

Burns Commemoration

1966



The first request for special stamps to honour Robert Burns came in a Parliamentary question of 26 October 1955: between then and February 1964, no fewer than 30 questions (including supplementaries) were asked. Perhaps the leading supporter in the Commons for a Burns stamp was the Labour MP for South Ayrshire, Emrys Hughes. Over nine years he put no fewer than 17 questions before the House of Commons.

Much of the Parliamentary pressure and the external lobbying by groups such as the Burns Federation was, in the 1950s, aimed at an issue to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Burns' birth. This fell in 1959; in 1958 the pressure on the GPO became so great as to lead to a meeting between the then Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, and an all-party deputation of MPs together with representatives of the Burns Federation.

During this period the announcement of any special issue generally led to a flurry of criticism about the choice of subject and further appeals for a Burns stamp, but to no avail. All requests were refused, explained as following official policy regarding special stamps. Time and again the GPO explained that it was policy to limit special stamps to 'current events of outstanding national or international importance and royal and postal anniversaries and occasions'. The GPO sought strenuously to avoid the commemoration of individuals and other anniversaries lest it cause a 'proliferation of issues'. Even after the bicentenary of his birth calls for a Burns stamp continued, as did the Parliamentary pressure.

In October 1964, with the formation of a Labour government, Anthony Wedgwood Benn became Postmaster General (PMG). This appointment was to have far-reaching effects on all aspects of the GPO, not least its commemorative stamps.

On 17 November that year, Emrys Hughes asked the PMG if he would be continuing the policy of the previous government regarding a Burns stamp. The answer was that he was 'currently reviewing Post Office policy with regard to the issue of postage stamps': evidence would indicate there was an increase in public pressure on the GPO concerning such a stamp. Certainly there was a number of written requests from members of the public, dating from November 1964 to January 1965. All correspondents were given the reply that the PMG then reviewing the stamp programme for 1965 and had not made any decisions.

On 1 February 1965, the PMG announced in the House of Commons the planned programme for that year. Included was the news that there would at last be a Burns stamp, to be issued in January 1966. A ten-year campaign had finally borne fruit.

SELECTION OF DESIGNERS

A meeting of the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) was held on 25 March 1965 during which discussions concerning the proposed Burns stamp resulted in the feeling that 'Scottish designers seemed indicated'. Mrs C G Tomrley therefore produced a list of eight Scottish artists registered with the Council of Industrial Design (CoID). This list included Gordon F Huntly, A B Imrie, Jack Fleming, Stewart Black, Jock Kinneir, Peter McCulloch, Ian McLeish and Ruari McLean. This list was approved by the Committee and it was agreed that these designers be commissioned to produce designs for the Burns stamps.

As far as the question of the actual design was concerned, the Committee felt that 'the Burns cottage seemed to be the most promising subject'. The cottage was Burns' birthplace in Alloway, Ayrshire, which featured in the design submitted to the PMG on 20 January 1965 by Emrys Hughes. This had been designed about 1959 by one of Mr Hughes' constituents, Alex Hanby of Dumfries, and had incorporated Burns' birthplace, the house in Dumfries where he had died and his statue from the same town.

The artists were invited on 13 August 1965 to submit designs for the stamp. In these invitations the GPO stressed the need for 'early and close co-operation with the Post Office and the printer so that your final designs will be suitable for printing without any subsequent attention'. The stamp printing firms of Harrison & Sons and Bradbury Wilkinson were also invited to submit designs but it would seem that a condition of their invitations was that the designs be produced by a Scottish artist. On or about 17 August, both contacted the GPO and declined to accept the invitation on the grounds that neither had any Scottish artists on their books.

INSTRUCTIONS TO ARTISTS

Earlier in 1965, the PMG expressed an interest in the instructions sent to artists to aid them with their designs. In early March he had been granted an audience with the Queen, at which the subject of the 'new stamp policy' was discussed. During this audience the Queen agreed that 'non-traditional' designs could be submitted for future issues. This was confirmed by a letter from the Queen's Private Secretary on 12 March 1965. It would appear that, during this audience, the question of the continued use of the Queen's head on stamps had been the subject of some discussion: certainly, the letter from the Palace contained the suggestion that the Royal cypher be used in place of the head 'on certain stamps'.

Benn had apparently inspected three sets of these instructions before they were sent out and now did the same for the Burns stamps, receiving a draft copy on 4 August. He made only minor changes before approving them 9 August, indicating that the radical proposals in this document had been thought out beforehand rather than being a last minute whim imposed by the PMG.

Artists were asked to prepare a set of two designs in denominations of 4d and 1s 3d 'to commemorate the anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns'. The instructions outlined what it termed the 'traditional' design before going on to inform artists that the Queen had consented to consider 'non-traditional' ideas. Artists were given 'absolute freedom as to size, features of design, colour and art work' and were encouraged to submit 'any designs that they wish'. They were even given the option, apparently at the Queen's own suggestion, of omitting her head, to be replaced by the words 'UK Postage', the Crown or the Royal cypher.

It was explained that allowing artists the freedom to submit non-traditional designs was experimental in response to criticism of past briefs for being too restrictive. However, designers were warned that there were no guarantees that any non-traditional designs would be selected and so were advised to submit a traditional design as an alternative to their non-traditional submissions.

The 'Instructions to Artists' contained information relating to 'traditional' designs:
the stamps to measure 1.5 inches by 0.86 inches (exclusive of gutters and perforations);
designs to be 'four times linear stamp size';
designs could be either symbolic or pictorial;
the selection of a theme, or themes, was left to the artist;
the Queen's head was to be included, with copies of the approved portrait supplied in two different sizes;
the denomination was to be included at least once and shown in 'clear Arabic numerals';

the wording 'Robert Burns' was to appear.

Designers were free to incorporate a representation of Burns' head provided that this remained part of the overall design and was smaller than that of the Queen.

A number of the instructions related to both traditional and non-traditional designs. Artists were, for example, asked to prepare their designs on 'good quality white board' in no more than three colours. They were told that the stamps would be printed by Harrison & Sons in multicoloured photogravure, a process which would reproduce a number of graduated tones; artists were therefore advised to ensure that their materials would permit photography of 'each tone in its true value'.

The fee for each design was 60 guineas with a maximum of 120 guineas for any one artist. Each design selected for production as a stamp would earn a further 190 guineas making a total fee of 250 guineas for each design. Artists were informed that the deadline for submissions was Monday, 13 September 1965.

SUBMITTED DESIGNS

A total of 40 designs were submitted:

G F Huntly - 2 designs (1 and 2), received 6 September;

R McLean - 10 (3 to 12), received 13 September;

I McLeish - 2 (13 and 14), sent 12 September;

J Kinneir - 4 (15 to 18), sent 13 September;

A B Imrie - 4 (19 to 22), sent 13 September;

S Black - 8 (23 to 30), sent 13 September;

J Fleming - 5 (31 to 35), sent 13 September;

P J McCulloch - 5 (36, 37, 37A, 38, 39).

A number of the artists had made use of the freedom granted them and several non-traditional designs were produced.

DESIGN SELECTION

The Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) met on 22 September 1965; present were James Fitton (In the chair), Sir John Wilson, Prof. R Guyatt, A Games, Mrs C G Tomrley (Secretary), A A Mead and D H Beaumont of the GPO, R F York of Harrison and Sons, plus J A Restall (as observer) and S Ingram (from the Post Office Savings Department).

The submitted designs were reviewed and the Committee selected as first choice Kinneir's non-traditional designs, 15 and 16. These simple designs featured only Burns' signature on a white background with 'UK Postage' in place of the Queen's head. However, the Committee did not appear to feel any enthusiasm for the notion of non-traditional designs as it instructed that the Queen's head be added. Second choice was Huntly's designs 1 and 2 that featured portraits of Burns. It was requested that all four be produced as colour essays.

The Committee also asked that essays be prepared of McLean's designs (5 and 6) featuring the words from 'Auld Lang Syne' around the border, although a lighter background colour was recommended. Essays of McLean's design 7, which featured a large portrait of Burns flanked by a plough, were also required as were essays of Kinneir's other designs, 17 and 18.

A summary of the essays held at the British Postal Museum & Archive are:

McLean design 4: 4d purple;

McLean design 5: 4d Purple; 4d with UK Postage; ditto with green surround; ditto with pink surround, ditto with red surround;

McLean design 6: 4d with UK Postage;

McLean design 7;

Stuart Black design 24;

Kinneir design: 4d and 1s 3d with Queen's head, 4d and 1s 3d with 'UK Postage'.

On 6 October, the PMG asked that essays of Imrie's design 22 be produced, another non-traditional design showing a portrait of Burns alongside his signature and a plough, but its most notable feature was the substitution of the Royal cypher for the Queen's head, the only design submitted to do so. The PMG was aware that time was running short but he requested that essays of this design be produced before any final selection was made. This design was essayed as both a 4d and 1s 3d value.

Around 14 October, revised artwork of Kinneir's 'signature' design was forwarded to Harrisons. Three essays in both values were delivered to the GPO on 19 October.

At a further meeting of the SAC on 20 October 1965 were J Fitton (Chairman), Lady Sempill, Sir John Wilson, Prof. R Guyatt, A Games, Mrs C G Tomrley, J N White, R F York (of Harrisons), S A Ridler (of Bradbury Wilkinson), and A A Mead (of the GPO).

Mr Fitton announced that Sir Kenneth Clark had retired as chairman and that he had been appointed to replace Sir Kenneth. The Committee viewed the essays.

The GPO representative informed the Committee that it was 'very unlikely' that any design without the Queen's head would be chosen, despite what had been said about freedom in the 'Instructions to Artists'.

Previously the first choice had been Kinneir's 'signature' designs, from which the Queen's head had been omitted: the head had now been added to these designs. This resulted in the signature being re-positioned and it was felt the signature was now vulnerable to obliteration by cancellation. It was now the opinion of the Committee that these designs be presented as the reserve choice on submission to the Queen. It was agreed that the position of the signature would be reviewed if the designs were selected by the Queen.

Huntly's two designs (1 and 2) now became the Committee's first choice. It was suggested Huntly work with Harrisons to effect some minor modifications; principally that the cross of St Andrew on design 1 be made thicker. Design 1 was recommended for the 4d and design 2 for the 1s 3d.

On 2 November, Harrisons sent four more sets of essays to the GPO. These are described on the delivery notice as 'colour variations' of the 4d value so it is to be assumed that they were further essays of Huntly's design 1.

SUBMISSION TO PALACE

On 5 November 1965, the PMG wrote to the Queen with four designs for the Burns issue. Huntly's designs were recommended as first choice (designated A1 and A2) with Kinneir's designs as alternatives (designated B1 and B2). It was noted in the submission that the white cross of Saint Andrew was to be broadened and the background colour made a lighter shade of blue. Similarly the Queen was told that, should B1 and/or B2 be adopted, the signature would be raised to avoid the risk of obliteration by the postmark.

The PMG also enclosed an essay of a further design (designated 'C') that had not been recommended for adoption but merely included as a matter of interest. This essay was of Imrie's design 22 which the PMG had personally requested in early October showing the Queen's head replaced by the Royal cypher. He referred to the letter he had received from the Queen's Private Secretary on 12 March 1965, in which this particular experiment had been suggested.

A reply on 10 November expressed the Queen's approval of designs A1 and A2.

The SAC met again on 11 November and considered all the essays of the Huntly designs. It recommended those for both the 4d (subject to the Queen's head being given a 'softer presentation') and 1s 3d. These approved essays were sent to the printers the same day. In the letter Harrisons was asked to include the name of the artist and the printer on the gutter of each stamp.

Further essays were delivered on 22 November. These were probably of the finalised Huntly designs, and some of were certainly used at a press preview of the stamps.

PRINTING DETAILS

The stamps were printed on white paper bearing the multiple crown watermark in sheets of 120 stamps. They were produced with and without phosphor bands, those with having three vertical bands.

The total quantity of stamps printed was 108 million of the 4d value and 9 million of the 1s 3d. The stamps were issued on 25 January 1966 and officially withdrawn from sale on 29 July the same year. However, the stamps were later put back on sale, reportedly in error, at the Philatelic Counters in London and Edinburgh and at the Edinburgh Festival.

The sales were:

Ordinary

4d – 77,905,176

1s 3d – 5,685,096

Phosphor

4d – 8,738,520

1s 3d – 1,226,160.

PRESS CONFERENCE

At a Press Conference held on 25 November 1965, the stamps were officially announced: the accompanying Press and Broadcast Notice described the stamps thus:

4d - The portrait of Burns is an adaptation of the Skiving chalk drawing of c1798, with the Saltire cross of St Andrew - the national flag of Scotland as a background.

1s 3d - The Naysmith portrait of the poet is superimposed on a background design which contains abstract symbols of his life; the plough, a scroll and quill, the rose, a stook of barley, the thistle, the gable-end of Mossgiel farmhouse. The script lettering is based on the calligraphic forms in Burns' signature on letters written towards the end of his life.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS

The GPO produced both a specially-designed first day envelope and a presentation pack.

The first day envelope, available from mid-December at 6d, featured the cottage in Alloway, Ayrshire, where Burns was born. The recently-established Philatelic Bureau in Edinburgh offered a full first day cover service.

Six special postmarks were used for cancelling first day covers, at Alloway, Ayr, Dumfries, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Kilmarnock. The normal postmark for London was not available for this issue as that office did not service any of the first day covers.

Special philatelic posting boxes were available at 68 offices around the country, at which presentation packs were also on sale. These contained a set of mint stamps and an information leaflet, at a cost of 2s 6d, plus a handling charge for bulk orders. A souvenir booklet (without stamps) was also put on sale from mid-December at 1s 0d.

G F Huntly was commissioned to design the presentation pack by the Postal Services Department around 18 November 1965. However, responsibility for producing this pack shifted to Edinburgh's Head Postmaster with the opening of the Philatelic Bureau there and it seems that Huntly's designs were overlooked. Instead the Head Postmaster commissioned another artist whose designs were used instead.

POSTMASTER GENERAL'S GIFTS

It was customary for the PMG to make gifts of new stamps. The Philatelic Bureau made available to the Postal Services Department 60 presentation packs and 60 first day covers, the latter cancelled with the rubber 'Alloway' handstamp.

A full list of recipients is not available, but seemingly included the Queen, Princess Margaret, Prime Minister, Emrys Hughes and Milner Gray (of the SAC). It seems reasonable to assume that gifts were also sent to the Speaker of the House of Commons, the designers, members of the Stamp Advisory Committee, former PMGs and Assistant PMGs, the PMG or equivalent minister of the self-governing members of the Commonwealth.

SIMON BATES
11 MARCH 1993.

REFERENCES

British Postal Museum & Archive file:
P 539/66 - Special Stamp: Robert Burns, 25 Jan 1966.