

Pictorial handstamps

Continuing his series, Richard West



Above: handstamps for Shakespeare's birth, Robert Burns, the opening of the Forth Road Bridge, Sir Francis Chichester (there was no GPO cover for this issue), and the International

Botanical Congress overprinted 'CANCELLED'. Opposite: handstamps for the 1968 Anniversaries, and the first pictorial 'first day of issue' handstamp for the Philatelic Bureau, 1972.

THE SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL issue of 1964 provided much to interest first day cover collectors: the first GPO first day envelope; the introduction of the circular 'first day of issue' handstamp; an appropriate slogan reading 'Shakespeare Anniversary Year'; and a pictorial handstamp relevant to the issue. Hitherto, the prime way of linking the theme of the stamps with the postmark had been with slogan cancellations. Apart from the British Empire Exhibition handstamps of 1924/25, the rather basic Postal Union Congress handstamp of 1929, and the handstamps linked with the Postage Stamp Centenary in 1940 (all of which really fall outside the time parameters of this series), the only pictorial handstamp which had been totally applicable was that for the 46th Parliamentary Conference in 1957.

However, from the Shakespeare series onwards, far greater use would be made of the pictorial handstamp. For the issue of 23 April 1964, the

handstamp read 'Shakespeare 400th Anniversary / Stratford upon Avon'. For the final issue of 1964, the opening of the Forth Road Bridge, the pictorial handstamps were very appropriate, there being one for each of North and South Queensferry, either end of the bridge. Many collectors chose these handstamps for their first day covers, but surprisingly few seem to have appreciated another handstamp which came in between. For the International Botanical Congress set a pictorial handstamp was in use in Edinburgh on the day of issue of 5 August 1964.

Incidentally, for the International Botanical Congress, the GPO envelope on which the four stamps were affixed and handstamped 'CANCELLED', was distributed at the time as a way of publicising the Post Office's own covers.

Generally speaking, covers serviced by the Philatelic Bureau had received a 'first day of issue' postmark (except for the Lifeboat Conference

follows the evolving FDC



and Red Cross Centenary, when the relevant slogan had been used). From the Shakespeare issue onwards, the Bureau used a 'first day of issue' circular handstamp (for Stratford upon Avon in the case of the Shakespeare set). However, for the two stamps issued in January 1966 for Robert Burns the Post Office provided pictorial handstamps at eight locations in Scotland, and although none was actually inscribed 'first day', all were available through the Philatelic Bureau. In addition, the cancellations applied by the Bureau can be distinguished (they are smaller in diameter) from those on covers put into posting boxes.

A similar approach was also used for the Sir Francis Chichester stamp, a pictorial handstamp being used at the Bureau, and at Plymouth and Greenwich.

There would now be a gradual awakening to the use of pictorial handstamps on covers. Sometimes these were 'official', such as for the British

Bridges set of 1968, inscribed 'first day of issue' and available at either Bridge (Kent) or through the Philatelic Bureau. Indeed, for the British Anniversaries set of 1968, no fewer than four 'first day of issue' pictorial handstamps were provided, one for each of the anniversaries commemorated.

At the end of 1970, a pictorial 'first day of issue' handstamp for each new issue became the norm at one location (and sometimes more than one) appropriate to the subject of the stamps (for example, that for the 1970 Christmas stamps was at Bethlehem in Wales). At first the Philatelic Bureau continued to use the basic 'FDI' handstamp, but from 1972 had a separate pictorial version for each special issue, designed to compliment the stamps. Furthermore, the Bureau would offer to service covers with either its own handstamp, or the 'alternative' pictorial FDI handstamp(s) for each issue.

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However, on one aspect the Post Office was very firm: while it permitted any organisation or individual to sponsor a pictorial handstamp, these could not be inscribed 'first day of issue'. This certainly did not deter; indeed, just the reverse. From fairly tentative beginnings, increasing use would be made of handstamps to link with the issue of new special stamps. Opportunities would be seized of linking each issue with appropriate organisations so that the cachet of 'official' might be applied to any covers that were produced, the handstamp also linking the organisation with the theme of the stamps. More often than not the organisation chosen has been a charity, which has been able to benefit from sale of the covers.

The first steps were again fairly tentative, from 'Posted from the Battlefield' for the Battle of Hastings set in 1966, 'Art on Stamps Exhibition' at the Strand Stamp Centre for the British Paintings of 1967 to the 'Christmas Toy Fair' at Selfridges in 1968. From 1969, the availability of specially commissioned handstamps escalated, and continues today.

Looking back In the previous article, reference was made to the slogan 'first day of issue' cancellation, with the envelope design. Not mentioned was the slogan used for the day of issue of the Prince of Wales Investiture stamps. Using the envelope design, it was inscribed 'Investiture Day' in English and Welsh. The 'First Day of Issue Westminster' slogan was used for the Churchill Memorial issue of 1965, in addition to the stamps to mark the 900th anniversary of Westminster Abbey in 1966.

From 31 May 1978, a 'first day of issue' slogan was used at Bournemouth, but with the inscription only, and no envelope design. In addition, examples of the envelope 'FDI' slogan are known with a triangle in which appears a number replacing the usual dateslug. Examples include number 162 within a triangle for Cardiff, and 635 for Reading, both used on the day of issue of the Paris Postal Conference stamp.

As mentioned last time, when the basic 'first day of issue' handstamp (non pictorial) was introduced (for the Shakespeare set), it was of a fairly

large diameter, albeit that used at Stratford upon Avon on that occasion was smaller. A smaller handstamp was also used by all 'first day of issue' offices for the Battle of Hastings set in 1966, although for the next issue, Christmas, all reverted back to the larger size. However, for the Christmas issue, a 'FDI' handstamp was also provided at Bethlehem (Llandeilo, Carmarthen), and this was of the small format. The 1967 EFTA stamps proved to be the final occasion when the larger diameter handstamps would be used, and thereafter the neater, smaller version would become the norm.

Forgeries From time to time, forgeries of first day of issue cancellations have cropped up, but surprisingly not usually to create what has now become a scarce first day cover. However, a 'forgery' does exist of the 46th Parliamentary Conference handstamp of 1957. I put the word forgery in quotes for, as it does not include the drawing of Big Ben, it is easy to detect.

In the early 1980s, the Postmaster at Freshfield, Formby produced his own circular 'FDI' handstamp, so that he could 'service' covers for his customers.

However, probably the most famous forgery is the 'FDI' circular handstamp for Diss in Norfolk. It seems a local dealer applied to the PO to have a local handstamp made available for each new issue, but this request was denied, so he produced his own. He certainly did not conceal this fact, taking an advertisement in the then weekly *Stamp Collecting* and illustrating the England Winners stamp on cover, cancelled with his own handstamp. He also produced a similar handstamp inscribed for 'Norwich Norfolk'. The dealer pleaded guilty to the charges brought against him. Ironically, the forged 'Diss' covers often command a hefty premium when offered for sale.

The question of definitives So far this series has concentrated on British special issues. However, definitives and airletters have also been afforded special first day treatment; and there is the saga of the introduction of the low value decimal definitives, at the time of a Post Office strike. But more about those next time ●