

SPECIAL STAMP ISSUE

25th Anniversary of the Battle of Britain

Date of issue: 13 September 1965



‘Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.’ With these words Winston Churchill paid tribute to the men of the Royal Air Force who defended Britain against the German air assault in the autumn of 1940. Only months after the retreat from Dunkirk, Britain faced perhaps the darkest days of the entire war as the Luftwaffe launched an all-out bombardment intended to pave the way for a German invasion. For the first time in the history of warfare, an entire battle was fought in the air: the Battle of Britain took place between 10 July and 31 October 1940, reaching its climax in mid-September when the German bombers began to blitz London. By the end of the battle, the RAF had lost 911 aircraft with 414 pilots killed; Luftwaffe losses totalled 1,733 aircraft.

REQUEST FOR A SPECIAL STAMP ISSUE

September 1965 marked the 25th anniversary of the Battle of Britain, and the Royal Air Forces Association (RAFA) planned a special commemoration during Battle of Britain Week, an event that had been held annually since the war. On 11 May 1964 L G Johnson, a holder of the Distinguished Flying Cross and Deputy General Secretary of the Royal Air Forces Association, wrote to the Postmaster General (PMG), Reginald Bevens MP, with a request that the Post Office issue special stamps to mark the anniversary. He wrote: ‘This turning point in our history ... should not be allowed to pass uncommemorated, and one very appropriate way which would bring the occasion to the minds of people both at home and overseas would be the issue of a special postage stamp or stamps as is customary on similar anniversaries of national importance or interest.’

Despite Johnson’s assertion that stamps commemorating ‘similar anniversaries’ were the norm, D H Beaumont of the Postal Services Department replied that a Battle of Britain issue would not be possible, based on the Post Office’s policy regarding special stamps. Stamps were issued only to mark ‘important current events of national or international interest and Royal and postal anniversaries’. Despite its historical importance, the Battle of Britain did not qualify under these guidelines. The Post Office was reluctant to make exceptions to the policy of not commemorating historical events because ‘The history of our country is so rich

in outstanding events and persons that if we were to abandon this policy we would be faced with the invidious task of discriminating between important anniversaries of various types or of greatly increasing the number of special issues.'

An acknowledgement of Beaumont's reply was sent by Johnson on 9 June; however, the RAFA did not allow the matter to drop.

On 2 July the PMG received a letter from Donald Chapman MP seeking a reply to a constituent's letter urging the Post Office to commemorate the Battle of Britain with a special stamp. This letter was from the Secretary, Midland Area, of the Royal Air Forces Association and indicated that the Association had passed a resolution at its Annual Conference in May to seek a stamp. This marked the beginning of a concerted campaign by the RAFA to persuade the PMG to overturn the decision to reject the proposal. During July and August, the PMG received representations from over 20 MPs on behalf of the Royal Air Forces Association. Each of the requests was met with a reply along the same lines as that given to Johnson. In the House of Commons the PMG was asked twice, on 7 and 28 July, about a possible stamp, and on both occasions gave a negative reply.

The reason behind the Post Office's rejection lay in the nature of the anniversary. Earlier in the year, stamps marking the 400th anniversary of the birth of Shakespeare had been issued as the festival marking the anniversary constituted a current event of significant national importance. The apparent lack of festivities to mark the Battle of Britain made such justification impossible, leading the Post Office to reject it on the grounds that anniversaries, other than Royal or postal ones, were not commemorated by stamps. It is clear, however, that the decision was far from straightforward. As late as 26 August, almost three months after the original request, the senior officials within the Post Office were still debating the matter.

On 26 August Hugh Fraser MP, Minister of Defence for the Royal Air Force, wrote to the PMG requesting he reconsider the decision. Representations from such a senior level required a serious reply and the background correspondence is revealing. A note from the PMG's Private Secretary to W A Wolverson, the Deputy Director General, clearly indicates that Reginald Bevins was in favour of approving the request. The difficulty lay in how to justify this in terms of current policy. A minute prepared by Brigadier Holmes, the Director of Postal Services, outlined the position of the Post Office.

The first objections related to having to commemorate a multiplicity of anniversaries once an exception was made, accompanied by the difficulty of climbing down following the rejections sent to those MPs who had previously made representations on behalf of the Royal Air Forces Association. In consultation the Foreign Office revealed its objection on the grounds that commemorating the Battle of Britain risked giving offence to the Germans at precisely the time that the UK was trying to forge links with the European Community, while it was concerned about the potential impact a stamp might have on the planned Royal visit by the Queen to Germany in May 1965. These views were, however, to remain confidential due to the political embarrassment that a leak to the press would undoubtedly cause.

The Ministry of Defence was informed of the Post Office's position on 28 September and of the Foreign Office's objection. Interestingly when Geraint Morgan MP wrote on 18 August suggesting the refusal to issue stamps was for fear of upsetting the sensitivities of the Germans, he was told in no uncertain terms that such considerations were in no way involved.

There was a marked difference of opinion between the politician at the head of the Post Office and the civil servants who formed the policy. The PMG's willingness to accede to the request, despite established policy, was firmly resisted by Wolverson and Holmes who took the view that relaxing the rules would only create further problems. The PMG succumbed to the civil servants' point of view. However, subsequent events would shift the balance of power.

A NEW POSTMASTER GENERAL - A NEW POLICY

The general election of October 1964 resulted in a narrow Labour victory, and with the new government came a new Postmaster General. Anthony Wedgwood Benn immediately undertook a full review of the Post Office, including special stamps: no decision would be taken regarding the Battle of Britain stamps until a new policy was in place. Wedgwood Benn's policy for issuing commemorative stamps was announced in Parliament on 15 December after having been approved by the Post Office Board of Directors on 25 November. It stated that the criteria for issuing special stamps would in future be:

- To celebrate events of national and international importance;
- To commemorate important anniversaries;
- To reflect the British contribution to world affairs, including the arts and sciences;
- To extend public patronage to the arts by encouraging the development of minuscule art.

At the same time the PMG announced that the stamp programme for 1965 was still under review and asked for submissions from Members of the House and the public. While the Battle of Britain anniversary now qualified for inclusion, no public statement was to be made.

In fact decision to issue stamps to commemorate the Battle of Britain had been taken at the meeting of the Post Office Board on 25 November, but it was mid-January before the news was unofficially released. The new Labour Minister of Defence for the Royal Air Force, Lord Shackleton, wrote to the PMG on 5 January 1965 to lend his support for a Battle of Britain issue. An internal minute to Wedgwood Benn dated 14 January proposed that Lord Shackleton be informed of the decision in confidence prior to the announcement of the 1965 programme in the House of Commons. However, difficulty still existed over the previous objections to a Battle of Britain issue raised by the Foreign Office. In the event, the PMG wrote to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Patrick Gordon Walker, explaining that together with the Battle of Britain stamps, the Post Office intended to issue nine other stamp series including one marking the 20th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. The Foreign Office does not appear to have objected further, and in his reply to Lord Shackleton of 20 January, Wedgwood Benn expressed his opinion that there was little substance to the Foreign Office's objections.

The official announcement of the stamp programme for 1965 came in a reply to a Parliamentary question on 1 February. The PMG announced that the Battle of Britain anniversary would be commemorated in September, although no date of issue or denominations were specified.

COMMISSIONING DESIGNS

Once the decision had been taken in November, the design process was initiated. Mrs C G Tomrley of the Council of Industrial Design (CoID) proposed two designers for the stamps as early as 4 December. Invitations to submit designs and accompanying 'Instructions to Artists' were sent to Andrew Restall and David Gentleman on 4 January by D H Beaumont of Postal Services. Their brief called for designs for 4d, 9d and 1s 3d stamps. Each stamp was to include the Queen's head in one of two sizes, either that on the 3d definitive or the smaller version as seen on the ½d definitive. The choice of theme was left to the designers, but each stamp would carry the inscription '25th Anniversary of the Battle of Britain'. Both Restall and Gentleman accepted the invitations sent to them, the latter collaborating with his wife Rosalind Dease.

Andrew Restall's initial designs were received by Beaumont of Postal Services on 22 February but were considered too controversial. The problem arose in the depiction of 'recognisable German aircraft' being shot down by RAF fighters. Restall was asked to redraw these so as to obscure the identity of the aircraft in flames, in particular by removing the German crosses displayed on the wings. Gentleman was also informed that the Post Office was concerned that designs should not offend the Germans in the light of previous Foreign Office objections to the stamp issue. The initial roughs produced by Gentleman and Dease had included a number of designs that depicted aircraft being shot down or wrecked. It was suggested that both designers include less controversial subjects such as anti-aircraft ground batteries, civil defence services and scenes of bombed destruction in London. The idea that those involved in the Battle of Britain, other than the RAF, in both support and defensive roles should be included had been proposed to the Post Office.

SELECTING DESIGNS

Andrew Restall's three designs were received a week prior to the meeting of the SAC on 9 March. Each carried the title '25th Anniversary of the Battle of Britain' as stipulated. The 4d showed a Spitfire against a brown background in which was shown an aerial battle involving RAF fighters and Luftwaffe bombers as red searchlights beamed across the sky. The 9d depicted an AA battery in action with red searchlights and a red foreground. The 1s 3d showed St Paul's Cathedral framed by the vapour trails of dog-fighting airplanes.

David Gentleman and Rosalind Dease submitted their initial designs on the morning of the SAC meeting. Gentleman had previously had discussions with Wedgwood Benn about innovative stamp designs, and decided to use the Battle of Britain commission as an opportunity to experiment. In particular he proposed two radical ideas: the omission of the

Queen's head and issuing stamps of the same value as se-tenant sets. In order to demonstrate how this might be achieved, Gentleman and Dease submitted 15 designs, 14 of which omitted the Queen's head. An acetate overlay showed the position of the denomination and the words 'UK postage' which was necessary to identify the stamps as British. The 15th design was a reworking of one of the 14 but incorporating the Queen's head to show how the designs could be adapted to include it.

Designs by Gentleman and Dease –

4d - all on one sheet:

fuselages only: Hurricanes and Messerschmidt 110 twin-engined fighter;

noses only: Spitfire and Heinkel 111 bomber;

fins and rudders only: Spitfire and Heinkel 111 bomber;

wing tips only: Spitfire and Messerschmidt 109 fighter;

attacking: Spitfire patrol and Dornier 217 bomber;

attacking: Spitfire and Junkers 87B - Stuka dive bomber;

ditched aircraft: Hurricane patrol and ditched Dornier 217 bomber tail;

fuselages only: two Spitfires;

patrolling: one large Spitfire (FZ) and two distant;

patrol banking: four Spitfires;

patrol in echelon: five Spitfires;

air/sea rescue: ditched Spitfire with pilot parachuting; RAF rescue launch.

9d design:

Hurricane pilot in cockpit on patrol.

1s 3d design:

St Paul's Cathedral and vapour trails above bombed skyline.

Alternate design with Queen's head:

wing tips only: Spitfire and Messerschmidt 109 fighter.

A lengthy synopsis accompanied these designs giving insight into the thought process leading to the eventual artwork. When choosing their subject matter, Gentleman and Dease had considered such auxiliary services as Civil Defence and the Anti-Aircraft units, but had considered it impossible to portray these in such a way as to identify solely with the Battle of Britain as opposed to some other aspect of the war. They therefore decided to focus on subjects readily identifiable with the battle. Two of the designs portrayed the earliest phase of the battle that took place largely over the Channel, hence one showed an RAF launch. The 1s 3d design was inspired by Cecil Beaton's famous photograph of St Paul's Cathedral framed in a smoking ruin.

In an effort to allay the fears of the Post Office over the diplomatic problems, the designers explained their reasons for the style of their work. While they recognised the need to avoid a jingoistic portrayal of the period, in the public imagination the Battle of Britain was remembered in a highly personalised way as battles between individual pilots many of whom became household names. Popular newspapers of the day published daily scoreboards of the encounters, keeping running totals of each pilot's kills. In keeping with

the popular perception Gentleman and Dease had concentrated on the most famous aircraft: the Spitfire and Hurricane. They felt that sensitivities apart it was necessary to portray the combat elements. In keeping with the public conception of the Battle of Britain, they decided to show the 'duels in the air' between different types of aircraft. Thus designs showed RAF fighters closing in on German 'planes, as in design. In an effort to avoid the more lurid details, the designers had decided to use conventional aircraft recognition silhouettes, thus also providing continuity of style and colour throughout the set.

This continuity was extremely important because of the manner in which Gentleman wished the stamps to be presented. It was intended that the first twelve designs would be printed on the same sheet in one denomination as a se-tenant set. According to Gentleman, presumably after consultations with Harrison and Sons, printing such a set was a relatively straightforward matter. The only conditions were that the colour range for the set must be uniform across all of the stamps, and the number of stamps in the set must be twelve or any divisor of twelve. Such a set, it was argued, would be of great interest to both philatelists and the public in general, although problems might potentially arise over recognition by staff at post office counters, a difficulty easily resolved by careful design and uniform use of a narrow colour range.

DESIGN SELECTION

All the designs were seen by the SAC, chaired by Sir Kenneth Clark. Unfortunately the minutes of this meeting are not in the British Postal Museum & Archives files, so the reaction to the controversial Gentleman and Dease designs is not known. However, D H Beaumont made the following notes.

Following receipt of the Gentleman and Dease designs at 8.30am, he took them to the CoID for the SAC meeting. The Committee considered all of Restall's designs unworthy of essaying and rejected them outright. As regards the Gentleman and Dease designs, the Committee was informed that the designers had exceeded their brief in the eyes of the Post Office officials and it appears little or no mention was made of the proposal to issue se-tenant designs of the 4d value. The Committee, while not greatly impressed, chose three of these designs as a second choice set - Spitfire and Junkers 87B - Stuka dive bomber; four Spitfires; and St Paul's Cathedral and vapour trails above bombed skyline - which were returned to the artist for inclusion of the Queen's head. To meet the need for more designs Sir Kenneth Clark suggested a painting by Paul Nash entitled 'Battle of Britain 1940'. It was agreed to obtain a copy for the Committee to view on 11 March.

That evening Gentleman telephoned to say that he was meeting with the PMG at his home the following morning and requested his artwork. Beaumont tried to contact the Post Office Directorate for more information regarding the meeting of which he was unaware, but was unable to do so. Gentleman collected the artwork. The meeting between Gentleman and Wedgwood Benn took place over breakfast on 10 March at the instigation of the PMG. Wedgwood Benn had obtained permission from the Prime Minister for an audience with the Queen to discuss the possibility of submitting unconventional stamp designs for Royal approval: in particular, he intended to submit designs which omitted the Queen's head. The

PMG's audience with the Queen took place at Buckingham Palace on the afternoon of 10 March. The Queen expressed an interest in seeing the unconventional designs, upon which Wedgwood Benn produced the Gentleman and Dease designs for the Battle of Britain stamps. Wedgwood Benn describes the scene in his diaries 'Out of the Wilderness, Diaries 1963-67': I unlocked my bag and spread out on the floor twelve huge design models of the stamps provided by Gentleman ... I then knelt on the floor and one after the other passed up to the Queen the Battle of Britain stamps bearing the words 'Great Britain' and no royal head on them. It was a most hilarious scene because I had my papers all over the place and she was peering at something that had obviously never been shown to her or even thought about at the Palace before.

The Queen agreed to consider such unconventional designs, a concession which Wedgwood Benn took to be approval of his proposal that the Monarch's head could be removed from stamps when appropriate. Subsequent events proved he was optimistic in this interpretation.

The SAC met again on 11 March to see the reproduction of the Paul Nash painting, agreeing it ought to form the basis of their first choice designs. Harrison and Sons Ltd were informed of this decision later that day and asked to produce essays in the normal commemorative stamp format, namely double the size of a definitive. Their artist was to consult Professor Guyatt of the Royal College of Art for advice. Postal Services arranged for the painting, which belonged to the Imperial War Museum, to be loaned to Harrison and Sons for photography, undertaken between 15 and 22 March. On 17 March Mr York of Harrison and Sons telephoned Beaumont to enquire as to the legend to appear on the stamps: Beaumont replied '25th Anniversary of the Battle of Britain'. This was, however, too lengthy to fit with the Nash painting and York suggested 'Battle of Britain 1940', to which Beaumont agreed. The change was confirmed after checking with Gentleman that the revised wording would suit his designs. Harrison and Sons prepared essays of the Nash painting in three versions: the first from a photograph of the original; the second based on a free copy of the painting by Anthony Farrar-Bell; the third an interpretative reproduction of the painting in which the dimensions were altered to fit the stamp format. It appears that Romek Marber was commissioned for this third version by Harrison and Sons as he was in contact with Professor Guyatt about the painting.

Gentleman prepared the three designs selected by the SAC for essaying with the Queen's head. Essays were forwarded to the Post Office by Harrison and Sons on 25 March for a SAC meeting the same day.

The 4d essay showed the tail of a wrecked bomber, however the SAC approved the other designs for two of the three stamps to be issued, but rejected 4d design as unsuitable, no reason being given in the minutes. Thus the Committee had only three designs, two by Gentleman and Dease and the Paul Nash painting, to recommend to the Queen for three stamps, but it was felt time did not permit the commissioning of more designs.

Although the SAC rejected his ideas for a se-tenant set, Gentleman did not allow the matter to rest. He had a powerful ally in the PMG. Wedgwood Benn's diaries make it clear that while he favoured innovation, the civil servants at the Post Office did their utmost to be

obstructive. So Gentleman and Wedgwood Benn conducted private consultations that virtually amounted to a parallel selection process. On 12 April, Brigadier Holmes, Director of Postal Services, received a minute from the PMG requesting additional essays. Gentleman had met Wedgwood Benn the previous Saturday and sought authority to have six of his designs essayed as a se-tenant block. Holmes was asked to have two sets of essays prepared: the set with the Queen's head on each stamp, the second to include the Queen's head on the top right hand stamp only, while the remaining five stamps included 'UK'. All these essays were to be shown to the SAC and the PMG. The designs were primarily versions of those originally submitted by Gentleman and Dease, though some variations did occur.

Designs for se-tenant block of six –

Set A: without the Queen's head

Top row -

Flight of Supermarine Spitfires;

Hawker Hurricane pilot about to engage approaching Junkers JU88 and a Messerschmidt Bf 109E;

Wing tips of Messerschmidt Bf 109E and Spitfire.

Bottom row -

Spitfires attacking a Heinkel HE 111;

Hurricane attacking a Junkers JU 87B dive bomber;

flight of Hurricanes over a ditched Dornier DO 17 Z 'Flying Pencil' bomber.

Set B: with the Queen's head

The same as set A except on second stamp of bottom row a Spitfire is substituted for the Hurricane.

Gentleman and Dease had also produced two single designs, one new and one from their first set:

9d - Messerschmidt 109 E fighter after a forced landing in the Home Counties; radar masts in the distance; curving vapour trails of a dogfight, and the high straight trails of more approaching raiders.

4d - St Paul's Cathedral amidst a devastated City.

The artwork was forwarded to Harrison and Sons on 14 April together with instructions to replace the former inscription by 'Battle of Britain 1940'.

Essays were received at Post Office Headquarters between 25 March and 23 April, including those of Paul Nash's painting.

The SAC met on 27 April to consider the essays requested a month previously. The Nash painting was seen in three versions: the original painting, a free version drawn by Anthony Farrar-Bell and a version in which the dimensions had been altered. The latter two were rejected, while the essay of the original painting was approved with a red rim border. This was selected as first choice for the 1s 3d design. Two of the Gentleman and Dease designs

were selected as first choice for the other two stamps: 4d - the St Paul's Cathedral design; 9d - a wrecked and grounded German fighter submitted as a 9d design in the second set put forward by Gentleman and Dease in late March. The SAC was informed by the Palace and PMG that it would be required to submit alternatives for each design to the Queen. The PMG stated that should the Committee be unable or unwilling to select alternatives, he would do so himself. In the light of this, the Committee repeated the original three Gentleman and Dease designs selected as a second choice set.

Instructions for further essays of the selected designs were sent to Harrison and Sons by Beaumont on 30 April. Essays of the Paul Nash painting with the red rim and the St Paul's Cathedral design with the value changed to 4d were requested, in addition to the other essays currently being produced. These were essays of the se-tenant set and of Andrew Restall's three designs which, despite having been rejected by the SAC, had been revived for political considerations. Several senior military officers and the Minister of Defence for the Army had submitted requests that ground forces involved in the Battle of Britain be recognised in the stamp issue. Although almost the same as his original submissions, these designs by Restall differed slightly from the others. They included the inscription 'Battle of Britain, 1940' and a number of design changes. The 4d featuring a Spitfire now had a blue background, while the red coloured searchlights on the 9d were changed to orange and the foreground colouring omitted. The position of the guns and people had also been slightly altered. The 1s 3d design featuring St Paul's Cathedral was essentially unaltered apart from the change of wording. The essays of Restall's designs were sent to Beaumont on 6 May.

Essays of the St Paul's Cathedral design by Gentleman and Dease as the 4d value were received on 14 May. The text 'Battle of Britain 1940' had been moved to the left and lightened to make it easier to read. On 20 May essays of the se-tenant sets were ready, those without the Queen's head were of the 4d value, while the set in which each stamp had the Queen's head had been essayed as 4d, 9d and 1s 3d. Wedgwood Benn saw these essays when he visited Harrison and Sons on 14 May and asked that they be shown to the SAC on 27 May. Final essays, of the approved version of the Paul Nash painting, were sent to Beaumont on 26 May.

When the SAC met on 27 May it was not shown the se-tenant set in either version. This was a direct contradiction of the PMG's instructions and is indicative of the extent to which Post Office officials attempted to undermine Wedgwood Benn's reforms. The SAC reaffirmed its first and second choice recommendations of the meeting of 27 April. Restall's design showing anti-aircraft gunners, the only one of his three designs put forward at this stage, was again considered unacceptable and rejected. A question arose over the RAF roundels that appeared on the 'wing-tips' design by Gentleman and Dease. Some of the Committee members were convinced that these were incorrect; however, subsequent inquiries to the Air Historical Branch (RAF) at the Ministry of Defence proved that the roundels were accurate.

SUBMISSION TO THE PALACE

At the end of May a rather anomalous situation existed with regard to the Battle of Britain stamps. The SAC had recommended two sets of three stamps each as first and second choices

for submission to the Palace. The PMG, however, supported a se-tenant set of six stamps only one of which bore the Queen's head, and which had not been seen by the Committee. A confrontation was inevitable, and it came in late June. On 24 June, Kenneth Hind of Postal Services prepared a minute outlining the proposed submission to the Palace for the PMG's approval. Hind reviewed the design and selection process that had taken place over the previous months, but neglected to make any reference to the se-tenant set. Instead Hind reminded the PMG of the first and second choice sets of the SAC and then brought up the matter of Restall's anti-aircraft battery design. It was felt this should be included in the recommendation, despite its having been rejected twice by the SAC, in order to avoid the controversy which failure to include any reference to ground forces would provoke. Hind therefore suggested that the Paul Nash design be dropped in favour of Restall's anti-aircraft battery design.

When these recommendations were put to the PMG for approval on 29 June, he was surprised to find that the se-tenant sets had not been included for submission to the Palace. When he enquired as to why they had been omitted, he was informed he had signed a minute indicating the idea should be dropped. Failing to recall having done so, Wedgwood Benn asked to see the minute. It turned out to be a lengthy paper into which one short phrase had been inserted, referring to the difficulty of producing multi-design stamps in the time available, in the hope that he would not notice it.

Wedgwood Benn decided to rewrite entirely the letter to the Palace and make new recommendations. He reminded the Queen of her agreement in principle to the idea of unconventional designs, and recommended the se-tenant block with the Queen's head on the top right hand stamp only and 'UK Postage' on the others as first choice for the 4d value. The se-tenant set with the Queen's head on each stamp was recommended as an alternative. Wedgwood Benn accepted Hind's proposal over the Restall anti-aircraft battery design, and recommended it as first choice for the 9d value. Gentleman's St Paul's Cathedral design was recommended for the 1s 3d value. The other designs selected by the SAC were included in the brief outlining details of the designs and were shown to the Queen, but were not recommended.

The following day, Wedgwood Benn appears to have reconsidered pursuing designs without the Queen's head. Although the Queen did in theory have the right of veto over the stamps, constitutionally she was more or less obliged to accede to the PMG's wishes. In view of his own poor press coverage and the government's slender majority, just two seats, Wedgwood Benn felt that issuing stamps without the Queen's head would invite too much criticism from the Tory press. Consequently, on 1 July the PMG's office telephoned Sir Michael Adeane, the Queen's Private Secretary, who was showing Her Majesty the designs at the time of the call. Adeane indicated that she was not happy approving designs that did not bear her effigy, upon which Wedgwood Benn made it clear that the Post Office would be happy to issue either se-tenant set, leaving the choice to the Queen. This was seen by Wedgwood Benn as a tactical retreat that could be used to his advantage at a later date, as recorded in his diaries. 'This [the set with the Queen's head on each stamp] will therefore be the stamp that is issued in September, but the press will be shown the stamps that were rejected. It will focus publicity on the machinery of selection and I shall explain that I make recommendations to the Palace including the Stamp Advisory Committee's

recommendations but of course the final choice remains with the Queen. Once this has happened I think it will pave the way for further moves next year with the pictorial stamps.'

The Queen also approved the PMG's first choice for the 9d and the 1s 3d stamps on 1 July.

ISSUING THE STAMPS

The approved essays were sent to Harrison and Sons for final cylinder production and printing on 14 July by D H Beaumont.

A press conference at which both the accepted and unaccepted designs were shown was held on 27 July and invitations sent to the press plus those who had been involved in the design and production process, including members of the SAC. Harrison and Sons sent negatives for the three values to Beaumont on 22 July and the first block of four of the 9d and 1s 3d values the following day. All of the artwork was returned to the Post Office at the same time. Five sets of two blocks of six stamps in the 4d value were handed to D H Beaumont by Mr York of Harrison and Sons just prior to the press conference.

Andrew Restall was commissioned to design a first day envelope and presentation pack. His instructions called for an envelope which included 'Battle of Britain 1940' and 'GPO First Day Cover'. The design was to complement the stamps while not repeating the designs and would be lithography printed in two colours. A problem arose, however, with the se-tenant block. The standard size envelope recommended by the Post Office for all mailing was too small to hold all eight stamps plus a special design. While it would seem an obvious solution to provide a larger envelope, this was considered impolitic because the GPO was actively encouraging the public to use standard size envelopes to facilitate automatic sorting. In the end it was recommended in a minute from Brigadier Holmes, Director of Postal Services, to the PMG that the design on the cover be reduced to allow all of the stamps to be placed on a standard size envelope of 7¼ inches by 4½ inches. The presentation pack was to be slightly smaller than the first day cover, 7 inches by 4¼ inches, and would include technical information and notes regarding the designers, stamp design in general and the printers. An historical essay on the Battle of Britain was requested from the Director of Public Relations at the RAF for inclusion in the pack. Both of these designs, the cover featuring two Spitfires, were ready by the end of July and 250,000 covers were ordered for delivery on 25 August.

Anxiety was growing among the Post Office civil servants over Wedgwood Benn's plans to display the unaccepted designs without the Queen's head at the press conference. T A O'Brien, Director of Public Relations, wrote to Kenneth Hind of Postal Services on 22 July to express his concern that to show these designs would inevitably lead to questions about as to what was official policy. Wedgwood Benn was well aware of the consternation of his officials, but felt that by displaying these designs, the question of stamp design in general and the Queen's head in particular would come into the open. He was, however, extremely anxious that the matter be presented as a design difficulty, rather than part of his own republican agenda. In this he was successful because for designers such as David Gentleman the question was one of design not politics.

The press conference while a success for Wedgwood Benn in his attempt to expand the limits of stamp design, did lead to other difficulties. When the idea of a se-tenant block was first raised by Gentleman in March, he mentioned possible difficulties at post office counters over recognition. It had been suggested to the PMG that the Post Office Unions ought to be consulted. Wedgwood Benn had, however, issued specific instructions that the Unions were not to be consulted in advance over the change, probably because he feared that Union objections would lend more weight to the objections of the civil servants. Once the intention to issue se-tenant blocks was made public two letters were received, one from J F O'Loughlin, Assistant Secretary of the Post Office Departmental Whitley Council, and the other from John Currie, Assistant Secretary of the Union of Postal Workers, both inquiring as to why the staff had not been consulted about the proposed issue and what practice would apply to the sales of the stamps. Both O'Loughlin and Currie were told in mid-August that the 4d blocks of six stamps would be sold as sets or as they came only, and that customers would not be permitted to pick individual stamps from the sheets. This directive was subsequently changed as another storm of protest arose over the stamps.

Within days of the design of the stamps being released to the public on 27 July, headlines regarding the 'Swastika' stamps appeared in the press all over the country. Objections to two of the 4d designs featuring German military emblems were raised by two MPs, David Weitzman and George Jeger, the members for Stoke Newington and Goole respectively. The focus was the stamp depicting a ditched Dornier DO 17 Z 'Flying Pencil' bomber on which could be clearly seen a swastika; there was also some objection to the iron cross which featured on the wingtip of a Messerschmidt.

On 4 August four questions were put to the PMG in the House of Commons requesting the withdrawal of these two stamps, while on 30 June the Lord President of the Privy Council wrote to Wedgwood Benn inquiring as to his view on the stamps. The Lord President, and incidentally the Prime Minister, was concerned about possible offence to British Jews and to the Germans as it was inevitable that some of these stamps would find their way to Germany on British correspondence.

Wedgwood Benn's reply amounted to a spirited defence of the stamps pointing out that the swastika was seen split in two on the tail of a sinking bomber half obscured by water, a fact not readily apparent in the black and white photographs which had been issued to the press. The designs had been shown to the Queen twice, once in March and again when she approved them in June, and had already been printed in large quantities by Harrison and Sons. It would be impossible to withdraw two of the six stamps without cancelling the whole set, which would result in a colossal waste of expenditure. The Lord President was satisfied with this answer and the Post Office refused to withdraw any of the stamps.

Nevertheless, by the time the stamps were issued, objections had been received from 28 MPs and hundreds of members of the public, many of whom announced their intention to boycott the stamps. The threatened boycott resulted in a change to the instructions issued to Post Office staff regarding the sale of the stamps, and made clear that anyone refusing to use the so-called swastika stamp should be allowed to return it and offered the 4d definitive instead. Any loose stamps left over as a result were to be returned to the Supplies Department.

On 13 September, the day of issue, the Post Office provided a full philatelic service complete with first day of issue postmarks at the Philatelic Bureau and at Biggin Hill, Westerham, Kent. As was customary, the PMG sent a first day covers and presentation pack to the Queen; Princess Margaret; the Prime Minister; the Speaker of the House of Commons; members of the Stamp Advisory Committee; former Postmasters General and Assistants; the designers, plus on this occasion to Air Marshal Sir Harold Lydford, KBE, CB, DFC, Chairman of the Council of the Royal Air Forces Association; Air Chief Marshal Sir John Baker, GBE, KCB, MC, DFC, Vice-President and Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Royal Air Forces Association; General Sir Robertert Mansergh, GCB, KBE, MC, Master Gunner, Royal Artillery. The gift for the Speaker of the House was not in fact sent due to the death of Sir Harry Hylton-Foster on 2 September and the delay in announcing his successor.

The Battle of Britain stamps proved to be very popular despite threats of a boycott and sold well before they were withdrawn on 31 May 1966. Total sales were as follows:

Ordinary

4d - 103,417,440

9d - 6,195,960

1s 3d - 6,469,440

Phosphor

4d - 11,560,440

9d - 1,143,440

1s 3d - 1,239,840

Presentation packs - 28,524.

Although the process by which the designs had been selected was rather tortuous and they were not without controversy, the Battle of Britain stamps marked a significant stage in the development of British stamp design. On the whole the changes were gladly welcomed by both designers and the public alike; however, for some members of the old guard, they represented one innovation too many. On 5 October Sir Kenneth Clark resigned his post as Chairman of the SAC. Officially he stated that 30 years' involvement in stamp design was sufficient service. However, it was made known to the other members of the committee that he was not happy with the new stamp policy and in particular objected to the way in which the Battle of Britain stamps had been produced. James Fitton replaced Sir Kenneth in the chair.

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National Postal Museum
September, 1993

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