

16. Tercentenary of the General Letter Office, 1960



With this issue, the Post Office celebrated the three-hundredth anniversary of what was virtually its own foundation—by one of the first Acts of Parliament of the Restoration, following the death of Cromwell, the fall of the Commonwealth and the return of Charles II to the throne. Cromwell himself had enacted (in 1656) that there should be 'One General Post Office and one Officer styled the Postmaster-General . . .' The new Act was little more than a confirmation of the previous 'unlawful' one, but a new Postmaster-General was appointed—one Henry Bishop—who is credited with the introduction, in 1661, of the first postmarks, known today as 'Bishop marks'.

The first of the two commemorative stamps, 3d lilac, was the work of Reynolds Stone, CBE, RDI, who had previously designed the 3d Victory (1946) and 3d Commonwealth Games (1958) stamps. His design, in the usual

horizontal format, showed a mounted postboy of the period (in the style of an early print), the year '1660', the cypher of Charles II, an elaborately scripted 'General Letter Office', and the figure of value with the Queen's 'Wilding' portrait set in an oval. A pleasant, straightforward design which clearly indicated the nature of the event, more than can be said for the other stamp!

The 1s 3d, a first design by Faith Jaques, was in the revolutionary 'narrow vertical' format for the first time, not generally a good shape for stamp design, excepting perhaps for a subject like the Post Office Tower. Miss Jaques gave prominence to the Queen's three-quarter face portrait, flanked by the commemorative years, '1660 1960', with, in the upper corners, a symbolic 'CII R' and the figures of value. The lower half of the stamp comprised a traditional post-horn alongside the St Edward's Crown, framed by sprays of oak-apples and leaves, reminding us of the legendary tale of Charles II hiding in the branches of an oak tree—the celebrated Royal Oak—from Cromwell's troopers after his defeat at Worcester in 1651. The design was enhanced by its colour—varying tones of green on a solid background, with judicious use of 'white'.

The stamps were photogravure-printed by Harrison & Sons on the new 'Multiple Crowns' watermarked paper (sideways on the 1s 3d), and issued in sheets of 120 on 7 July 1960, just prior to the opening of the London International Stamp Exhibition at the Royal Festival Hall on the 9th. The quantities printed were 3d 143,390,520; 1s 3d 6,090,840; and on 25 August the Post Office announced that stocks were nearing exhaustion. They were finally withdrawn on 31 December 1960.

Apart from minor constant flaws, the best-known variety occurs on the 3d stamp and consists of a cleft in the mane on the top of the horse's head: it may be found on stamp 2, row 17, in sheets printed from cylinder 1 (no dot). Part of the printing of the 3d was on chalk-surfaced paper.

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