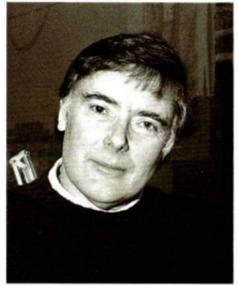


DAVID GENTLEMAN has designed more stamps than any other designer of British stamps. His output of 88 British stamps (99 when designs in conjunction with Rosalind Dease are included) started 35 years ago this month. In addition he has designed no fewer than 29 stamps for the Republic of Nauru in Central Pacific. He is not a philatelist and yet he is arguably Britain's most important philatelic designer. He has pioneered much in stamp design, laying foundations for future designers, richly deserving the accolade of Royal Designer for Industry (RDI) awarded by the Royal Society of Arts. His influence is felt to this day.



A designer of exceptional talent, Gentleman was the first recipient of the Reginald M Phillips Award for postage stamp design, receiving the gold medal in 1969 and once again in 1979 for his British Stamp Designs from 1974 to 1978. Photograph courtesy of *Gibbons Stamp Monthly*.

Education, training and achievements Born in 1930, David Gentleman was educated at Hertford Grammar School, moving up to St Albans Art School before going on to the Royal College of Art where he gained his ARCA and taught for some time. Since then he has worked in illustration, design, print-making, watercolour painting as well as writing and illustrating, *David Gentleman's Britain* (with over 450 illustrations) and other titles in the same series. He has produced a series of lithographs of architectural landscape subjects including castles and great houses of England. He has held many exhibitions of his watercolours and travelled extensively in the Central Pacific, India and East Africa. The scale of his work ranges from the miniature art of postage stamp design to massive projects such as the 360 foot mural in Charing Cross Underground.

Stamp issues – early policy Although 'special' stamps were issued from time to time, these were, until 1963, confined to one or two issues each year. There were in fact only three special issues between 1952 and 1959 compared with the eight or nine issues per year now!

Tony Benn's contribution to philately It was not until Anthony Wedgwood Benn MP (Tony Benn) served as Postmaster General from 1964 to 1966 that a new policy was enacted. Mr Benn had invited designers and artists to submit ideas and suggestions for future stamp issues with a view to broadening the range of subjects while at the same time maintaining or improving high standards. Gentleman, who had already designed three stamps (National Productivity Year, 1962) was one of the artists who replied.

In the resulting album of ideas commissioned by Tony Benn, Gentleman included alternatives to the Monarch's head on stamps, such as 'Royal Arms' or the inscription 'Great Britain' or even 'UK'; also a larger size (41 x 30mm) for a more sympathetic proportion to improve pictorial illustration and a silhouette monarch's head for a less intrusive presentation. Most of these ideas were adopted and are still in use today.

Of the designer's work for the Post Office, Tony Benn said: 'David Gentleman's contribution to the development of our stamp policy was absolutely central to its success. He responded at once to my request for designers to bring their ideas forward and I commissioned him personally to produce an album showing what could be done.

The result was brilliant and I gave one copy of this album to Harold Wilson who was captivated by the designs, and with his blessing I took the other copy to Buckingham Palace for my audience with the Queen.

No other stamp designer can have commanded the attention of the Monarch personally for so long and this led directly to the acceptance of the much more imaginative postage stamps towards which David Gentleman has made such a contribution.

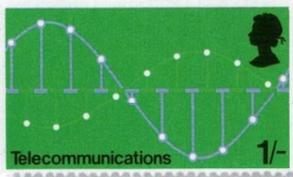
But quite apart from his work, David was a delightful person with whom to work, and my admiration for him has grown over the years.'¹

What do we mean by design? Design is really a problem-solving discipline. This is true of engineering as well as of graphic design. But a design problem, unlike a mathematical one, has many possible answers and the designer has to find the optimum solution. In stamp design the suitability of the subject for graphic interpretation and the ability of the designer to produce work of clarity and precision that will withstand reduction to a mere square inch or so is vital. Although, as David Gentleman puts it, 'It is not simply a question of scale; things can be beautiful and well designed or ill considered muddles at any scale.'²

Some subjects are of mind-numbing vagueness and need painstaking research to reach either a satisfactory solution or a 'best compromise'.



The illustrations for a stamp are required to communicate the subject to the viewer with little room for any explanation other than a title. Gentleman succeeds by simplification in his Post Office Technology set.



Difficult subjects for stamp design

Gentleman has tackled difficult subjects and yet produced graphic solutions of great merit. The Post Office Technology issue is a good example. The National Giro, Automatic Letter Sorting and Telecommunications

stamps of 1969 were subjects for which solutions do not readily spring to mind. Ask yourself how you would illustrate these, if you had not seen Gentleman's designs? His Automatic Sorting stamp (1s6d value) clearly conveys the basic principle of an extremely complex electronic machine, showing the gates automatically triggered by the phosphor banding of the stamps. Here, the part represents the whole. Likewise, Gentleman reduced the Telecommunications stamp (1s value) to a pair of sine waves to symbolise the many hundreds of messages transmitted electronically in a telecommunications system. Symbolic 'telegraph poles' join the base line. The design was cleverly arranged to appear as a pair of continuous sinusoidal wave forms in a se-tenant strip of two or more stamps.

Art versus design There are many examples of both art and design in postage stamps the world over. The Automatic Sorting Machine stamp shown above is clearly a design because it translates a vague concept into an understandable piece of engineering. Art, on the other hand, is the spontaneous expression of an artist's feeling for a subject. There are numerous examples of famous works of art reproduced at stamp size – the design element in these being reduced to the selection of typefaces and the placing of The Queen's head and value digits. To sum up, 'The Designer,' Gentleman says, 'has to translate a complicated, hazily-defined and verbal subject into visual terms which must be concentrated, interesting and self-explanatory.'³

Changing the Monarch's image! The three sets by David Gentleman which followed his 1962 National Productivity Year were the Lifeboat Conference, 1963, four of the five Shakespeare Festival set of 1964 and the Churchill Issue of 1965. Gentleman had argued that The Queen's head,

based on the three-quarters portrait by Dorothy Wilding, was far too large and uncompromising to sit comfortably in the frame alongside the stamp illustration. Accordingly, he progressively reduced the size over his next three commissions. But he was to go further, and reverting to the idea of a silhouetted profile head originally presented in his album of 100 designs, he adapted the coinage head which was to make its first appearance in the 'Landscape' issue 1966 in designs by Leonard Rosoman. Later that year, Gentleman reduced the size of the silhouette still further in the 900th anniversary of the Battle of Hastings set. This gave rise to Prince Philip's reference at the time to 'David Gentleman, the Head Shrinker'.



The Queen's (Wilding) portrait in Gentleman's Lifeboat issue compared with the 'shoulders eliminated' Queen's head in his Shakespeare set and the head reduced to the base of the neck on the Churchill pair. In 1966, he reduced the size of the silhouette still further in the 900th anniversary of the Battle of Hastings set, right.

'Commoners' on stamps In Gentleman's Shakespeare Festival set, the portrait of a 'commoner' was to appear for the first time on the same stamp as The Queen's portrait causing consternation in some quarters. There were, however, no serious consequences. Indeed since then persons below the rank of a Peer of the Realm have appeared on British stamps including Churchill 1965, Robert Burns 1966 and Emmeline Pankhurst 1968 to name only three. Shakespeare's image was based on the Droeshout portrait from the centre-piece of the title page of the first folio (published in 1623, seven years after his death) but shown in reverse so that the poet appears to face towards the centre – a nice touch – to balance with the Wilding portrait of The Queen. The stage-sets Gentleman used to illustrate the stamps were typical of those of the 16th century used in Shakespeare's best-known plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Puck and Bottom (3d); *Twelfth Night* with Feste the clown (6d); *Romeo and Juliet* – the Balcony Scene (1s3d) and *Henry V* – the Eve of Agincourt (1s6d).

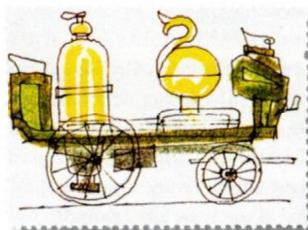


Art and design combined Art and design were combined in Gentleman's beautiful 'Good King Wenceslas' 1973 Christmas set in which the problem of communicating the theme was cleverly resolved. Gentleman said of this set 'In some ways the designs with their cut-away walls and unreal medieval perspectives did make certain demands on the imagination.'⁴ Clearly, the design element, the placing of the cut-away buildings and the position of the figures had to be decided before the artistic rendering of the landscape could be started. The cold blue colouring which predominates in

The 'modern medieval' style of Christmas 1973 borrowed heavily from the simplistic style which typified 13th century art, including a peculiar perspective which contrived to look both inside and outside a building simultaneously! Two stamps in the set show this particularly well.



the five 3p values carrying the theme convey the idea of snow which is deep and crisp and even, as in the carol. There is a kind of 'cardboard castle' effect which is particularly apt in Gentleman's interpretation but the same effect in his earlier Prince of Wales Investiture set (1969) was perhaps less appropriate. The Wenceslas set with its landscapes, castles and figures, tells the story clearly and with great charm – an impressive solution to the problem of communicating a given theme.



Fire Service issue Early sketches featured fire engine components like the nozzle of the power hose. Fire engines from different periods over the 200 year span were developed as artwork for approval.

Who decides the theme? Speaking on the choice of theme Gentleman said, '...stamps never begin with a designer seeing something pretty and thinking: that would make a good stamp... A new issue usually starts with an idea for a theme, perhaps (from) within the Post Office, or by a member of the public or by a public institution which would like its own stamp.'⁵

The development of a theme from briefing to finished solution is known from the publication of the unadopted designs for Gentleman's 1974 Fire Service Issue. The PO brief required a set of four stamps to mark the 200th anniversary of the 1774 Fire Prevention Act. Gentleman describes how with little to go on, he set about obtaining books, photographs, brochures and library references until there were so many possible solutions that he had to prepare a series of preliminary sketches to decide which ideas would make the most meaningful set of stamps. These sketches featured fire engine components like the fire-bell or the nozzle of the power-hose or the familiar fireman's helmet. Then he drew up sketches showing fire engines from different periods over the 200 year span. These appeared to be the optimum solution and he went ahead with artwork for approval.

Designs without perspective The final adopted designs showed the fire-engines in side-elevation in the manner of engineering projections, without perspective, reasoning that to show the historic spoked wheels of these



Liverpool and Manchester Railway The first stamp shows the *Rocket* approaching the Moorish Arch, Liverpool; the second has the carriages passing through the Olive Mount Cutting; the third shows a carriage and cattle truck crossing Chat Moss; the fourth has the horsebox and coach-carrying truck near Bridgewater Canal and the final stamp has the goods truck and mailcoach at Manchester.

fire-engines in perspective would have produced an overlapping confusion of wheels and spokes. The designs show only the two nearside wheels. Until this is pointed out, one is hardly aware that the farside wheels are missing. The simplification is well justified adding force to the belief that perspective is seldom necessary in miniature work.

Other designs by Gentleman in which perspective is omitted include *British Ships* 1969, *Concorde* 1969 (9d and 156d values), 50th Anniversary of the BBC 1972, *Social Reformers* 1976, *Christmas* 1977 and 1989.

Liverpool and Manchester Railway Early railway details are cleverly shown in this se-tenant strip of five stamps by Gentleman in 1980. The stamps join together to form a train pulled by Stevenson's *Rocket*. The dress and stance of the driver and fireman suggest a uniform based on the dress of a 'gentleman' of that era. The standards provided for different classes of passenger are shown respectively with plush coaches for first class, followed by austere carriages for second class with the third class in open trucks behind!

One stamp depicts the early use of the railway to carry a road vehicle. It shows a horse and carriage complete with passengers, driver and footman. The horse is in an open-sided truck, the sheep are in a bar-sided truck. Carrying road vehicles by rail is therefore at least 160 years old!

Luggage was carried outside on the roof on these early trains, following the custom of the road coach. The first-class carriage has a guard sitting on the roof, while third class passengers do not even warrant a roof, unlike the cattle which at least are spared this indignity! The last stamp in the strip shows a goods wagon (complete with stowaway) followed by the mail coach which has a guard seated on an outside dicky-seat at the rear. How did he keep his top hat on?

Unusually, Gentleman uses perspective, though minimal, on the carriages and some of the background details in this set. However, unlike the *Fire Engine* set discussed earlier, he does indicate the carriage wheels at the far side in perspective and he does show the width of each carriage. Likewise the background farmhouse on the fourth stamp and the double arch in the distance on the final stamp in the strip are each rendered with some perspective. In this particular instance perspective is well justified since it suggests an appropriate 'landscape' background to the train, carefully worked out so that every stamp has an appropriate background. Few British stamps communicate such a wealth of information.

Rosalind Dease 1928-97

As this issue was being passed for press, we learned the sad news of the death of Rosalind Dease. With her husband, David Gentleman, she designed 11 of the special stamps of 1965 and, on her own, a further 20 stamps issued between 1968 and 1974. Describing her work on the Inigo Jones set, she wrote in the *Bulletin* of August 1973: 'Designing stamps is really only one quarter pure creative work. The rest of the time is taken up in preliminary research, committee meetings and production supervision. Besides being a designer one has to be a public relations expert, a technician and a scholar...'



Social Reformers 1976 Gentleman's Social Reformers set of 1976 might be said to suffer from its own excellence. Its theme is the squalor and misery which existed before the work of the great social reformers. The feeling is conveyed in colour. What could be more appropriate than black to commemorate Thomas Hepburn's efforts to improve the conditions of miners hewing coal. The grimy colour of the other three stamps in the set is again fitting comment on the conditions which the reformers Robert Owen (10p), Lord Shaftesbury (11p) and Elizabeth Fry (13p) struggled to improve.

Gentleman's mastery of symbolism is well illustrated in each of these designs. Hands are featured in all the stamps. Hands hold a pick in the hewing of coal. A child's hands thread a needle and are seen through the unguarded machinery in the 10p value. A small boy's hand holds a brush in the 11p chimney cleaning stamp symbolising the awful practice of sending children clambering through the flues to brush away soot. Shackled hands grasp the grimy prison bars in the 13p stamp. These disembodied hands were a unique contribution to stamp design. A further innovation can be seen in a block of nine of the unguarded machinery (10p) stamps which produce complete assemblies of drive belt and pulleys, not obvious in the single stamp. Such configurations interest some collectors.

The Author William Aubrey Witham, recently retired, was born in 1929. An artist and former professional engineering designer and inventor in his earlier career, he later became responsible for graphic design, marketing and public relations with the international ITT Controls and ultimately Johnson Controls International. He is a natural artist, whose great grandfather Joseph Witham was a maritime artist with work in many maritime museum collections in the UK and USA, and grandfather Walter Witham was a landscape painter. He was formerly a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and member of the Institution of Engineering Designers. In the late 1950s, he founded the National Committee on Engineering Design Education, submitting recommendations to the then Prime Minister, Harold MacMillan. He exhibited and sold many of his paintings in aid of church charities throughout Scotland as a member of the Layman's Building Fund under the chairmanship of the Earl of Elgin.

References

- 1 Letter to author from Tony Benn, MP
- 2-5 *The Design and Production of Postage Stamps*, David Gentleman, Royal Society of Arts, 1974
- 6 David Gentleman, notes on the 1989 Christmas issue (*Ely Cathedral, Royal Mail Special Stamps Yearbook 1989*)

One can imagine a certain trepidation among the selection committee knowing that here was a set that might be seen less sympathetically by a public who in the main simply buy stamps to post letters.

Pioneer artist and designer It might be argued that designers who succeeded David Gentleman have produced equally good work, but it has to be remembered that Gentleman led the way and did not have the advantage of hindsight which they now have, nor have they had to worry about the stamp sizes and proportions or the monarch's image and the many details that have since been established because of Gentleman's earlier work.

As a professional designer, he would agree that any 'final' design at best represents only one of many possible solutions in a methodology of divergence which is the essence of design. But let us finish in Gentleman's own words: (The search for a solution) '...creates a welter of abandoned sketches, but unfortunately I don't know of any effective short cut. One would have thought that with some hard and careful thought at the outset, it would be easy to decide clearly and logically what was going to work, and then simply sit down and do it... Instead I need to go through a gradual process of refinement to find out which ideas will best serve the purpose, and abandon everything that doesn't'⁶ ●