

## 40 years ago, it was toys for Christmas

The 1968 Christmas issue, by Richard West

NOVEMBER IS traditionally the month when Royal Mail issues its annual Christmas stamps. It is also virtually certain that not everyone will approve of the designs. And so it has been, since the very first British Christmas stamps back in 1966. At that time Tony Benn was the Postmaster General, and it was he who not only felt it right to have special stamps for the Christmas post each year, but that those first stamps should be designed by children. The designs resulted in many complaints, such that the following year, Edward Short, the new Postmaster General, favoured religious paintings instead. Still not everyone was satisfied, with many uncertain as to whether paintings are suitable for reproduction on stamps.

Edward Short was still in the chair when work started on the Christmas issue of 1968. Friction that had been developing between the PMG and the stamp advisory committee of the Council of Industrial Design had reached a head under Mr Short, who disbanded the committee, favouring instead that the Post Office should appoint its own Stamp Advisory Committee. The new committee met for the first time in February 1968, and one of its first tasks was to evaluate the designs which had already been received for the Christmas stamps. Some of these had come from designers commissioned by the Post Office, but many others were unsolicited – Benn had encouraged the public to propose ideas for both subject matter and designs.

The artists invited by the Post Office who submitted designs were Mary Grierson, Geoffrey Trenaman, Clive Abbott, Arnold Machin and J Norris Wood, while the invitation was also extended to Harrison and Sons and to Bradbury, Wilkinson to submit designs. It was the practice in those days for the Post Office to approach not only individual artists but also the stamp printing companies. Unsolicited designs came from T Devereux, T H Barrett, Keith Hensby, H St John Harrison, A R Hundleby, and S Doubtfire.

However, the committee favoured the set from an established designer, Rosalind Dease. Rosalind was not, in fact, commissioned by the Post Office. She was married at that time to David Gentleman, and had worked with him on a number of successful designs for 1965, including the Churchill, Commonwealth Arts Festival and Battle of Britain issues. Harrison and Sons, at the time printing the majority of British stamps, invited Rosalind to prepare ideas on its behalf.

The theme of her designs was children playing with their toys. Inevitably the Post Office received several complaints that the stamps did not convey the true meaning of Christmas. The toys were meticulously researched by Rosalind – the rocking horse is typical of those popular in the 1880s; the dolls represent an English wax doll of about 1820 and a 19th-century rag doll; the doll's house is an early Georgian example; and the train set is based on one popular in America in the late 1800s. The girl featured on the 4d and 9d stamp was based on Rosalind's own daughter, Fenella Jane; the boy was a figment of her imagination. ▶



CHRISTMAS 1968



Unaccepted stamp designs for the Christmas stamps of 1968 by John Norris Wood (top) and Bradbury Wilkinson & Co.



Above: the issued designs. A horizontal design was chosen for the 4d value because the Post Office knew that many, when addressing Christmas cards, start the address fairly high up on the envelope.

The three stamps had values of 4d, 9d and 1s6d. Interestingly, the 1st and 2nd class system of posting had been introduced in September and, as the Post Office felt that the majority of Christmas cards would be sent at the 2nd class rate of 4d, decided not to issue a 1st class, 5d, Christmas stamp.

On all three values the Queen's head was printed embossed in gold. This could only be achieved on a sheet-fed printing press, the Rembrandt press in use at the time, and so this was used for printing the entire run of the 9d and 1s6d values. However, while the Rembrandt press was used initially to print the 4d value, it is possible this proved too slow for the large quantity of stamps required of this denomination. Therefore, part of the production of the 4d value was undertaken on a Thrissell reel-fed press, capable of printing up to five colours at one time. Consequently, the sheets of 4d stamps that had been printed with five colours on the Thrissell were then transferred to the Rembrandt press for the gold embossing.

There are various ways of distinguishing 4d stamps printed on the two presses. The best method is to view cylinder blocks: stamps from the Rembrandt press start with cylinder number 1A; those from the Thrissell start with 2A. Stamps from the Rembrandt machine have the left-hand sheet margin perforated; those from the Thrissell press have the top sheet margin perforated. On the Rembrandt stamps the top of the Queen's head is level with the top of the boy's head, while the boy's pullover is uniform in its grey colour. On the Thrissell printing the Queen's head is generally lower than on Rembrandt printings, but as the head was gold embossed as a separate operation, this is not always the case. However, on the Thrissell printings the grey of the boy's pullover has a more uneven appearance.



All three values can be found with the embossing omitted. Also all three values are known with the phosphor missing: there was one phosphor band on the 4d for the 2nd class rate, and two bands on the other values. A few missing colours are known, but by this time the printers were becoming more proficient at handling multicoloured stamps.

As had become standard practice by this time, the three stamps were available within a presentation pack. The packs were produced with the text in English, or in German primarily for sale through the Post Office's philatelic agents in Germany. This was the second presentation pack containing a special issue (the first was the 1968 Paintings set) to be produced as a German edition.

The Post Office produced a first day envelope, also designed by Rosalind Dease, the design being of a doll's house. In addition to the 'first day of issue' handstamps provided by the Post Office, an appropriate privately-sponsored handstamp for the day of issue, 25 November, was inscribed Selfridges Christmas toy fair.

In addition to the stamps, there were two pictorial airletters produced that year. One, designed by Geoffrey Trenaman, showed an airship with Father Christmas as a passenger, while the 9d 'printed' stamp featured three Christmas trees. The second was designed by Peter Gauld, showing an angel in flight, with the stamp depicting the Star of Bethlehem.

The complaints about the stamps were such that for Christmas 1969 the Post Office decided to adopt a religious theme. The results, by Fritz Wegner, proved to be among the most popular Christmas sets of the past 40 years – but that is another story ●

#### Acknowledgements

*Stamp Histories of the British  
Postal Museum & Archive  
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Stanley Gibbons catalogue*