

British Special Stamps

59. British Ships 1969



The Post Office's maiden voyage across the thematic oceans of the world was an enterprising project, intended as 'a tribute to British ship-builders and seamen'. The issue of six stamps depicting 'British Ships' on 15 January 1969 was no doubt inspired by the *QE2*'s own impending maiden voyage and it is likely that the original idea of a commemorative issue for the debut of Britain's latest Cunarder was subsequently and enthusiastically expanded to embrace our maritime history from the first Elizabethan era to the second contemporary one.

David Gentleman designed the stamps (employing his favourite 'cut-out and stick down' technique) which were issued in varying formats – the 5d. *Queen Elizabeth 2* in treble-definitive size; three double-size 9d. stamps, issued together in a strip, showing an Elizabethan galleon, an East Indiaman and the *Cutty Sark*; and two treble-size stamps, both 1s. denominations, issued as a pair and depicting the *Great Britain* and the (first) *Mauretania*.

Here now is a summary of the six vessels which I described in greater detail in 'Stamps for Pleasure: 18. Ships & Shipping' – November 1978 *Philatelic Bulletin*. RMS *Queen Elizabeth 2* (now universally known as the *QE2*): Built by Upper Clyde Ship-builders (formerly John Brown) for Cunard; length 963 feet, gross tonnage 65,862; launched by HM the Queen in September 1967; cost £30 million. Designed for trans-Atlantic crossings and cruises.

Elizabethan galleon: Merchantman and warship; average tonnage 500 to 900, and length 100 to 200

feet; far superior to Spanish galleons in design and seaworthiness. East Indiaman: Operated by the East India Company between Britain, India and the Far East in the late-18th and early-19th centuries; fast, comfortable vessels of 1,000 tons and upwards. *Cutty Sark*: Famous clipper; launched at Dumbarton on the Clyde in 1869; named from Burns' poem *Tam o' Shanter* ('cutty sark' or 'short petticoat'); length 224 feet and gross tonnage 963; now permanently moored at Greenwich.

Great Britain: First iron-built, screw-driven, ocean-going ship; designed by Brunel, built at Bristol, 1840-43, and launched by Prince Albert; length 300 feet, gross tonnage 2,735; finally used as a storage hulk in the Falkland Islands, and towed back to Bristol in 1970. *Mauretania*: built by Swan, Hunter for Cunard; length 760 feet, gross tonnage 31,938; entered service in 1907, crossed the Atlantic in record time in the same year; broken up at Rosyth in 1934.

The stamps were photogravure-printed by Harrison and Son in sheets of 72 (5d. 8 x 9), 120 (9d. 6 x 20) and 80 (1s. 8 x 10), on unwatermarked paper, the 5d. with one (horizontal) phosphor band, the remaining values with two bands. Some values are recorded with colours omitted, the most spectacular being the 5d. with the black – Queen's head, value, hull and inscription – omitted. Quantities sold were: 5d. 67,584,528; 9d. 14,351,160; and 1s. 10,784,480; English presentation packs, 116,526; German packs, 4,416.

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