the minority of historic fire engines with proportions tending more to the vertical were eliminated so that the same frame could be used throughout the set. A last point made by Gentleman explained his use of a solid white background: To show as much detail as I could, I had to make the engines as big as possible, and this meant using a white background with only the perforation to frame it ... The interesting outlines and the real colours of the engines themselves ... look best against white.'

As well as Gentleman's own article in the 'British Philatelic Bulletin' in May 1974, features also appeared in 'Stamp Magazine' and 'Stamp Monthly'; all three articles were based more or less on the artist's Royal Society lecture, and all three were accompanied by specimens of Gentleman's research material and working sketches.

THE FIRE ENGINES

All four machines finally chosen as subjects by Gentleman were in the Science Museum collection; in order of date these were as follows:

Fire engine 1766 - this was a hand-operated two-pump fire engine made by Samuel Phillips and is described in an inscription as presented by 'Benn. Way, Esqr., to the Parish of Denham, Bucks, 1766'. It was designed to be either dragged or carried. Gentleman included this because of its similarity to a machine owned by Warwick Castle, whose more 'upright proportions would have looked out of place in the set'. For the final version Gentleman discarded strict accuracy by turning the 'goose neck' nozzle to face left.

First steam fire engine 1830 - invented by John Braithwaite, partner in the firm of Braithwaite & Ericsson. The first production model was regarded with intense suspicion in conservative fire-fighting circles but acquitted itself well at several London fires in 1830. It consisted of a boiler and two direct-acting steam pumps with a firebox fed air by mechanical bellows and was wheel-mounted for horse traction. It could pump 150 gallons a minute to a height of 90 feet.

'Sutherland' fire engine 1863 - built by Merryweather & Sons Ltd of Greenwich. It won first prize in the steam-operated pump section at the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1863 and could throw a powerful jet of water to 160 feet in height. The model depicted was bought by the Admiralty and used in Devonport dockyard until 1905, when it was returned to the Merryweather works. In 1924 it was finally retired to the Science Museum, having fought its last fire in 1918. In 1974 this and the 1830 model were believed to be the oldest steam pumps existing.

First motor fire engine 1904 - delivered by Merryweather to the Finchley fire brigade, it was the first self-propelled vehicle to be used by a public brigade (a prototype had been successful in private use on the Rothschild estate in France). The same 30 horsepower petrol engine powered both the vehicle and a pump with a capacity of 200 to 250 gallons per minute. The model is depicted with a 50 foot telescopic escape ladder. The Finchley engine retired from fire-fighting in 1928 and was sold as a pump to a gravel pit, whence the Science Museum retrieved it from obscurity in 1930.

DESIGNS SEEN BY SAC

Gentleman's four designs depicting the historic fire engines of 1766 (3½p), 1830 (6p), 1863 (8p) and 1904 (10p) were seen at the SAC meeting of 27 September 1973. It was agreed that

these made a good set; the artist had ordered them chronologically, so that the lowest value depicted the oldest machine, and the highest the most recent. The Chairman announced his intention to reverse this so that the 1904 engine would be on the lowest value, his reason being that it was most easily recognisable as a fire engine, 'and therefore the one which has the widest circulation among children and the like'. The meeting agreed that the colours of the 8p and 10p stamps were too similar and should be more differentiated, and that other parts of the designs should be amended where they seemed to press the Queen's head too closely. Several members suggested that a contemporary engine such as the Chubb appliance at London Airport should be included. Rose explained that it had proved that the more modern the fire engines considered, the less they looked like the expected image of a fire engine; however, it was agreed to pursue this further.

On 24 October essays were supplied by the stamp printers Harrison & Sons Ltd of 6p Sutherland fire engine 1863 and 8p first steam fire engine 1830.

The SAC saw these the following day, plus finished artwork for the two other designs and three drawings of modern fire appliances following the comments at the previous meeting. It was decided that modern fire engines should not be included 'for design reasons'; Gentleman's choice of machines was agreed and a full set of essays was promised for the next meeting. On 26 October a letter was sent to R F York of Harrisons, confirming the points that had arisen at the meeting and in York's earlier discussions with Stuart Rose:

1. The wheels of an engine will be adjusted where they do not appear to be touching the ground.
2. A strut missing from the ladder on the 3½p stamp will be put in.
3. The angle of the Queen's head will be adjusted.
4. Reverse the chronological order of the stamps, making the newest engine 3½p and then in descending date order.

Harrisons supplied sets of essays on 5 December of:

3½p first motor fire engine 1904;

6p Sutherland fire engine 1863;

8p first steam fire engine 1830

10p fire engine 1766.

The essays were shown to the SAC on 6 December. White pointed out that the 6p stamp should now be 5½p, and it was agreed that each caption should begin with a capital letter. Sir Paul Reilly, Director of the Design Council, was disappointed that the Chubb fire engine was not to be included, as it was an outstanding piece of design and unequalled for its purpose. Mrs Gabrielle Pike, a lay member of the Committee, suggested that the Chubb might be shown on the first day cover. The following day D Beaumont of Marketing wrote to York with instructions that the first character of each caption was to be in capitals and the

value 6p should be amended to 5½p; York should also note that an alternative caption for this last design was being considered. In the meantime work could begin on preparing cylinders in all respects except for the captions. A further note to York from Stuart Rose dated 13 December confirmed a agreement with David Gentleman reached the previous day that the 'p' in the values should be lowered from the head to the foot of the numerals – 'that will avoid any modification being made to the drawing on the 3½p where the space for the value is a bit tight'.

FINAL ESSAYS SUPPLIED

Despite unspecified 'technical difficulties', essays were supplied by Harrisons on 29 January 1974 of:

- 3½p First motor fire engine 1904;
- 5½p Prize-winning fire engine 1863;
- 8p First steam fire engine 1830;
- 10p Fire engine 1766.

On 1 February essays were forwarded to the Minister of Posts & Telecommunications for submission to the Queen, and another set to the Chairman of the Post Office, Sir William Ryland. In the Queen's absence the essays were approved by her Council of State, notification of this being received on 14 February. Meanwhile on 6 February the MDP had authorised printing to begin on 8 February, on the basis that royal approval could be assumed; he commented that the designs were 'a colourful and worthy set'. Two 100-stamp sheets of each value were supplied by Harrisons on 11 March for a press conference the following day announcing full details of the issue, although a good deal was disclosed in David Gentleman's lecture to the Royal Society in February. On this occasion the Post Office seem to have been particularly pleased with results, the 'British Philatelic Bulletin' announcing in its April number that 'we confidently expect [this] to be one of the most popular issues of recent years', while Gentleman was complimentary towards Harrisons, the stamp printers, remarking in a letter of 22 May, 'I think that George York and his galley slaves did a very good job on this issue.'

ISSUE OF THE STAMPS

The stamps were issued on 24 April as scheduled in the following colours: (3½p) grey-black, orange-yellow, greenish yellow, dull rose, ochre and grey; (5½p) greenish yellow, deep rosy magenta, orange-yellow, light emerald, grey-black and grey; (8p) greenish yellow, light blue-green, light greenish blue, light chestnut, grey-black and grey; (10p) grey-black, pale reddish brown, light brown, orange-yellow and grey. The denominations were the

respective base rates for inland first class, European letters, and airmail letter to Zones B and C. The stamps were 30mm by 41mm printed on paper with 'all-over' phosphor coating. Most stamps bore the PVAD (polyvinyl alcohol with dextrin) gum, but an unknown number of 3½p were issued with PVA gum.

Sales figures by the time the set was withdrawn on 23 April 1975 were as follows: 47,526,900 of the 3½p, 7,393,600 of the 5½p, 6,737,600 of the 8p, 6,631,300 of the 10p. A presentation pack with text by Alan Martin Harvey was designed by John Sutherland-Hawes of Sutherland Hawes & Associates and produced by Moore & Matthes (Printers) Ltd. Versions with both English and German-language insert cards were supplied; 118,010 packs were sold in all. A PHQ card, reproducing the 3½p stamp, and a first day cover by John Sutherland-Hawes depicting a historic fire scene, were also produced.

SPECIAL HANDSTAMPS AND PUBLICITY

The special handstamp available from the Edinburgh Philatelic Bureau for the first day of issue depicted an 18th century fire-fighter - some official first day covers with the Bureau handstamp are known with the overprint 'Merryweather - the first name in firefighting' and others with 'Science Museum Souvenir - firefighting collection'. The Science Museum had a booklet on fire engines on sale in time for the fire service anniversary and release of the stamps, which illustrated three of the appliances represented in the set. Postcards featuring the 1830, 1863 and 1904 engines shown on the stamps were sold by the Museum for use as maximum cards. Three other special handstamps with special relevance were 'First Open Day Avon County Fire Brigade Bristol' at No. 2 Fire Station, Bristol, 'Inaugural Ceremony Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service' at Cambridge Fire Station, and 'Binns Philatelic & Fire Services Exhibition Sunderland'. Two unrelated special handstamps available on the day marked Lansing Bagnall's 25th anniversary at Basingstoke and 'MCC v Hampshire Champion County 1973' in London NW8. Of the standard 'first day of issue' handstamps, appropriate was 'London SE1' as the headquarters of the London fire brigade. The ordinary circular datestamp impressions for Hose (Melton Mowbray) and Burnt House Lane (Exeter) were also relevant, as was Tooley Street SE1 - Tooley Street had been the scene of a famous and disastrous fire on 22 June 1861. The details are that the 'Insurance Companies' brigade - more properly the London Fire Engine Establishment founded on 1 January 1833 - turned out in almost full strength to fight a warehouse blaze that had spread to the rest of the street; James Braidwood, the brigade's commander from its earliest years, was killed under a collapsing wall in the heart of the fire while leading from the front as was his custom; the insurance companies paid out over £2,000,000, and handed over their fire-fighting role to the new Metropolitan Fire Brigade on 1 January 1866.

A special publicity effort in connection with the stamps was undertaken in Northern Ireland, where the slogan postmark 'The Fire Brigade needs Men of Courage' was in use from 24 April to 5 June at Belfast, Coleraine, Portadown, Lurgan, Ballymena and Londonderry. In addition to this the Northern Ireland Fire Authority held open days on 24 April at all its stations in the province, at which postcards featuring a recent Belfast incident were for sale on behalf of the Fire Service National Benevolent Fund. These cards were serviced with an FDI cancellation plus just one of the special stamps per card. Apart from these activities, and those in Avon, Cambridge and elsewhere already described, the Home Office ordered 1,250 posters on 4 March advertising the stamp issue, for display by fire stations throughout the country.

Between the press announcement of the issue on 12 March and the actual issue of the stamps on 24 April, there was some newspaper criticism over the description of the machine on the 3½p stamp as 'the first motor fire engine'; both the 'Guardian' and 'Manchester Evening News' published claims that the Merryweather appliance shown, supplied to the Borough of Finchley on 23 November 1904, had been predated by a machine used in Eccles, Lancashire, three years earlier. More details came from Miss M Patry, the Borough Librarian of Eccles, citing a petrol-engined motor fire-tender made by a local firm, the Protector Lamp & Lighting Company, and supplied to the borough on 8 September 1901. On this occasion, however, the Post Office was sure of its ground and was able to point out that the Eccles machine, being a tender as opposed to an engine, was basically a carrier of men and apparatus rather than a piece of apparatus in itself - it had been used to transport firemen and their portable equipment including a manually operated water-pump to the scene of fires, but the Merryweather had been the first self-propelled vehicle used by a public brigade to incorporate its own pump driven by the same motor as the vehicle itself. There was, in fact, research by the Post Office that the Eccles machine had been predated by a month; the Royal Carrying Company of Liverpool had constructed and exhaustively road-tested a motor fire-tender on a Daimler chassis, in which they sought to interest the city's Watch Committee. These tests were carried out alongside the Liverpool brigade's horse-drawn equipment en route to actual fire alarms and had been completed in August 1901.

LATER PRESS COMMENT

Later criticism seems to have been confined to a complaint in the Glasgow 'Sunday Mail' on 5 May that the 150th anniversary of Edinburgh Fire Brigade, the first municipal brigade in the world, had been ignored; the writer chose to see this as a further rebuff to Scotland after the long delay in issuing a Burns commemorative and the refusal to issue a John Knox stamp the previous year. In the August 1974 issue of 'British Philatelic Bulletin', however, there was criticism from a specialist viewpoint by the architect and philatelist Gerald

Davies, in effect disparaging the whole issue by suggesting that Gentleman had passed up the chance to restrict himself to 'a few bold formalised shapes' such as the fireman's axe and helmet, the traditional alarm bell and the modern flashing light. He also argued that instead of using 'a multiplicity of colours', Gentleman 'could have imposed a restrictive discipline of colour by using a dominating one for each value (at one time a requirement of stamp design which has got lost on the road somewhere)'. Replying in the October number, Gentleman remarked, 'I share Mr Davies' regard for bold formalism, but not as the only possible solution to the problems of stamp design.'

David Gentleman had already been paid £660 (four designs at £150 plus 10 per cent) in October 1973, and received a similar sum for the completed designs once the final essays were approved in February 1974. The stamps were his third consecutive set for the Post Office, as he had also been responsible for the Christmas 1973 series and the British Trees stamp issued at the end of February. Gentleman was born on 11 March 1930 and educated at Hertford Grammar, St Alban's School of Art, and the RCA, of which he was made an Honorary Fellow in 1981. In a busy career as watercolourist, graphic designer, lithographer, wood engraver and illustrator of books (including many of his own), he successfully designed 100 stamps.

GILES ALLEN
23 June 1995

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