

A major philatelic first

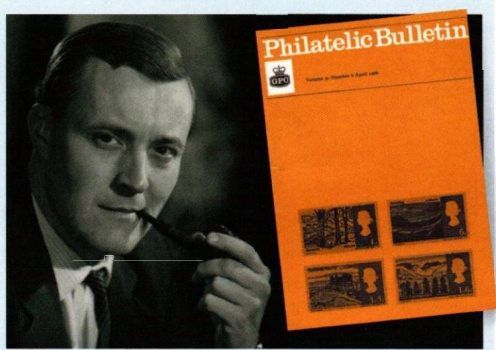
James Mackay on the introduction of pictorial stamps and the Queen's silhouette 40 years ago

THE STAMP ADVISORY COMMITTEE met on 11 August 1965 and submitted a list of nine possible subjects for stamps in 1966. At that time the only definite issues were those for the 900th anniversary of Westminster Abbey and for Robert Burns, but the Committee proposed a further nine events or anniversaries: 900th anniversary of the Battle of Hastings; centenary of the Royal Aeronautical Society; the bicentenary of the birth of John Dalton; 50th anniversary of Accident Prevention; 50th anniversary of the Royal College of Nursing; 14th World Conference of the International Council for Bird Protection; opening of the Severn Bridge; Enterprise Neptune; and the investiture of the Prince of Wales at Caernarfon Castle (The last-named did not actually take place until 1969, and was then suitably celebrated by a set of five stamps and an aerogramme.)

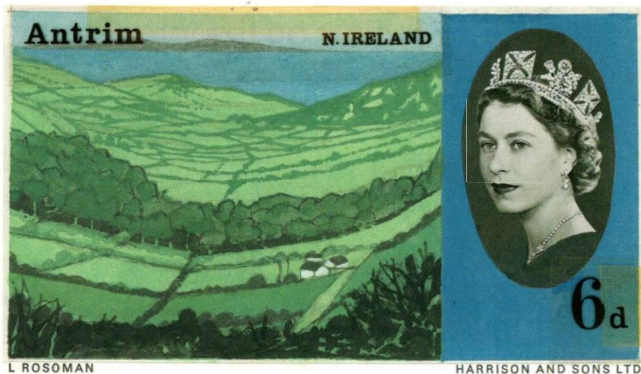
This list was submitted to the PMG for him to select six to add to the two already chosen. Tony Benn, however, had his own ideas. He wished to get away from purely commemorative issues and focus on a more purely pictorial approach. In an internal memo of 21 September 1965 he accepted the Battle of Hastings issue for October 1966 but replaced the other suggestions with issues for the World Cup (June) and Christmas (December), along with pictorial issues showing birds (July) and British technology (September). He proposed an issue on 4 April 'possibly a multiple design stamp and possibly showing some regional landscapes'. If the landscapes included coastlines, he argued that this issue could 'embrace Enterprise Neptune'. He added that this first pictorial issue might meet the earlier demands for regional stamps made by Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

On 27 October Benn announced in Parliament the special issues for Burns, Westminster Abbey, World Cup, and Battle of Hastings and stated that special pictorial issues were to be introduced, although gave no further details. His statement was reported in the *Bulletin* in December (vol 3 no 4) with the comment 'This opens up all sorts of exciting ideas and we eagerly await further information.'

At a Committee meeting on 11 November the notion of linking the landscapes set to Enterprise Neptune was raised, but the PMG now pressed for a series depicting typical landscapes from the four countries of the UK. In December the Council of Industrial Design supplied a list of six artists for this project, including Lynton Lamb, designer of the Castles high values, Leonard Rosoman, William Kempster, Peter Robertson and David Gillespie. On 22 December they were formally invited to submit artwork. ▶



A revolution in policy towards new issues occurred in the period when Tony Benn (Anthony Wedgwood Benn) was Postmaster-General in Harold Wilson's first Labour government. Collectors of GB stamps may be familiar with the results, but the details of how these changes came about have never yet been fully revealed.



Above: Leonard Rosoman's artwork for the 6d, one of his four designs selected as first choice by the SAC. Essays were printed with the Wilding portrait, and with alternative cameos. Some essays are shown above; the approved version is on the front cover.

Royal discussions In November The Queen had discussions with the Prime Minister and the PMG regarding the use of her portrait on pictorial stamps. Her Majesty originally had no objection to the omission of her effigy from these stamps, but later changed her mind, and as a result the compromise of a silhouette profile was agreed. In fact, the artists were given the option of using the Wilding three-quarter facing portrait.

By 17 January 1966 a total of 43 designs had been submitted, ranging from four each from Lamb and Rosoman to a massive 16 from husband and wife team, David and Anne Gillespie. (Some of these designs were featured in the *Bulletin* of July 1966.) The Committee met on 26 January and selected Rosoman's four designs as their first choice, the runners-up being four designs by the Gillespies. A further quartet of Gillespie designs was subsequently taken to proof stage.

Independently, David Gentleman submitted four designs with a coastline theme, with a silhouette profile derived from the coinage effigy by Mrs Mary Gillick. These, too, were taken to proof stage, so when the Committee met again they had 24 proofs to consider.

Gentleman's designs were much deeper than the standard landscape type of the period and, were rejected because full sheets of 120 would not fit into the portfolios used by post office counter staff and there was 'a strong possibility of Union complaint'. The PMG also liked the idea of issuing the stamps as a se-tenant block of four but Harrison and Sons rejected this as 'technically impossible'.

Time was now pressing, if the stamps were to be released on 25 April, and in the end Benn was reluctantly forced to abandon the

Gentleman designs which he had ardently championed as 'a real first'. In the end Leonard Rosoman's designs won the day and were issued in four different denominations: 4d landscape near Hassocks, Sussex; 6d Antrim, Northern Ireland; 1s3d Harlech Castle, Wales; and 1s6d Cairngorm Mountains, Scotland. By late February James Fitton, acting Chairman of the Stamp Advisory Committee, met the PMG to finalise the submission to The Queen. Even at this late stage Benn was still pushing the Gentleman designs, but Fitton strongly disagreed, and in the end only the designs selected by the Committee at its meeting of 26 January were sent to the Palace.



Designs by David Gentleman included these two versions of the Hebridean coast: with a profile derived from the Gillick coinage head, and a coat of arms alternative to a portrait.



On 25 February the PMG wrote to The Queen, pointing out that a series of pictorial, rather than commemorative, stamps was 'an entirely new venture for this country' and as a result 'it would be appropriate to use a new profile effigy of Her Majesty in the design'. As a result, essays were submitted in both Rosoman and Gillespie designs, with the Wilding portrait and the coinage silhouette as alternatives. The Queen was in the Bahamas at the time, but she cabled her decision to the PMG and this was confirmed by letter from Buckingham Palace on 2 March.

The approved essays were forwarded to Harrison's the following day. A week later, however, doubts regarding the proposed date of issue had arisen because it might clash with the General Election, called for 31 March. It was feared that election fever would have a detrimental effect on any promotion of the issue in the general media. As a result, the Director of Postal Services recommended that the issue be postponed until 2 May. The PMG approved of this, and the decision was officially announced on 11 March.

Press launch On 6 April the Post Office staged a briefing for the media and revealed the new stamps. The press release described the landscape stamps as 'the first British stamps not linked to some current event or important anniversary'. Prominence was also given to the new 'cameo' portrait of The Queen, developed by David Gentleman. Leonard Rosoman was hailed as 'a newcomer to British stamp design'. He would subsequently design the Menai Bridge stamp (1968) in the same genre.

The stamps went on sale on 2 May. They were produced in both plain and phosphor versions, and the 6d and 1s6d values exist with an inverted watermark. There were a number of interesting constant varieties, particularly the missing D in the printer's imprint on the 6d – 40,000 sheets were printed before this error was noticed and corrected. Numbers sold ranged from about 6.5 million of the 1s3d to over 91 million of the 4d. There was no presentation pack but the Philatelic Bureau provided a FDC service. Special First Day of Issue postmarks were provided especially for this issue at Lewes, Sussex; Coleraine, Co Londonderry; Harlech, Merioneth; and Grantown-on-Spey, Morayshire. Covers bearing these relevant local postmarks are worth looking out for. ▶

Above left: 1s6d essays with alternative portraits. Centre: essays from the SAC's second choice set, by the Gillespies, with two alternative portraits. Right: two further Gillespie designs, essayed at the PMG's request, with cameo adapted by David Gentleman.



Continuing the break with tradition: 1966 British Birds, 1966 British Technology, 1967 British Discovery & Invention, 1967 British Wild Flowers and 1969 British Ships.

Significant issue The designs were doubtless derived originally from photographs but were drawn after the manner of tourist posters of the period. A further year would elapse before the use of purely photographic reproductions in full, natural colour occurred, with the release of the first set devoted to British paintings, and this trio also marked the adoption of the format which David Gentleman had envisaged in his landscape essays.

At the time many philatelists and probably most laymen did not appreciate the significance of this 'first'. After all, a set of four landscape stamps was issued two years earlier, but they were clearly inscribed as celebrating the 20th International Geographical Congress. But that this was, indeed, a major break with tradition was soon re-inforced by other issues of a purely thematic nature, notably the charming British Birds set of 8 August 1966. Whatever had been the 'technical impossibility' raised by Harrison's had vanished within months, as this set was produced as a se-tenant block. It was followed a year later by the similar series on British wild flowers and then British paintings and finally British discovery and invention (September 1967) – one of the ideas raised by Tony Benn back in September 1965.

In many cases what appears to be a purely thematic set according to the Benn doctrine has, in fact, a topical or commemorative element. Thus the British Ships set of January 1969 actually celebrated the launch of the *QUEEN*, which made her maiden voyage to New York the following May.

Nevertheless, the thematic sets, often giving equal prominence to subjects in the four countries of the UK, proved to be an immensely popular medium with collectors and general public alike. In the early years this policy was regarded as something of a catching up process, Britain having lagged well behind the rest of the world in the matter of pictorial stamps.

In more recent years, however, the choice of subjects has reacted more to market forces and a sustained effort by Royal Mail's marketing team to gauge what the public wants. The Fashion Hats issue of 2001, for example, was created in response to a need to satisfy the growing body of female collectors. Similarly, the sets devoted to animals and birds which have heralded the new year since 2001 strike a responsive chord with the public. This trend is also in line with the policy of the annual Europa issues (50 years old this year) which have employed distinctive themes since 1974 •

This article is based on an unpublished official history of this issue prepared for the former National Postal Museum. A number of these histories were published by the NPM in book form and in its Philatelic Year annual reports.