

News Release



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CURTAIN GOES UP ON ROYAL MAIL'S CHRISTMAS NATIVITY PLAY STAMPS

Five stamps showing children taking part in school Nativity plays will be bringing a splash of colour to the nation's Christmas mail this year, Royal Mail announced today.

Youngsters are portrayed in designs based on the familiar Nativity roles of Mary, Joseph, the Three Wise Men and the heavenly host of angels.

The stamps will go on sale at post offices nationwide from November 1, while at the same time, books of the 19p and 25p stamps will also be available from around 80,000 retail stamp outlets, including most major supermarkets, newsagents and corner shops.

Rosena Robson, Royal Mail's Special Stamps Manager, said: "Christmas stamps have become a popular tradition of the season, with many of our customers treating them as a festive decoration for their greetings.

"We hope our stamp designs will prompt fond memories of Nativity plays, which are a cherished part of school life for many young children and their families."

The stamps were designed by Newcastle-based illustrator Yvonne Gilbert, who previously designed the 1984 Christmas stamps. She used many photographs of children dressed in Nativity costumes to build a composite coloured pencil design - so the final result does not represent any one particular child.

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The 19p Second Class stamp, the most popular for Christmas mail, shows youngsters in a scene of the Holy Family in the Stable at Bethlehem.

On the 25p First Class stamp, suitable for using on mail destined for EC countries, children in the role of the Three Wise Men carry their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The non-EC letter rate 30p stamp shows a young girl as Mary, with a doll in her arms symbolising baby Jesus, while the 35p stamp - the overseas postcard rate - shows children as the shepherds. On the final stamp in the set, the 41p basic Airmail rate, there are two angels of the heavenly host.

The origins of re-enacting the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem in a Nativity play date back to at least Mediaeval times. It was a popular theme for "mystery plays" during the 12th and 13th Centuries, which were plays based on significant biblical events, like the Nativity and the Resurrection.

Individual mystery plays were often performed together in one long play to tell stories from the bible in a chronological sequence of events. Different towns in England took great pride in performing their own variations of these "cycle plays". Some could last as long as a week and were often performed as part of a holiday or period of celebration.

One of the most famous and best documented was performed in York and was made up of 54 individual playlets, which told the story of Jesus from the prophecy of his birth through to the Resurrection.

One of the first people to stage a Nativity play similar to the modern versions was St. Francis of Assisi in the 13th Century, who used real animals and a crib in his plays, to teach the people of Assisi about the birth of Christ.

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TECHNICAL DETAILS

The four stamps are printed in photogravure by Harrisons & Sons Limited. They are horizontal in format and measure 41mm x 30mm, with a perforation of 15 x 14. The paper is phosphor-coated, except for the 19p value which has one phosphor bar, and the gum is PVA Dextrin.

STAMP BOOKS

The 19p stamp will be available in retail stamp books of 20, in a pane measuring 407mm x 60mm. The 25p stamp will be sold in books of 10, in panes measuring 204mm x 60mm. Both books measure 96mm x 60mm and the stamps will be the same as those not sold in books, with no elliptical perforations.

CYLINDER NUMBERS AND COLOURS

Information to be supplied later.

FIRST DAY COVERS

Special First Day Envelopes, designed by Tutssel St John Lambie Nairn, with text by Mike Barden, will be available from the British Philatelic Bureau, 20 Brandon Street, EDINBURGH, EH3 5TT and at most main and many sub-post offices, priced 25p each.

The usual first day of issue facilities will be available at post offices with philatelic post boxes. Two first day of issue postmarks will also be available, one from the British Philatelic Bureau and one from Bethlehem, Llandeilo, Wales. These are illustrated below:



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The Bureau will provide its usual First Day Cover service. Covers addressed to the correct postal address, including postcode, of the destination required and bearing all five stamps will be cancelled "British Philatelic Bureau" or "Bethlehem" and despatched for £2.18 [inland] and £1.86 [overseas].

Application forms for these services are available from the British Philatelic Bureau and at main post offices and should be returned no later than November 1, 1994. For customers who wish to pay through Girobank, the Bureau's account number is 11000099. Customers requiring only the special handstamps may obtain them under the reposting facility by sending, on the first day of issue, a stamped addressed envelope under an outer cover endorsed "Special First Day of Issue Handstamp" to the British Philatelic Bureau or the Royal Mail Wales and West Special Handstamps Centre, Royal Mail, 220-228 Penarth Road, Cardiff, CF1 1AA.

PRESENTATION PACK

The Presentation Pack [number 252] was designed by Tutssel St John Lambie-Nairn with photography by Andy Seymour. Text was written by Mike Barden. The packs will be available from the British Philatelic Bureau and at most main post offices and many sub-post offices from November 1, 1994, price £2.25.

STAMP CARDS

Five new stamp cards [numbers 166a, b, c, d and e] each featuring one of the stamps, will also be on sale, price 25p each, from the British Philatelic Bureau and most main post offices and many sub-post offices.

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For further information, please contact the Post Office Newsroom on:

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