

7. Royal Silver Wedding, 1948

In a previous article in the series 'British High Value Stamps of the 20th Century' (*Philatelic Bulletin*, Vol. II, No. 5, January 1974) I commented on the importance attached by the British Post Office to the occasion of the Silver Wedding of the late King George VI and his Consort, Queen Elizabeth, on 26 April 1948. This was made evident by the decision to issue a £1 stamp which proved to be a controversial 'double-edged sword'—it was a handsome, prestigious design worthy of the event, yet (and the Post Office made no secret of this) it was intended mainly for collectors at home and abroad, primarily as a means of obtaining much-desired revenue.



The £1 stamp, designed by Joan Hassall (who survived four unaccepted essays, a rejected bromide and three competitors), was fully documented in my previous article: now it is the turn of the equally attractive 2½d stamp, intended for 'the man in the street' to use on his letters and thus share in the nationwide celebrations.

A late decision—November 1947—to issue the stamps left the Post Office with rather less than five months to commission and select suitable designs, have the stamps printed by the willing but hard-pressed printers—Harrison & Sons Ltd of High Wycombe—and then have them distributed and placed on sale throughout the United Kingdom. It was a time for cool heads, fingers dutifully crossed, and speedy consultation with the selected artists.

These, for the proposed 2½d design, were Joan Hassall, J Stobie, H L Palmer (who had designed the previous Stamp Centenary and 2½d Victory issues), L Thornton and G T Knipe. Here I must express due acknowledgement and thanks to A G Rigo de Righi, Curator of the National Postal Museum, and author of the very fine Museum publication, *The Stamp of Royalty*, 'British Commemorative Issues for Royal Occasions, 1935-1972', for much of the information given here. It reproduces, in colour and black and white, more than 20 trial designs for the Royal Silver Wedding issues.

From the beginning the 2½d stamp was intended to be in horizontal format, and the method of printing of both 2½d and £1 stamps—photogravure—was very quickly settled. No doubt recess-printing was considered for the high value, but time did not permit the laborious engraving of plates while the extra cost, too, would have been prohibitive. Attractive, contemporary portraits of the King and Queen, based on photographs by Dorothy Wilding, were selected for both designs and, in the event, the now familiar 'twinned' profile portraits were employed on both stamps.

Joan Hassall and the four Harrisons' staff artists named above immediately started work on a Post Office idea for the 2½d design—the incorporation of 'stock' landscapes of Tower Bridge and Windsor Castle, also, later, Buckingham Palace. All these early efforts were, after due consideration, discarded, and by the end of January 1948 no official decision

had been taken on suitable designs for the 2½d or the £1 denominations.

During early February eight new designs for the 2½d were submitted by the Harrisons' team (as well as five essays for the £1 stamp), and all but one artist, G T Knipe, persisted in using the background 'landscapes' theme which had been rejected previously. George T Knipe, who may have had in mind the simplicity and success of the earlier Edward VIII photogravure printed issues, broke away from his design colleagues and depicted the Royal profiles in isolated splendour, flanked, in his first attempts, with the 'Tudor' crown and the figures of value, and the years '1923-1948' at the foot; alternatively, the Royal Cipher replacing the crown with the years running vertically at the sides.

The accepted design was a composite—or a compromise—of Mr Knipe's two essayed bromides: the crown and the '2½d' were retained in the upper left and right corners, and the years '1923-1948' kept in their flanking positions. There had not been time for essays in the selected colour—ultramarine—recommended by the Royal Fine Arts Commission, and the designs of both 2½d and £1 values were put in hand, posthaste, on the strength of stamp-size photographs! That was just two months before the stamps were required to be on sale—26 April 1948, the anniversary day.

While the £1 stamp was available in London and certain head post offices elsewhere, the ubiquitous 2½d value was sold throughout the country to the tune of 147,500,000 stamps. As with the £1, the 2½d stamps were overprinted for use in the British Post Offices abroad.

JAMES WATSON

CORRECTION

In Mr James Watson's article about the 'Centenary of the First Adhesive Postage Stamps, 1940', published in the January issue of the Bulletin, the reference made to the size of the stamp should have read, 'a horizontal design half as wide again as a normal definitive'.

We apologize to Mr Watson.

British Empire Exhibition, Wembley 1924-1925

Mr James Watson's article on the British Empire Exhibition postage stamps, which appeared in the August 1974 edition of the Bulletin, created a lot of interest, and inspired many readers to write to the Editor. Mr Watson made the point that the special commemorative postage stamps, the first commemoratives to be printed for Great Britain, were sold only at the post offices in the exhibition grounds. It is this statement which readers believed to be inaccurate.

Mr Watson was invited to reply in the December bulletin, in which he made it clear that his source of information was from a series of articles written by W G Stitt-Dibden who had made a special study of the 'Wembley' issues. This therefore prompted us to make a search of the official files on the BEE, and the following information came to light.

The Post Office and the Exhibition Authorities agreed that the postage stamps should be sold only at the exhibition grounds, but to satisfy the needs of some philatelic dealers and those members of the public who were unable to travel to Wembley, a service was introduced at the exhibition ground and also at the London Chief Office, whereby the stamps could be obtained through the post.

It is conceivable therefore that some sub-postmasters, in an effort to maintain the goodwill of their customers, may have acquired stocks of the stamps by this method. It must be stressed, however, that such practice would have been quite unofficial. Also, visitors to Wembley were able to buy unlimited quantities of the stamps, take them away from the exhibition and postally use them anywhere in the United Kingdom. This was permissible and would explain the use of postmarks other than the Exhibition postmark.

We are in agreement with Mr Watson that the scarcity of the 1925 issue is due to the poor sales because BEE was not so popular as it had been in 1924.