



1966 and all that

John Holman recalls the birth of Christmas stamps and traces 45 years of their popularity

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS STAMPS WERE ISSUED IN 1966, in the same year that Bobby Moore held aloft the World Cup Trophy and in the same month that Tom Jones released the Number One hit *Green Green Grass of Home*. Austria had issued the first true Christmas stamp in 1937, so we were by no means the first, and by 1966 we were joining many countries that were already commemorating the festive season philatelically.

The 1966 stamps were bold in design and caused quite a stir. They were the winning designs from a schools' competition announced by the Postmaster General Tony Benn. About 5,000 entries were received and the winners were King of the Orient by Tasveer

Shemza of Stafford and Snowman by James Berry of London, both then six years old. By the time the stamps were issued on 1 December 1966, Mr Benn had moved to another government department and his successor, Edward Short (now Lord Glenamara) launched the Christmas issue and presented the children with their prizes.

Errors exist with the gold-embossed head of the Queen completely missing, and others with the gold head but without the embossing. The

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names of the designers and printer were shown in the bottom margin of the stamps and one stamp in some sheets of the 3d value had the initial 'T' of 'T SHEMZA' missing, making an interesting constant variety. First day covers were serviced bearing a postmark for the tiny village of Bethlehem in south Wales, the postmark being applied at the Head Post Office in Llanelli. A Bethlehem postmark is still used on Christmas FDCs.

Not everyone thought getting children to design stamps was a good idea and the practice was not repeated until 1981, when five stamps by children aged five to 16 resulted from a *Blue Peter* competition.

Religion versus secular designs An ongoing discussion about Christmas stamps has been about how to reconcile the wishes of customers who like to see Biblical themes on their stamps at Christmas with those of others who prefer jolly images of holly, festive foods, presents and Christmas trees. The policy has been to have a balance, some years seeing religious issues, others secular. Since 2007 additional Christmas stamps showing the Madonna and child have been available at post offices for customers specifically wanting a religious image.

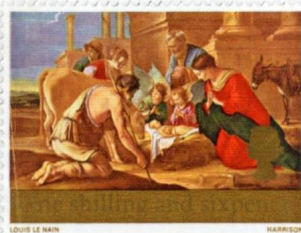
Religious image GB stamps started with the second Christmas issue in 1967, reproducing paintings of the Adoration of the Shepherds (see right) and The Madonna and Child. The designs were the work of Stuart Rose, head of Post Office Design. The 1s 6d stamp caused some controversy because the value was expressed only in words and the Queen's head was placed in the lower right-hand corner rather than at the top. The 4d stamp went on sale in October but the other two values were not released until late November. The Nativity story was also the theme of the 1969 set showing the Herald Angel, Three Shepherds and Three Kings, in colourful images by Fritz Wegner who also designed the 1979 issue showing the Nativity story spread over five stamps (see 13p value, right).

The 1970 Christmas stamps – the last with shillings and pence values – reproduced Nativity scenes from the beautiful De Lisle Psalter in the British Museum. They were the work of 28-year-old Sally Stiff, and were produced by Harrison & Sons Ltd on a 'Wood' machine. Eight cylinders printed the colours, one embossed the gold Queen's head, and one applied phosphor. Not surprisingly errors of missing colour, phosphor, and embossing exist (4d and 5d, right). The five-penny stamp with missing gold head is extremely rare. Sally Stiff also designed the 1972 stamps that featured angels, made from textiles, with musical instruments – trumpet, lute and harp. Angels with musical instruments appeared again for Christmas 1975, this time the work of R Downer.

Enid Marx produced the 1976 issue, taking inspiration from English medieval tapestries of ►

Facing page: the very first Christmas issue of 1966 produced some nice varieties for errors collectors.

Below: Biblical-themed stamps began with the second Christmas issue in 1967, designed by Stuart Rose. Other Nativity scenes shown here are from 1979, 1969, and two from 1970





Above, left to right: 1974 Christmas issue featured stone medieval bosses from British Cathedrals and churches; David Gentleman's design of 1989 included a 1p surcharge for charity; the stained glass theme of 1992

the Christmas story – an interesting textural approach, but the reduction of the tapestries to stamp size did not work especially well.

Churches and stained glass The 1971 issue reproduced stained glass windows from Canterbury Cathedral, beginning a theme of showing the splendours of some of our cathedrals and churches. The 1974 set – one of my favourites – featured medieval bosses from York Minster, Worcester Cathedral and churches in Norfolk and Devon. The 3½p stamp exists with the light stone background colour omitted, recently catalogued at some £35,000. Stained glass was also the subject for the 1992 issue, from churches in Surrey, Berkshire, Oxfordshire and south Wales. David Gentleman's 1989 stamps, showing Ely Cathedral, included a 1p surcharge for charity on four of the five values.



In 1977 David Gentleman interpreted the Twelve Days of Christmas

Christmas Carols Carol singing might be considered to cover both religious and secular themes. Eminent stamp designer David Gentleman designed six stamps based on the carol Good King Wenceslas for the 1973 issue, followed by another six on The Twelve Days of Christmas in 1977 (see 9p, left).

Carol singers, from Tudor to Victorian times, featured on the 1978 design by Faith Jacques, and in 1982 Barbara Brown provided colourful interpretations of five popular carols including While Shepherds Watched, and We Three Kings. Carol singing again featured on one of 1990 stamps, this time devoted to the theme of a 'white Christmas' in the snow. Linda Gray's Folk Customs issue of 1986 also crosses the divide between religious and secular.

These 1968 stamps were part of the first secular Christmas set, designed by Rosalind Dease



Secular themes The first non-religious stamps were the 1968 trio showing children playing with their Christmas presents, designed by Rosalind Dease. This was the only issue to bear the greeting 'Happy Christmas'. We had to wait until 1980 for the next secular issue, this time showing Christmas decorations by Jeffery Matthews who tells me it is his favourite of all his Royal Mail designs. Interestingly, he did the original drawings in pencil on stamp paper specially supplied by Royal Mail, as he found he could get the best results on this paper. With lateral thinking, he included Christian symbolism – the star,



Left: one of Jeffery Matthews' personal favourites among his Royal Mail designs is this Christmas stamp of 1980

crown, light and evergreen in his fine designs (see the 12p stamp, above).

Tony Meeuwissen's 1983 stamps evoked a fantasy Christmas. Pantomime characters were featured in 1985 and 2008; Father Christmas in 1997 and 2004; a Dickensian Christmas for 1993 (celebrating the 150th anniversary of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*); robins in 1995 (see below) and 2000, and a robin also appears this month, with Wallace and Gromit on one of images specially created by Aardman Animations (see Volume 48, page 58).

Specialist study Christmas stamps make an attractive thematic collection and can form a serious philatelic study. There is much to collect – books of Christmas stamps were introduced in 1984, miniature sheets in 2004, and Christmas stamps in definitive stamp size in 2006. Self-adhesive stamps started in 2001 and Christmas stamps in Smilers®/generic sheets in 2000.

In 1984-87 certain values had stars underprinted on the back as part of a discount promotion. A special discount rate for Christmas cards in 1986 resulted in the 12p and 13p stamps in the same design (below left). In 1988 stamps were printed at 13p before the rate increased and 14p stamps produced – only a few of the 13p stamps were found in Royal Mail Yearbooks and they are now catalogued at £9,000. Happy Christmas! •

Below left to right: the 1986 12p was the same design as the 13p stamp; this robin was voted *Bulletin* readers' favourite of 1995; from 1984 to 1987 certain values had a starred underprint on the back

