

The Postal Museum Large Print Guide

Zone 4 - Designs on Delivery



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Designs on Delivery

The postal service had proven itself an organisational marvel. It embraced new technologies and experimental ideas. It had grown and expanded even during wartime.

Yet visually it had become dull and functional.

It needed an injection of vision, colour and imagination – and in the 1930s, that's what it got.

The Jolly Postman Trail:

Can you find the hidden secret in this pillar box?

Object plinth - Vans and vehicles

From the first mail coach until after the Second World War, horse-drawn vehicles were an efficient overall choice for transporting the mail. But early in the 20th century, new options emerged.

In 1904 the Post Office bought its first mechanical mail vehicle – a steam tractor. By the 1920s, steam had given way to petrol power and the Post Office was developing its own delivery fleet. Only Ford and Morris sold vehicles that could be serviced nationwide, and initially the Post Office chose Ford.

After pressure in Parliament to use British products, Morris became the key supplier.

Morris Minor van, 1935

Made to a Post Office design, this mail van helped staff collect, transport and deliver the post. Its small capacity made it perfect for rural areas.

OB1995.329

Object plinth - Airmail pillar box, 1930-34

If you wanted to post an airmail letter in 1930, you could use a blue pillar box. Its large collection plate allowed space to detail international collection times and prices.

2010-0136

In December 1934, a regular London-to-Brisbane service began. The journey of 12,700 miles was the world's longest air route and took 12 days.

International airmail

Blue post boxes for airmail letters first appeared on London's streets in 1930. While a regular airmail service had begun in 1919, the new boxes helped advertise much faster and far-reaching international services at a premium cost.

Speed was all-important. Fleets of vans transported the mail to nearby airports, where enormous four-engine biplanes carried it to destinations including India, South Africa and Australia.

In 1937, the Post Office launched the Empire Mail Scheme, lowering the cost of sending letters to British Empire destinations. From a starting point of 10 million airmail letters per year in 1935, numbers doubled annually, reaching over 91 million in 1938.

Image caption:

Top: Flying to the other side of the world: the first air mail to Australia.

Bottom: Around the globe: Empire Air Mail, by Ashley Havinden, 1939.

Who redesigned the Post Office?

The first PR guru

Sir Stephen Tallents joined the Post Office in 1933. His role was to handle public relations – a phrase he may have been the first to use.

The changes he made revolutionised the Post Office, from the perception of its products to a trust in its services. He brought a fresh focus on design in stamps and posters. He also launched a film unit and a new staff magazine.

Communication in style

Since 1881, the Post Office had been directing customers to post their letters early. It was the world's longest-ever continuous poster campaign – but it wasn't very persuasive.

In the 1930s, the Post Office began creating witty and stylish poster campaigns using artwork by cutting-edge designers. A Poster Group of experts, including the director of the National Gallery, met to advise on which artists to employ.

The results were stunning, whether they were asking customers to pack carefully, or staff to save usable lengths of string. Some of the posters were an educational resource sent to schools.

Object wall - posters

(Numbered in columns)

1: 3d is the Minimum Foreign Letter Postage Rate

Manfred Reiss, 1949.

POST 109/227

2: Stamps in books save time

Hans Arnold Rothholz, 1955.

POST 110/2520

3: Post Much Earlier This Christmas

Jan Lewitt and George Him, 1942.

POST 110/1171

4: The Post Office Handles 23,000,000 Letters a Day

G R Morris, 1947.

POST 109/195

5: Inland Post Cards Need a 2d Stamp

Derrick Hass, 1954.

POST 110/1322

6: Post Office Lines of Communication

Jan Lewitt and George Him, 1940.

POST 109/517

7: Post Early

Leonard Beaumont, 1950.

POST 110/1257

8: Travel Early, Shop Early

Harry Stevens, 1960.

POST 109/318

9: Quickest way by Air Mail

Edward McKnight Kauffer, 1935.

POST 110/2488

10: Let's Work as a Team

Joseph Ramsey Wherrett, 1952.

POST 110/4207

11: Deliver the Telegram Quickly and Safely

Pat Keely, 1951.

POST 110/1595

12: 79,242 Postmen

Duncan Grant, 1939.

POST 110/2501

13: Carefully packed contents intact.

Correct address in block capitals. Pack your parcels carefully.

Stan Krol, c.1953.

POST 110/3218

14: Please Pack Parcels Very Carefully

Tom Eckersley, 1957.

POST 110/2592

15: Save Usable Lengths of String

John Woods, 1957.

POST 110/1590

16: Pack Your Parcels Carefully

Hans Unger, 1960.

POST 110/2606

17: Post Office Magazine

Editors commissioned live action photography for the Post Office Magazine. Front cover, May 1960.

POST 92

18: Post Office Lines of Communication

Frederic Henri Kay Henrion, 1950.

POST 109/208

19: Outposts of Britain – a Postman in Northern Ireland

Edward McKnight Kauffer, 1937.

POST 109/516

20: Mail Steamship Routes

Macdonald Gill, 1937.

21: Post Early

Frederic Henri Kay Henrion, 1949.

POST 109/289

22: Loading mails at the docks in London

Harold Sandys Williamson, 1934.

POST 110/3174B

23: 41,271 Engineering Workmen

Duncan Grant, 1939.

POST 110/4320

24: 4d Minimum Foreign Rate

Tom Eckersley, 1951.

POST 110/3210

25: Think Ahead, Write Instead

Hans (Zero) Schleger, 1945.

POST 110/3200

26: GPO logo

Preliminary sketch by Macdonald Gill, 1934.

POST 122/8391

27: London Post Offices and Streets

E P H Cowan, 1962.

POST 110/1434

28: Send a Greetings Telegram

Norman Jaques, 1952.

POST 109/414

Post Office Magazine

With so many staff working for the Post Office, good in-house communication was vital. Since 1885 there had been a magazine to share news and updates.

In 1934, a new, glossier version launched under the title 'The Post Office Magazine'.

For over 30 years, it published employees' photographs and stories of delivering the mail in the busiest cities and remotest countryside.

You could buy the magazine for a penny, and postal workers received it for free from 1979. Today, a newsletter called the 'Courier' carries staff news.

Image caption:

By 1935, 'The Post Office Magazine' had a circulation of 172,000 copies.

Windows on the world

If you had been at school in the 1920s, the only pictures on the wall would probably have been dated, dusty paintings and maps.

But in the 1930s, the Post Office produced sets of vibrant educational posters to send to schools. With colourful imagery, they illustrated themes in communication, from its history to its impact around the world.

One set in particular, called 'Outposts of Empire', showed people delivering post in Central Australia, Barbados, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). It gave people a sense of the Post Office's international reach – and brought the world into the dullest classroom.

The scenes on the posters are typical of portrayals of Empire at this time. The artist took inspiration for these

designs from material supplied by the postal administrations of the countries depicted.

Image caption:

‘Outposts of Empire – Barbados, Central Australia, Ceylon and Southern Rhodesia’ by John Vickery (1937).

A new brand

Today we see logos on every product. In the 1930s, this kind of branding was new.

Sir Stephen Tallents was head of public relations at the Post Office. He thought a logo would help people recognise and respect the postal service. The brand, launched in 1935, incorporated the letters GPO for General Post Office, and a crown to show the service's royal origins.

The designer was MacDonald Gill and he used the Gill typeface for the lettering. This font had been created by his brother Eric, and it is still a favourite for its combination of traditional and modern influences.

Image caption:

Earlier ideas for the GPO logo included a post-horn and strap.

Can you spot the new GPO logo in place on some of the educational posters on display?

The uncrowned King

Have you ever spotted a pillar box marked EVIIIR?
They're very rare.

The initials on a pillar box show who was king or queen when the Post Office installed it. When Edward VIII came to the throne in 1936, the Post Office produced stamps showing his portrait, and over 160 new pillar boxes.

But Edward VIII reigned for less than a year before he gave up the throne to marry divorcee Wallis Simpson. His brother became King George VI and the Post Office started work on new stamps again.

When the EVIIIR pillar boxes went for repair, the initials would be changed to those of the new king.

Image captions:

Top left: George V – Edward VIII's father – favoured decorative and more traditional stamp designs.

Top middle: Edward VIII chose this modern design, submitted by a 17-year-old, Hubert Brown – who unfortunately did not receive credit initially.

Top right: After Edward VIII's abdication, George VI's stamp design compromised between modern and traditional elements.

Please do not touch

Object plinth - Type A Edward VIII pillar box, 1936

You're looking at a rare pillar box. The Post Office only ever installed 16 of these large Type A pillar boxes bearing King Edward VIII's initials.

OB1994.45

The Jolly Postman Trail (in letterbox):

Each pillar box carries the king or queen's initial.

Can you think of a king or queen whose name begins with the letter 'E'? Look inside the letter box to find the answer...

'E' could stand for Edward or Elizabeth.

Object case 1 – Edward VIII stamp artwork

1: Plaster cast by Percy Metcalfe, September 1936

The crowned King Edward VIII appears on this plaster cast. It was originally made for the coronation medals and then used for the proposed coronation stamps.

KEVIII/02/01

2: Edward VIII accession stamp artwork, August 1936

This is the original artwork for Edward VIII's accession stamps, with a profile image of the King's head. The annotation reads: 'head position not correct'.

KEVIII/02/01

3: Edward VIII accession essays, June 1936

King Edward VIII chose this simple stamp design sent in by 17-year-old schoolboy Hubert Brown. Hugh Cecil took the photograph of the King's portrait featured on the stamp.

KEVIII/01/31b

4: Edward VIII coronation essays, December 1936

The Post Office's proposed designs for a coronation stamp were never used. The King abdicated on 10 December 1936 before the ceremony took place.

KEVIII/03/28bc

Why make a film about delivering the mail?

Post Office films

'Night Mail' is the most famous of the films made by the GPO Film Unit, which existed from 1933 to 1946.

The idea that the Post Office should make its own factual films was deliberately experimental. It reflected the hi-tech workings of the postal service itself, which now also ran the huge telephone network.

'Night Mail' combined footage of the London-to-Glasgow Travelling Post Office (TPO) train on its overnight run, with poetry by W H Auden and music by Benjamin Britten. From cutting edge documentaries and educational films to psychedelic animations, the Post Office positioned itself at the forefront of innovative film making.

Supported by The Bernard Sunley Charitable Foundation

Plaque, 2011

In 2011, UNESCO added the films of the GPO Film Unit to its Memory of the World Register for their world significance and outstanding universal cultural value.

E15422

‘Euston Station: Loading the Travelling Post Office’ by Grace Golden, 1948.

The Jolly Postman Trail:

From fresh fish to strawberries, the Post Office still gives advice on how to pack the most unusual parcels safely.

‘A London Loading Platform’ by Grace Golden, 1948.

Object plinth - Type E Combination Pillar Box, 1931- 33

Can you find the hidden secret in this pillar box?

That's right – it sells stamps as well as collecting letters. Another Post Office innovation from the 1930s, the Type E combination Pillar Box and Stamp Vending Machine offered its services 24 hours a day.

Unfortunately the vending machine was not reliable enough, and post tended to get stuck inside the box.

OB1994.44

Image caption:

The handy sign on top of this pillar box pointed people towards their nearest Post Office.

Interactive exhibit - Design your own stamp

Having your picture on a postage stamp is a privilege usually reserved for kings, queens and VIPs... but now it's open to you too!

Use the screen below to place your photo into a historic stamp or create your own special stamp design.

Object case 2 – Definitive Stamps

Top left: Queen Victoria and Four Kings, 1837 - 1937

Did you know the very first postage stamp showed a picture of Queen Victoria when she was just 15 years old? The portrait was based on a medal and was used on every British stamp for her entire 63 year reign.

When her son, Edward, became King, the Post Office had to decide which way he should face on the new stamps. On coins, kings and queens take turns facing left or right. But for stamps, they chose to keep him facing left - just like his mother. That way, when the stamp was placed in the top right corner of an envelope, the King's face looked towards the address, not away.

Since then, all kings and queens on stamps have also faced left. Artists use drawings, sculptures, and photographs to create the portraits. These images represent Britain to people all around the world.

2016-0049, KEVII/01/01, KGV/01/35, KEVIII/01/27,
KGVII/01/08

**Middle right: Queen Elizabeth II and King Charles III,
1952 & 1966**

Queen Elizabeth II had two stamp portraits during her long reign. The first was a photograph taken by Dorothy Wilding, showing the Queen turned slightly to the side so you could see her face at an angle.

In the 1960s, a new design was created, inspired by side-profile photos by John Hedgecoe. The plaster cast you see to your right has many similarities to the photograph and became the new stamp portrait.

Today, King Charles III's stamps follow a simple and classic look, inspired by his mother's stamp created by Arnold Machin. His portrait has no crown or fancy decoration - just the stamp's value and a special barcode. The barcode helps Royal Mail operationally and adds an extra layer of security.

QEII/LVW/1/010A, QEIID(L)/10/23

Lower left: What is a definitive stamp?

Definitive stamps are the everyday stamps we use, typically with first or second class values. But what appears on them - and why?

1. Portrait

An image of the king or queen on the throne.

2. Value

Shows how much the stamp is worth.

3. Perforation

The cuts around the stamp which allows it to be pulled apart.

4. Year Code

Since 2010, stamps have included the year they were printed. You can find it hidden in the wavy lines behind the monarch's head.

5. 'U' Shape Cuts

These stop people from using the stamp more than once
- if someone tries, the stamp will tear apart.

Lower right: King Charles III Plaster Cast, 2023

The portrait of King Charles III on stamps was based on a sculpture made by artist Martin Jennings for coins.

Jennings produced a plaster cast of the King's profile, which was photographed and supplied to Royal Mail.

Using computers, the design team added special lighting effects to the photo. This helped create the final image you see on stamps today.

2024-0246

Queen Elizabeth II's First Stamps

Queen Elizabeth II's first stamps were issued on 5 December 1952.

The designs featured a portrait taken by Dorothy Wilding, who had worked as a photographer at the Royal Court since 1937. In the photograph the Queen is wearing an ornamental headdress (or 'Diadem') that was also worn by Queen Victoria on the Penny Black.

The final five designs frame the portrait and were personally approved by the Queen. The Wilding series of stamps were the first to feature special markings that could be read by automatic letter sorting machines trialled in the 1950s and 60s.

Image captions:

Top right: Full-face photograph taken at Wilding's first photoshoot with the Queen.

Top middle: Illustration by Edmund Dulac based on a photograph from first sitting.

Top right: Full profile photograph of the Queen facing right, from the second sitting.

Middle right: Dorothy Wilding, with some of her portrait photographs, 1956. © William Hustler and Georgina Hustler/National Portrait Gallery, London

Bottom left: 2 ½ d stamp issued 5 December 1952.

Photograph by Wilding, design by M. C. Farrar-Bell.

Bottom middle: 1 ½ d stamp issued 5 December 1952.

Photograph by Wilding, design by Enid Marx.

Bottom right: Coronation 1s 3d stamp issued 3 June 1953. Design by Edmund Dulac.

The Jolly Postman Trail (in envelope):

This portrait of Queen Elizabeth II has appeared on over 200 billion stamps. It's one of the most printed images in the world.

To see the Queen

Have you heard of Arnold Machin?

You're definitely familiar with his work.

His portrait of Queen Elizabeth II is one of Britain's greatest icons.

In 1965 Arnold Machin won the commission to create a new profile portrait of the Queen for stamps. By creating a plaster model, and then photographing it in different lighting conditions, he produced a classic design.

The Queen approved the portrait for a set of stamps called the 'Machin series', first issued in 1967. She especially requested a shade of deep olive-brown sepia for the first class rate, echoing the colour of the Penny Black.

Image captions:

Top left: Arnold Machin first designed the Queen's portrait for coins, and later adapted it for stamps.

Bottom left: Arnold Machin's image of the Queen is one of the most widely reproduced images ever.

Bottom right: Arnold Machin watches his stamps come off the printing press.

Object plinth - Plaster cast, Arnold Machin, 1966

This is Arnold Machin's final cast, known as the 'Dressed Head', which provided the iconic portrait of Queen Elizabeth II for use on British stamps from 1967 to date.

OB1998.1050

Object case 3 – Commemorative Stamps

A commemorative stamp celebrates an anniversary or a specific theme. This could be anything from the birthday of a famous author to the animals in our woodlands.

Stamp Design Process

Creating a new stamp can take years. Artists are chosen to send in their ideas, and a team of experts work with Royal Mail to choose the best design.

From left to right, you can follow the journey - from the first drawings all the way to the finished stamp you see on letters.

1: To celebrate 100 years of the Royal Entomological Society of London's Royal Charter, four artists were asked to design special insect stamps. Each artist created a set of pictures showing different creepy-crawlies.

The designs were shown to a group called the Stamp Advisory Committee. They preferred the work of two artists and asked them to make a few changes and send in improved versions.

March - June 1984

QEII/181/04, /08, /09 & /15

2: One of the artists, Gordon Beningfield, was asked to make his insect designs more colourful. He redrew his dragonfly, this time adding beautiful pink flowers around it. He also created a brand-new design featuring a bright red ladybird.

July 1984

QEII/181/06 & /07

3: Beningfield's designs were chosen to become the issued stamps. They were tested at stamp size and sent to the Monarch for approval.

In 1984, Queen Elizabeth II approved the stamps and they went into production.

1984 - 1985

QEII/181/28 & /36

Off With Her Head

4: Unlike other countries, Britain doesn't put its name on stamps. Instead, the stamp shows a picture of the current king or queen to represent the country. Early stamps of Queen Elizabeth II used a photograph by Dorothy Wilding, showing the Queen turned slightly to the side.

1994 & 1962

SW/521/286, QEII/13/28

5: Stamp designers found it tricky to fit the Wilding portrait onto the stamps. One artist, David Gentleman, tried out different ways to symbolise Britain. His proposed designs controversially removed the Queen's image from the stamp, but these were not approved. Instead, they used a smaller, simple silhouette of the Queen's profile.

1966

DG06/02/04

Unusual Stamps

6: Around the world, special commemorative stamps celebrate different themes, and sometimes use unusual materials. In 1973, Bhutan made stamps that were actually mini vinyl records! You can put them on a record player and hear Bhutanese folk songs and stories.

1973

SW/44/36

7: Buddhist Thangka paintings depict images of sacred figures. In 1969, Bhutan made stamps featuring five of these beautiful paintings, each printed on silk rayon fabric.

1969

SW/44/02

8: While most stamps are flat, two-dimensional designs, in 1971 Bhutan released a unique set of plastic moulded stamps. These featured famous sculptures that appeared to rise off the page.

1971

SW/44/18

Object wall - A Stamp Design Revolution

Up until 1965, most stamps still simply showed the monarch's portrait.

Only 19 sets of commemorative picture stamps had ever been issued. When Labour politician Tony Benn became Postmaster General, he proposed removing the Queen's portrait from stamps.

Designer David Gentleman had similar ideas and drew up new approaches. Among them were larger format stamps with a small silhouette of the Queen, encouraging much greater design freedom. This radical change led to the ever-growing range of themes we see on stamps today.

Postage stamps are a great way of commemorating people and acknowledging their achievements. These frames celebrate the British women throughout history who have succeeded in their chosen field. Many of these women have gone above and beyond to help others - sometimes even risking their own lives.

Top left: Humanitarians, 1975 & 1967

Many women have worked hard to make the world a better place. Elizabeth Fry helped improve prisons, and her work was honoured in a stamp showing hands at prison bars, designed by David Gentleman.

In 2016, three other British women - Josephine Butler, Eglantyne Jebb, and Sue Ryder - were honoured on stamps for their humanitarian work, helping those in need.

For the 50th anniversary of women winning the right to vote, Clive Abbott illustrated Emmeline Pankhurst being grabbed by a policeman. This powerful picture shows the struggles women faced while fighting for the vote.

QEII/119/34 & QEII/59/003

Top right: Servicewomen and Nurses, 2008 & 2006

The painting of a woman in blue depicts a member of the Women's Royal Naval Service, also called the WRNS, produced for a set of Navy uniform stamps.

Later in 2022, a set called 'Unsung Heroes' acknowledged the different jobs women performed during the Second World War.

Mary Seacole was a nurse during the Crimean War. Mary was of mixed heritage, of Scottish and Jamaican descent. She overcame discrimination due to her race and gender, and she opened a hotel to care for sick and wounded soldiers. She was commemorated on a stamp with a portrait painted by Albert Charles Challen.

2009/16/36 & 2006/08/28

Bottom left: Cultural Icons, 1979 & 1984

Female authors such as Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, Mary Ann Evans and Elizabeth Gaskell have all been commemorated on stamps. The artist Barbara Brown created these stamp-sized illustrations of the women, along with tiny scenes from their novels.

British actress and cultural icon Vivien Leigh has also featured on many stamps. One shows her acting alongside Laurence Olivier, in the 1941 movie 'Lady Hamilton'.

QEII/144/06-08A & 1985/07/57

Bottom right: Scientists and Explorers, 1996 & 2002

There haven't been many stamps showing female scientists, but one important exception is Dorothy Hodgkin. She was a Nobel Prize-winning chemist and appeared on stamps in 1996 and 2010.

In 2024, the first British female TV weather presenter, meteorologist Barbara Edwards was also celebrated on a stamp.

In 2003, a stamp set called 'Extreme Endeavours' honoured Amy Johnson, a pilot who became the first woman to fly solo from Britain to Australia.

1996/07/40 & 2003/05/15

Interactive exhibit - Pneumatic Systems

Pneumatic technology was so successful in moving around telegraph messages that it was soon used for other things.

The efficiency of the system and the small size of the canisters made them ideal for transferring cash and documents. In the 20th century many shops used the system to move money from the tills to the back offices.

Even today some hospitals use pneumatic systems to move medicine, prescriptions and patient notes quickly around the building.

Pneumatic Tubes

Write a message on the paper provided.

Roll it up and place it into one of the canisters.

Open the flap at the base and put the canister inside.

Shut the flap and watch your message whizz across the gallery!

Quirepace Ltd.

Innovation in Vacuum and Conveying Technology

www.quirepace.co.uk

Do not use when busy lamp is illuminated.

Left: Send/in

Right: Receive/out

Do not insert paper

Please use a canister to send your message.