

Hidden dates Reach for a magnifier: in the first of two new articles, Richard West finds 'hidden' dates on British stamps

In 1965 Clive Abbott (who sadly died in 2008) had the distinction of being the first British stamp designer whose name appeared on stamps, namely the two he designed to mark the opening of the Post Office Tower. Tony Benn, when Postmaster General, felt that the work of the designer and printer should be acknowledged, but the idea did not last long, and the final set to provide such a recognition was that to mark the maiden flight of Concorde in 1969. Over the years, some have put forward the proposal that it would make life easier for collectors if the year of issue were to be included within each stamp design. To meet such demands, Royal Mail started in 1987 to include the year with a copyright symbol within the border area of many of the special issues (although the caption on the stamp sometimes renders such additional information redundant). This practice was ended by the start of the special Millennium programme at the beginning of 1999; the Millennium stamps adopted their own numbering system – counting down to the Millennium in 1999, and back up in 2000.

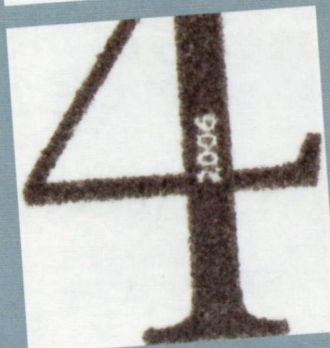
Nevertheless, the idea of including the year of issue within the stamp design did not disappear, and since the Christmas stamps of 2005 the year will be found on most special issues. However, these dates will often not be immediately obvious, for they are 'hidden', included using microprinting within the stamp design, or appearing on a phosphor band. In general one or two basic principles apply: if the stamp design includes a caption indicating the year of issue, for example, 'Scout Centenary 2007', there will be no need for an additional 'hidden' date; if a design is one that has been previously used before 2005, such as the miniature sheet issued following the announcement of London being awarded the 2012 Olympic Games, no date will appear; if the stamp is printed by lithography, the date will appear as a part of the design, printed using microprinting; and if a stamp is printed by gravure, the date will be seen within a phosphor band.

Country stamps No hidden dates appear on definitives, with one exception. Such dates were first used in the pictorial Northern Ireland designs of 2001, within the denomination on stamps printed by De La Rue, Enschedé and Walsall. Dates are found on the 'bleed-off' designs and on those with white borders printed by litho (except for the Smilers versions of the 1st class value used for the Glorious Northern Ireland and Glorious United Kingdom generic sheets). Interestingly, stamps of the same denomination from different printers, or with or without the white border, may have dates in different positions. Enlarged illustrations showing the positions of the hidden dates were included in Douglas Myall's 'Mainly Machins' feature in the February 2006 *Bulletin* (page 182).

Here is where to find the date on Northern Ireland definitives with bleed-off design: 2nd, in the horizontal stroke of the 2* ● 1st, at base of 1* ● E printed by Walsall or De La Rue, in lower horizontal stroke of the E ● 65p, in horizontal stroke of 5, and in basketwork near 3rd perf hole down on the left ● 68p, in upper circle of 8, and in the basketwork near the 3rd perf hole down on the left. (*The dates are in the same position on the 1st and 2nd stamps printed by Enschedé within the *Microcosmos* prestige stamp book.)

Here is where to find the date on NI definitives with white borders: 2nd, in the horizontal stroke of 2 (later removed on gravure printings) ● 1st, at base of 1 (later removed on gravure printings) ● E, in lower horizontal stroke of E ● 40p, in horizontal arm of 4 ● 42p by Walsall, in horizontal stroke of 2 ● 42p by De La Rue, in horizontal arm of 4 ● 44p, in horizontal arm of first 4 ● 68p, in top arm of 6, and in 2nd strand of the basketwork opposite the 4th perf hole down on the left ● 72p, in horizontal arm of 7.

From 2007, sheet versions of the Northern Ireland definitives (including the 1st and 2nd class) have been printed by gravure; this process does not so effectively print the tiny dates, so the dates are no longer incorporated on the stamps. ►



Hidden dates on five special stamps of 2006, and on a Northern Ireland Country stamp, from top left: the 72p Sounds of Britain; 1st class Football World Cup; National Portrait Gallery (Virginia Woolf); 47p Ice Age Animals; 42p Animal Tales; and 2001 68p Northern Ireland (white border design, printed by De La Rue).

Special issues There now follows a checklist of special issues with hidden dates, indicating where these can be found – with thanks to Dean Price of Royal Mail's Stamps team for advising the date's location on each stamp. Where the same design appears in a miniature sheet, prestige book, retail stamp book (for Christmas issues) or as part of a Smilers sheet, the date will be found in the same position. This list omits issues where there is no hidden date, possibly because an older design is repeated, or because the caption on the stamps makes the hidden date superfluous.

Next month I will reveal the location of the hidden dates on the 2007 and 2008 special issues.

Christmas 2005 This was the first special issue to have a hidden date. Printed by gravure, the date is seen horizontally within the phosphor bands, towards the bottom of the left-hand band on stamps with two bands, and just above the denomination on the centre band on the 2nd class stamp.



Animal Tales On all values the date appears as microprinting in the denomination: 2nd, horizontally on the 2 • 1st, vertically on the 1 • 42p, vertically on the 4 • 68p, vertically on the 6.



A British Journey: England On all values (1st), the date appears on the right-hand phosphor band, towards the bottom of the design, reading vertically.



Ice Age Animals Vertically on the denominations: on the 1 of 1st • the 4 of 42p and 47p • the 6 of 68p • the first 1 of £1.12.



The Queen's 80th birthday The date appears horizontally on the phosphor bands, near the bottom just above the caption on each stamp. On the 2nd class stamps the date appears on the single band. On all other values, the date appears on the outer bands of each se-tenant pair of designs.



World Cup Horizontally on the denominations: the 1 of 1st • the 4 of 42 • the first 4 of 44 • the 5 of 50 • the 4 of 64 • the 7 of 72.



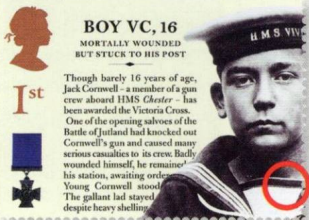
Modern Architecture On all values the date is printed horizontally at the bottom of the right-hand phosphor band. ▶



The National Portrait Gallery The date appears very clearly in the bottom left-hand border of each design.



Victoria Cross On all three se-tenant pairs the date appears reading vertically at the bottom of the phosphor bands – it appears in the outer bands of each pair, ie, on the left-hand of the left-hand stamp, and on the right-hand band of the right-hand stamp.



Sounds of Britain The dates are found as follows: 1st, under left armpit of dancer (not shown below) • 42p, in front of drummer's legs • 50p, between arms of harpist (see p207) • 72p, by right leg of guitarist (not shown) • and £1.19, under male dancer's left arm.



Christmas The date appears as part of the phosphor bands. It is horizontal towards the bottom of the centre band on the small 2nd class. It is vertical on all other values, towards the bottom, of the centre band of the large 2nd class, and on the left-hand band of all other values •

