

Another view Douglas Myall takes a look at what defines a definitive

THE DISTINCTION between definitives and special issues has become blurred. In the reign of Queen Victoria all issued adhesive stamps were definitives and were inscribed 'Postage' (1) – even the £5 orange, although that was more likely to have been used for revenue purposes. A set of new designs was issued in 1887, the 50th year of her reign, and became known as the 'Jubilee' issue. They, too, were treated as definitives. Interestingly, the marginal rules at the bottom of the sheets became known as 'Jubilee lines' and this description lasted until they were abolished in 2003.

All the stamps of King Edward VII (2) were definitives. So, too, were those of King George V until Britain's first commemoratives were issued to mark the 1924 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley (3). This set was reissued the following year and was quickly (for those days) followed by a set of five to mark the holding of the Postal Union Congress in London in 1929 (4). No commemoratives were issued in the short reign of King Edward VIII but the coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth was marked by a single stamp in 1937 (5). Others followed for the centenary of the penny black, the Victory issue of 1946, their majesties' silver wedding in 1948 (6), the London Olympic Games the same year and a couple more before Queen Elizabeth acceded to the throne in February 1952.

And so the pattern continued, with important national and international events increasingly being marked by pictorial issues. In 1966 there was an innovation when a set of four stamps depicting British birds was issued. These did not commemorate anything and when similar issues appeared for British wild flowers the following year and other general subjects after that, it was clear that the word commemoratives no longer sufficed to describe them. A new term, special issues, was coined by Royal Mail to embrace both commemoratives and other pictorial non-definitives.

However, matters did not remain so simple. In 1990, a set of five stamps was issued to mark the 150th anniversary of the Penny Black (7). They were termed 'special definitives' by Royal Mail, a somewhat ambiguous name some may think.

Enter the smiling stamps 1990 saw the introduction of what Royal Mail call its Smilers® range, another innovation that did not fall squarely into the category of either special issues or definitives. These had their origin in what were named at the time as Greetings stamps. The first Greetings stamps were issued on 31 January 1989 in books of ten and the five images depicted Cupid, a rose (8), a yacht, a bowl of fruit and a teddy bear. These were accompanied by a dozen little labels reading 'Happy Birthday', 'Thank you', 'Congratulations' and similar sentiments. The first Greetings stamps were previewed in the December 1988 issue of *Bulletin*, where their purpose was stated to be to 'promote the sending of postcards and greetings cards' and to 'complement the card or letter inside the envelope'. The announcement added that they would be on



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long-term sale and that 'collectors will have to make their own decisions about how, where and whether they fit into their GB collections'. To me this indicated that they were neither definitives nor special issues and I named them Social stamps.

The second book of Greetings stamps was issued in 1990. It featured famous smiles, among them Punch, the Mona Lisa, the Cheshire Cat and the Laughing Policeman (9), again with a set of appropriate labels. These proved to be popular with the public and a second set of Smilers[®] with the same designs was issued the following year. The name was later used generically to refer to this kind of stamp and was registered as a trade mark in 2003.

The first Occasions stamps were issued in sheets on 6 February 2001 (10). The five NVIs featured 'hallmarks' on the themes of Love, Thanks, ABC, Welcome and Cheers. They were intended for use on social mail in the manner of Greetings stamps. Others followed in subsequent years with themes such as New Baby, Hello and Love. Some of these have also been issued as Smilers[®] sheets.

The large format Greetings stamps were reduced to definitive size in September 2005, when Royal Mail first began to call them definitives.

Celebratory stamps This year's London 2012 Olympic (11) and Paralympic Games (12) stamps are also called definitives, although, according to official statements, they were issued 'to celebrate London's Olympic Year'. So are they definitives or not? The question is important, because if you have special issues on standing order with Tallents House you will not have received the Games stamps and will have to order them specially.

In 1994 Royal Mail published *The Story of Definitive Stamps* written by two eminent authors, Richard West and Douglas N Muir. The book's glossary defines 'definitive' as: 'stamp on long-term sale, not issued for any special occasion'. That must rule out many of the issues which are now sold as definitives. I have not been able to come up with a definition that would include them without also including stamps that nobody would call definitives, such as the NVIs depicting views of Britain.

In my view, an important feature of a definitive is that the main element of the design must be a portrait of the monarch. The Diamond Jubilee of The Queen's reign is being celebrated this year by the issue of two first-class NVIs (13 and 14). There can be no doubt that these are definitives because, although they were issued to mark a very special occasion, they consist almost wholly of the Machin portrait and replaced the standard NVIs which were withdrawn while they are on sale.

Finally, I have seen it suggested that the two Olympics stamps pre-paying the worldwide 20g rate (12) are unique in having the portrait facing right. There is nothing new under the sun and some of the Castles high values (15) had the portrait facing that way. Indeed, on two of them, the £1.50 and £5 issued on 18 October 1988, it was the engraved version of the Machin head •



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