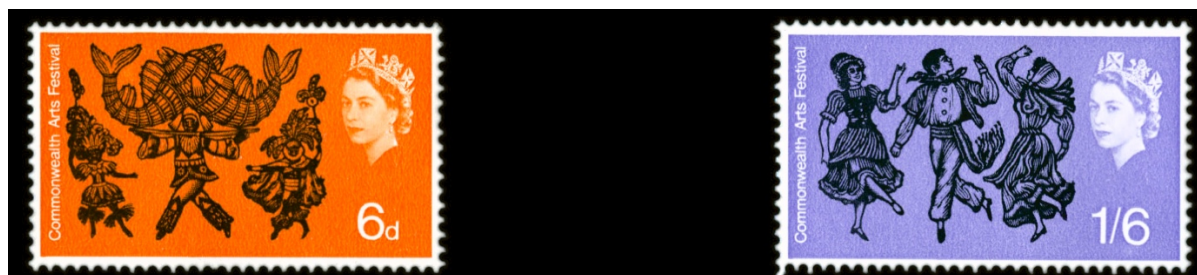


Commonwealth Arts Festival

1965



The Commonwealth Arts Festival, held between 16 September and 2 October 1965, was the first festival to celebrate the cultural and artistic traditions of the Commonwealth as a whole. Its aim was to forge links among member countries in the field of the arts extending beyond the Festival itself. The participation of almost all the Commonwealth had been secured by 18 August 1964 when Lord Balfour of Inchrye, the Chairman of the Festival, wrote to the Postmaster General (PMG) to suggest a set of special stamps to commemorate the event.

An event of this magnitude obviously merited serious consideration at the Post Office, and a reply to Lord Balfour was sent on 31 August to the effect that the programme for stamp issues had not yet been finalised, but the Commonwealth Arts Festival would be considered 'a serious contender for inclusion'. A further letter from Ian Hunter, the Director General of the Festival, was received in early September, which again outlined the case for an issue.

With an impending General Election, the Postal Services Department (PSD) of the Post Office decided to delay finalising the following year's stamp programme until it could be approved by the new Postmaster General (PMG), should there be a change. Labour won, and the new Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, appointed Anthony Wedgwood Benn as Postmaster General (PMG).

Benn undertook a wide-ranging review of the Post Office, resulting in a broadening of the criteria for new stamp issues. Although the new policy fundamentally changed how special issues were selected, it had little impact on the Commonwealth Arts Festival proposal, which would have quite easily qualified under the old guidelines and did not suffer under the new system. The only impact was to delay the final decision and announcement.

Anthony Benn received another letter in support of the Commonwealth Arts Festival on 29 December 1964, this time from Lord Taylor, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the

Commonwealth Relations Office. Lord Taylor emphasised the degree to which the Festival had garnered support from the government and the municipal authorities of London, Liverpool, Cardiff and Glasgow where events were being staged. Lord Taylor suggested that the stamps be issued in denominations that would be used both in the United Kingdom and for postage to the Commonwealth. He further suggested that a special air-letter form might be issued. This was acknowledged by the PMG on 13 January 1965.

On 1 February, in response to a Parliamentary question, the programme for special stamp issues for 1965 was announced in the House of Commons by the PMG. The Commonwealth Arts Festival would be marked with an issue of two stamps, the issue date and denominations to be finalised at a later date. The Lords Balfour and Taylor were officially informed of this decision, of which they were doubtless aware, by the PMG on 16 February.

COMMISSIONING DESIGNS

A timetable, probably drawn up in February, for all stamp issues planned for 1965, indicated the production schedule for the Commonwealth Arts Festival stamps (although not strictly adhered to, especially towards the later stages):

Briefs to artists - 22 March

Designs to Post Office - 21 April

Chosen designs to printers - 3 May

Essays from printers - 24 May

Approved essays to printers - 1 June

80 per cent of stamps to Supplies Department - 19 July

Date of issue - 1 September.

Invitations to submit designs were sent to four artists, and the printing firms of Harrison and Sons and Bradbury Wilkinson, on 2 March. The individual artists were William Kempster, David Gentleman, Stewart Black and Walter Hoyle. All were experienced in stamp design, apart from Walter Hoyle for whom this was the first stamp design commission. The 'instructions to artists' accompanying the invitations made it clear that two stamps were to be issued, in 6d and 1s 6d denominations. It was left to the artist's discretion to select an appropriate theme, although the organisers suggested the conference crest might feature. Copies of the conference brochure, with the official crest, were enclosed. The deadline for completed artwork, drawn four times linear stamp size (6.04 inches by 3.044 inches), was 21 April.

On 10 March, the day after receiving its invitation, Bradbury Wilkinson informed the Post Office Supplies Department that, due to other commitments, it would not be able to take on the commission. Further invitations were sent to Douglas Annand, an Australian artist, and

Don Foster on 13 March. Douglas Annand was also unable to accept, although did not inform the Post Office of this until 5 April. No reply to the invitation was received from William Kempster and he did not submit designs for the issue.

SELECTING DESIGNS

The submitted designs were received prior to a meeting of the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) on 27 April; David Gentleman's designs arrived last on 26 April. The designs were all numbered upon arrival at PSD as follows:

Walter Hoyle - two designs (1 and 2);
Harrison and Sons - four designs (3 and 4, 14 and 15);
Stewart Black - four designs (5 to 8);
Don Foster - four designs (9 to 13);
David Gentleman - six designs (16 to 21).

Unfortunately the files do not contain a description of the designs received, apart from those by David Gentleman. His submission was accompanied by an outline of the thought process behind his designs, as well as providing a description of them: 'I have chosen to emphasize more the last word of the title: FESTIVAL. It is, after all, being celebrated, not just as a propaganda exhibition, but as a festival of song, dance, etc. So I have picked out carnival, or carnival-type, costumes to underline this.'

David Gentleman submitted three designs each of which could be essayed in either of the two colour sets that he proposed. He described his designs as follows:

A - A set of three costumes from the Trinidad carnival which demonstrates very well the assimilation and transfiguring of European carnival costume and their amalgamation with existing tribal ceremonial dress.
B - A stage costume in the carnival/tribal tradition from the Nigerian stage production of the internationally known 'Palm Wine Drunkard' by Amos Tutuola.
C - A tribal mask from Ijaw.

Each design was presented in the two colour sets (mauve and orange) which Gentleman numbered Set 1 and Set 2. The artist's numbering corresponds to the Post Office's numbers as follows:

A1 - 16,
A2 - 17,
B1 - 18,
B2 - 19,
C1 - 20,
C2 - 21.

The third design (20 and 21) was intended as an alternative to the other two and was not the artist's first choice. David Gentleman also felt that, should the first design (16 or 17) be selected for essaying, the carnival fish would require re-engraving more boldly and simply. This design had been presented in two versions one of which (A1 - 16) had smaller figures than the other (A2 - 17).

DESIGN SELECTION

The SAC met on 27 April to consider all of the designs with the intention of selecting four for further development. The committee selected Gentleman's designs, featuring carnival dancers, as its first choice, preferring the version with the smaller figures on a mauve background (A1 - 16, B1 - 18). It was also decided to ask Gentleman to prepare another design, 'in which black Commonwealth people were not depicted' with the same theme. A set of designs that represented both the black and white countries of the Commonwealth would, it was felt, be more balanced. If this new design was acceptable, it would replace design 18 (B1), the Nigerian drama costumes, in the first choice set. As its second choice, the committee selected a design from Harrison and Sons depicting 'Toys' (3 and 4), together with another Harrison and Sons design that had the names of the participating countries printed over the Festival crest (15). The blue background on this latter design required modification. Should Gentleman not be able to produce a 'white' Commonwealth design, the 'Toy' design would be selected for the second stamp. David Gentleman was informed of the committee's decision on 28 April and agreed to produce another design. He also undertook the re-engraving of the carnival fish for the first design as he had requested.

The second choice designs were forwarded to Harrison and Sons for essaying, followed by Gentleman's two designs featuring 'black Commonwealth' carnival dancers, the re-engraving having been completed. The first set of essays forwarded to the Post Office by Harrison and Sons on 20 May were of the second choice 'Toys' design (3 and 4), essayed in both red and blue. Essays of design 15 featuring the Festival crest followed on 26 May.

The following day, the SAC met to view these essays and the new design by Gentleman (there had been insufficient time to have it essayed). The new design featured three dancers from Les Feux Follets, a Canadian dance company, in 18th century Acadian (French Canadian) costumes. The committee approved this design for the 1s 6d value to accompany the 6d Trinidad Carnival design. The essays of the two Harrison and Sons designs were also approved and designated second choice, the 'Toys' design being selected in red. David Gentleman's designs were essayed in early June, with essays for the two 'black Commonwealth' designs, including the Nigerian folk drama costume design (18) now

considered an alternate, being forwarded on 11 June. Essays of the Acadian dancers design with the mauve background were forwarded on 23 June.

These were inspected by James Fitton on behalf of the SAC as there was not enough time to hold a full meeting. An internal memorandum, dated 25 June, from K Hind of Postal Services to the PMG, in preparation for submission of the designs to the Queen, outlines Fitton's deliberations. The SAC had decided to replace design 18, the Nigerian costumes, with the new Acadian folk-dancers design, while retaining the Harrison and Sons designs (3 and 4) as second choice. This decision had not been without dissent; James Fitton had preferred the discarded design. Consequently, when he viewed essays of the Acadian design, Fitton was not willing to give them his unmitigated approval, while at the same time felt reluctant to override the expressed majority opinion of the committee. His proposal was that the final choice between these two designs should be left to the Queen.

SUBMISSION TO THE QUEEN

This approach did not find favour with the Post Office, reluctant not to provide the Queen with a clear recommendation. Hind proposed that the PMG present two distinct sets of designs for approval:

Set 1 to consist of design 15 - Trinidad Carnival dancers, and the new design featuring Acadian folk-dancers;

Set 2 to comprise design 18 - Nigerian costumes, and design 3 - the 'Toys', by Harrison and Sons.

The other Harrison and Sons design, 15, of the Festival crest overprinted with the participating countries' names, was eliminated. This design had run into difficulty over the list of names it showed, as there had been some delay in finalising the list of participants. The Commonwealth Relations Office had confirmed on 16 June that Cyprus and Gambia should be added to the list, while Rhodesia should be excluded on the grounds that, as a colony, it was not entitled to equal status beside the independent countries of the Commonwealth. Finally, the 'United Republic of Tanzania' should be changed to read merely 'Tanzania'. Harrison and Sons confirmed that these changes could be made should the Queen approve the stamps, but the abandoning of this design was facilitated by these difficulties, given the tight deadlines which had to be met in order to keep to the issue date of 1 September.

Anthony Wedgwood Benn agreed with K Hind's recommendations regarding designs to be presented to the Queen. In his letter to Sir Michael Adeane, Private Secretary to the Queen, Benn stated that the first choice set, now designated A1 (design 16) and A2 (Acadian dancers), was that selected by the SAC, while the second choice, B1 (18) and B2 (3), 'found

favour with the committee'. He did not explain the process by which design 18 had been included, or that he had overridden the choices of the committee to a degree. Essays of the first and second choices were presented to the Queen, together with a description of the designs, on 2 July at Holyroodhouse. She approved designs A1 (16) and A2 (Acadian dancers) for issue.

PRODUCING THE STAMPS

Once approved, arrangements were made for the press launch of the stamps at Post Office Headquarters on 21 July. Invitations were sent to those involved in the stamp issue, including the Lords Balfour and Taylor who had proposed the idea. Harrison and Sons prepared an initial print of the stamps, sending a block of four of each denomination to D H Beaumont of Postal Services on 14 July. These were accompanied by negatives of the stamps and all the original artwork. The Press and Broadcast Notice released for the press preview describes the stamps as follows:

On the 6d stamp is an illustration of three dancing figures from the famous Trinidad Shrove Monday Carnival. The colours are orange and black.

The 1s 6d stamp picture folk-dancing by three members of Les Feux Follets, a Canadian dance company. The colours are mauve and black.

Design of the stamps was credited to both David Gentleman and his wife, Rosalind Dease, an illustrator and typographer in her own right.

ISSUING THE STAMPS

The date of release had been set for 1 September, despite the fact that the Festival did not begin until 16 September. The problem was that the Battle of Britain issue was due for release on 13 September, and the Post Office wished to avoid a clash. In the event, the Commonwealth Arts Festival stamps were issued the same day as the Lister commemorative stamps, necessary as a consequence of delays resulting from an industrial dispute in the Postal Supplies Department earlier in the year. These delays also resulted in the Post Office not providing official first day envelopes or presentation packs for either issue. A service for customers' own covers was available from the Philatelic Bureau.

The Postmaster General sent mint stamps, mounted on a specially prepared gift card, to the Queen, Princess Margaret, Prime Minister, Speaker of the House of Commons, previous Postmasters General and Assistant PMGs, Postmasters General of the Commonwealth, members of the Stamp Advisory Committee, the designers, and, in connection with the

Festival itself, Lord Balfour of Inchrye and Ian Hunter, Chairman and Director General of the Commonwealth Arts Festival Society respectively.

The stamps were withdrawn on 15 April 1966 having been issued in the following quantities:

Ordinary

6d – 12,264,840

1s 6d – 1,621,080

Phosphor

6d – 5,003,000

1s 6d – 788,880.

A D Griffiths July 1993

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