

Stamp revolutionaries

Tony Benn and David Gentleman were responsible for massive philatelic changes in the 1960s. Here they discuss how it all came about



Above: the first commemorative Christmas stamps, commissioned by Benn in 1966, were designed by two sixty-year-olds as part of a competition that attracted over 5,000 entries

Below: a stamp from each of Gentleman's Christmas issues – 1973, 1977 and 1989



IT IS OVER 50 YEARS SINCE Tony Benn and David Gentleman made their very different but equally dramatic entrances into the world of stamps. In their respective spheres of politics and design they proceeded to make a huge difference to the way that UK stamps are perceived, and in the process became friends. December seems as appropriate a time as any to catch up with them. Tony Benn was responsible for commissioning the first commemorative British Christmas stamp in 1966 (ref Vol 48 issue 4) during his well documented period as Postmaster General from 1964 to 1966. And among the 101 stamps designed for Royal Mail by Gentleman are arguably the most popular Christmas stamp issues – 1973, 1977 and 1989.

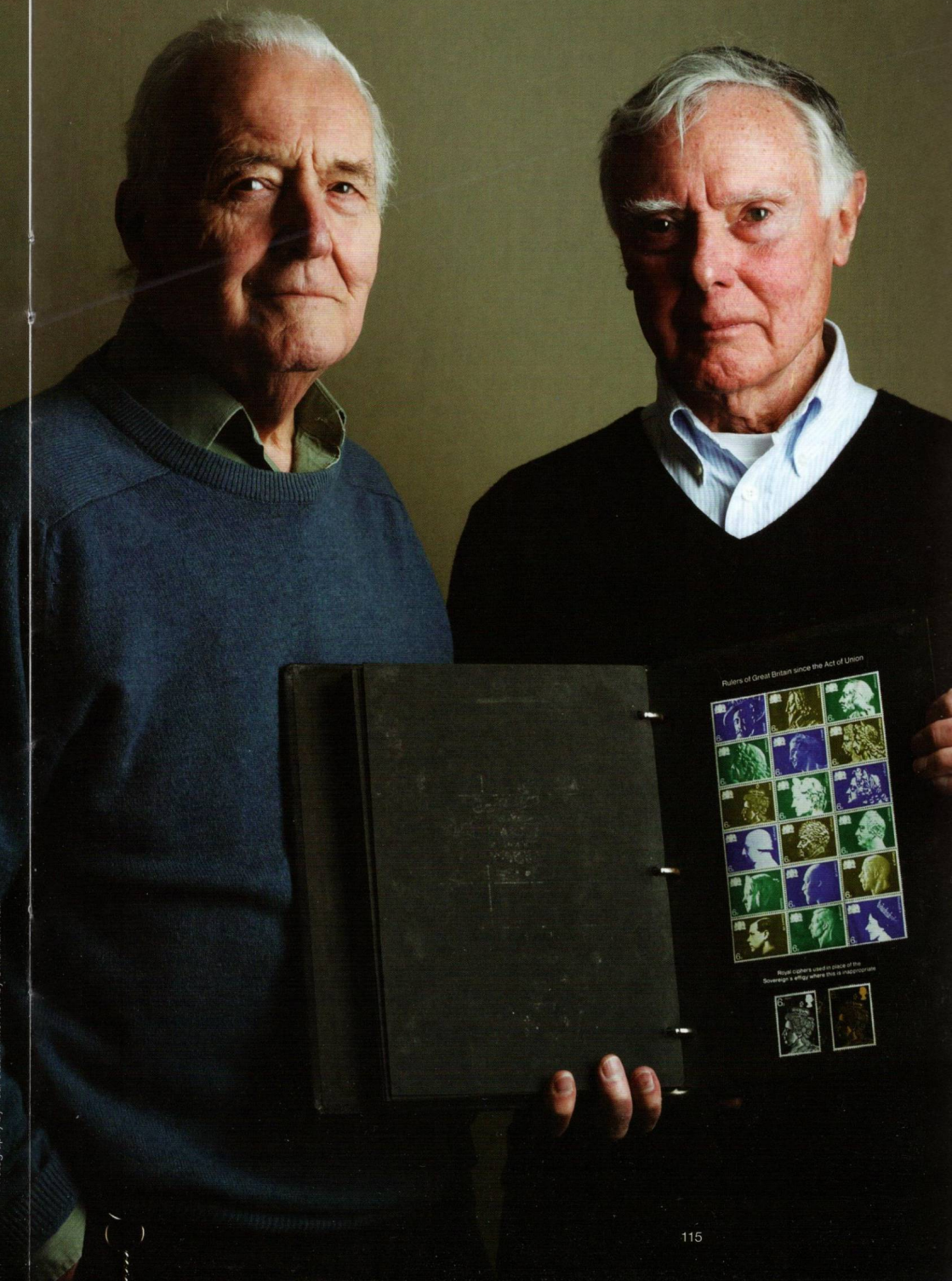
Those contributions to Christmas stamps were some of their less controversial achievements. The 1960s was, of course, a time when all conventions were looked at with a view to modernisation. Benn and Gentleman's work together just pre-dates the point in time in 1967 when the Wilding photographic portrait of the Queen was superseded by Machin's bas-relief sculpture. During their collaboration in 1965 they were the first to question the size and very inclusion of the Queen's head on all stamps, and this was viewed with considerable suspicion by traditionalists.

Benn began to consider the role of stamps as soon as he became Postmaster General: 'I thought we should develop them – I realised that stamps were a form of art that circulated around the world. I discussed it with my officials who were very conservative and I decided to put out a note asking whether any designers had ideas, and David responded.'

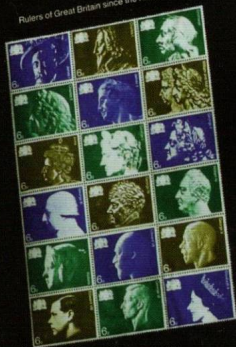
An album of ideas

Gentleman recalls, 'I'd already designed two or three stamp sets for Royal Mail and I found it difficult to place anything else alongside the Queen's head [then the Dorothy Wilding portrait]. It was a clash. So I suggested that commemorative stamps would be much better without the Queen's head at all... I also thought stamps should be more beautiful, more interesting. So Tony said: "Why don't you come up with an album to show whether there's any truth in these ideas?"' That Benn respected Gentleman's work was crucial to this phase. In fact, Benn describes Gentleman as 'one of the best – if not the best – stamp designers in the country'.

Benn still owns one of the three existing copies of the original Gentleman album, the same one that caused all the fuss when he showed it to The



Rulers of Great Britain since the Act of Union



Royal coats of arms in place of the Sovereign's effigy where this is inappropriate



Queen in 1965. But was the issue of stamp reform really about politics or simply a question of artistic endeavour – or both? Benn says, ‘The reform was about the way we could show Britain’s story through stamps... actually it was the design that was important.’ Gentleman is equally adamant: ‘It was purely a design matter for me.’

A design challenge

Gentleman called his album *Essays in Stamp Design*. It featured artwork with the Queen’s head replaced by the words Great Britain or UK, with royal ciphers and crests. But it also included innovative designs carrying a small silhouette of the Queen, Machin’s version of which is still used to this day.

It emerges that Benn didn’t tell Gentleman that he was showing his work to the Queen. ‘You told me afterwards!’ Gentleman laughs at the memory.

Benn’s account of his meeting with the Queen to show her non-traditional designs is legendary. ‘I began by saying, “I understand that you have banned any change,” and she said: “No, not at all”. So I said, “I’ve got some new designs.” And she said: “Can I look at them?” So I showed them to her. And then I said, “Do you see any difficulty about these?” And she said “No. Not at all”’

In a neat tactical move, Benn showed the Queen the racehorse stamps first and he laughs as he recalls that he knew these would really interest her, given her love of riding. The result was an agreement in principle for subtle changes to be made, and for more experimental design and a profile portrait

to be used on all stamps. It seemed that Benn and Gentleman had made significant progress.

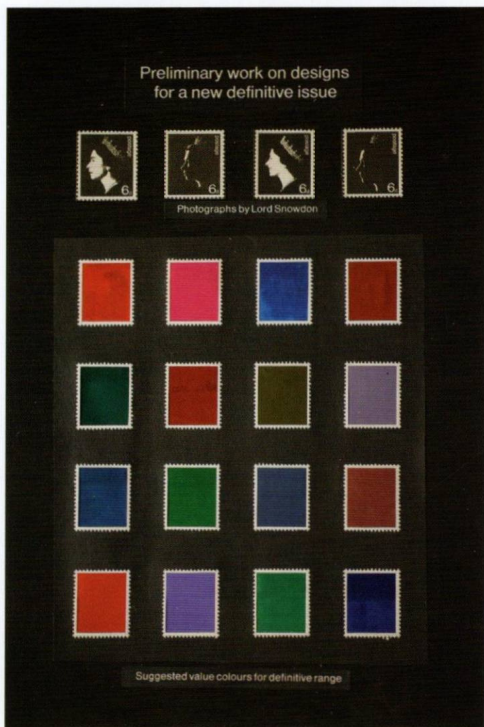
If Benn thought he had won support for his ideas, he was soon reminded that this was but one battle in a ‘war’. ‘By the time I got back to my office,’ he continues, ‘Buckingham Palace had rung the Prime Minister [Harold Wilson], who’d called my office to say the Queen wouldn’t have it.’ He wasn’t hugely surprised, given the context. ‘Historically, there was a controversy about having an adhesive stamp at all because, of course, one couldn’t lick the back of Queen Victoria’s head!’

Not the retiring types

Whatever the motivation, Benn and Gentleman gave us the foundation for the stamps we use today. Given the chance would they do it all again? Feisty as ever, Benn says: ‘Yes, I would. I feel I helped liberate the Post Office from restriction, and I found a brilliant designer, too.’ The admiration between the two men is mutual. ‘You were a marvellous enabler,’ says Gentleman. ‘Almost everything that one put on a stamp at that time was potentially revolutionary. It was extremely exciting.’

Both men continue to follow their callings.

Below: Gentleman’s preliminary work on new designs for definitives included portraits by Lord Snowdon and suggestions for new colours



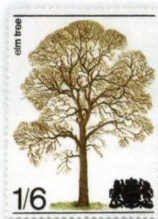


Gentleman has designed coins to mark the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery and the 100th anniversary of the Entente Cordiale. His work includes books, murals, prints and watercolours.

'Earlier in my life I was interested in expressing other people's ideas as graphically and powerfully as I could,' he explains. 'Then I moved towards expressing my own.' Benn is still spreading the Socialist word with his one-man theatre shows, which are universally sold out. How does he find the inspiration to carry on doing this. 'I believe that the media and the political class underestimate everybody's intelligence,' he replies.

Have they been bitten by the 'collecting bug' themselves? Benn says he doesn't think of himself as a collector but then goes on to reveal: 'I keep a lot of archives. Since I was Postmaster General I've kept every stamp they have sent to me.' Gentleman has archives, too, 'but I don't collect anything,' he says. Benn also has all of Gentleman's books. 'He's one of our most distinguished artists. We've become friends and, through the Stop the War Coalition, we've been able to continue to working together.' (Benn is President and Gentleman designed some of the group's campaigning images.) It's clear that the two men have enjoyed talking over past times and still have a strong desire to work for change •

‘Since I was Postmaster General I’ve kept every stamp they have sent to me’



Left: Gentleman points to designs that were later used for the 1969 Post Office Technology issue.

Above: one of Gentleman's design proposals that used a symbol – in this case a Royal Coat of Arms – instead of the Sovereign's photograph



Left: Gentleman's 1977 Christmas set is still much admired for its graphic simplicity