

Origins of Santa Claus It is believed by some that Odin, chief god of the Vikings, could be the basis for the cheery, bearded generous Father Christmas; alternatively St Nicholas is more popular as the origin of Santa Claus. Nicholas was born in the 4th century in Asia Minor, to wealthy and devoutly religious parents. He became a priest and was made a Bishop when only 30 years old. He gave away all his riches and was renowned for his goodness and generosity. According to legend, he threw three purses of gold through the door of a poor nobleman who could not afford dowries for his beautiful daughters; on another occasion he dropped gold coins down a poor man's chimney, and they fell into a stocking lying on the fireside to dry. This is thought to be the origin of children hanging up their stockings to receive presents from Santa. The Bishop of Myra was eventually to become a Saint.

The mythology of Santa Claus can be traced through the Dutch immigrants who migrated to America. Holland's Sinterklaas made the transition from saintly bishop to the North American Santa Claus. In 1809, Washington Irving wrote of Santa as a tubby, jovial little fellow who flew through the air in a sleigh driven by reindeer. It took the well-known portrait drawn by Thomas Mast, a German immigrant in America, for him to become the jolly red-faced character wearing a long white beard and red-hooded cloak we all know and love today. Santa has certainly kept up-to-date with modern ideas and developments over the years, eg transport, from trains to cars, from aeroplanes to spaceships, instead of traditional sleighs drawn by reindeer. Instead of letters sent up a chimney, to postal contact or telephone, and more recently on the internet.

In modern times, the commercial Santa Claus can be found in most department stores, in a magnificently decorated grotto, much to the delight of youngsters. He also has many homes in various countries such as Iceland, Greenland and Finland, where some offer tourist attractions and facilities including sleigh rides drawn by reindeer. May he live on for ever and ever and continue to bring joy and pleasure to children all over the world ●

The first Christmas FDCs

FORTY YEARS AGO the British Post Office issued its first Christmas stamps. Public pressure had been growing for such stamps, but it was not until Anthony Wedgwood-Benn became PMG that anything materialised. Benn first thought that such stamps might carry a surcharge for charity, but it seems such notions were quickly dismissed. However, he was keen that the designs should be done by children, the winners of a competition staged through schools. He gathered leading representatives from the world of education for guidance, hoping that the stamps would be issued for 1966. The advice he received was that time prohibited a competition until 1967 at the earliest – not soon enough for Benn, who decided that the PO would hold its own competition, which attracted around 5000 entries. The issued stamps did not find universal favour; Ann Belshaw's third-place design was used for the Post Office's first day envelope.

At this time first day cover collecting was very popular, encouraged by the Post Office with 'first day of issue' cancellations and envelopes. By 1966 demand was considerable, particularly witnessed with the Battle of Hastings issue. The little Welsh village of Bethlehem was the obvious location to post covers of the new Christmas stamps, and a 'first day of issue' handstamp was provided, and has been for the day of issue of every Christmas set since, even though there is no longer a full-time post office at Bethlehem. It was quite a shock for the postmistress, accustomed to serving the occasional customer through a stable-type door. On the day of issue, 1 December, extra staff were brought in, and a room in a nearby pub was commandeered to provide space to cancel mountains of covers. Most collectors were content with the 'first day' handstamp, but the more resourceful would have used a special service so that the covers received the normal operational handstamp.

Over the years covers cancelled by operational handstamps from places with a clearly associated name such as Bethlehem, Nasareth or St Nicholas, Guildford, have commanded a premium price. Sadly, today such opportunities are virtually nil, as these small sub-offices are now no more.

Richard West on first day arrangements in pre-decimal days



Top left: PO first day envelope for Christmas 1966, cancelled with the large 'first day of issue' handstamp in use at the time. Top right: the smaller, neater handstamp used at Bethlehem.

Bottom left: a 1967 cover cancelled on the two dates of issue. Bottom right: a special handstamp was commissioned in 1968 to celebrate Selfridges Toy Fair.

Another alternative has been an appropriate slogan postmark, although these are more problematic on the basis of condition, as slogans are often far from perfect. In 1966, 'Post Early for Christmas' was in use.

Following comments about the 1966 designs, the new Postmaster General, Edward Short, felt that the 1967 Christmas issue should be religious in content, and recommended the use of famous paintings. He also flirted for a while with the idea of a charity surcharge, again to no avail. For the first and only time, the set was issued in two parts, the 4d on 18 October, and the 3d and 1s6d on 27 November, as Mr Short was keen that those mailing cards, etc, overseas could use special stamps. Thus there were two 'first days', and on this occasion the PO allowed covers to be posted twice, so as to bear all three stamps. Bethlehem was again the preferred place for the 'first day' handstamp, although once more the operational handstamp has proved much scarcer. In addition a machine-

applied 'first day' cancellation was used at Bethlehem, primarily for use of the bulk mailings to doctors undertaken by Medical Mailing. For the 'second' first day, two other appropriate slogans were in use: Cheltenham 'See the Christmas Illuminations', and Londonderry 'First Ever Christmas Present – God Gave His Son'.

The 1968 designs again caused controversy, as Rosalind Dease had chosen a theme of children playing with toys: many felt this failed to convey the spirit of Christmas, and Dease came in for a good deal of criticism. For those sending FDCs the pattern was much as before – operational handstamps being utilised by the more astute, and with a slogan 'first day of issue' being available from Bethlehem intended for bulk mailings, and with the Christmas Illuminations slogan from Cheltenham. However, FDC producers were becoming aware of the possibilities, and this year a complementary special handstamp was commissioned to promote the 'Christmas Toy Fair' at Selfridges. ▶



The 1969 designs (left) were considered outstanding. A pictorial Bethlehem first day handstamp (above) was introduced in 1970.

In 1969 two Postmasters General were involved in the Christmas issue, the first being Roy Mason. Following the comments made about the 'toys' theme the previous year it was agreed that in 1969 the issue would be both religious and traditional. Mason felt that using paintings, as in 1967, was a sound idea, although not all were convinced that paintings translated well to stamps. The decision fell to the next PMG, John Stonehouse, who agreed that contemporary artists be invited to submit designs on a religious theme. The result was one of the most successful Christmas issues from Royal Mail: three designs by Fritz Wegner. These were issued by the new Post Office Corporation – the role of Postmaster General having been replaced by the Minister of Posts & Telecommunications, initially John Stonehouse, and the Chairman of The Post Office.

Some debate took place over denominations. The Post Office did not want a special stamp at 2nd class rate, 4d, as this might cause confusion in sorting offices. The Stamp Advisory Committee, on the other hand, believed that the majority posted their Christmas cards at 2nd class rate, and should not be denied using a special stamp: the SAC won.

For FDCs, there were the familiar 'first day of issue' handstamps including Bethlehem, the 'first day' slogan from Bethlehem, the Christmas illuminations slogan from Cheltenham, and operational handstamps from places such as Nasareth and Bethlehem. Another suitable slogan on this occasion publicised *Dick Whittington* at Lewisham Concert Hall, and a one-day circular handstamp was inscribed 'Jerusalem, Skellingthorpe, Lincs'.

Despite the fact that the 1969 designs had been so well received, there might not have been any Christmas stamps in 1970. There were fears that the task of printing the new decimal definitives was onerous enough for the stamp printers Harrison and Sons without adding a Christmas issue. A compromise suggested was to release just one stamp, showing the Christmas tree in Trafalgar Square, but the idea did not work. In the end, it was agreed to issue three stamps, as had become the norm. Stuart Rose, the Design Director for the Post Office, put forward the proposal that the designs should be based upon religious motifs, as found on sculpture, tapestry or stained glass.

Two sets of submitted designs were found to be equally pleasing, so those by Sally Stiff, based on the British Museum's De Lisle Psalter, were used for 1970, while designs by Collis Clements based on stained glass at Canterbury Cathedral were retained for use in 1971.

The issue resulted in a 'first', in that the first day of issue handstamp in use at Bethlehem was pictorial, in fact designed by Sally Stiff and based on her 4d stamp. Another suitable handstamp was that for Lilleshall Parish Church, celebrating its 1300th anniversary. Slogan postmarks were as previously, with 'first day' from Bethlehem and Christmas illuminations from Cheltenham, but this time one to promote Fairfield Christmas Circus was also applicable.

Following decimalisation, the pattern for FDCs would change, with more commissioned handstamps for new issues. The Christmas set would be the one constant in each year's programme – but more of that on another occasion •