

Off with her head! Part 2 of Douglas Muir's series adapted from his forthcoming book

FOLLOWING his meeting with The Queen, Tony Benn's letter to her, dated 12 March 1965, was addressed in deferential terms. He was 'delighted, and not at all surprised' to learn that there was no ban on submitting new ideas. He felt that the first step was to seek the views of designers themselves. New techniques and treatments could then be submitted to The Queen for consideration. He wanted to be able to announce this by a parliamentary answer in these terms: 'Her Majesty has graciously consented to consider for approval new designs, both traditional and non-traditional, for new definitive, commemorative and pictorial series. Designers will therefore, in future, be invited to submit any designs they wish and these will go to the Stamp Advisory Committee for transmission for Her Majesty's consideration and approval in the normal way. Her Majesty has also consented to the use of a new profile photograph for use in the new definitive series'.

This is the second of three articles abridged from chapter 5 of Douglas Muir's new book, *A Timeless Classic: The Evolution of Machin's Icon*, soon to be published by the British Postal Museum & Archive. The series will be concluded next month.

A letter came back the same day from The Queen's private secretary, Sir Michael Adeane. He wrote, at her command, to say she was grateful to him for explaining the position. The Queen agreed to the terms of Benn's statement. However, there was a gentle, added warning which Benn was to misinterpret or ignore. 'She hopes that you – like herself – will keep an open mind as to whether her effigy should invariably appear on commemorative and pictorial stamps, in accordance with tradition, or whether it might be more appropriate in some cases to replace it by an emblem of sovereignty such as the crown or her own cipher. This question can, no doubt, be considered when the album of new designs is ready for inspection.'

The next day, Saturday 13 March, David Gentleman and his wife Rosalind Dease came to tea with Benn. Gentleman agreed to prepare a sample album of stamps, showing what could be done with different treatments of the head, royal ciphers, and crowns. Thus ended a dramatic few days which had thrown British stamp design policy into turmoil. The normally quiet Stamp Advisory Committee demanded a meeting with Benn, the same day as their next formal meeting (25 March), and he gave them the news that The Queen had agreed to consider non-traditional designs 'for example, pictorial series on regional landscapes, great houses, English Kings and Queens, and other similar subjects. These could be printed in blocks comprising differing designs of one denomination: the stamps to be sold as a block or singly. Such series need not incorporate the traditional monarch's head. They might incorporate the crown or the royal cipher, and/or possibly some other indication of the country of origin, eg the letters 'UK'. He suggested that an album of examples to show the possibilities opened by this policy should be prepared and shown to the Queen. It was agreed that the Postmaster General should commission David Gentleman to produce such an album.' ►

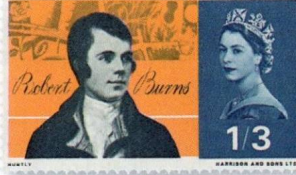


The Battle of Britain stamps: an essay of David Gentleman designs as a se-tenant block, with The Queen's head on one stamp only, and UK postage on the others. May 1965.

The fight over The Queen's head was to continue throughout 1965. On the one side were Benn and Gentleman; ranged against them were the SAC, postal officials and the Palace. The first clashes came over the Battle of Britain stamps. Gentleman prepared artwork for the three chosen designs with The Queen's head included and these were then essayed. In private conversations with Benn he continued to press for se-tenant blocks of designs, so, on 12 April, Benn instructed postal officials to prepare essays of six of Gentleman's designs as a block. One set was to be with The Queen's head on all of them; another was to have it only on the top right design.

Benn saw these essays on a visit to the stamp printers, Harrisons, on 14 May and asked that they be shown to the SAC at their next meeting on 27 May. However, this was not done and the SAC recommended other designs. In late June Benn discovered to his surprise that the se-tenant block was not included in the submission to the Palace. Furious, he rewrote the letter to the Palace with new recommendations, reminding The Queen of her agreement in principle to the idea of unconventional designs. First choice was now the Gentleman block with The Queen's head on only one stamp; the alternative had The Queen's head on all. Sir Michael Adeane, her Private Secretary, indicated that she was not happy approving designs without her effigy, so Benn made it clear that the Post Office would be happy to issue either se-tenant set, and left the choice to The Queen. She approved the set with her portrait included.

Thus the Stamp Advisory Committee had been bypassed. Benn did not get his wish for stamps without the monarch's head, but he did succeed in having blocks of Gentleman's designs printed together. Members of the SAC were understandably unhappy at their treatment and the Chairman, Sir Kenneth Clark, resigned. In a short letter to Benn he cited only the fact that he had been on such a committee for over 30 years under 13 Postmasters General, but it was clear that he did not agree with present trends. Years later he wrote: 'There had been a change of outlook in the production of stamps with which I was not in sympathy. I cannot say if I was right or wrong but it was evident to me that there should be a Chairman with more liberal views. I was afraid that the admission of pictorial stamps would lead to complete banality, and I have been proved right.'



From top left: essay of a design by A B Imrie with the Scottish crown; essays of designs by Jock Kinnear, with and without The Queen's head; and the issued pair of stamps by Gordon Huntly. Below: essay of another 'non-traditional' design by Jock Kinnear. October 1965.

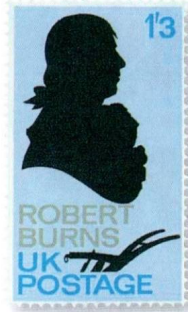
Special stamps for Robert Burns The bicentenary of the birth of Robert Burns had fallen in 1959, when stamp-issuing policy was still very conservative. As a result, despite much lobbying, no stamps were issued. With the new policy there was renewed pressure for stamps, and it was agreed that two would be issued in January 1966, even though there was no event or anniversary to be celebrated.

For this issue revised instructions to artists were sent out at Benn's instigation. Traditional design incorporating The Queen's head was now only one option. Artists were also given 'absolute freedom as to size, features of design, colour and art work' being encouraged to submit any designs they wished. Importantly, they were also given the alternative of omitting The Queen's head, to be replaced by the inclusion of the words UK POSTAGE, the crown or royal cipher.

The result was a total of 40 designs of which 21 could be described as non-traditional – in other words minus The Queen's head. One even had the cipher ER (not EIR) and Scottish crown. The Stamp Advisory Committee, now under the chairmanship of James Fitton, initially chose two of the non-traditional versions featuring Burns' signature. However, they asked that they be proofed with the addition of The Queen's head.

At their meeting of 20 October, the Post Office representative informed them that it was very unlikely that any design without The Queen's head would be chosen, despite the freedom given in the 'Instructions to Artists'. So designs by Gordon Huntly featuring the two main portraits of Burns, after Alexander Nasmyth and Archibald Skirving, together with the Wilding portrait of The Queen, were proposed as first choice, and approved.

The Gentleman Album In March The Queen had agreed to the creation of an album of experimental designs with symbols other than her head, but asking Benn to keep an open mind about whether her portrait should invariably appear. Benn discussed this with David Gentleman and asked for his proposals. A list from Gentleman provided a myriad of ideas, from regional landscapes to transport, and plants and animals to the industrial revolution. There were some 15 major headings including famous men and women and a series of 'most-interesting-looking sovereigns'. ▶



Opposite page, top: a 1965 print from David Gentleman's woodblock (shown on page 259), based on Mary Gillick's coinage head; and examples of different applications of the same image.

Below: Mary Gillick's original plaster cast for the first coins of Queen Elizabeth II, 1952.
© Royal Mint

The final commission was dated 9 August. Listed were requirements for definitive and commemorative stamps and then the experimental designs. 'Pictorial Stamps: Sets of designs, three low values in each, are required on any typically British themes which allow the artist maximum scope for effective design. As with the commemorative topics mentioned above, the stamps need not be of standard size. If designed without the Queen's head the legend "UK Postage" and the value should be prominently shown.'

Gentleman had asked if he had to adhere to the standard size for his designs. As a result the commission was amended so that the question of size and format was left to him. He subsequently created his designs in a new size, $1:\sqrt{2}$, and perforating tools had to be changed accordingly.

Work continued on the experimental designs over the summer, but just before they were completed a letter arrived from the prime minister's private secretary, Derek Mitchell, who had taken the opportunity to discuss various matters with Sir Michael Adeane, The Queen's private secretary. Adeane had said that he was 'a little apprehensive in case the Postmaster General persisted with his ideas about postage stamps not bearing a portrait of the Sovereign'. When Mitchell enquired if The Queen's views had changed since March Adeane replied: 'the fact was that the Queen had pretty strong views on this, not from any personal *amour-propre* but because she was against a departure from long-standing tradition. In her relations with her Ministers it was proper for her to keep an open mind but there was no doubt at all that she would greatly prefer not to be faced with an unpalatable decision and one in which she might feel bound to reject the advice offered to her.'

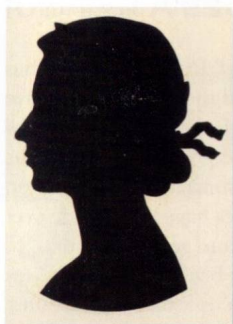
When informed, the Prime Minister apparently thought the PMG should not even commission experimental designs. Benn was furious. His position had clearly weakened. 'It looks as if my new stamp policy has been torpedoed. Whether or not the Queen cares personally about it, Adeane and all the flunkies at Buckingham Palace certainly do.'

Immediately thereafter, he went to see David Gentleman and had first sight of the designs he had been producing with his wife Rosalind. Benn regarded them as 'superb' but they also seemed to provide a solution to the problem of The Queen's head.

The Gillick cameo head and other symbols When the first photographs were taken of The Queen by Dorothy Wilding in 1952 Wilding was briefed beforehand by both Post Office and Royal Mint officials. Four artists attended personal sittings, among them Cecil Thomas and Mary Gillick. The effigy chosen for use on British coinage was one by Gillick, uncrowned and facing right.

Looking for a new profile head in 1965, Gentleman now took Gillick's coinage head and reversed it so that it faced left, as all monarchs' heads had done on stamps. Changing the





portrait from a three-quarter angle photograph to a flat cameo, and further formalising it by reducing it to a silhouette without any internal detail or modelling, enabled the head to take its place within a wide range of stamp designs more appropriately and effectively than the three-quarter angle Wilding photograph. Gentleman also created a variety of different sizes and shapes (above right) – solid within an oval or frame, and reversed out of a colour.

Gentleman brought his finished designs to Benn, and in discussion they came back to alternative symbols to represent the country, other than The Queen's head. Ideas included the E II R cipher, the crown or the royal coat of arms. Gentleman returned with a variety of symbols including the royal coat of arms in various formats (right).

Benn took the designs to show Harold Wilson, whose support would be crucial. Wilson had discussed the matter with the Queen at his latest audience. 'With regard to The Queen's head, he said that he had spoken to The Queen personally about it and that she didn't want her head removed from the stamps. There was no argument and I told him that it would create no problems as I could put a head on every stamp and showed him the cameos.'

In practice this was the final decision though both Benn and Gentleman pressed on, and when the album of experimental designs was eventually produced it contained alternative essays with the royal coat of arms in a variety of guises.

Benn now wrote to his officials to confirm the change of plan. 'You will recall that in March I had an audience with The Queen as the result of which it was agreed that non-traditional designs could in future be submitted. The Queen's Private Secretary confirmed that the royal cipher might be used on certain stamps in place of The Queen's head.'

'Following this the brief sent to designers was amended to take account of this decision, which had been announced in the House of Commons. As you know, a number of designs bearing different inscriptions and some with the royal cipher or a crown were submitted.'

'Since then the Prime Minister has discussed the matter with The Queen. Arising from these discussions it has become plain that The Queen does now wish her head to appear on stamps, though she is content for this to be represented by silhouette.' ●



Above: Symbols suggested as alternatives to The Queen's head, by David Gentleman.