

Collecting Decimal Machins

Part 1

D G A MYALL

The Machin head is the only design in the history of British postage stamps to have unified the complete range of definitives from ½p to £1. This was first achieved with the pre-decimal series on 5 March 1969 when the four large-size values (2/6d, 5/-, 10/- and £1) engraved by Bradbury Wilkinson were issued (delayed from 9 September 1968). This unity lasted well into the decimal era and ended only when the castles design for the high values was re-introduced in a modified form on 18 October 1988. Since then, the £1 has become a 'low value' and was re-issued with the Machin head on 22 August last year, with novel security printing features. So stunning is the three-dimensional look of this stamp that I for one would happily see *all* the castles stamps change to Machins. Yes, even the £10 one, despite the call on my pocket that such a move would mean. Then, once again, Machins would unify the whole definitive range, a position which all Machin maniacs would argue is its rightful one.

Decimal day was 15 February 1971 but the first decimal stamps with the Machin portrait were issued on 17 June 1970. They were recess printed by Bradbury Wilkinson in the denominations 10p, 20p, 50p and £1. Although the latter had been part of the pre-decimal

Machin series, a new layout of the printing plate meant that there were 100 stamps to a printer's sheet instead of 160. A small change to the typeface used for this value was introduced on 6 December 1972. The small format definitives for the then current tariff were all issued on D-day. There were 12 of them, printed by Harrison in photogravure: ½p, 1p, 1½p, 2p, 2½p, 3p, 3½p, 4p, 5p, 6p, 7½p and 9p. Perhaps only the idiosyncratic British could introduce a decimal currency with a fraction in it. This did not disappear until the ½p coin was demonetized on 31 December 1984.

New tariffs, new values

Since then, there have been 18 major tariff changes, with a further one very likely later this year. Each has necessitated the introduction of new values, or the re-introduction of a previous value in a new colour, to meet key rates and to maintain a practical range of make-up values. Changes of colour of the same value have also been caused by operational requirements, chiefly to meet technical demands of mail sorting machines. Other changes were brought about by two reviews undertaken by Jeffery Matthews at the request of Royal Mail. An account of these was given in the *Bulletin*, January/February 1993.

Leaving aside the pre-decimals, it would require a collection of 300 stamps to have just one of every Machin value and of every official colour change. At this level one must include

£4315 pane of 5 x 3p plus label ex 25p Vétérans Transport No 2 book (17 September 1971) showing imperforate "blind" label, also perforated label pane – the labels could be detached and used as stamps!





Elliptical perforations – pair of 38p printed by Enschedé

three other groups in addition to the National range of standard unified issues. These are: the Country or Regional stamps, first issued on 7 July 1971; the non-value indicator (NVI) stamps, first issued on 22 August 1989; and the stamps issued in 1990 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the penny black. The total is made up as follows:

Large format (including the redrawn £1)	12
National, small format (including the small £1)	109
Isle of Man	4
Scotland	55
Wales	55
N. Ireland	55
NVI's (including the 1993 horizontal self-adhesive)	5
1840 anniversary	5
Total:	300

Such a collection indicates the diversity of the Machins and its attraction to collectors. Stamps are issued in three basic forms: in sheets, in booklets and in coils. Some of them exist in only one form; the 60p, for example, can be found only in books, (as can the famous $\frac{1}{2}$ p side band, but that is rather more specialised).

Of course, there is much more to Machin collecting than one of each. The past 25 years have seen many major developments in both printing and mail sorting technologies, and Britain has led the world in most of them. Every aspect of the makeup of a modern postage stamp has undergone change. Among the most important are the further development of phosphor inks and phosphorised papers, and the introduction of security features to counteract forgery. All these changes have left their mark on the stamps. In this fact lies the secret of their fascination.

Where to start

25 years is a long time and it would be very difficult to accumulate a complete Machin collection now. So where should you start if you want to have more than a basic collection of "one of each"? There are many "break points", limited only by what interests you personally and by your budget. In the rest of this article I will try and indicate some of the possibilities. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list but it will give you some idea of the scope available for a personalized collection.

All restricted forms of Machin collecting fall into one or other of two groups. I call these "closed" and "open". By a closed group I mean one in which there will be no more issues. For example, the series issued to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the penny black is a closed group. An open group is one which is concerned, at least partly, with issues which are still on sale. Examples are stamps with blue fluor in the phosphor ink, or machine vended booklets. Each kind of group has its advantages and disadvantages. The collector of a closed group knows that he is not going to be under the pressure of having to keep up with anything and everything that Royal Mail issues within his area of interest. On the other hand, he will be unable to obtain his wants at face value at his local post office and may find some of his purchases cost a considerable sum. Of course, even items in an open group may also cost a lot if they consist of errors, but there is always the chance of a lucky find, such as imperforate stamps or ones with



*Top: The new £1 – Mr Myall's favourite Machin!
Below: 1p and 12½p values – ideal for specialist study*

the phosphor omitted. The fun of the hunt is available to both groups of collectors, but collectors of an open group will never be complete until after Machins have come to an end; and what a sad day that will be!

Printers

Six firms have been engaged to print the Machins: Bradbury Wilkinson, Harrison, Waddington, Questa, Walsall and Enschedé, using a dozen different papers and four gums. Three printing methods have been used: recess (or intaglio), photogravure, and lithography. Here is source enough of variety and interest, although you will need to be able to distinguish the work of the various printers and to identify the paper/gum combinations. This is perfectly possible and there are many specialist publications to help you.

A traditional interest of all stamp collectors is perforation and the Machin series offers ample opportunity to build a collection around the subject. While only four gauges have been used, one of them an error but knowingly released (on some Walsall booklets in October 1990), a study of the various perforators used, both rotary and comb-operated, interests many people. Then there are the elliptical perforations, introduced to small format definitives in April 1993; these make a collecting group on their own.



Six printers – 20p Bradbury Wilkinson (Recess, 1970) and Waddington (Litho, 1980); 2p Photogravure (Harrison 1988 and Enschedé 1995) and Litho (Questa 1988 and Walsall 1993)

More specialized have been the variations in the pin layouts on the margins of booklet panes brought about by operational requirements (The Great Britain Decimal Stamp Booklet Study



20p Machin (photo) with "Penny Black" (recess) from 1990 miniature sheet

Circle has codified over 50 types). This is an open group and Questa machine-vend books have recently added a new layout to it. Pin layouts have also been altered for other purposes. One of the earliest was stated to have been to help the blind avoid mistaking the labels in early stitched books for stamps. Stamps with deliberate straight edges also fall into this group.

I have mentioned the wide range of colours that have been used for decimal Machins; based on official colour names there have been over 100 of them. This variety is a feature that prevents a display of Machins from being boring, a calumny often advanced by the uninitiated! "All those identical stamps on an album page", they cry. Well, each to his own bent, but a plateful of penny reds does not look all that different to me. One collector I know limits himself to a single colour; well, actually, a colour group. Variations on the green theme have provided him with an amazingly interesting collection. This is an open group because there are eight different greens in the current Jeffery Matthews colour range.

Single Value

An even more restrictive self-imposed limitation is adopted by collectors who concentrate on a single value. I know people who collect nothing but 3p stamps or 12½p ones. The latter is a closed group but although the 3p is not in the current range one never knows whether it might one day be needed again and so there is always the prospect of certain closed groups being re-opened, probably just as you feel that you have exhausted the possibilities and are looking for something else to collect. The formation of a single value collection can present quite a challenge if it is to be anything like complete. In addition to such regular items as cylinder blocks, coil leaders and booklet panes, there are major errors such as imperforates and missing phosphors and, for some colour trials, essays and

proofs. Not all of these are expensive; a missing phosphor 1p from sheets can be had for only £2 or £3.

In fact, the humble 1p is suggested as a candidate for a single value, single colour collection; the modern equivalent of the penny red, perhaps. This value is the only

one which has been continuously available unchanged from D-day to the present, apart from a hardly noticeable colour change from crimson to dark maroon in 1991. Until June 1993, when Enschedé took over the contract for it, all were printed by Harrison; it does not exist in a lithographed version.

Se-tenant pairs

No booklet pane consists solely of 1p stamps; those that exist are se-tenant with other values. This leads me to suggest another sphere of collecting which is very popular, especially on the continent. (There are many, many Machin enthusiasts in foreign countries; testimony to the global appeal of the design.) Se-tenant pairs can be collected horizontally or vertically. If you want all of them you must collect both forms since not all pairs exist in both. The current, and soon to be abolished, 50p machine vend booklet contains a vertical pair of a 25p stamp under a slogan label; no horizontal pairing of these two elements exists. Of course, if you wish, you can exclude pairs which do not consist only of stamps; the choice is entirely yours.

I have mentioned the 1840 anniversary issue and this is a very interesting closed group, having a direct connection with the beginning of stamp collecting. One of the unissued plates of the original Victoria head was combined with the Machin head to make the design (hence the popular reference to these stamps as “double heads”). This was very skilfully done by Jeffery Matthews. This group would make a splendid adjunct to a classic collection of penny blacks and twopenny blues, especially as the colours of the stamps were black and light blue in a conscious decision to link them with their famous predecessors. There were only five values and all were printed in sheets by photogravure. The stamps were not issued in coils, but the two lower values, 15p and 20p,



50p book (*Giant's Causeway - Sep 1995*) showing 25p vertically se-tenant with Postcode Helpline labels

which predated the minimum inland letter rates of the time, appeared in booklet form, as did the 29p value.

As usual, booklets provide the major source of variety and interest. The two lower values were issued in 50p and £1 machine-vend books printed by Harrison. The pane in the £1 book was also printed by Walsall as a lithography trial. Walsall, along with Harrison and Questa, also printed both values in red retail (window) books. Stamp World 1990 was held during the period these stamps were on sale and a special prestige book, London Life, contained panes with anniversary stamps, including one in which they appeared se-tenant with the standard issues; a case of two group collecting interests overlapping. The 20p was also featured on a miniature sheet se-tenant with a replica of the penny black, although the latter was not perforated.

Curiously, all of the 1840 anniversary sheet stamps exhibited the feature known to collectors as “screened value”. The photogravure process as used by Harrison employs a cross-ruled screen to create the tiny cells which hold the ink. (The depth of these varies and it is this which gives the full tonal range which is so distinctive of the process.) The cause of value screening is underexposure to light at a certain stage of the cylinder-making process. This is an example of how an understanding of the printing processes can enhance one’s interest and enjoyment. You do not *have* to bother with “flyspeck philately” although even this is of interest to ‘platers’; who patiently re-create the original printer’s sheet of booklet panes from the flaws they contain. This enables faked material to be detected and is it so very different from plating penny reds?