

Collecting Decimal Machins

Part 2

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Country stamps

An obvious grouping of Machins is provided by the Country stamps. Although many people collect the stamps of all four countries, some prefer to collect only those of the one where they live. No doubt one incentive is the fact that supplies of new issues are more readily available than are those of the Nationals. *Four* countries? Yes, do not overlook the four values issued by the Isle of Man. These ceased when the Manx postal administration became independent on 5 July 1973, so that is a closed group. Country stamps were issued only in sheets until 1989 when the first of a series of prestige books, the Scots Connection, was issued featuring one of the four countries making up the United Kingdom. This was followed by London Life in 1990, Wales in 1992 and Northern Ireland in 1994. Of course, the London Life book, which was England's "entry" did not contain any Country stamps. England, alone among the constituent countries of the Kingdom, does not have its own series of stamps. Speaking as an Englishman, maybe there should be even more Machin designs. No Country stamp has been issued in coil form – so far.

Horizontal Format

The mention of Machin designs reminds me that there has been one other major innovation in addition to the double head series. This was the horizontal format of the stamps in the book of 20 self-adhesives which was trialled in the Tyne Tees television area in 1993-94. These trials revealed that more work was needed to perfect the technique. This particularly involves the gum employed which was a unique double formulation designed to enable the stamps to be removed easily from the backing cover and (for collectors!) used examples from envelopes. Further research which has been undertaken by the Post Office's chemists at their research laboratories in Swindon has been encouraging and we could well see more self-adhesive Machins in future although whether they would again be in booklets and whether they would use the horizontal design cannot be predicated. Probably the design would not be repeated (unless further field trials prove necessary) as this unique Machin shape was meant only to provide easy recognition during the monitoring of the experiment.



Scotland: 15p Photogravure (Harrison) Type 1 solid eye joined to background;
26p Litho (Waddington) Type 2 "opened" eye, not joined to background



The self-adhesive stamp prepaid the cost of an inland first-class letter but it did not have any value printed on it. It is one of the stamps known collectively as Non Value Indicators, or NVIs. These were first issued in August 1989 as part of the drive to sell more stamps by making them available to the public from numerous retail outlets. These have all been issued in booklets, still known to collectors as window booklets from the fact that the first issues had a cutout on the front cover covered by a clear laminate through which one of the stamps inside could be seen. At first, these retail books, as Royal Mail refers to them, contained normal value stamps. (Some of them contained 1840 anniversary stamps.) The incentive for retailers to stock the books received a setback when rates were increased in September 1988, as retailers did not wish to hold stocks of out-of-date stamps, and the public did not want to have to buy odd value stamps to make up the deficit. To overcome these problems, Royal Mail

50p machine-vend books: printed on Jumelle press (cover Grand Prix Austin) 12p and 10p set in line; Chambon press (cover 1903-5 Vauxhall) 12p and 10p not in line

introduced non-value stamps which prepaid the minimum postage rates whatever these happened to be, so that a rate change did not affect their validity; it merely increased the retailer's profit! The very first NVIs cost 15p and 20p (although only sold in books of four or ten) but they can be used today even although the rates have increased to 19p and 25p respectively, and they will continue to be valid after the next tariff increase. NVI stamps in sheet form were introduced in September 1993.

Value figures

The self-adhesive stamp was another of Jeffery Matthews' brilliant designs and maybe his work on *Machins* would itself form an interesting subject for a collection. He has had almost as much effect on the design as Machin himself.



Changes to values: 20p and 75p (above)
1993 Self-adhesive in horizontal format (right)

Remember, it was he who designed the 1840 anniversary issue and he compiled the now standard palette of colours used on all Machin stamps. Another instance of his influence on the design was the re-drawing of the figures of value following a decision by Royal Mail to exercise more control over this feature. The new numerals were introduced gradually from March 1983 and took five years to extend to all stamps in the range. These, too, would make a good starting point for a Machin collection. Yet another example of Jeffery Matthews' influence occurred on the Country issues, where the symbols by which the country of use is indicated were re-drawn by him when the printing method changed from photogravure to lithography. Even moderate specialists recognise the different symbol types.

Re-drawn values and symbols are only part of what I consider to be the really fascinating aspect of Machins. Just as collectors of the classic issues concern themselves with tiny details which enable them, for example, to plate the alphabets used on the Victorian line-engraved stamps, so a study of value types and settings enables the student to allocate even single stamps to their various printings. (A setting is the placement of the value in relation to the edges of the design.) Many issues exist in only one type and setting and it is no exaggeration to say that experts can frequently tell, from the examination of a single stamp, whether it came from a sheet, coil or booklet and even, on occasion, the number of the cylinder which printed it. At this level there is no doubt that Machins offer intellectual stimulus as well as relaxation. If you want to pursue this line, specialist publications exist to guide you through the maze of Machins.

Break points

Among the more recent "break points" for those who wish to start collecting Machins, may be mentioned the introduction of a blue fluor in



the phosphor inks used by all four firms currently printing Machins. These are being stocked by the British Philatelic Bureau. Another is the reversion by Harrison to PVA gum; this was first trialled on the 19p and issued on 19 July 1994. Other stamps with this gum will be appearing shortly.

As the earlier mention of self-adhesive gums above indicates, Post Office research continues and other results of it may well impinge on Machin collecting in the future. A hint of this was given by Dr Tim Lane, head of the research at Swindon, in an article in the October 1993 *Bulletin*. Special barcodes printed on the surface of the stamps in a luminescent ink could enable machines to read all sorts of information, such as the value of the stamp, in addition to the traditional separation of mail into first- and second-class. So if you are hesitating and wondering where to start collecting Machins, maybe these experiments will one day soon give you your excuse – or opportunity.

I know that there are many aspects of Machin collecting which I have not mentioned, such as head types, coil leaders, variations in the type, colour, width, placement and screening of phosphor overprints, the use of the head on postal stationery, and even on the stamps of another country (Hong Kong), but I hope I have said enough to convince you that Machins are far from boring and offer multiple opportunities to indulge in any facet of stamp collecting that appeals to you.

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