

National Productivity Year

The Editor looks back 40 years to the first set of stamps designed by David Gentleman



Today's collectors will find it hard to believe, but there was but a single set of special stamps in 1962 – comprised of three values, totalling around 9p in today's money. This set, issued on 14 November, marked the opening by the Duke of Edinburgh of the Macmillan government's National Productivity Year, aimed to revitalise the economy. The subject may not sound too exciting, but the stamps were amongst the most interesting of the 1960s.

TO BEGIN WITH, they were the first designs by David Gentleman, then aged 32. Other designs were submitted by Kenneth Briggs, Peter Gauld, Faith Jacques, and Jeffery Matthews, and stamp printers Bradbury Wilkinson, De La Rue, and Harrison & Sons Ltd. Their unadopted designs, also unused designs by David Gentleman, were shown here in November 1967.

Not only were they the first stamps by David, but the first to be issued in both plain and phosphor-lined versions, the first to have 'traffic lights' in the sheet margins, and the first for which a missing Queen's head error was discovered.

The designs David is on record as describing National Productivity Year as a 'Stalinist-sounding' subject, and the stamps are not amongst his favourites. In a paper given to the Royal Society of Arts in 1974 he said: 'My first set of designs, for National Productivity Year, got off pretty lightly considering how bad they were. The NPY arrow symbol had to be included, and I decided to use some more arrows to suggest a sudden national upsurge of energy; but arrows are almost as dated as symbols as they are as weapons, and the only thing they really signify is the designer's inability to think up anything better.'

I recently asked David for his views on the stamps now. He replied: 'Looking at these stamps again after a 40 year gap, and in the light of your own affection for them, perhaps my earlier judgement on the designs was a bit harsh. What I really still most dislike is the subject itself – propagandist and exhortatory – and the fact that, like all stamp subjects at that time, they still had to commemorate a passing event. They couldn't just say "Let's all be more productive": productivity stamps without a "Year" tacked on wouldn't have been eligible as a subject. When working on the Album three years later, one of my aims was to break down this rigid commemorative strait-jacket so that stamp subjects could become more interesting.'

'The reasons I like the 3d design best of the three are firstly that, despite including the map of Britain as well as the arrows, it looks very simple; and secondly that, since most of the design is in the purple printing, it doesn't depend on the two cylinders being printed in perfect register. There

David Gentleman's new book *Artwork* was reviewed in last month's *Bulletin*. It is available from Royal Mail Tallents House price £27. Order code 03 AAC.



David Gentleman at the opening of Talents House, 21 March 2001.

are no places where two colours overlap or white hairline cracks can open up between them, and it would have to be printed badly out of register before anyone would notice. This is not so true of the other two designs, where I was still feeling my way.'

On the 2½d stamp 'units of productivity' are represented as children's toy blocks, each adorned with an upward-thrusting arrow; and on the 3d 'nation-wide productivity' is indicated by two overlapping arrows superimposed upon a map of the UK. On the 1s3d, soaring arrows depicted in close formation, possibly inspired by the Farnborough Air Show, represent 'unified productivity'. The Queen's head was set within an oval frame, a device used by David on the Battle of Britain stamps in 1965. In his new book *Artwork*, David tells us that he thinks the 3d the best of the three and the one he took most trouble over.

The designs were welcomed by the Editor of *Gibbons Stamp Monthly* as the uniformity of style made for a coherent group – many previous British sets, by different designers, were rather a mixture of design styles. *Stamp Collecting* noted that the 3d stamp omitted the Shetland Islands from the map of GB, and in a Parliamentary debate on stamp issues, in March 1963, Roy Mason MP (later PMG) criticised the NPY issue and pressed for more pictorials related to industries, literary personalities and other themes.

Varieties and errors As James Watson pointed out here in 1976, there were numerous mishaps in paper and printing, providing a host of flaws and varieties for collectors. There were three printings of the 2½d resulting in distinct shades: myrtle-green and carmine-red, deep green and bright carmine-red, and blackish olive and carmine-red.

The second is the scarcest; the phosphor version is from the third printing, ie the blackish olive shade. The SG *Specialised* catalogue estimated that the three printings amounted to 62, three, and 34 million stamps respectively. The 3d comes from at least two printings – listed in the *Specialised* catalogue as light blue and violet (plain and phosphor), and the scarcer light blue and deep bluish purple (plain only). Three cylinders, 2A, 2C and 2D were used for the violet colour – cylinder blocks of 2A are quite scarce. Only 2D was used for the phosphor version.



Different shades of green on the 2½d Queen's head.



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Top: a half sheet of the 3d with missing Queen's head error was displayed on the Stanley Gibbons stand at Stampex in 1963.

Above, from left to right: the retouched arrow on the 2½d value, the unretouched arrow, and the 'lake in Yorkshire'.

Damage to the green (1B) cylinder of the 2½d led to numerous repairs and retouches – all to be found listed and illustrated in the *Specialised* catalogue. These constant varieties make an interesting display and it is worth checking copies in your collection against the *Specialised* catalogue to see if you have any. There were also a number of interesting varieties on the 3d, especially the lakes in Scotland and Yorkshire and 'Kent omitted' varieties. There are no major varieties listed for the 1s3d, although three minor flaws are recorded in the *Specialised*.

For those interested in major errors, The Queen's head (blue colour) can be found missing on the 3d and 1s3d values. The discovery of a sheet of the 3d with 76 of the 120 stamps with this error caused quite a stir in the philatelic world and in the national press. A half sheet was displayed on the Stanley Gibbons stand at Stampex in 1963 before being broken up for sale to collectors. Copies were priced at £85 – the current valuation is £800. The 1s3d error was not discovered until sometime after and is now priced at £4000 in the catalogue.

Imperforate 'imprimatur' stamps, both plain and phosphor, all with upright watermarks, exist from the National Postal Museum Archives sales of the 1980s. These are unpriced in the catalogue. I have also seen offered in auction catalogues the two lower values imperf and overprinted with horizontal lines – these are thought to be printers' waste.

Watermark and phosphor The watermark is inverted on the 2½d and 3d stamps. Edge cracks were discovered in the paper after coating, and it was feared that the brittle paper would disintegrate during the gumming process. To obviate this, the edges were trimmed prior to gumming and subsequently fractured and trimmed to size in the usual way, but the extra trimming process resulted in the finished reels of paper being wound in a reverse direction to normal, and printing from these reels resulted in the inverted watermarks. The 1s3d was reeled and printed in the normal way, with upright watermark.

Phosphor-lined stamps were produced for sale in the Southampton, Liverpool and London SE1, 5, 11 and 15-17 districts where ALF (Automatic Letter Facer) sorting machines were in use. The phosphor was applied by the flexography process, resulting on the 3d and 1s3d with stamps from the first and sixth columns of sheet (adjoining left and right sheet margins) having a narrow band at left or right. These are separately listed in the *Specialised* catalogue, with an unpriced 'left-hand band omitted' 3d variety.

Sheet markings Multicoloured stamps meant the need for more printer's marks in the margin and 'traffic lights' or coloured check dots were introduced with this issue, printed in the right-hand sheet margin opposite the final stamp in the sheet on the dot panes of the 2½d and 3d and on all sheets of the 1s3d. Autotron marks – coloured bars which serve as an electronic control on colour registration – are also found; these were introduced the previous year, as were the colour designations 'G GREY G RED', 'G BLUE G MAUVE' and 'G BLUE G GREEN' printed on the sheet margins but usually trimmed off prior to issue. Worth watching out for. Readers interested in sheet markings are recommended to read the useful notes on these in the *SG Specialised* catalogue. The markings found are recorded under 'Sheet Details' in the listing for each stamp issue.

Pre-release and first day This set provided some excitement even before it was issued! Indeed even before the designs were made public, supplies had been issued in error at the Ladywell post office in Lewisham (south east London) on 16-17 October. Some stamps used on the mail were obliterated using an 'E' handstamp (normally used for Express mailbag labels), and the date on the machine postmark scratched through. It is believed that about 350 of the 3d stamp were sold, about 60 of the 2½d and just 20 of the 1s3d. Examples were also posted later at a number of offices in the Home Counties. This early release was recorded as the 'Lewisham Leak' in *GSM* at the time, and I recall seeing one of the 'leaked' 3d stamps in the *SG* window in the Strand prior to the day of issue. Somewhat surprisingly I have never come across the pre-release covers offered for sale over the past 40 years – one assumes they remain the pride and joy of a few collectors.

In 1962 there was no Philatelic Bureau or *Philatelic Bulletin*, Post Office first day cover, first day postmarks or presentation pack. Collectors of *FDCs* could buy blank covers produced by the Philatelic Traders' Society/British Philatelic Association and others, and mail them on the day of issue to