

Red Cross Centenary Congress

Date of issue: 15 AUGUST 1963



In 1959 the Earl of Woolton, Chairman of the British Red Cross Society, asked the Postmaster General (PMG), Ernest Marples, whether stamps could be issued to mark the centenary of the international conference held in Geneva on 26 to 29 October 1863, which ultimately led to the foundation of the Red Cross in August 1864. The standard reply was given, that other than for Royal and postal anniversaries, 'the Post Office do not issue stamps to mark past events'. Following the appointment of Reginald Bevins as PMG after the general election of October 1959, a policy review took place, which eventually concluded on 3 December 1960 that, 'if there were a current event marking a historical anniversary of outstanding importance ... we might well be more ready than we have been in the past to have special issues'. Hardly bold words, and there was certainly no immediate rush to implement a more liberal policy. By the end of 1961, however, attitudes were changing, largely thanks to the growing pressure on the GPO to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth.

RENEWED APPEAL

On 2 January 1962 Dame Anne Bryans DBE, Deputy Chairman of the British Red Cross, wrote to the Director General of the GPO, Sir Ronald German, whom she knew personally through her membership of the Independent Television Authority, of which the GPO was the appointing body, raising once more the possibility of an issue for the Red Cross in 1963. She received a cautiously favourable reply, so on 11 January visited GPO Headquarters to meet Sir Ronald and Brigadier K S Holmes, the Director of Postal Services, and during the discussion drew their attention to the fact that a large international gathering was planned in Geneva in September 1963 to celebrate the centenary.

In a subsequent recommendation to the Assistant PMG, Miss Mervyn Pike MP, Brigadier Holmes wrote on 30 January: 'Red Cross principles and their embodiment in the Geneva Convention ... are without question exceptionally important historically'. A stamp would therefore be justified; it would be even better if the issue could be associated with similar

events that might be taking place in this country. Equally there should be no clash with other stamp issues occasioned by events of even greater importance than the Red Cross anniversary.

RED CROSS PROPOSAL ACCEPTED

The APMG agreed, and Sir Ronald replied to Dame Anne that a Red Cross issue was conditionally accepted, subject to finalisation of the 1963 stamp programme and confirmation of any proposed Red Cross activities. Details of the latter were given by Dame Anne on 2 March: she thought the most significant part of the Geneva programme between 15 August and 15 September 1963 was the opening of the 20th International Conference on 2 September. She hoped that an event in the UK and attended by Royalty might be arranged for 8 May, the birth anniversary of Henri Dunant, founder of the Red Cross. This second possibility was not seen as practicable for the Post Office, as May 1963 almost certainly would see an issue for National Nature Week.

It was impossible to give Dame Anne a definite reply until the matter was approved by the PMG, so throughout the spring and summer of 1962 no further action was taken, despite promptings from the Foreign Office, the Department of Technical Cooperation, and the Secretary of State for the Colonies. Dame Anne wrote again to Sir Ronald on 22 August, and was reassured 'that the Red Cross stamp was a very likely candidate'. On 7 September the 1963 stamp programme was put to the APMG, with the Red Cross issue agreed on 10 September, but due to continuing discussions on the remainder of the programme, it was not possible to pass the information to Dame Anne until 3 October.

COLOUR REPRODUCTION DISCUSSED

Also on 7 September 1962 a meeting between Supplies Department representatives, R F York of the stamp printers Harrison & Sons Ltd, and T P Harvey and D H Beaumont of the Postal Services Department discussed a provisional timetable for the 1963 stamp programme. It was proposed that the Red Cross issue should be in four to five colours, be 3d (inland and Commonwealth surface mail), 1s 3d (airmail to Canada, India, etc) and 1s 6d (airmail to Australia, New Zealand, etc), and issued during August 1963. Also discussed was breaking with custom by avoiding the use of the colours of the definitive issue, where this might inconvenience the designers; it was thought that for the 3d the violet would cause problems in conjunction with the scarlet of the Red Cross symbol. On this point 'it was recognised that in the case of unified stamps colour was an important aid to recognition of value, but this did not seem so marked in the case of a double sized stamp on which a wide variety of shades of the basic colour was already permitted'.

H J Harvey of Supplies wrote to Hornsey of PSD on 28 September with reservations about Harrisons' ability to handle a programme involving eight different stamps each in four to five colours: 'Our experience is that Harrisons find considerable difficulty in producing cylinders to the hairline degree of accuracy required in multi-colour work.' In 1961, 'we came near to disaster because of cylinder troubles', and with the NPY issue of 1962, 'deliveries ... have been delayed well beyond the programme dates for the same reason'. Mr York of Harrisons was confident of the firm's capacity to cope, but Harvey thought the 1963 programme 'rather ambitious ... I feel we ought to advance more cautiously'. He urged that the stamps be confined to two to three colours, with any decision to go for four to five colours in future years based on the results.

DESIGNS SOUGHT FROM ARTISTS

On 28 September, Mr Hornsey met with Mrs C G Tomrley of the Council of Industrial Design (CoID) to discuss the plans, it being agreed that at least half the artists recommended by the CoID should have been winners of national or regional competitions: each artist would be asked to design a complete set of three.

The final decision on colours is recorded in the 'Instructions to artists' issued on 18 October: the option of changing the background colour from the definitive standard was confined to the 3d; however colours other than the definitive violet should be no deeper than half tone, and red could not be used as the Red Cross to be included in all designs would be in full strength scarlet. The 1s 3d and 1s 6d should have the standard green and steel blue background colours respectively. However, one additional secondary colour could be used on the 3d, up to four on the 1s 3d, and up to two on the 1s 6d, the choice being left to the artist.

Invitations went to Anthony S B New, John Brinkley, Peter Gauld, Enid Marx, Reynolds Stone and Mary Adshead plus the three main stamp printers (Harrisons, Bradbury Wilkinson, Thomas de la Rue & Company). Artists were asked for rough sketches with explanatory notes by 3 December (later changed to 10 December). The sketches would be returned by 7 January 1963 (later 14 January) with artists notified whether they were suitable for development into finished drawings, which in turn would have to reach GPO Headquarters by 4 February. The fees were 40 guineas for each rough sketch up to a maximum of three per artist, plus 20 guineas for each completed drawing, and a further 190 guineas if the design was used, totalling 250 guineas (£262.50) for each design accepted. An information pack accompanying the 'Instructions' explained the structure and purpose of the Red Cross movement and the objects of the Conference.

A minor stipulation had been that designs should include 'International Red Cross Conference'; on 4 December, however, Dame Anne Bryans wrote to the GPO advising that this should read 'Red Cross Centenary Congress'. This was the result of a dispute between Nationalist China and Communist China over representation at the conference; as a result it had been decided that no government representatives should now attend and the status of the event had thus changed.

INITIAL SELECTION

By 10 December 37 sketches were to hand, examined over the next two weeks by representatives of the GPO, Harrisons, the COLD and the Red Cross. They came from:

Mary Adshead (4);

Reynolds Stone (3);

Enid Marx (4);

Peter Gauld (3);

John Brinkley (4);

Anthony New (7);

Harold Bartram, for Harrisons (3);

W Brown, for Harrisons (3);

Bradbury Wilkinson (3);

De La Rue (3).

Many comments were made, and are summarised as follows.

Harrisons asked for clearer emphasis in the finished designs to facilitate registration, while the GPO commented that the year 1863 should not be mentioned, as it was the Congress that was to be celebrated rather than the original event. The Red Cross had more to say, to maintain its internationalist and neutralist image: individuals should preferably be shown as civilian volunteers rather than identified with any religious, military or governmental institution, and groups of figures shown as racially mixed. A striking objection was to the symbolic use of doves of peace as it was felt that this had come to be misappropriated by the Soviet Union for political ends. The Red Cross were also at pains to emphasise its relevance to the modern world, and thus wished to avoid historical references to individuals, locations or events. One design with a globe was criticised as 'incomplete and inaccurate', and references to 88 member nations (this figure was in the information included with the 'Instructions') were rejected as this figure changed constantly and would certainly no longer apply by August 1963. The Red Cross was also against a design depicting the Moslem Red Crescent and the Red Lion and Sun of Iran, as these were 'not British'.

The issue was announced in a press release of 18 December 1962. On 24 December F J Langfield of PSD requested finished versions of ideas submitted by John Brinkley, Anthony New and Harold Bartram for Harrisons. John Brinkley was asked to contact Harrisons regarding the colouring of the Queen's head, separation of the fine lines between the frames used in his design and the registration of lettering in different colours on white. Anthony New was requested to change the value of one design from 3d to 1s 6d, and of another from 3d to 1s 3d; in addition he was asked to provide backgrounds in several alternative colours for one to differentiate it from the other. On one of New's designs it was suggested the olive sprays be strengthened with a flush of colouring run through the Queen's head, to bring the design 'more into line' with the other two. Bartram was asked only to relocate the value figure on one of his designs from the top to the bottom of the small panel in which it was shown. All three artists were asked to change the legend, as requested by Dame Anne Bryans on 4 December, to omit '1863' as applicable (the Brinkley set and one from Bartram): '1963' could be retained.

FINISHED DESIGNS RECEIVED

On 10 January 1963 New returned three completed variations of one of his designs with different treatments of the olive spray, a revised second design and overlay sheet, and for his third design an overlay sheet with the revised design plus eight different coloured backgrounds. Although not mentioned in New's covering letter, it was presumably at this time he supplied a hitherto unseen fourth design with a figure of eight formed by doves, around the Red Cross symbol and Queen's head, of which seventeen in lighter colour than the rest represented the founding nations of the Red Cross. On the following day the revised Bartram designs were returned by Harrisons and Brinkley also returned his amended set after consultation with the printers. He suggested the Queen's head should be 'in the full strength colour of each stamp - ie, mauve, green or blue', the colour of the equivalent value in the definitive series.

On 25 January the Stamp Advisory Committee met under the chairmanship of Sir Kenneth Clark with Lady Sempill and Mr James Fitton, Paul Reilly and Mrs Tomrley of the CoID, and Langfield and Hornsey of the Postal Services Department. Mr Hornsey presented the designs from which to select two sets out of three, a first choice and reserve. The committee's first choice fell on the two designs by Bartram; as his third design had been rejected in December it was proposed he be asked to complete the set by producing a further one in the same style, which the committee considered reminiscent of the work of the distinguished abstract artist Ben Nicholson, in its balancing of rectangular and circular shapes and warm and cool colour tones.

The second choice was the modified set by New; although the design for the 3d was not liked in any of the three new versions, and was replaced with another of his designs even though it clashed with the stipulations of the Red Cross in that it included doves (allegedly a Soviet political symbol) and these were 88 (inaccurately reflecting the number of member nations). However, it was thought the design was satisfactory on its overall merits and that both the number and nature of the doves 'would be indiscernible in the small size' (ie, stamp size). Once again the wording would need changing; the colour would be violet, while black was chosen out of the alternatives provided for the 1s 6d. It was decided not to proceed with the designs by Brinkley.

On 19 February Langfield wrote to R F York of Harrisons enclosing the six amended drawings for the chosen sets. He requested that these be essayed with the Red Cross symbol in full strength scarlet throughout, and the Queen's head 'in the full tonal range of the appropriate background colour'. Why blue rather than green was chosen for the 1s 3d remains unexplained.

ESSAYS SUPPLIED

Harrisons returned essays to Mr Langfield on 9 April of the chosen designs by Anthony New and Harold Bartram for each of the 3d, 1s 3d and 1s 6d.

The ensuing discussion which included the artists, Mr Langfield and H Berry of Harrisons, found the essays satisfactory except that those of Bartram's new design for the 1s 3d had the incorrect legend 'Red Cross Centenary Conference'. Revised essays with 'Conference' altered to 'Congress' were supplied.

Other essays in alternative colours are in the British Postal Museum & Archive, but are not recorded on despatch notes from Supplies Department or Harrisons. They are -

Anthony New: 3d in either umber, violet, dark red or green; 1s 3d in dark grey or light grey; 1s 6d in indigo or light blue.

Harold Bartram: 3d as issued; 1s 3d in either light green or yellow; 1s 6d as issued.

STAMPS APPROVED AND PRINTED

Final essays of both sets were forwarded to the PMG on 13 May, the Bartram set recommended as first choice; this was approved by the Queen on 17 May. A press conference was held on 27 June: Bartram and B T Coulton attended on behalf of Harrisons, and Miss Naylor-Smith and Colonel Billett, Assistant Secretary and Press Officer respectively of the British Red Cross Society. The stamps created a favourable impression,

and on 19 July Dame Anne Bryans wrote to Langfield: 'I am most delighted with the design. Gone, thank goodness, are all those doves of peace! The simple design with our Red Cross in its normal setting is by far the best way we could have it. The Postmaster General and Sir Ronald [German, the DG] are lunching with me ... next week and I shall take great pleasure in telling them of one very satisfied customer'. On 10 July, each individual artist or print firm was paid 120 guineas, except for Anthony New and John Brinkley who received 180 guineas each, and Harrisons paid 750 guineas (£787.50).

Some technical problems arose during printing: on 1 July Mr Coulton wrote on behalf of Harrisons to Mr Hornsey of PSD admitting that the Queen's head and surrounding background were reproducing lighter on the 3d than had been approved on the final essays, 'however, we did not feel that it varied sufficiently from the essay to delay going into production'. The first cylinder accounted for about 10 per cent of the total print run; a second cylinder produced a considerable improvement, 'though perhaps still a slight shade below the essay'. If the first cylinder had to be reused it would be corrected to deepen the background. On 19 July Supplies reported that in trials to improve the appearance of the stamps, 75,000 sheets (9 million stamps) of the 3d had been printed on special 70 gsm coated paper, which would be issued alongside sheets printed on ordinary paper; this would be done 'indiscriminately', ie, without any special measures being taken to segregate the two types. However, this project was later abandoned and stamps issued only on standard 63.5 gsm coated paper.

SALES AND POSTMARKS

On 15 August 1963, the day events began in Geneva, the stamps were issued and remained on sale until 1 September 1964. All stamps were double definitive size in sheets of 120 with multiple crowns watermark. The 3d was red and lilac, the 1s 3d red, blue and grey, and the 1s 6d red, lilac and bistre. Totals sold and printed were as follows:

Value	Total printed	Sales (non-phosphor)	Sales (with phosphor bands)
3d	182,100,000	157,277,800	10,349,280
1s 3d	9,500,000	7,278,120	929,040
1s 6d	9,684,000	6,995,160	1,038,840

Of the gross numbers printed, some 92 per cent of the 3d were sold, as opposed to about 86 per cent of the 1s 3d and 83 per cent of the 1s 6d. Total value of sales was £3,210,836 of which the purely philatelic element was estimated as about £75,000 (on the assumption of half a million of each value).

A 'First Day of Issue' cancellation service was provided via special posting boxes at 30 main post offices. From 15 August to 15 September 50 special dies in stamp cancelling machines at 33 offices provided the slogan '1863 Red Cross Centenary / A Century of Service 1963'.

A gift card was designed by Stuart Rose of which 46 with the stamps were sent out on the day of issue. Recipients were the Queen and Princess Margaret, the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the House of Common, Sir Winston Churchill, the PMGs (or equivalent) of self governing Commonwealth countries (13), the British Red Cross and its principal officers, including the Queen Mother (7), the Stamp Advisory Committee (8), the PMG, plus former PMGs and APMGs still in Parliament (11), Stuart Rose and Harold Bartram (2). There were 100 cards and 200 accompanying envelopes ordered for delivery to GPO Headquarters on 12 August, at a total cost of approximately £13.

REACTIONS TO ISSUE

On 16 August Sir Kenneth Clark, chairman of the SAC, wrote to the PMG: 'Personally I am very pleased with the 1s 6d and satisfied with the 3d, but for some reason we could never get the 1s 3d quite right.' Opinion in the specialist press was mixed: an article in 'Philatelic Trader' of 5 July, which 'Philatelic Magazine' repeated verbatim the following week, referred to the 'simple geometric designs' of which much had been made at the 27 June press conference, and commented: 'There is altogether too much geometry and fretwork in British stamp design ... The GPO has modernised its attitude towards stamp issuing. It should now let the designers use their imagination.' On the other hand the August issue of 'Gibbons Stamp Monthly' praised the issue as 'bold, colourful miniature posters'.

There were reports of premature release; there was a complaint by the Head Postmaster of Horsham that the natural vigilance of his staff was being stretched by the 'current trend towards frequent issues of new stamps'.

The most celebrated misprint was the partial or complete disappearance of the Red Cross symbol on the 3d; an Investigation Branch memorandum of 17 September revealed that had already been detected prior to the issue date. Examples turned up in Glasgow on 2 September, to much excitement in the Scottish press. Others were reported from Workington, Cumberland, as late as 30 October.

THE ARTIST

The successful artist, HAROLD BARTRAM, was born in London in 1928. He trained at the Central School of Arts & Crafts between 1946 and 1950, and subsequently worked in

magazine illustration and most other fields of print design (folders, leaflets, books, stationery, posters, etc) for clients as various as Shell Petroleum, British Railways, and the National Union of Teachers. He also taught graphic design and typography at the London School of Printing; in 1963 he was Senior Lecturer in the Design Department of the London College of Printing and also Consultant Designer to the stamp printers Harrisons. The Red Cross issue was his only British stamp design.

GILES ALLEN
26 October 1993

REFERENCES

British Postal Museum & Archive files:
P648/65, P1895/65.