

The Four Kings

Adrian Keppel examines the production of stamps during the reigns of the Four Kings, to coincide with this month's new Kings and Queens issue

THE ERA OF the Four Kings is an important one in British philately, marking as it does the transition from classic stamp production to more modern stamp-issuing policies. We note how the balance shifts from purely definitive issues to an emphasis on commemorative stamps. Along the way, various changes in stamp production were introduced which helped shape our stamp catalogues as we know them now.



Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3



Fig 4

Fig 1 Issued in January 1902, 2½d, printed by De La Rue.

Fig 2 1911 1½d, printed at Somerset House

Fig 3 1911 4d, perf 15x14, printed by Harrison & Sons

Fig 4 The unissued 2d Tyrian plum, printed by De La Rue



King Edward VII (1901-1910)

The reign of King Edward VII is characterised by a process of continuation. De La Rue had held the contract to print stamps in letterpress ever since 1855, when the first surface-printed stamps of Great Britain were issued during the reign of Queen Victoria. A new ten-year contract had just been negotiated in 1899, so they remained the sole printers of British stamps during the first King's reign (see fig 1). Issued 110 years ago this month, the first Edward VII stamps featured the left-facing profile of the King by Austrian sculptor and artist Emil Fuchs.

At the end of their ten-year contract, De La Rue submitted to the Board of Inland Revenue a lower tender, to reduce the cost of stamp production. But it was still higher than that of Harrison & Sons, to whom the Board eventually decided to give the contract – in 1911.

By that time King Edward VII had died, but the change of printers would still have an impact on his stamps. As stamps for the new King – George V – were not ready yet, various provisional printings were made of the existing Edward VII design between 1911 and 1913. Harrison's did not have the facilities to print multi-coloured stamps, so they printed the mono-coloured stamps there and the bi-coloured stamps (see fig 2) were printed at Somerset House. This is easily the most intricate period of King Edward VII's reign, as the printings are very hard to distinguish, especially since mono-coloured stamps were later printed at Somerset House too. The only easy ones to identify are all stamps with perf 15 x 14 – these could *only* have been printed by Harrison & Sons – as all other stamps are perf 14 (see fig 3).

All stamps during this era were printed on paper with the Imperial Crown watermark for the low values, and with the Large Anchor watermark for the high values. Only ordinary paper was used until 1905, when chalk-surfaced paper was introduced for various values. This paper had a special coating making it harder for postmarks to be removed. By 1910 a third type of paper had been introduced for the provisional printings only. This was smoother than the earlier provisional printings, which were on coarser paper.

The most exciting item from Edward VII's reign is undoubtedly the unissued 2d Tyrian plum (fig 4). It was produced in May 1910 as part of De La Rue's project to replace all bi-coloured stamps with mono-coloured ones. But the death of the King prevented its issue, and the majority of the stock was destroyed with only a few copies surviving. Other major items to watch out for are the inverted watermarks, which occur on a good number of values printed by all three printers (although the De La Rue versions command the highest catalogue prices), and the first booklets issued in Great Britain, which appeared in 1904 (fig 5).



Fig 5 A 1904 booklet pane, printed by De La Rue



King George V (1910-1936)

The picture becomes even more muddled when we enter the reign of King George V properly. Concentrating on the printers first, we have Harrison & Sons printing the surface-printed Downey Head definitives of 1911, although some of them are also printed at Somerset House. The two are now so indistinguishable that they no longer warrant different catalogue numbers. The best way to recognise the two printings (and that goes for subsequent joint ventures as well) is to look for copies with control numbers in the margins. The Harrison printings have no full stop after the letter (fig 6), whereas the Somerset printings do. The 1912 Profile Head definitives follow the same pattern (fig 7). By the time the Profile Head issues get reissued with a different watermark, the main printer had become Waterlow & Sons, who would hold the contract for printing the low value definitives from 1924 to 1933. In 1934, Harrison's regained the contract, mainly because of their investments in what was then cutting-edge technology – the photogravure process. Before they were ready to commence printing in photogravure, however, new stamps were needed, so Harrison's started by printing some more of the Profile Head stamps in letterpress (fig 8), with the 6d printed at Somerset House (fig 9).

These provisional printings by Harrison's may sometimes be distinguished by their streaky gum. It is not until the mid-1930s that things quieten ▶



Fig 6



Fig 7



Fig 8



Fig 9

Fig 7 1912 1d Profile Head printed by Harrison & Sons
 Fig 8 1935 2d definitive, printed by Harrison & Sons in photogravure
 Fig 9 1913 6d Profile Head printed at Somerset House
 Fig 6 1912 1d Downey Head printed by Harrison & Sons, without full stop after letter B



Fig 11



Fig 12

Fig 10

Fig 10 1918 Bradbury Wilkinson printings of the Seahorses

Fig 11 1925 1½d value of the 'British Empire Exhibition' set,

printed in recess by Waterlow

Fig 12 1929 1d value of the

'Ninth UPU Congress, London' set, printed in typography by Waterlow & Sons



Fig 13 The rare Prussian Blue version of the 2½d Silver jubilee stamp

down and Harrison becomes the sole printer of the low value definitives, which would from now on be printed in photogravure.

A complicating factor in the George V era is the production of the high values. These so-called Seahorses stamps were printed in recess, for which different printing contracts were made up. The first set, of 1913, was printed by Waterlow Bros & Layton. This was followed by De La Rue printings in 1915, and Bradbury Wilkinson printings in 1918 (fig 10). The re-engraved version of the Seahorses was recess-printed by Waterlow and issued in 1934.

A final matter to look at is the production of Britain's first commemorative issues. Again, we find a mixture of printers responsible for various issues. The 1924 and 1925 recess-printed 'British Empire Exhibition' stamps were recess-printed by Waterlow (fig 11). The 1929 'Ninth UPU Congress, London' set (fig 12) was a joint venture by Waterlow for the low value surface-printed stamps, and Bradbury for the £1 recess-printed value. The final commemorative issue, the 1935 'Silver Jubilee' set, was printed in photogravure by Harrisons.

The first decade saw a variety of papers being used. Old stocks of paper with the Imperial Crown watermark were used for the first Downey Head stamps, and paper with a Simple Royal Cypher was introduced in 1912. The Multiple Royal Cypher paper was used in 1912 and 1913 for the production of coil stamps. In 1924, a Block Cypher watermark was introduced and this would be used for the remainder of the King's reign. Two subtypes exist, one in use by both Waterlow and Harrisons, the other by Waterlow only, as part of an experiment with different paper. In general it can be noted that wartime papers (used from 1917 to 1921) are coarser than the pre- and post-war papers. For the Seahorses and the UPU £1, special watermarks were used.



The most famous philatelic item in the King George V era is undoubtedly the Prussian Blue version of the 2½d Silver Jubilee stamp (fig 13). A total of four sheets of this shade were printed and inadvertently sold over post office counters.



King Edward VIII (1936)

The 11-month reign of King Edward VIII saw only four stamps issued. They were all printed by Harrison & Sons in photogravure on paper with a Block 'E8R' watermark (fig 14). The stamps were printed in sheets, coils and booklets. Because of the short nature of his reign, there are no errors or extraordinarily rare items to collect. The booklet panes with a variety of advertising labels could be said to be the most interesting collecting area, as are copies overprinted 'Cancelled' or 'Specimen'.



Fig 14



King George VI (1936-1952)

As with Edward VII, the era of King George VI is characterised by continuity. Harrison & Sons still held the contract for all low value definitives and were also responsible for all commemorative stamps issued during the reign. All stamps produced by Harrisons were printed in photogravure on a paper with a Block 'GVIR' watermark (fig 15). The only other printer involved in British stamp production during this King's reign is Waterlow, who held the contract for printing the high value definitives. The two high values sets that were issued during the reign of George VI – the Arms high values introduced in 1939 (fig 16) and the Festival high values of 1951 (fig 17) – are both recess-printed. Surprisingly, the wartime years did not have a noticeably detrimental effect on papers used. The only change was the use of different inks. Lighter colours were introduced during the war as a means of economising.



Fig 15



Fig 16

It may be regarded a sign of improved production techniques that in this reign, too, there are not any major errors to collect. The most (in)famous of all is not really a scarce item, but more a remarkable item. The Coronation stamp of 1937 may be a humble 1½d stamp, but it comes with more than 20 catalogued varieties (fig 18)! There are so many of them that it has sometimes been suggested that these major varieties may not all have occurred inadvertently. Be that as it may, it has turned the Coronation stamp into a proper collectable!

By the end of the period of the Four Kings, stamp production had settled down considerably, with the bulk of the production in the hands of a single printer, produced in one printing method, and the high values being the only exception to this rule. And in subsequent decades, not much changed – it isn't until the early 1980s that we see the beginning of the end of the Harrisons' long monopoly, with new printers encroaching upon their terrain ●

Fig 15 1947 11d definitive, printed by Harrisons & Sons.
Fig 16 1942 10s 'Arms' high value in lighter ink, printed in recess by Waterlow & Sons
Fig 17 1951 10s 'Festival' high value, printed in recess by Waterlow & Sons
Fig 18 One of the 20 catalogued versions of the Coronation stamp of 1937



Fig 17



Fig 18