

## George VI A look back at the stamps of George VI, first issued 60 years ago this month by Jean Matheson



Unadopted designs for 1937 Coronation stamps by Eric Gill (left) and Edmund Dulac (middle), and the issued stamp by Dulac. The stamp was based on the photograph above, by Dorothy Wilding.

LAST DECEMBER a Fort Belvedere, Windsor postmark recalled King Edward VIII's dramatic abdication in 1936, an event marked also by a recent cover bearing the King's portrait, patterns of his uncirculated coinage, and packs of specimens of the stamps that went on sale that September sixty years ago: the deep green ½d, deep scarlet 1d, the 'brown lake' 1½d and deep ultramarine 2d (SG 457-460). These stamps, the first to be produced from a photograph, were praised by some for their simplicity and execrated by others for the receding Crown hovering near the Monarch's 'guillotined' head. The general public rushed to buy these novelties, and *The Times* reported that in some cities the usual 10 days' supply sold within 24 hours of issue.

Joining the fray in *The Times* correspondence columns were Eric Gill, etcher, typographer, and a Royal Designer to Industry, who liked the stamps' lack of 'stupid ornamentation', and Edmund Dulac, a renowned illustrator and a medallist, who thought them ill-designed, with unsuitable lettering and a poor likeness of the King. Because preparations for a Coronation on 12 May 1937 were well-advanced when King Edward abdicated, it was felt that the new King George VI, and his Consort, Queen Elizabeth, should be crowned then, and Gill and Dulac were put to the test when the Post Office presently chose them to design new stamps to be issued by that date.

Dulac soon abandoned the image provided by the PO and, from a plaster cast, produced the head that would appear on nearly all King George's stamps. The ½d-6d stamps (SG 462-70) designed by Gill, showed a Tudor Crown over the Dulac head. On the 7d-1s values (SG 471-5) Dulac incorporated a different Crown in his hexagonal frame for the head, and in the corners were national flowers larger than the sprigs on Gill's stamps. The words 'Postage' and 'Revenue', omitted from King Edward's stamps, were re-instated on King George's.



Stamp by Eric Gill with the Dulac head

**The Coronation** Only the lowest denominations could be available in time for the Coronation. Even the novel Coronation stamp had briefly to serve as the 1½d definitive. This first British stamp to show a Monarch and Consort was Dulac's alone. He sent autographed specimens to two friends, joking that in time they might fetch as much as 6d each.

Based on a study by Dorothy Wilding, photographer to fashionable society, the stamp showed the King as Admiral of the Fleet, with the Queen in formal gown and tiara, among Coronation Regalia (SG 461). As Duchess of York, the Queen had figured on a Newfoundland stamp in 1932 (SG 226) and has now appeared on sufficient British and Commonwealth stamps to form a thematic collection. As Queen Mother she would inspire the first stamp to mark a Royal birthday, when Jeffery Matthews framed Norman Parkinson's photograph of her in a white border as backing for the legend (SG 1129), and John Gorham's stamps celebrating her 90th birthday repeat, on the 34p, the portrait that Newfoundland used long ago. The 29p too, echoed an earlier stamp, showing full-face Queen Elizabeth in the gown and jewels she wore for the Silver Wedding profile photograph.

In 1937, Queen Elizabeth in Coronation robes appeared alone on Australia's 5s stamp (SG 176), but generally King and Queen were shown together, as in a border of Maori design for New Zealand (SG 599-601), inset upon a view of Victoria Falls for Southern Rhodesia (SG 36-9), and on stamps for the Colonies and Dependencies.



Australia's 1937 5s stamp, with Queen Elizabeth in Coronation robes

**High values** Great Britain's highest values were issued mid-1939. The Crown, omitted from Dulac's design based on the Royal Arms, was restored on advice from the College of Heralds, which then submitted a design by the Somerset Herald, G R Bellew; an obituarist in 1993 called him 'a designer, an artist, and a perfectionist in all things'. The King chose Bellew's design, asking only for minor alterations to letters and figures, and Dulac's also, asking that the Royal Arms be enlarged, and his own head correspondingly reduced. Dulac's 2s 6d and 5s values (SG 476-7), and Bellew's ornamental frame of national flowers around the Dulac head on the 10s stamp (SG 478), remained in use until 1948, a £1 value in the Bellew design – the first for almost 20 years – having joined them in 1947.



Dulac's 2s6d stamp, 1939

War-time ink shortages meant paler stamps – there were even proposals to save paper by issuing stamps half-size. But even in those days the centenary of the adhesive postage stamp could not pass unmarked in its birthplace, and Queen Victoria and her great-grandson, George VI, figured on





Centenary of the postage stamp by H L Palmer, with lettering by Eric Gill

**Opposite above** left to right: Special stamps for the return of peace, by Reynolds Stone and H L Palmer; Royal Silver Wedding by G T Knipe.

**Opposite below** left to right: Olympic Games by Dulac, UPU anniversary by Mary Adshead, and Festival of Britain by Dulac

commemorative stamps issued on 6 May 1940. Dulac had prepared a new head for Queen Victoria, to face the King's, but Harrison's H L Palmer's stamp bore the familiar Wyon head, so both faced left on the one-and-a-half-times sized stamp needed to accommodate them (SG 479-84). The lettering was a final contribution to stamp design from Gill, who died that year. To him, such work was only for times when he lacked other commissions, while Dulac became increasingly absorbed in its intricacies.

**Peace** The return of peace called for the first special stamps in several years. At this time, the PO – at the insistence of the Board of Trade – broke with its former advisers, the College of Heralds and national fine art institutions, and entered a – sometimes ambivalent – relationship with the new Council of Industrial Design. While it accepted the COID's nomination of the sculptor, Reynolds Stone, to design the 3d stamp (SG 492), it sought no collaboration on Palmer's 2½d (491), which was criticized for its crowded design of buildings, transport, flowers, and massive 'V' for Victory formed from searchlights backing the King's head. But Stone's stamp fared little better, mocked for including Masonic symbols, and the PO taken to task for pricing this 'better' stamp for overseas postage.

**1948 commemoratives** On 10 May 1948 two stamps, marking the third anniversary of the Channel Islands' liberation, illustrated the local seaweed harvesting. The 1d scarlet by Harrison's J R R Stobie, and the 2½d ultramarine by Edmund Blampied, a well-known Jersey artist, although intended primarily for the Islands, were valid for postage throughout the UK and available on the mainland – but at only eight Head Post Offices. Relatively unknown at the time, and unappreciated, they were our first pictorial stamps.



Unadopted designs for 1948 Silver Wedding and proposed 1940 Anglo-French stamps

In 1948 there was general acclaim for the upright format blue £1 stamp that the COID nominee, Joan Hassall, designed for the Royal Silver Wedding (SG 494). Miss Hassall incorporated Crown, value and the dates '1923-1948' to seem parts of the 'silver' frame for Dorothy Wilding's photograph of the Royal couple in profile. G T Knipe of Harrison's used the same photograph for his simple horizontal format blue stamp (493), and both stamps, issued on 26 April, omitted the words 'Postage' and 'Revenue' for the first time since King Edward's stamps. Philately owes the King, too, some acknowledgement for these stamps, produced at the eleventh hour after he rejected designs based on the PO's suggested theme – the King and Queen at Windsor Castle – and Miss Hassall's alternative, framing them in a garland of bells and blossoms.

On 29 July that year, four horizontal format stamps marked the Olympic Games' opening at Wembley (SG 495-8). The numismatic artist, Percy Metcalfe, designer of a 1937 Coronation medal, diverged from the Olympic rings' customary grouping to align them on the 2½d ultramarine. He, and Stanley Scott of Waterlow's who designed the bright purple 6d, incorporated the traditional laurels, Metcalfe's wreathing the globe, and on Dulac's



is brown the Winged Victory reflected the Olympics' origins. On the 3d violet, Abram Games, poster artist, depicted an athlete's head thrusting through the globe.

The Universal Postal Union's 75th anniversary on 10 October 1949 called for the fourth issue of special stamps within 18 months – more than were issued in the King's father's quarter-century reign. This brought more newcomers to stamp design, with the mural and portrait artist, Mary Adshead, centering the King's head against the hemispheres on the 2½d ultramarine, and H Fleury showing on the bright purple 6d, appositely if not clearly, the goddess Concordia carrying letters to the world. Metcalfe based his 3d violet on the UPU monument at Berne – altering the detail – and Bellew on the 1s brown (his final stamp design) girdled the globe with a posthorn (SG 499-502).

**Festival of Britain** New high value stamps appeared in 1951. Mary Adshead's green 2s6d and red 5s bore, respectively, oval-framed images of Nelson's HMS *Victory* and White Cliffs of Dover (SG 509-10) illustrating how stamp design was changing since the time when Gill and Dulac agreed on one point: that a stamp was not a picture. Metcalfe, on the other hand, incorporated Pistrucci's St George and Dragon in his blue 10s, while his brown £1 rendering of the Royal Arms, although differing in many details, was reminiscent of the Dulac 5s of earlier years (SG 511-2).

These horizontal stamps were issued on 3 May, simultaneously with those marking the Festival of Britain (SG 513-4). Games's 4d ultramarine featured his Festival symbol – Britannia's head impaled on the north point of the compass, flags strung from east to west. Dulac's scarlet 2½d showed Britannia stately in the type of helmet she had worn on the George V's 'sea horse' values, a horn of plenty for a Kingdom now at peace, and communications symbolised by the wand of Hermes, messenger of the gods. These were the last special stamps before George VI's untimely death. Throughout his reign he had held decided views on many of the designs submitted to him, and sometimes offered pertinent advice and comments ●

#### Acknowledgements

**Drabble, G E** Royal Anniversaries, *British Philatelic Bulletin*, March 1993, pp159-61

**Last, Barbara** Nine Royal Decades, *Bulletin*, August 1990, pp286-8

**Mackay, James** Stamps of the Four Kings: King George VI Definitive Stamps, *Bulletin*, March 1994, pp190-1

**Righo de Righi, A G** The King George VI High Values 1939-48, *Bulletin* March 1973, pp3-5 & April 1973, pp3-5

**Watson, James** British Special Stamps, *Bulletin* November 1974, pp4-5 (1947 Coronation), March 1975, pp5-6 (1948 Silver Wedding), April 1975, p4 (1948 Channel Is Liberation), July 1975, p11 (1951 Festival of Britain)

**Watson, James** The British High Value Stamps of the 20th Century, *Bulletin*, January 1974, pp4-5 (1948 Silver Wedding), February 1974, pp10-11 (1951 'Festival')

**McCarthy, Fiona** *Eric Gill*, Faber & Faber, 1989

**Rose, Stuart** *Royal Mail Stamps: A Survey of British Stamp Design*, Phaidon Press, 1980

**White, Colin** *Edmund Dulac*, Studio Vista, 1976