

## British Birds

1966



The first mention of special stamps with British Birds as the theme can be found in the minutes of a meeting of the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) on 11 August 1965, during which there was discussion of the tentative plans for the stamp programme for 1966. GPO representatives revealed that eight issues were planned and listed nine possible themes. Included was the idea to mark both the XIV 'Congressus Internationalis Ornithologicus' and the World Conference of the International Council for Bird Protection with 'one issue of multiple designs'.

The British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA) files reveal that around this time the GPO favoured a stamp programme that placed 'rather less emphasis on direct commemoration'. A memorandum of 21 September 1965 from the Postmaster General (PMG), Anthony Wedgwood Benn, mentions launching a 'pictorial experiment' and the intention to issue special stamps that do not specifically commemorate any particular event. The memorandum included a draft programme for special stamps in 1966 with three such pictorial issues, including 'a pictorial series showing birds and possibly domestic animals'. The proposed issue date was 15 July 1966, while the issue might 'embrace the Ornithological Congress and the World Conference of Bird Protection'. Of note is a handwritten instruction from the PMG on the memorandum that all stamps should, in future, bear the name of both printer and designer.

During discussion of the programme it was decided that the 'emphasis of this year's pictorial stamps is to be on subjects that are typically British'. By early February opinion

favoured having just one theme for any one pictorial issue. Thus it was suggested that the theme be limited to birds rather than including domestic animals as originally proposed: a memorandum to the PMG on 4 February 1966 suggested the theme be 'native wild birds'.

The PMG approved the theme of British Birds on 4 February. He also expressed a wish to see the stamps printed as a block of four in a single denomination. His reasoning was that this would make matters easier for counter staff while the lack of higher denominations would increase the popularity of the stamp issue.

Draft versions of the artist's instructions had been 'produced so the GPO wrote to the Council of Industrial Design (CoID) asking for a list of artists. On 8 February Mrs C G Tomrley of the Council replied suggesting Michael Goaman, Peter Barrett and John N Wood. It seems that the CoID believed there was time to 'recommission if the first lot should fail'.

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## TIMETABLE

The BPMA file contains a draft timetable for the British Birds issue:

Invitations to artists - 4 February 1966

Designs to Printer - 11 March

Essays to GPO - 4 April

Notice in GPO 'Circular' - 20 April

Approved essay to Printer - 22 April

Requisitions by - 13 May

Completion of deliveries - 3 June

Warehouse start - 6 June

Dispatch to Head Offices - 28/30 June

Dispatch to London Offices - 6/7 July

Sale Date - 15 July.

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## INSTRUCTIONS TO ARTISTS

The GPO prepared a list of instructions aimed at assisting artists invited to submit designs. They were informed that stamps would be in only one denomination, 4d, issued in July 1966, and were asked to prepare a set or sets of four designs. The designs were to be in full colour on white board of good quality.

Artists were to use a total of eight colours in the four designs and to use a white, not a black, background. They were advised that the stamps would be printed in photogravure

and that this technique would reproduce a number of graduated tones, and so were instructed to ensure that their materials permit photography of each tone in its true value. Shade cards were enclosed with the instructions.

The stamps would be double the normal size of stamp and could be either horizontal or vertical in format. The designs were to be drawn four times linear stamp size and were to include the value in 'clear Arabic numerals'.

All designs were to include a profile portrait of the Queen's head, in either black or white. Artists were told to use their own version of this profile that might possibly be used on the stamp itself. They were also advised that these profile drawings might be replaced by an approved profile drawing which had been commissioned separately.

One stipulation was that the birds be indigenous to the United Kingdom and not migrant-visitors. Artists were asked to incorporate the name, in English, of the bird.

The fee for each completed design was 60 guineas, with a maximum for any one artist of 240 guineas. For each selected design a further 190 guineas was paid, a total of 250 guineas. All designs were to be submitted by Monday, 14 March 1966.

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## SUBMITTED DESIGNS

It was on 14 February 1966 that D H Beaumont of the Postal Services Department wrote to the artists: the letters of invitation urged 'early and close co-operation with the Post Office and the printer' to ensure the designs were suitable for printing.

On 16 February the GPO wrote to the stamp printing firms of Harrison & Sons and Bradbury Wilkinson inviting them to submit designs. They were asked to submit designs that were the collective efforts of their design departments rather than the work of individuals. On 17 February Bradbury Wilkinson replied that due to 'pressure of work at the present time' it would be unable to accept the invitation.

The GPO received designs from:

Peter Barrett - received 14 March

Michael Goaman - 14 March

Harrison & Sons (Sheila Perry) - 16 March

John Norris Wood - 21 March

It seems Barrett submitted 17 ideas, but the stamp-size reproductions/bromides in the BPMA files show only eleven designs.

J N Wood's designs were based on the theme of 'Garden Birds', for which he selected species of bird that were both well-known and seen in most parts of the country: Green Woodpecker, Goldfinch, Blue Tit and Robin. He also included rough drawings of a number of other birds: Kingfishers, Barn Owl, Herring Gull, Black-Headed Gull and the Blackbird.

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## SELECTION OF DESIGNS

The designs were discussed at a meeting of the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) on 23 March 1966: present were: James Fitton (Chairman), Prof. R Guyatt, F H K Henrion, Mrs C G Tormley (Secretary), R F York (Harrisons), D H Beaumont (GPO).

The Committee felt the designs were good and selected the work of two designers to be produced in essay form. The first choice was four of Barrett's designs: Barn Owl, Puffin, Sheldrake and Blue Tit. It was thought the Queen's head was too small and recommended it be enlarged. Second choice was designs by J N Wood. The SAC was also shown Wood's rough designs and it recommended the Black-Headed Gull and the Blackbird be essayed, together with the Robin and the Blue Tit.

It was decided that these eight designs be essayed with the Queen's head in white on a grey panel. It appears there was some discussion regarding the use of a 'Machin' head for this issue but, as it was now intended that the designs be submitted to the Queen on 29 April, this idea was dropped.

The designs submitted by Harrisons (by Sheila Perry) were admired by the Committee but were not selected because it was felt that the shadows that were a feature of these designs were too dominant.

The GPO undertook to check the colours used with the Royal Ornithological Society.

Essays were delivered to the GPO at the end of April 1966, produced as blocks of four stamps.

On 25 April the PMG announced, in response to a question in the House, the details of the stamps for 1966.

These essays were considered by a meeting of the SAC on 3 May 1966: present were J Fitton (Chairman), Sir John Wilson, M Gray, Prof. R Guyatt, F H K Henrion, Mrs C G Tomrley (Secretary), Miss C McFarlane, plus the PMG, D H Pentecost, A A Mead, D H Beaumont and Miss Mantz for the GPO, and R F York representing Harrison and Sons.

Both the SAC and the PMG were pleased with the quality of the designs, so it was decided to have more than the four stamps originally intended, and to submit a set of six stamps to the Queen, namely Wood's four designs together with two from Barrett. This submission was to include a note explaining that the Committee had made a first choice of four stamps but was recommending producing a block of six due to the 'quality and attractiveness' of the designs.

On 4 May the GPO contacted Harrisons to recommend adjustments to certain colours. Changes were suggested the designs showing the Robin, Blackbird and Black-Headed Gull, the result of consultations with the Natural History Museum (the brown used for the Robin's plumage on the essay was felt to be too 'hot'). At the same time the printer was advised that the issue would comprise a block of six stamps.

On 5 May further essays were received from Harrisons, which presumably incorporated the changes suggested.

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## CAUSE FOR COMPLAINT

Having decided to issue a block of six stamps after previously announcing that the issue would comprise a block of four, the GPO was aware of the need to publicise this change. It appreciated the philatelic trade would already be preparing both advertisements and merchandise on the basis of four stamps.

There is no record in the BPMA file to show that an announcement was made although draft copies of a Parliamentary question do exist. The need for an official statement was made immaterial as the decision to issue six, not four, stamps was leaked to the philatelic community.

On 12 May 1966, a partner of The Connoisseur Stamp Service, R F Grover, wrote to the PMG to express his amazement at the rumour of a possibility of two additional stamps for the issue. Mr Grover felt such a decision was 'scarcely conceivable' and pointed out that his company, along with other manufacturers and dealers, had already prepared material based on a block of four stamps. He maintained that his company had gone to considerable expense to produce a first day cover for this issue that had attracted 'substantial orders' but now appeared to be obsolete.

Mr Grover had received accurate information for he knew that the GPO had been inspired by the quality of the submitted artwork. Mr Grover felt the GPO had gone back on its word. Following changes to release dates of earlier issues Mr Grover felt compelled to ask the

PMG 'does it now mean that we cannot rely at all on official statements made in the House and released to the Press?'

Mr Grover warned that nothing but harm could come as the result of any change to the issue at this late stage. He also sent a letter to the Queen registering his feelings on the matter.

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## ROYAL APPROVAL

The PMG wrote to the Queen on 10 May 1966 for her approval of the designs. Enclosed were three sets of essays:

A - 4 designs (Barrett)

B - 4 designs (Wood)

C - 6 designs (4 by Wood, 2 by Barrett).

The PMG explained that a block of four 4d stamps was originally intended, in which case designs 'A' were recommended as first choice. He added that the SAC felt that six stamps would 'add even more to the attractiveness and popularity of this issue', hence designs 'C'.

The reply on 16 May expressed the Queen's concern upon receiving Mr Grover's letter, stating that 'Her Majesty felt that some importance ought to be attached to retaining the goodwill of the philatelic trade', although she was prepared to approve the block of six stamps. Should the GPO decide against the block of six stamps the Queen's choice for the four designs was 'B'.

The PMG saw the Queen the next day during her visit to the Post Office Tower and this matter was discussed. It was decided to revert to the block of four, designs 'B'. The PMG authorised a change of release date from 15 July to 1 August to cope with any delays to the production schedule caused by the change from four stamps to six. He was now advised that to revert to four stamps would involve further delays. The PMG at this point decided to change his mind yet again and issue six stamps, but before he could contact the Palace he was informed that Harrisons had already destroyed the cylinders for the block of six stamps. Thus the GPO committed itself to four stamps, 'B' in the submission to the Queen: the issue date was confirmed as 8 August 1966.

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## PRODUCTION DETAILS

The stamps were first British commemoratives printed in eight colours, applied in two printings of four colours each. The first printing applied grey, yellow, red and green while

the second used blue, light-brown, dark-brown and black. The stamps were printed on a 'Rembrandt' machine and missing colours are known on all stamps.

The stamps were printed 120 to a sheet, on paper with the multiple Crown watermark. Phosphor stamps were produced, with three vertical phosphor-bands. The number of stamps sold was:

Ordinary - 88,047,742;

Phosphor - 14,613,120.

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## **SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS**

First day envelopes were produced, 7¼ inches (184mm) by 4½ inches (114mm), featuring a country scene printed in black and green, designed by Ronald Maddox, and with the inscription 'G.P.O. Commemorative Cover British Birds Pictorial Issue'. The price of the envelope was 6d; the GPO Philatelic Bureau provided a full first day cover service for 4s 4d. The files record that 150,000 envelopes were ordered from HMSO in May 1966.

Presentation packs were also produced. These contained mint copies of the four stamps and a folder with artistic and technical details, plus information on the designers and the printing process. Preparing these packs began in May when it seemed there would be two designs by Peter Barrett in the set, so biographical details were obtained which are in the Archive file. The technical information came from the British Trust for Ornithology.

Special philatelic posting boxes were provided at 79 offices around the country. All items posted in these boxes bearing the special stamps were cancelled with a rubber handstamp inscribed 'First Day of Issue'.

The stamps were officially launched on 23 June 1966, while a Press and Broadcast Notice gave details of the stamps, the designer and the special philatelic arrangements.

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## **POSTMASTER GENERAL'S GIFT SCHEME**

As usual the PMG sent gifts of these stamps, a first day cover and Presentation Pack, to the Queen, Princess Margaret, the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the House of Commons, members of the Stamp Advisory Committee (8), the designer J N Wood, previous Postmasters General/Assistant Postmasters General whether or not still in Parliament (15), the Postmasters General of equivalent of the self-governing countries of the Commonwealth (19). It seems 47 gifts were distributed.

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## **PREMATURE RELEASE OF STAMPS**

Premature release of the stamps involved the Philatelic Bureau. Due to the absence of a supervisor a temporary member of the staff dispatched in error two orders on 14/15 July 1966. Four sheets were sent to Mr Ellis Paul, Sale, Cheshire and Mr P Clough, Keighley, Yorkshire.

The Bureau realised its error and attempted to recover the sheets but failed. It would appear that Mr Paul used about a sheet of these stamps on mail addressed mainly to himself on 17 July. The local sorting attempted to intercept all such mail: those items found had the datestamp obliterated, but not all the items posted were recovered. An article from the 'Manchester Evening News' of 29 July stated that Mr Paul received 22 items with a clear datestamp.

The GPO investigation concluded that those sheets not posted by Mr Paul and Mr Clough were sold by them to other local philatelists.

SIMON BATES  
3 MARCH 1993.

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## **REFERENCE**

British Postal Museum & Archive file:  
56/72 - 1966 Pictorial Issue (Birds).