

SPECIAL STAMP HISTORY

900th anniversary of the Battle of Hastings

1966



The story of the stamps to mark the 900th anniversary of the Battle of Hastings began with a letter of 5 November 1962 to the Postmaster General (PMG) from the '1966 Celebrations Council', constituted in Hastings to prepare events to celebrate the anniversary. The letter suggested that 'this famous anniversary in the history of our country' be commemorated by stamps.

The reply from the GPO, dated 9 November, was non-committal. The Council was informed that the policy regarding special stamps confined them to 'outstanding current national or international events and Royal and postal anniversaries'. Even though the Battle of Hastings resulted in the death of the last Saxon King of England and marked the beginning of the Norman Monarchy, the 900th anniversary was clearly seen by the GPO as an historical, rather than royal, anniversary. Such anniversaries were excluded by the policy unless of outstanding historical importance and marked by notable current events. The GPO therefore asked to be kept informed of the events the Council proposed to stage, in order to decide whether this occasion warranted an issue of stamps.

Planning of the anniversary celebrations was in its infancy and the Council had only undeveloped ideas. These included re-enacting King Harold's march from Stamford Bridge and the Battle of Hastings itself. The feeling within the GPO was that the planned celebrations 'had the air of a local publicity drive' and, as such, did not merit an issue of stamps.

On 14 November 1962, Captain H Kerby asked in Parliament whether the PMG intended to issue stamps to commemorate the 900th anniversary of the Battle of Hastings. The Assistant PMG's (APMG) written reply of 26 November repeated the points made to the Council, but no decision was made as to whether any stamps would, or would not, be produced. It was pointed out that the stamp programme for 1966 would not be settled until the beginning of 1965 at the very earliest but the APMG assured Captain Kerby that the GPO would bear in mind the suggestion at that time.

Written requests were received from the public during 1964. One of these, from K I P Adamson of Doncaster on 17 December 1964, suggested that any stamps marking the Battle of Hastings be based on the Bayeux Tapestry. The GPO replied to all these enquiries pointing out that it was still too early for any decision. On 22 December 1964 there was another question in Parliament, asked this time by James Allason, but still no decision was made by the GPO.

Requests for stamps celebrating the battle continued during 1965, one even coming from Australia. A design suggested frequently was to incorporate the head of King William I with that of Queen Elizabeth II.

Mr Allason asked a further question in Parliament on 19 May 1965 as to whether any decision had been reached, and also suggested that a stamps could show William, Duke of Normandy, being offered the English Crown at Berkhamsted Castle.

By the late summer of 1965 the decision to issue stamps for the anniversary had been made. On 27 October the PMG was asked how many stamps he would be issuing in 1966 and one of the issues he announced was a Battle of Hastings series, intended to be issued on 14 October 1966.

Mr Allason then asked, on 3 November 1965, if the PMG would produce stamps which related to the Norman Conquest in general rather than to the Battle of Hastings alone, taking the opportunity to ask once again if one design could feature William being offered the Crown at Berkhamsted.

OBJECTIONS TO ISSUE

Sir John Eden wrote on behalf of one of his constituents on 24 November 1965 who objected 'very strongly' to the idea of the Battle of Hastings stamps. He felt that the GPO should not be seen to commemorate an English defeat and should instead 'issue stamps only for the anniversary of victories that occurred in English history'.

The GPO replied on 6 December stressing that the Battle of Hastings was a significant event and one that changed the course of English history. It mentioned that this was a very popular subject with the public and 'it would seem to be a very narrow outlook' to reject merely because it related to a defeat.

APPEALS FROM ORGANISATIONS

The co-ordinating Committee for the Commemoration of 1066 appears to be the successor to the 1966 Celebrations Council, organised on a more ambitious level. The Chairman, Sir R F S Denning wrote on 28 January 1966, asking that his committee see all designs for the Battle of Hastings stamps before any selection was made. He also suggested that the committee's symbol be incorporated into the designs.

While the GPO was prepared to consult with sponsors of special issues as to whether there was any preference of symbol or title, it preferred to leave it to the discretion of the stamp designers as how best to depict the subject. The particular symbol was thought by the GPO to be 'modernistic'.

The PMG's reply of 4 March declined to provide this committee with details of stamp designs in advance of the press launch. The reason given was the restrictions imposed by the tight timetable involved in the stamp production process. He did, however, undertake to advise the artists commissioned of the committee's symbol without making it obligatory.

In mid-March the committee wrote again asking if the designs might commemorate the Norman Conquest as a whole rather than be confined to the Battle of Hastings. This idea was not taken further. On 31 January 1966 the Director of the Society of Descendants of King William I, a charitable, non-profit making organisation, wrote to the PMG with a formal request that the Battle of Hastings stamps feature a portrait of King William I. This body was likewise told that designers were given the freedom to select their own themes. The GPO added that although it would not be instructing artists to use King William's head it was not improbable that some of the designs submitted might do so. The GPO wrote back to the Society of Descendants in May after all designs had been submitted, to tell them that the head of King William had not featured in any design.

INSTRUCTIONS TO ARTISTS

In a memorandum dated 21 September 1965 the PMG outlined a projected stamp programme for 1966 that envisaged selecting designs for the Battle of Hastings stamps through a schoolchildren's competition. There was a change of mind in January 1966 and the idea was transferred to the 1966 Christmas issue. Mr Beaumont of Postal Services Department therefore wrote to the Council of Industrial Design (CoID) to ask it to nominate artists to be invited to submit designs. In a reply dated 18 January, Mrs C G Tomrley suggested three designers, Edward Bawden, Clive Abbott and Miss Margaret Calvert. The CoID also suggested Cecil Keeling as 'a spare and as a new name'. Later, on 2 February 1966, Gordon Huntly was added to the list.

Accordingly, on 4 March, the GPO wrote to Miss Calvert, and Abbott, Bawden and Huntly inviting them to submit designs for the stamps. On 8 March the stamp printing firms of Harrison & Sons Ltd and Bradbury Wilkinson were also invited. The firms were instructed to submit designs as collective efforts on the part of their respective design departments, not as entries from individual artists.

Enclosed with all invitations were instructions that stated there would be three values, 4d, 6d and 1s 3d, so each artist was asked to prepare a set of three designs. Each design was to be in full colour on 'good-quality, white board' and all designs were to be submitted to GPO headquarters by 18 April 1966.

The choice of theme was left to the artist, although they were asked to incorporate '900th Anniversary Battle of Hastings' or 'Battle of Hastings 1066'. Artists were also to include a profile portrait of the Queen, in either black or white. Artists were to design their own profile portrait as the commissioned profile drawings were not as yet completed.

Artists were told to use not more than five colours and to use white as a background rather than black. They were also informed that the stamps would be printed in photogravure, which produced a number of graduated tones: a shade card was enclosed as a guide as to the range of tones available.

Fees were 60 guineas for each completed design up to a maximum of 180 guineas for any one artist. For each selected design there was an additional payment of 190 guineas. The payment was to include any modifications to the original design.

SUBMITTED DESIGNS

On 9 March 1966, Edward Bawden wrote to decline the invitation due to his already heavy work load. On 10 March Bradbury Wilkinson also declined, and so on 16 March the GPO extended the invitation to Cecil Keeling.

A total of 31 designs were submitted, the majority after the deadline of 18 April.

Cecil Keeling – 3 (received 14 April);
Clive Abbott – 9 (received 18 April);
Harrisons – 10 (7 received 19 April);
Gordon Huntly – 6 (3 received 19 April, 3 received 26 April);
Margaret Calvert – 3 (received 21 April).

All designs were horizontal and a number exceeded the dimensions specified in the 'Instructions to Artists'.

THE SELECTION PROCESS

These designs were viewed by a meeting of the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) on 3 May 1966: present were: James Fitton (Chairman), Anthony Wedgwood Benn (PMG), Mrs C G Tomrley (Secretary), Sir John Wilson, Prof. R Guyatt, F H K Henrion, Miss C M Farlane, plus D H Beaumont and A A Mead of the GPO, and D H Pentecost, Miss Mantz and R F York of Harrisons.

The SAC rejected Abbott's designs; it was felt he had chosen 'a rather unfortunate cameo head'. Harrisons produced four designs based on the Bayeux Tapestry and these too were rejected, together with another set of designs although both sets were thought good by the Committee. Keeling's designs attracted favourable comment but were not recommended for production as colour essays. The Committee's second choice was Miss Calvert's designs, but its first choice was three designs by David Gentleman that had been submitted through Harrisons. Gentleman was working on a separate commission from the PMG to prepare designs for all manner of stamp issues. His three designs were based on the Bayeux Tapestry and were put forward, together with Miss Calvert's designs, for production as colour essays.

Some essays were delivered on 9 June. On 13 June 1966 essays of further Gentleman designs were delivered, described on the delivery notice as being produced in strips of six stamps. It is not clear precisely as to the origins of these new designs, and the idea for a se-tenant strip.

At a further meeting of the SAC on 15 June 1966 were J Fitton, Lady Sempill, Prof. R Guyatt, A Games, M Grey, F H K Henrion, Mrs C G Tomrley, Miss C McFarlane, J N White, P I Fellows, plus the PMG and D P Wrattton, A A Mead, D H Beaumont and Miss Mantz of the GPO, and R F York of Harrisons.

All the essays of the designs by Gentleman and Miss Calvert were seen and Miss Calvert's were rejected. The Committee decided that the strip of six stamps would be produced as the 4d value and not 6d as essayed. The minutes show that there had been some discussion regarding printing

the silhouette of the Queen in gold. The committee agreed that printing the strip of 4d stamps in this manner would present 'insuperable technical and administrative difficulties' and it was decided that the Queen's head on these stamps be printed in black. The meeting confirmed that the Queen's head on the other two denominations would be printed in gold.

ROYAL APPROVAL

On 28 June 1966 the PMG wrote to seek the Queen's approval of the design; this came from the Palace of Holyroodhouse on 30 June.

On 5 July Beaumont wrote to Harrisons and the Supplies Department advising them of the approved essays:

4d (denomination changed from 6d)

(it would appear as if this one essay referred to all designs of stamp on the strip of six stamps.)

6d with Queen's head in gold, and denomination changed from 4d

1s 3d with Queen's head in gold.

Correspondence from Harrisons indicates that there was some uncertainty as to whether gold would, after all, be used for the Queen's head on the 6d and 1s 3d, with a suggestion that the Christmas stamps for 1966 might be printed in this way rather than the Battle of Hastings stamps.

PRINTING DETAILS

The 4d stamps were printed in se-tenant strips of six, the first time that the GPO had produced such a strip. The stamps were printed in sheets of 120 whereas the 6d and 1s 3d stamps were printed 60 stamps to a sheet.

The watermark used was multiple crowns which appeared sideways on the 1s 3d stamp. The 4d stamps have been found with the watermark inverted.

Nine colours were used to print the 4d, and five each for the 6d and 1s 3d. This was ambitious on the part of the GPO, having earlier intended to produce the stamps using just five colours. It was not completely successful as there are numerous examples of missing colours on the 4d while the 1s 3d is known with the lavender missing.

These were the first British commemoratives with the Queen's head in gold and this also caused difficulties. The gold was easily dissolved by a water/alcohol solution and this provided the unscrupulous with an opportunity of deception. Accordingly 6d and 1s 3d stamps with the gold head missing are not listed in the stamp catalogues.

The 1s 3d stamp was notable not only for its size but also that the Queen's head appeared in the top left-hand corner of the stamp and was looking to the right. This was the first time since the introduction of adhesive postage stamps in 1840 that the monarch's head was not facing the left.

The stamps were released both non-phosphor and with phosphor bands, with three phosphor bands on the 4d and 6d, and four bands on the 1s 3d. The 6d phosphor sold out in September 1967 and the remainder were withdrawn from sale on 13 October of that year. The quantities of stamps sold were:

Ordinary

4d – 89,197,226

6d – 12,012,328

1s 3d – 5,721,426

Phosphor

4d – 15,861,960

6d – 2,820,360

1s 3d – 1,646,280.

All artists received 180 guineas as payment for their designs. Harrisons received 1,375 guineas for Gentleman's eight adopted designs.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS

On 6 July 1966 Beaumont wrote to David Gentleman inviting him to submit designs for a first day envelope and presentation pack.

Gentleman was instructed that the design for the envelope should feature the same theme as the stamps without repeating them exactly. The design was to be confined to the left hand side of the envelope and to use a maximum of three colours. The envelope measured 10 inches (255mm) by 4½ inches (114mm) and was longer than those customarily used by the GPO in order to accommodate all the 4d stamps.

The files show that 150,000 first day covers were ordered but a memorandum of 25 October 1966 states that 250,000 were sold. Regardless of this confusion, it seems certain that stocks were exhausted. During October the GPO received a number of requests for replacements for first day covers damaged in transit, for which it was estimated that an additional 2,000 covers were required. The GPO contacted the printers of the original covers (Dickensons) to be told the company was not willing to re-print fewer than 50,000 covers. The GPO arranged with a printer in Hastings to print the required 2,000 for £25. These were delivered to the GPO during November and appear to be in a slightly different shade of green compared to the original covers.

The presentation pack was 7 inches (178mm) by 4¼ inches (108mm) when folded and Gentleman was instructed to use only three colours. He received 50 guineas for each design. The packs cost 4s 9d. The files show that 91,000 presentation packs were ordered with sales recorded as 51,332.

The Philatelic Bureau in Edinburgh provided a full first day cover service. In addition special philatelic posting boxes were provided at 85 offices around the country: rubber handstamps with 'FIRST DAY OF ISSUE' were used to cancel items bearing the stamps.

GIFT SCHEME

The PMG sent a gift of a first day cover and presentation pack to the Queen, Princess Margaret, Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister, H King, the Speaker of the House of Commons, members of the SAC (8), David Gentleman, former PMGs and Assistant PMGs still in Parliament (15), Postmasters or equivalent of the self-governing Commonwealth countries (21), Lord Erskine.

PREMATURE RELEASE

There are numerous reports of items bearing the Battle of Hastings stamps being found in the post before the issue date. These reports came from offices all over the UK, some up to a week prior to the release of the stamps. Some of the better documented incidents were:

Sheffield: 103 of the 4d sold on 13 October, with 45 recovered;

Garnlydan TSO: 14 of the 4d sold on 13 October, with 13 recovered

Boscawen TSO: about 24 of the 4d sold on 13 October, with about 8 recovered.

SIMON BATES
24 FEBRUARY 1993

REFERENCE

British Postal Museum & Archive file:
P1897/65 - 900th Anniversary of Battle of Hastings