

STAMP HISTORY

The King George VI “War Emergency” Stamps

1936-7



The origin of the so-called “War Emergency” stamps of King George VI goes back to 1936-7. At that time, A.G. Tydeman, Controller of Post Office Stores, was questioning all contractors as to the fire precautions taken at their works. Quite what prompted this exercise is not clear but it could have something to do with the burning down of that seemingly indestructible building – the Crystal Palace.

At the end of 1936 Tydeman asked D.P. Dell, a senior Staff Officer in the Stores Department to investigate the arrangements regarding the safety of the negatives, cylinders and positives at Messrs Harrison and Sons. In March 1937 Dell reported as follows:

“...the negatives and positives are stored in one room and the cylinders in another. Both rooms are off the main corridor of the Post Office portion of the Factory and are no more secure against fire than the paper, the machinery or the printed stock.”

In fact, the Post Office had only supplied one steel cabinet to house the negatives and positives. By 1937 this cabinet could only hold about a quarter of the material, the rest being stored on open wooden racking. Dell considered that even the material in the cabinet was not safe from fire damage as the metal would become so hot in a fire that the contents, especially the glass negatives, would be destroyed.

When stamps had been printed by the letterpress process reserve printing plates were held at either the Royal Mint or Somerset House. The Mint also held the master plates and dies from which new working plates could be easily produced at short notice. In the event of serious damage to the printing plant there would be little delay in re-starting production as there were many other printers who could take over in an emergency.

With the change to the photogravure method of printing stamps in the early 1930s the situation changed entirely. As Dell pointed out the Post Office had "all its printing eggs in one basket". He was instructed to make a more detailed enquiry into the situation and find out how long it would take Harrisons to restart production after a fire or similar disaster. In September Dell wrote to W.H. Rhodes of Harrisons asking for a comprehensive report. Dell's worst fears were confirmed: it could be as long as six to eight months before printing could resume if the press was damaged. Other processes could take almost as long to replace. As Post Office Stores only kept a Postmasters' stock of two months' supply the situation was clearly unacceptable. Tydeman decided on a two-part solution: firstly to have duplicate positives stored at Somerset House, or other safe store; and secondly to revert to letterpress printing as a safeguard to fall back on and he arranged with the Royal Mint for master dies and plates to be produced for current values up to 2½d.

The current photogravure stamps were not suitable for reproduction by letterpress but the new postcard stamp design would be acceptable as an emergency measure. Postcards were, of course, printed by letterpress anyway. Although the design did not include the word "Revenue" the Post Office was of the opinion that as other issues had omitted the word the new stamp should be acceptable. The Postal Services Department, in a memorandum, agreed with the proposals with the proviso that a 6d value be added to the ½d to 2½d values already suggested by the Stores Department.

One of the first problems to face Dell was that of size. The postcard stamp was larger than its perforated counterpart (0.9" by 0.75" as against 0.885" by 0.705"). This meant that if the postcard stamp were to be reproduced full size there would be no room for the perforations. Harrisons were of the opinion that as the emergency stamps might have to be printed on inferior machinery by inexperienced operators it was important to have the inter-stamp gutters as large as possible. After a considerable amount of discussion the Vice Controller of Post Office Stores, R. Fanshawe, wrote to Harrisons giving the proposed measurements. The stamps were to be 0.885" down by 0.7125" across. This would give a horizontal gutter of 0.095" and a vertical one of 0.0875". These sizes would produce a printing plate similar in size to those of George V, i.e. 20.15" x 10.55".

Dell instructed the Mint to proceed with engraving the ½d die. The die was to be based on the postal stationery die, Q19. It was suggested that Eric Gill should be asked to produce drawings for the 6d and 2½d values, these being the two values which could give most problems in terms of "design space". In the event the artists at the Mint produced satisfactory drawings. J.A.C. Harrison, the Mint's engraver, began work on the ½d die in November 1938. In December 1938 the Mint submitted stamp-size bromides for the 2½d value. The head was the same size as that for the postcard stamp but the surround had been reduced to bring the stamp down to the required size. The Mint thought that design "A" looked rather crowded and in "B" had painted out the white line round the head which

was thought to give a more open look to the design. The Post Office approved the design with the proviso that the oval above the letter "T" be completed and instructed the Mint to start work on the dies and plates for all values using the one design.

On 19 December the Mint sent two further bromides marked "Sketch C". One was approved by Fanshawe, the other had a darker background behind the head, postage and value. Dell wrote to the Mint giving approval but hoped that the head would be exactly the same as that used for the postcard stamp.

In January 1939, Fanshawe instructed the Mint to produce two master plates for each value as he understood this would incur little or no extra expense. He pointed out that the provision of the master plates was regarded as a matter of urgency and asked how soon the plates could be made ready. In fact, the Mint had stopped work on the emergency dies to concentrate on the production of postcard dies etc. The Mint assured Fanshawe that work on the emergency issue would restart as soon as possible and on 23 January 1939 submitted a bromide for the 6d value.

The closing of the oval below the head had given a somewhat pinched appearance and the Mint suggested that raising the head might cure the problem. On 6 February 1939 proofs PD/A171b/c from the "original die – soft" were submitted and approved. Proof "c" was returned to the Mint and "b" retained by Post Office Stores. The cost of producing the six master plates was £330 with a second set costing an additional £210. The Mint queried whether a second set was really necessary as it would only take a few weeks to produce a new master plate. The Post Office's view was that with such a small additional cost involved it would be sensible to have a reserve set especially as some 30 working plates would be needed to continue production. Fanshawe was of the opinion that if a second set of masters had to be produced before work on the new working plates could begin it could cause serious embarrassment to the Post Office if the result was a general exhaustion of stocks.

In May 1939 the Mint submitted proofs PD/A212b/c taken from the soft steel working die A.R. 10. Proof "b" was returned to the Mint as approved and "c" was retained. W. Whitaker, the Superintendent at the Mint had noted that the ½d and 1½d values were given priority but as the value tablets for the value had to be engraved by hand and the 6d value had been the subject of the "original die" the working die of this value had been produced first.

Over the next few months the Mint produced working dies for the rest of the values which were approved subject to the removal of a smudge from the monarch's cheek. In July 1939 the Post Office received proofs of dies for striking the master plates. The dies for the 1½d and 2d values were approved but those for the 2½d and 6d values were not. In the former the veins in the left leaf of the rose were missing and in the latter, PD/A244b/c, the hair at

the back of the parting was very faint. Later in the month proofs from the corrected dies were submitted and approved.

Dell was looking for a safe place to store the plates and decided on the Head Post Office at Gloucester. By November all the plates had been deposited. A new plate was required in May 1940 when the foreign letter rate was increased to 3d. The striking die, A.R. 11, was produced in September and the plate stored at Gloucester. In January 1942 Harrison's printed 52 sheets of the 2½d value in blue. This was the only value to be proofed in colour. The sheets were delivered to the Post Office Stores in June 1942 where two blocks of six stamps were removed. The two blocks are the only remaining examples of the colour proofs, the rest being destroyed in July 1942.

One more plate was produced, for ½d and 1d rolls, but no documentation has yet been found for this plate. The lack of paperwork could be explained by the fact that as existing dies were used to produce the plate no detailed paperwork was necessary.

As well as the material mentioned the BPMA has black pulls from all the master plates, a master die with blank duty dated January 1943, transfer roller A.R.14 with 6d and blank duty dated February 1939, master plate No. 2 6d value 29 September 1939 and the striking dies A.R.5-11 (all values).

Each year the Postmaster at Gloucester was required by the Auditors to confirm that he still had the plates in his possession. These letters continued up to at least September 1967 when the file ends. The BPMA has only one plate in its possession and all efforts to locate the rest or their fate have been in vain.

REFERENCES:

POST 52/926

POST 52/507