

SPECIAL STAMP ISSUE

FORTH ROAD BRIDGE

1964



At the time of its completion in August 1964, the Forth Road Bridge was the largest suspension bridge in Europe, and the fourth longest in the world. Crossing the Firth of Forth beside the old railway bridge at Queensferry, the new bridge provided a road link between Fife and Edinburgh, which had previously been maintained by a ferry service dating back to the Middle Ages. Construction began in 1958 at a cost of £20 million, of which the bridge proper accounted for some £9.5 million. The overall length of the bridge, including the northern and southern approach viaducts, is a little over 1½ miles, while it stands 150ft above the water at its lowest point. The project was intended to provide important access to and from the newly industrialised areas of Fife, while improving road transport to the north generally.

PROPOSAL FOR A STAMP

The Lord Provost of Edinburgh, The Rt Hon Duncan Weatherstone, wrote informally to the Postmaster General (PMG) on behalf of the Forth Road Bridge Joint Board on 25 February 1964, with a request that the Post Office consider a stamp to mark the bridge's completion. Although the precise date of the opening of the bridge was as yet undetermined, the Lord Provost expected the Queen to conduct the official ceremony sometime in August or September. Knowing that the Post Office would be issuing stamps to mark the 10th International Botanical Congress in early August, the Lord Provost suggested in his letter that a special stamp for the bridge could be issued in either July or September. He felt that a stamp issue prior to the opening, say in July, 'might usefully advertise (used in its highest sense) the occasion ... or alternatively would commemorate the occasion, if issued in September'. (The Lord Provost of Edinburgh to the PMG, 25 February 1964)

Although this request was received some months after the special stamp programme for 1964 had been finalised, it was acted upon very quickly by the Post Office. Enquiries were

made to the Scottish Development Department on 2 March, by D H Beaumont of the Postal Services Department, concerning the anticipated opening date. In pursuit of further information, Beaumont was informed that although, weather conditions permitting, the bridge would be ready to take traffic in early August, no decision had been made, but it was likely that the official opening would be in late August or early September.

A minute to the Assistant Postmaster General (APMG), Ray Mawby, MP, from the Deputy Director General (DDG), W A Wolverson, put forward the case for stamps, for the completion of the Forth Road Bridge, a major engineering achievement, qualified as 'an outstanding current event of national importance'. It was recognised that a stamp would lead to pressure to commemorate other civil engineering projects: later requests could be evaluated on their own merit.

The bridge's completion as a significant Scottish event was emphasised by the DDG in view of some accusations, both in Parliament and the press, that the Post Office neglected Scotland when deciding on the subject matter for stamps. This had arisen over the decision to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, having not marked the Robert Burns anniversary a few years previously. A Forth Road Bridge stamp would, it was felt, go some way to reconciling the imbalance, and more importantly, conciliating aggrieved Scots.

Regarding a date of issue, mid-September was the preference of the Post Office, to leave sufficient time after the International Botanical Congress issue of 5 August 1964. The proposed was 10 September: should the official opening be in early September, or thereabouts, the date of issue would, if possible, be altered to coincide. A second issue in August was considered out of the question.

These proposals were approved by the APMG on 16 March, and the Lord Provost of Edinburgh was informed that there would be two stamps, 3d and 6d. The Lord Provost's original proposal that the stamps might 'advertise' the opening of the bridge did not even merit discussion within the Post Office. The Lord Provost's reply indicated that the opening date was likely to be early September, so the Post Office's tentative date appeared close. All, however, was to remain confidential until the announcement could be made officially in Parliament, which would not be until the Lord Provost had made an official request for a stamp: his previous approach had apparently been 'exploratory'. This bureaucratic hurdle was cleared on 19 March, and an announcement made in the House of Commons on 14 April 1964.

COMMISSIONING DESIGNS

James Fitton, a member of the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC), had been impressed by a painting of the Forth Road Bridge that had recently won a competition organised by the 'Daily Mail' and the Arts Council of Scotland. He suggested that the Edinburgh-based artist, J Andrew Restall, be invited to submit a design for the stamps. Mrs C G Tomrley, Committee secretary, wrote to Restall on 6 April, requesting that, if he was interested, he should provide a photograph of the painting, and visit London to discuss the details of stamp design with both the Post Office and Harrison & Sons, the printers. Restall was more than happy to oblige, and was one of six artists to receive an invitation to submit designs. It was assumed by Fitton that Restall was a Scot, an erroneous fact that he passed on to the Committee. Only one of the other artists invited was Scottish.

It had been the original intention of the SAC that only three artists submit designs, hoping this would allow for more consultation with the artists during the selection process. Initially, Restall, William Kempster, whose unsuccessful designs for the Geographical Congress stamps had been very highly thought of, and Gordon Huntly, a Scottish artist, were to receive invitations. Should these three, relatively inexperienced in designing stamps, prove unsatisfactory, there was still time to commission more designs. However, T P Hornsey, a Post Office representative on the Committee, felt time was of the essence, so it decided, at a meeting on 20 April, to send invitations to Harrison & Sons, Michael Goaman and Anthony New.

The 'Instructions to Artists' accompanying the invitations, sent out on 28 April, required the submission of designs to F J Langfield of Postal Services by 25 May. There was no limit to the number of designs an artist could submit; however payment would only be made for a maximum of two. All designs were to be pictorial and include the Queen's head, the size being as on the current 3d or ½d definitive. The words 'Forth Road Bridge, 1964' and the denomination, in clear Arabic numerals, should appear.

Colours were restricted to three for the 3d and four for the 6d, although, in exceptional circumstance, up to five could be considered. The background for the 3d was not to be red or black, but could be any other colour. The tone of the background was not to be deeper than mid-tone, unless violet was used, in which case it could be any shade. The range of tone was restricted by the requirements of photogravure: the artists were supplied with shade cards to illustrate the tone range this process could reproduce.

Technical details and photographs of the bridge were available from ACD Bridge Company, a consortium undertaking the construction. Both the Postal Services Department and Harrison & Sons were also available for consultation, which was encouraged to minimise technical problems arising at a later date.

SELECTING DESIGNS

There were 17 designs comprising eight sets submitted by 25 May 1964, including three sets submitted by Harrison & Sons from various artists, of which one was Derek Cousins, but the identity of the other two is unknown. Bromides of the designs were produced with each allocated a number:

Derek Cousins of Harrison & Sons – 1 and 2;

Other artists from Harrison & Sons – 3 to 6;

Andrew Restall – 7 and 8;

Gordon Huntly – 9 and 10;

William Kempster – 11 and 12;

Anthony New – 13 to 15;

Michael Goaman – 16 and 17.

Each design featured the road bridge, while a number also depicted the older railway bridge in the background (nos 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 11). Two sets, those by Huntly and New, included designs with maps of the Firth of Forth, and the roads leading to and from the location of the bridge at Queensferry (nos 10 and 15). Gordon Huntly had omitted the route numbers of the roads on his map, and asked that a note be attached to the artwork stating these could be added, as he considered these were important as ‘...essential to help convey the idea of the bridge being a road bridge, and opening up convenient routes to the north’. (Huntly to Langfield, 25 May 1964)

The designs were shown to the SAC on 27 May. Although a record is not available, it seems that those by Andrew Restall (7 and 8) and William Kempster (11 and 12) were chosen. These quite similar designs featured the road bridge from two perspectives, one showing it lengthwise in proximity to the railway bridge, and the other emphasising its height and breadth.

A further meeting was held on 10 June, because while Restall’s designs were thought by far the better, certain changes had been required. Sir Kenneth Clark, committee chairman, agreed to meet Restall at the North British Hotel in Edinburgh on 9 June to discuss these: the lettering used on both designs to be altered to make it more visible, and the boats depicted on the 6d design (no. 8) be omitted.

Essays of Restall’s designs were sent to Beaumont, PSD, by Harrison & Sons on 8 June. The printers had experimented with various colour combinations for the lettering.

Andrew Restall:

design 7 – 3d in white, black, blue or green;
design 8 – 6d in white or blue-brown.

Sir Kenneth took the original artwork and one of each of the different colours to show Restall, who agreed the lettering was difficult to read when reduced to stamp size; they decided to change the lettering across the top to black, and that down the right hand side, '1964' and the denomination, to white, the same applying to both designs. It was also agreed to remove the small boats in the lower right hand corner of the 6d design.

Essays of William Kempster's designs (11 and 12) reached Beaumont, PSD, on 10 June. The original drawings were also returned by Harrison & Sons.

The changes to Restall's designs, as discussed with Sir Kenneth Clark, were approved at the SAC meeting on 10 June. There were time constraints with three months to the proposed date of issue. The Committee decided to put forward the paler of two essays seen as first choice recommendation to the Queen; Kempster's designs were put forward as they stood.

There was concern among the committee members that the Queen be fully aware of their support for Andrew Restall's designs. When the first and second choice designs for the previous issue, Botanical Congress, had been presented to the Queen, she had approved the second choice through what many members felt was a misunderstanding: she had apparently understood that the committee did not prefer one design over the other, when in fact they had been most adamant that the first choice, designs not selected by her, was much superior. The committee want a repeat so asked that the notes to accompany the essays make it very clear that Restall's designs were much better than Kempster's. It was suggested that Restall be cited as 'a new young artist resident and trained in Scotland and showing outstanding talent'. (SAC minutes of 10 June 1964)

The required changes to Restall's designs were passed to Harrison & Sons on 11 June by Beaumont, together with the preferred 'paler' essays'. Harrisons returned the reworked essays of design 8 (6d) on 18 June, and design 7 (3d) the following day.

The selected designs by Andrew Restall and William Kempster were put to the Queen, it being made very clear that Restall's was considered the better: the wording of the letter was toned down by the Deputy Director General's office, although did refer to Restall's as being of 'outstanding merit'. The Queen on 1 July approved Andrew Restall's designs.

FIRST DAY COVER AND PRESENTATION PACK

Restall was notified of the Queen's approval on 3 July, and invited to submit a design for the first day envelope and presentation pack. Presentation packs had been introduced with the Shakespeare stamps earlier in 1964 with great success, and the practice had continued on an experimental basis for the two subsequent issues. No firm decision had been taken regarding a first day cover service, but the Deputy Director General, W A Wolverson requested he be consulted before any official announcements were made. Despite this uncertainty, PSD went ahead with commissioning designs and ordering stock.

Restall's brief for the envelope and pack required that the designs complement, but not repeat, the stamps. The design on the envelope should be confined to the left hand side, with sufficient room for the stamps to be affixed on the right. The dimensions were 7¼ inches by 4½ inches, and the envelope would be printed in two colours, although there were no restrictions on the colours used.

Restall was to design the pack insert card, including information about the bridge, the designer, the stamps and printing process. The card would bear the Royal Arms printed in red or blue. Print ready artwork was required by 20 July.

Restall submitted a rough of the envelope design to Beaumont on 7 July, and a rough layout of the presentation pack on 9 July. Both considered acceptable: final artwork for the pack was submitted on 15 July. The envelope design closely resembled that of the stamps, showing virtually the full span of the bridge against a background similar to the 3d stamp.

The pack design called for the Royal Arms to be blind embossed, or alternatively in blue outline should embossing prove unacceptable. Two photographs of the bridge under construction had been sent with the original instructions, and one was used in the pack. The photographs had previously appeared in 'The Scotsman', and permission was sought for their use.

ISSUING THE STAMPS

The date for the official opening of the Forth Road Bridge was finalised in mid-July as 4 September 1964: the stamps were issued the same day. There were 150,000 envelopes ordered from HMSO for delivery on 17 August at the latest, while 50,000 cards, sleeves and wallets for the pack were ordered from Harrison & Sons for delivery in late August.

A preview of the stamps for press was held on 6 August, simultaneously in Edinburgh and London. Restall attended the Edinburgh function, while members of the SAC and others involved in the production of the stamps attended in London.

However, the question of the first day cover service had to be resolved. T P Hornsey prepared a brief that he submitted to K Hind, the Assistant Secretary, PSD, outlining the case for continuation. Hornsey felt that the time to review the service would be after the Forth Road Bridge, the last issue of 1964, and before discussions began on the programme for 1965. He provided a cost breakdown of the service for the International Geographical Congress stamps showing that the Post Office made a small profit of £770. The greater part had come from the sale of the stamps to collectors, while the servicing of the covers, including the sale of envelopes, generally operated at a loss. It was predicted that such losses could be eliminated with better staff training, increasing overall efficiency. Hornsey recommended the service continue as there was a profit to be made, albeit a small one.

These conclusions were approved by Hind after some discussion, particularly over the profitability of the service. Hind forwarded the recommendations to Mr Wolverson on 4 August, who sought the opinion of the Director of Postal Services, Brig. K S Holmes: Wolverson wished to know why the Post Office was justified in charging the same fee, 3 shillings (15p) for an issue with just two stamps as for previous issues with four stamps. Brig. Holmes replied that as the principal costs were in the handling of the envelopes, rather than the stamps, the costs would not change substantially for a two-stamp issue. This was accepted by Wolverson; a first day cover service was approved on 6 August.

It may have been that the Deputy Director General was testing the water in preparation for a review of the policy on first day covers. Great efforts were made to promote sales of the envelopes and presentation packs for this issue, while all Head Postmasters were asked to report in detail their experiences with the service.

A large number of essays of the approved stamps were forwarded to Beaumont, PSD, from Harrison & Sons on 31 July. A block of four of each denomination was sent to K J Ley of the Public Relations Department, for him to send to the regional Public Relations Officer in Edinburgh, presumably for use at the press preview in Edinburgh on 6 August. One essay of each stamp was also sent to D Stewart, Head Postmaster in Edinburgh, who took them to the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, who had initiated the idea of the stamp.

The print order for the stamps was submitted to Harrison & Sons in mid-July: 3d - 143 million, 6d - 19 million

Letters were sent to the Postal Controllers for each region on 19 August, encouraging them to promote the sales of first day covers of the stamps. The controllers were provided with

a regional breakdown of sales for the Geographical and Botanical Congress envelopes, to motivate them to compete with each other. They were to instruct Head Postmasters to display the promotional posters, which had already been despatched, together with samples of the stamps and envelopes, for several days prior to 21 August, during which the envelopes would go on sale at 6d each.

The stamps were released on 4 September 1964, the day on which the Queen opened the Forth Road Bridge. Unusually, there are no reports of stamps being released prior to the issue date.

The Postmaster General sent gifts of mint stamps, first day cover envelopes and presentation packs to various eminent persons, and those associated with the bridge. The usual recipients were the Queen, Princess Margaret, Sir Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the House of Commons, previous Postmasters General and Assistant PMGs, Postmasters General of the Commonwealth, members of the SAC, and Andrew Restall. The following also received gifts as members of the Forth Road Bridge Joint Board, Duncan Weatherstone, Lord Provost of Edinburgh, Chairman, and John Williams, Vice-Chairman.

The Forth Road Bridge stamps sold very well, proving particularly popular in Scotland, with 288,868 blank envelopes sold by post offices, and Scotland accounting for 220,630 alone. Even discounting Scotland, the blank envelopes for this issue sold in greater quantities than those for the Geographical or the Botanical Congress. However, 10,453 presentation packs were sold, far fewer than for previous issues.

Reports from Head Postmasters suggested the extra publicity had been successful. There were, of course, the inevitable complaints: one Head Postmaster said the posters were too small, while another complained they were too large. A common complaint was that it had been impossible to obtain further supplies of the envelopes on the first day of sale, with some offices running out of stock before noon. A number of post offices also reported that the posters had arrived damaged, while one enterprising postmaster in Liverpool made his own replacements with great success.

The stamps were withdrawn on 2 July 1965 having sold in following:

3d - 108,098,480 (ordinary), 8,020,92 (phosphor)

6d - 12,055,960 (ordinary), 1,240,800 (phosphor).

A few months later in 1964, Andrew Restall took up a lectureship in advertising design at the Coventry College of Art, and the following year was awarded a Fellowship in Minuscule Design at the Royal College of Art, sponsored by the Post Office. He went on to design many more stamps.

Alan Griffiths
National Postal Museum
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